

Problematizing platform use in qualitative inquiry: a postdigital, anti/colonial critique

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Abstract

Qualitative inquirers are increasingly exploring the possibilities and promise of web-based research. From re-envisioning the meaning of face-to-face interaction through online collaboration platforms to harvesting organically occurring digital content, these data generation interactions occur on platforms designed for purposes other than inquiry. Researchers who work within these platformed field sites must be clear on the affordances of these imperfect and continually evolving ecosystems. In this article, I engage in a postdigital anti/colonial critique of platforms to outline the contours of their relational-cultural affordances as distinctly colonial and white. From this engagement, I invite a dialogue on the risks researchers take when assuming a platform is universal and, subsequently, our digital research on these platforms are neutral endeavors. I conclude with a series of critically reflexive prompts for researchers to consider when engaging in digital research.

Keywords

virtual anti/colonial research, platformed whiteness, critical reflexivity, postdigital qualitative critique, digital racism and colonialism

With the advent of Web 1.0 in the mid-1990s, social scientists began conducting research via the internet (Tavakoli and Mura, 2018). At this time, the internet provided unprecedented access to explore phenomena across time and space, but it was read-only and limited in what it offered. The introduction of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s ushered in the social age of the internet, where users' interactions with each other and emerging technologies facilitated new possibilities for interconnected research, especially as we

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continued to hurtle through increasingly intelligent and immersive generations of the internet (Tavakoli and Mura, 2018). While qualitative inquirers have been exploring these possibilities for some time, there has been a relatively recent upsurge in web-based qualitative inquiry (Paulus and Lester, 2021). This upsurge is dually credited to digital advancements and the affordances of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing researchers with the opportunity, born of necessity, to innovate their practices (Mwambari et al., 2022). Qualitative scholars continue to re-envision the meaning of face-to-face interaction in conducting interviews and focus groups on collaboration platforms (Howlett, 2022). Others explore the possibilities of text-based synchronous and asynchronous data generation on social media and document-sharing platforms (Colom, 2021; Estrada-Jaramillo et al., 2023; Opara et al., 2021). Social media also allows ethnographers and other inquirers interested in cultural transmission to harvest organically occurring digital content to develop a deeper understanding of political, social, and cultural milieus (Cheek and Koro-Ljungberg, 2018; Kozinets, 2019; Mills, 2018).

All these data generation interactions occur on platforms designed for purposes other than inquiry. The term “platform,” in and of itself, evades strict definitions, instead embodying an infinite collection of connotations (Steinberg and Li, 2017). Most plainly, a platform is a digital space that facilitates interactions between separate but interdependent users, businesses, and interfaces. Digital platforms orchestrate multiple aspects of our lives, including our workspaces (e.g., Slack, Outlook, Teams), social connections (e.g., Facebook, TikTok, X (Twitter)), communication (e.g., Zoom, WhatsApp), emotional lives (e.g., Headspace, BetterHelp), education (e.g., BlackBoard, Wikipedia), and our organizational abilities (e.g., Google Docs, Dropbox), among various other purposes. Regardless of our reasons for connecting to platforms or their intended audience’s use, most are sites of commerce created to generate income either from the revenue streams of users’ interactions with content and advertising or through the users’ increasing productivity and constant connection to work (Jin and Curran, 2015). Social media platforms specifically produce a model that depends on users’ interactions to create content that keeps the platforms viable and generating revenue. Such practices equate to building a shopping center for consumers to buy products, where they pay for admission and create the merchandise.

Researchers who work within these platformed field sites must be clear on the affordances of these imperfect and continually evolving ecosystems (Barbosa and Milan, 2019). In platform studies, affordances describe how the characteristics of an object define how it is used, focusing on how the “material qualities of technologies suggest certain practices while they also accommodate (un)intended uses” (Wetevrede and Borra, 2016: 1). Currently, methodological literature is paying needed attention to the technological affordances of digital research, such as the availability, multimodality, interactivity, portability, and temporality of research on the web (Paulus and Lester, 2021). Authors are also discussing their experiences of conducting research on various platforms, guiding readers in the benefits and challenges therein (Colom, 2021; Lester, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021). However, save for a handful of articles (e.g. Cheek and Koro-Ljungberg, 2018; Mwambari et al., 2022) in this literature, the platform is described by its technical specificities, treating it as a neutral ground rather than a space replete with relational and cultural meanings.

Just as we become embedded in, and thus acutely aware of, field sites in real life (an inadequate term for describing non-digitalized interactions within our highly digitized world), we are equally embedded in digital field sites suffused with relational-cultural affordances. The relational affordances of platforms focus on the interactions between the user, interface, and objects and how these choreograph the interactions, shape sociality, and engineer user identities (Willems, 2021). Cultural affordances attend to the ways that technologies and platforms “either reinforce established cultural values and meanings or... destabilize them” as well as how ideologies are “holistically and deeply embedded in a community and consciously or unconsciously maintained by community members” to “reveal the power dynamics of a network that involves various actors in a particular context” (Sun and Suthers, 2021: 3022). These relational-cultural affordances are an essential focus in understanding digital tools for research, in considering the possible and tangible outcomes of a person’s relationship with technology and objects, including how people perceive the objects and their awareness (and effects of that awareness) of the effects of using such objects, and in determining how cultural ideologies are reproduced and refined within these spaces.

In this article, I present a postdigital critique of the relational-cultural affordances of platforms as being distinctly colonial and white. To this end, I address three key questions: (1) How do platforms enact coloniality; (2) how do the white spaces of platforms work; and (3) in what way do colonialism and whiteness merge in the processes of controlling users? With this critique, I aim to invite a dialogue on the risks researchers take when assuming that a platform is universal and, subsequently, that digital research on that platform is a practice of neutrality.

A note on positionality

I ground this article in a postdigital (Jandrić and Ford, 2020), anti/colonial¹ (Dei and Kempf, 2006) stance that aligns closely with my positionality. Therefore, before moving into the broader discussion of the colonial and white infrastructures of digital platforms, I situate myself vis-à-vis the research that brought me to this postdigital analysis. I recognize that as a researcher and methodologist, I am a knowledge producer, and knowledge exists within systems of hegemonic control that I always risk reproducing. This risk is heightened due to my being a white settler within a settler colonial nation, who speaks the colonizer’s language and who is imbued with an onto-epistemological frame of whiteness. I am also a physically able, straight, cis woman—privileged identities that influence my belonging as a faculty member at a research institution in the United States. Given these multiple privileged identities and my political responsibilities as a scholar-activist, I am committed to disrupting the systems of power where I hold the most power. While there are many pathways of injustice that I seek to confront, my most significant commitment is to disrupting colonialism and how colonialism hinges on the creation and reproduction of white supremacy.

Doing anti/colonial research means taking an intentionally activist stance in counter-ing colonialism while understanding that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is intricately intertwined. It means attending to how social identity markers, such as race, ability, nationality, language, class, gender, and sexuality, were born out

of the need for colonizers to distance themselves from those they mark as Other to justify their oppression, dispossession, and genocide. For me, the crux of an anti/colonial stance is to constantly keep in the fore the way that the essence of colonizers' humanity (that is, my humanity) comes from the creation and dehumanization of Others (King, 2019; Smith, 2021; Veracini, 2010).

Thus, I work from a stance of anti/colonialism as a tool of accountability to evoke knowledge not forced through Westernized, white, Eurocentric lenses while recognizing that I am representative of what I oppose. In my work, critical theories are crucial to challenge my beliefs and assumptions about the world, and I predominantly utilize settler colonial theory (Tuck and McKenzie, 2014; Veracini, 2010) and critical whiteness studies (Leonardo, 2009; Matias and Boucher, 2021) to assist me in deconstructing these powers and oppressions. My goal is to challenge whiteness and coloniality by exploring arts-based, participatory, and culturally meaningful pathways for resistance and liberation in inquiry.

Despite these commitments, I acknowledge that I continue to evade awareness of colonial whiteness, especially when it occurs in the spaces of the everyday. Recently, I have leaned hard on digital tools in inquiry, first, as a response to COVID-19 and now as a tool to reach participants across geospatialities and a method for understanding hegemonic reproduction in popular culture. I also use the availability of "organically" occurring social media content to teach a qualitative analysis class where students "harvest data" for their projects. I initially understood these spaces and practices as ethically complicated yet neutral. What I was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to recognize was how insidious colonialism and whiteness are in the affordances and infrastructures of the platforms I was using.

I began writing this paper as a research note, discussing the use of a messaging app for an online photovoice project. After a year of writing, reading, and exploring, I abandoned the "note," and what has emerged is the current postdigital anti/colonial analysis. To open this critique, I first describe postdigitalism, whiteness, and coloniality. I then discuss digital colonialism and imperialism, digital whiteness, and the impact of surveillance and carcerality in digital spaces. I conclude this paper by sharing reflexive questions qualitative researchers can ask themselves when conducting digital research. To be clear, my goal in this article is to aid in understanding how white colonial spaces shroud themselves in neutrality while simultaneously creating racialized exclusion, with a focus on the effects these realities can have on research participants. Given the expanse of the internet and the rapidity with which digital scholars are pulling apart these realities, this paper is not meant to be definitive or complete but to open a conversation built on critical awareness.

Postdigitalism, whiteness, and colonialism

Interest in the globalization of digital technologies and our changing relationships with these technologies has given rise to postdigital studies. Just what is meant by postdigital is contested (Knox, 2019). Scholars utilize the term *post* to indicate a period marked by a society's disillusioned and mundane socio-technological relations posterior to the novel experiences and perceptions of technology. Some have adopted the term *post* to advance critical explorations of what digital technologies are and what they mean in human being

(Knox, 2019). In the spirit of the critical, Peters and Besley (2019: 65) have written the following:

the postdigital does not describe a situation, condition or event after the digital. It is not a chronological term but rather a critical attitude (or philosophy) that inquires into the digital world, examining and critiquing its constitution, its theoretical orientation and its consequences.

These critically oriented, postdigital scholars probe the political economy of digital infrastructures and the merger of biological and technological systems to understand how they “constitute the unsurpassable horizon for existence and becoming” (Peters and Besley, 2019: 65). One goal of postdigital ruminations is to “counter oppressive technologies, or more specifically the uses of technologies that mystify realities with (un)intentional unjust outcomes” (Misiaszek et al., 2022: 122).

The bifurcation of the meanings of the post in postdigital, from historical significance to critical attitude, is arbitrary. Exploring postdigital relations requires understanding the turning points in technology’s history that have shifted it from novel to mundane while critically evaluating how pervasive the digital world is in directly and indirectly shaping global society (Knox, 2019). Through a postdigital lens, we can understand digital technology as a process of continuity and an enduring history “already embedded in, and entangled with, existing social practices and economic and political systems” (Knox, 2019: 358).

What is available to us within the digital world has been developed by people living in a particular time, place, and space. It is crucial to pull apart the historical, spatial, and ideological drives of that time, place, and space. For example, the internet was conceived in the United States by the Department of Defense as it sought to understand how best to disseminate information following a feared nuclear attack in response to the Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik satellite (Curran et al., 2016). While many countries have contributed to the ongoing expansion of digital technologies, the United States continues to dominate in digital platform ownership, creation, and exportation (Kenney and Zysman, 2016). The militaristic origins and ongoing market domination of digital platforms have created the increasing need for postdigital scholarship that attends to the colonial (Kwet, 2019; Mann and Daly, 2019) and white ideologies (Matias and Aldern, 2020; Noble, 2018) undergirding digital technologies’ use, availability, structure, effects, and content (Jandrić and Ford, 2020).

Colonialism is a foreign power’s domination of a sovereign people or country (Jordan, 2022). There are multiple types of colonialism, from exploitative to settler, each with differing goals yet driven by imperialistic beliefs in the superiority of the colonizers and their entitlement to take people, land, and resources for profit (Smith, 2021; Tuck and McKenzie, 2014). Whiteness is hard-wired into colonialism as European colonizers (those who named themselves white) invented race to justify the genocide, enslavement, land theft, and oppression of Others—those who were established as non-white (Veracini, 2010). The intersection of the invention of race, and the white race in particular, and colonial domination has created a global world that is subjected to whiteness—a racialized-ideological discourse that white people are superior to all non-white people (Leonardo, 2002). Central to white colonial domination is the forced imposition of the

colonizer's values, culture, and language on the colonized, which has created nations, institutions, and practices grounded in the white racial frame (Feagin, 2020).

In countries like the United States, this discourse has material, relational, physical, emotional, and cultural consequences as white culture, beliefs, and identity have been normalized through time, becoming the standard by which all others are compared (Jordan, 2023). Whiteness "transcends national boundaries" (Leonardo, 2002: 32) as it is intrinsic to the structures of globalization. This transcendence is especially seen in neo-colonialism, which entails exploiting regions through soft political power, creating one country's economic and resource dependence on another. Policies, practices, institutions, structures, and other processes present as race-neutral while perpetrating the "material and discursive" (Leonardo, 2002: 32) violences that dehumanize non-white Others. Since whiteness is a hegemonic form of control, it is differentiated from white people because all people, regardless of racialized identity, are subject to the ideology and its consequences. However, white people are the primary beneficiaries of whiteness and maintain their power and privilege by sustaining an "epistemology of ignorance" (Mills, 1997: 18). That is, white people willingly feign ignorance of the world being built on white supremacy to avoid losing the privileges associated with being white.

A postdigital, anti/colonial analysis explores just how the establishment of digital platforms, artificial intelligence (AI), and the content and infrastructure of digitization reproduces the colonial ideologies enveloped in manifest destiny and white supremacy (Gray and Stein, 2021; Maddox and Malson, 2020). Postdigital ruminations invite qualitative researchers into a space of criticality to interrogate the assumed neutrality of the digital world and the imperception of how networks built on algorithms shuttle us towards the content that will sell the most goods regardless of the potential harm built into that content. Rather than replicate an "empiricist, apolitical stance" (Leurs, 2017: 135), a critical postdigital analysis centers on how the "globally networked postdigital age... has transformed global structures of imperialism, settler-colonialism, and colonialism without changing their core features" (Jandrić and Ford, 2020: 700) to understand how whiteness and colonization are implicit within the affordances of the technologies we use.

A postdigital, anti/colonial exploration of digital platforms

Currently, much of the qualitative, methodological literature addresses concerns regarding the methods and ethics of doing research online, either in using platforms as data generation tools or as sites for obtaining cultural data, as seen in digital ethnographies. Indeed, the ethics of digital research are crucial and messy, open to debate, and lacking clear codes of conduct (Lester, 2020). Lester (2020) recently framed questions whose answers will continue to evolve, including what counts as human versus text in online spaces. Other scholars recognize that even with all the technological affordances of digital platforms, globally, many people do not have access to online spaces; therefore, digital research already positions itself as research on a privileged group (CohenMiller and Boivin, 2021). However, as Leurs (2017: 140) writes, "what often gets silenced in the methods sections of journal articles is how gathering digital data is a context-specific and power-ridden process similar to doing fieldwork offline." From a postdigital perspective, the significance of context and power shifts beyond understanding the hierarchical relationship of the researcher to the participant to how the expansive possibilities of

research on digital platforms amplifies existing hierarchies of colonial and white privilege and oppression (Leurs, 2017).

Many advancements in digital platforms have occurred within the United States, a country built on settler colonialism and white supremacy (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Given that the United States is a nation dependent on maintaining an epistemology of colorblind ignorance (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), there is a tendency for digital technologies to be presumed racially neutral. However, as is common in the United States and other countries where white people represent the dominant racialized identity, being “raceless” equates to default whiteness (Boffone, 2022). As researchers, we must consider how our digital practices and platforms normalize a colorblind approach to time, place, and space and the transmigration and local domination of whiteness over the geographies and people that interact with them. In the following, I explore digital colonialism, digital whiteness, and digital surveillance as part and parcel of digital inquiry.

Digital colonialism, digital imperialism

The predigital goals of colonialism were justified and furthered through data gathering about colonized people as scholars moved across geographies to study “exotic” cultures (Smith, 2021). These processes of academic imperialism measured cultures against European norms, depicting Othered cultures as savage and unknowing, thereby justifying their colonization, enslavement, and genocide. At the same time, these processes led to the establishment of Westernized knowledge systems and educational institutions as a stabilizing force of colonial rule, indoctrinating the colonizers and colonized into Westernized ideologies. Through the evolution of academic imperialism, local knowledge systems were made subaltern and borders were drawn around what knowledge is and who has the power to produce knowledge (Smith, 2021).

Increasingly, scholars are illustrating how the global expansion of platforms reproduces imperialism through the implementation and forced use of platforms from the United States. The implantation of these platforms in Othered cultures limits the cultures’ control of information and technology while enforcing “Americanness” around the globe (Mann and Daly, 2019). These platforms tend to be positioned as universally applicable, and “characterized by the placelessness and intangibility of global networks, digital media have largely been imagined as immaterial and deterritorialized entities that are located nowhere” (Steinberg and Li, 2017: 178). At the same time, while platforms from the United States are positioned as placeless, platforms from other countries are depicted as dangerous. For example, TikTok, a Chinese-owned social media platform, has been targeted by government officials under the guise of security, reinforcing the power of domestic surveillance (Fandos and McCabe, 2023), while engaging in centuries old racist and xenophobic tropes about the encroachment of China into the United States (Jordan, 2022). The imagined universal digital geography neglects the US-based quasi-monopoly on targeted locations that edges out “counterhegemonic platforms” emergent within that locale (Steinberg and Li, 2017: 175).

The asymmetrical balance of political, cultural, and economic influences that emerges between Westernized nations, predominantly the United States, and Othered countries, has been termed platform imperialism (Jin and Curran, 2015). The dynamics of power created through platform imperialism lead to structural domination, demanding that

localities assimilate to “the tech products, models, and ideologies of foreign powers—led by the United States—constitut[ing] a twenty-first century form of colonisation” (Kwet, 2019: 4). As Kwet (2019: 8) warns, these systems allow the United States to extract revenue from the localities in terms of infrastructure access and appropriation of intellectual property and also control information flow and determine “social activities (like social networking and cultural exchange), and a plethora of other political, social, economic and military functions mediated by their technologies.”

Like the economic domination and resource exploitation of classical colonization, the FAANG corporations—Meta (formerly Facebook), Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Alphabet (Google)—dominate the digital economic space in their home country of the United States as well as in many other countries, extracting content created by others for their gains (Kwet, 2019). In countries such as Venezuela, where high rates of internet access merge with high rates of poverty, platform companies exploit the availability of cheap labor for ghost work. This behind-the-scenes labor, such as audio transcription, photo and video tagging, and photograph sorting, typically goes unnoticed by typical users yet is blamed for creating a global underclass (Gray and Suri, 2019). Such exploitative methods of extracting profit from human labor while depriving them of the necessary resources to grow independent of those companies is reminiscent (Hao and Hernández, 2022) of extractive colonization, where the goods benefit the metropole without the users of those goods recognizing where they came from or how they were produced (Veracini, 2010).

The control of the flow of information in global contexts is seen in how platforms treat content as data, a property bought and sold, granting platforms the right to determine what users can access on the basis of the value it has for the company rather than the user. This control has been illustrated by platforms such as Facebook, which experimented with users’ feeds in six countries, removing all content except sponsored posts and posts shared by friends (Petrovic, 2017). Other news or media was featured on a less prominent “explore feed” unless content creators bought space, thus decreasing access to non-government-controlled content and other independent information (Petrovic, 2017).

Conversely, platforms suggest that they prioritize individual liberty and open content, which contradicts the priorities of Indigenous knowledge holders, who tie the type of knowledge shared with the authority level of the sharee (Wilson, 2008). Knowledge from this perspective cannot (or should not) be easily abstracted, decontextualized, and sold (Funk and Guthadjaka, 2020). A concern arises when considering how the design of platforms reproduces colonial white knowledge domination by shifting “authority over knowledge away from Indigenist intellectual sovereign processes and rights to self-determination” (Funk and Guthadjaka, 2020: 1). The architecture of these platforms, developed in the United States, is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to account for the local needs, rights, and beliefs of the communities where they are implanted. For example, Facebook’s platform makes it difficult for a user to delete their account, which does not account for the needs of some Aboriginal Australians, where during mourning, there are restrictions on the use and reproduction of the names and images of recently deceased people (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).

Beyond the exploitation and the control of information, when platforms from the United States dominate in other countries, there is an impending cultural domination

in the infiltration of the developers' ideological beliefs. Cultural domination through digital imperialism relies on the same ideologies that fueled colonialism, such as seen in manifest destiny (Mann and Daly, 2019) and the colonizers' belief that they were fated, due to their unique and intrinsic virtue as "Americans," to civilize savage people and territories. The same ring of destiny and civilization undergirds US-based platforms territorializing markets abroad and fast-tracking digital technologies in classrooms and other institutions to aid those countries in meeting the demands of the global marketplace (Kwet, 2021).

Maddox and Malson (2020: 8) warn that digital imperialism is not only spreading "'Americanness' across the globe" but a particular type of cyberlibertarianism specific to the goals of Silicon Valley that prioritize free market, meritocratic, individualistic, and capitalistic market hierarchies. While this contemporary form of imperialism occurs under the guise of creating a globally borderless community, what surfaces is the United States' desire "to lay claim to territorial dominance" (Maddox and Malson, 2020: 8). The processes and results of digital colonialism and imperialism provoke multiple tensions for qualitative inquirers, including the ways in which platforms grant us the technological entrée into Othered countries or cultures, the perception of content as data, and thus property for the taking, and how the platforms we use are governed by ideologies not meant for participants but are only meant to extract labor and economy from them.

Digital whiteness

Digital platforms mirror global systems of racism that are structurally embedded in and simultaneously reproductive of whiteness (Boffone, 2022). One of the primary tricks of whiteness, and what makes it a consistent and persistent reality in Western cultures, is that it covers itself, making itself the norm or default mode, so that actions and beliefs of exclusion and white supremacy are marked as only those that are radical and overtly racist. However, as Western cultures operate under the cover of this colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), whiteness is always operating in the background, creating "a social space where whiteness goes unquestioned" and is obfuscated (Brunsma et al., 2020: 14). It is through the operating system that is whiteness that digital platforms reify and reproduce white supremacy and racialized exclusion. While these spaces claim to be raceless, inclusive, and equitable, platforms' underlying whiteness works to "hide, speed up, and even deepen discrimination, while appearing neutral or benevolent" (Benjamin, 2019: 4).

Matamoros-Fernández described these impacts and processes as "platformed racism," a racism that has "dual meanings: first, it evokes platforms as amplifiers and manufacturers of racist discourse and second, it describes the modes of platform governance that reproduce (but that can also address) social inequalities" (2017: 930). Daniels (2013: 702) warned of platform racism over a decade ago, saying that social media and other digital worlds created spaces "where race and racism play out in interesting, sometimes disturbing way." Platformed racism occurs through a variety of mechanisms, including cultural and financial appropriation, ontological expansiveness, and the "coded gaze" (Buolamwini, 2023: xiii).

The reality of appropriation has material effects on creators of color, where their original content is extracted and exploited for the profit and influence of white creators. This occurs on platforms such as TikTok, where dance challenges invite creators to innovate a new dance and encourage others to perform the dance themselves. While positioned as a fun and egalitarian method of connecting social media users, within the “attention economy” (Davis, 2022: 29), digital-ideological mechanisms that led the creation of algorithms promote certain creators over others and creators of color are routinely alienated from the subsequent financial and influence rewards as a white creator becomes known for and profits off the dance. Subsequently, the cultural relevance of the dance is lost, and the normality of whiteness is baked further into the system (Boffone, 2022). This phenomenon is not new and is seen in academia when white scholars become known for the theorizing of critical scholars of color while they depoliticize the theories (Compton-Lilly et al., 2002).

The concept of ontological expansiveness describes the nuance and intricacy of how whiteness creates digital spaces and how digital spaces recreate racialized differences (Sullivan, 2006). As Sullivan (2006: 10) wrote white people as ontologically expansive, meaning they “tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, or otherwise—are or should be available to them to move in and out as they wish.” In digital spaces, we see ontological expansiveness occurring through many means, from digital imperialism described above to cultural appropriation, wherein white people “demonstrate racially-entitled access to cultural practices and spaces” representing “exploitation of the language, customs, or practices of communities of color... commodities to be used for the benefit of white people and then discarded at their discretion” (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2020: 436).

Culturally appropriative ontological expansiveness occurs in seemingly “harmless” ways, such as digital blackface, where white people adopt the images of Black people to express their feelings or thoughts. What is often positioned as a playful exchange is illustrative of the modern rhetoric of racism, which uses humor to reify stereotyped racializations while reproducing white entitlement at the belittlement of Others (Nakamura, 2013). Through digital blackface, images, voices, and movements reminiscent of minstrel shows portraying Black people as overly animated, hypersexual, aggressive, and dramatically comedic are used for a white person to enact a persona, shedding, appropriating, and profiting off Black identities as they wish (Howard, 2022; Williams, 2021). The use of avatars also promotes appropriation through the production of racially based cyber-typed images, from cartoon “Chinese” pandas to representations of geishas or ninjas (Nakamura, 2013). Through avatars, users can temporarily appropriate racialized identities without recourse or the inherent risks of being racialized (Nakamura, 2013). To be clear, both cybertyping and digital blackface perpetuate whiteness through the “stylized gestures, parodic reiterations, and corporeal enactments that purport these racial inscriptions are somehow ‘real’” (Nayak, 2016: 173), rather than stereotyped artifacts of whiteness.

While ontological expansiveness describes how whiteness is perpetuated through presumed entitlement, it also describes how white people create space and how white space creates race. On digital platforms, whiteness is normed, for example, by not allowing users to denote their race, creating the digital world as a raceless, default white space

(McIlwain, 2017). Concurrently, social media platforms contain filters that, while not being their purpose, automatically lighten skin tones, in effect whitewashing darker skin tones (Jerkins, 2015).

These seemingly small processes norm whiteness while other processes, such as human-designed algorithms, reproduce race by deepening oppression, disparities, and chronic racism (Noble, 2018). Once considered an objective computational performance, algorithms are now called to task as some of the greatest instigators of race-based hate and the dehumanization of people of color (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). Noble (2018) details the many affordances of algorithmic oppression, such as web searching the term “Black girls” and being directed to pornography, or how facial recognition software automatically tagged Black people as “apes and animals,” or how searching the word n***** in Google Maps led to a map of the US White House during President Obama’s terms. On social media platforms, the intersection of algorithms and AI can be manipulated to spread hate, as seen with Microsoft’s quickly disbanded Tay, a machine-learning chatbot released on Twitter (X) in 2016. Subsequent to users’ interactions with Tay, she quickly began tweeting racist, antisemitic, and violently misogynistic messages (Vorsino, 2021).

Recently, Buolamwini (2023: 10) described the “coded gaze,” the “embedded views that are propagated by those who have the power to code systems” as deeply problematic for the burgeoning field of AI. As the data selected to train AI, most often reflects the prejudices, preferences, and priorities of whiteness, the outcomes of what AI predicts can lead to intersectional discrimination largely, and racism, more specifically (Hsu, 2024). Buolamwini’s (2023) work on the coded gaze was prompted by her experience of the failures and misidentification of facial recognition programs. The algorithms that train facial recognition AI were created on, by, and for the faces of white men, resulting in biased facial recognition with dire consequences, including discrimination in financing, policing, employment, medical care, and housing (Buolamwini, 2023).

The coded gaze of generative AI on platforms such as ChatGPT, Claude, and others has increased the expansiveness and ubiquity of platformed racism. via the data AI are trained on, and the uncritical prompts fed into the programs (Hsu, 2024). For example, when asking an image generator to produce an image of a kind person, this image is often white, while images generated from prompts about poverty routinely show people with darker skin tones. Even when using explicit counter-prompts such as “adding the word ‘white’ to a prompt for a ‘poor person’” can lead to “images in which commonly associated features of whiteness, such as blue eyes, were added to dark-skinned faces” (Ananya, 2024, para. 11).

The contradiction of online spaces is that they at once claim to be raceless—a utopia where all belong—however, through acts like digital blackface, the coded gaze of algorithmic processes, and lax policies promoting “critical discourse,” these spaces reproduce and reify derogatory, racist, and sensationalist ideologies through the free-flow and pushed content to obtain more traffic (Buolamwini, 2023). Via platformed racism, platforms are used as tools to promote racist ideologies that are allowed to flow through spaces, such as Twitter (X), where content moderation is arbitrarily applied against a set of vague standards, implicitly providing cover to the reproduction of racism and whiteness (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021).

As qualitative inquirers conducting research in these spaces, we must pause to consider what it means to invite and engage participants in platformed field sites that tacitly support racism a depict whiteness as neutral.

Digital surveillance and carceral control

The concept of surveillance and carceral control sits at the intersection of coloniality and whiteness (Jordan, 2022). In North America, colonial expansion was predicated on the violence of surveilling and controlling the populations indigenous to the land. This control was maintained by state-sponsored violence, from rape and murder to the separation of families by placing children in “schools” suppressive of Indigenous knowledge and culture that doubled as places of indentured servitude (Stone-Mediatore, 2019). Following the end of slavery in the United States, the proliferation of Black Codes, laws restricting free and freed Black people, led to incarceration and institutionalization to enforce labor and social control among racialized people (Davis, 2011). These efforts at surveilling and incarcerating were implemented under the guise of protecting public decency and promoting civil society, creating what Stone-Mediatore (2019: 2) describes as “state-violence-disguised-as-righteousness.” That is, the violence of colonialism and racism were wrapped in the rhetoric of white supremacy and manifest destiny as salvation and progress (Mignolo, 2007).

Today, surveillance and carceral logics have a complicated role in digital coloniality and whiteness. Surveillance is endemic in digitized societies, where platforms invoke a crowdsourced panopticon of participatory surveillance facilitated by users broadcasting personal information across vast and unknown audiences (Weissman, 2021). This culture of peer-to-peer surveillance complicates the relationship between privacy and surveillance by encouraging people to monitor themselves and others, merged with the tension and desire to hold influence over oneself and others (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Marx, 2019).

These tensions occur when content creators cede privacy to gain more viewers while the surveillants of online content are fed content on the basis of the values upheld by the platforms’ algorithms. While content creators appear to control the information flow, they are still subject to the values built into the platform that determine which content is more valuable and which content is inappropriate. Returning to the idea of the digital panopticon, we must consider how “naturally occurring data” (Paulus et al., 2017: 752) exists within an architecture of crowdsourced control wherein “the ‘carceral’ with its many diffuse or compact forms, its institutions of supervision or constraint, of discreet surveillance and insistent coercion” (299), are present in most aspects of life and engaged in practices meant to “justify, normalize, and naturalize punishments, expulsion, and violence” against people of color (Gray and Stein, 2021: 543).

Within social media spaces, there is increasing acknowledgment that platforms promote racialized practices through surveillance by removing content created by racialized users to prioritize the content of white creators (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). The banning and purging of racialized users’ accounts on social media platforms interweave with the reality of living in a carceral state of exclusion and surveillance bent on stabilizing capitalism, neoliberalism, and white supremacy. Black women on Facebook have repeatedly described how their content and eventually their profiles are

banned and removed when they openly discuss racism on the platform (Gray and Stein, 2021). For example, podcaster and activist Wysinger posted, “White men are so fragile, and the mere presence of a Black person challenges every single thing in them” (Guynn, 2019: para. 3). Within 15 minutes, Facebook classified this post as hate speech and suspended Wysinger’s account, threatening banishment if she continued to post such content. The suspension of users’ accounts has been termed “Facebook jail,” denoting the carceral logics of a prison, not “as a building ‘over there’ but a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere” (Gilmore, 2007: 242).

The measures taken by moderators in social media spaces are primarily reactive, responding to users who complain about posts as violating their rights and comfort. For example, Instagram removed a post meant to connect women of color, creating a space to express anger and grief over the killing of a Black girl, because white women complained they were excluded from that space. The process of banning and purging due to user complaints has been compared to “how white people reflexively call the cops whenever they see a Black person outside. Except in this case, it’s not my physical presence they find threatening, it’s my digital one” (Delgado, 2017: para. 3).

The banishment of digital content and identities that differ from the white racial frame (Feagin, 2020) is a global phenomenon steeped in the dynamics of surveilling in the name of public decency. For example, in Australia, Facebook repeatedly removed content that showed Aboriginal women with bare and painted chests and banned the content posters for violating its nudity policy (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), likening ceremonial dress to sexual explicitness. Facebook defended its actions by suggesting its audiences “may be culturally offended by this type of content” (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017: 931).

Conversely, while social media companies take a heavy hand against content that could potentially offend a white audience, lax policing of hate speech has allowed white supremacists, conspiracy theorists, and far-right extremists to weaponize spaces like Twitter (X). The inconsistencies in regulating these platforms boil down to the recognition that hate and disinformation increase platform growth (Binder, 2021) under the guise of public commentary and humor (Roberts, 2019). Moderation based on Westernized values is complicated due to the ambiguity of social media policies, users’ moderation of Othered content, and the ways that platforms depend on moderators who are outsourced laborers, neither in the country of the content created nor in the country of the platform’s development. The lack of local engagement in moderation leads to a lack of nuanced understanding, instead prioritizing profit-seeking (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Qualitative inquirers who enter these spaces must consider who has had the right to create these “naturally” occurring data and to what effect, simultaneously asking what it means to invite participants onto platforms that surveil, track, and ban digital being.

Reflexive considerations for qualitative inquiry in online spaces

As the world grows increasingly dependent on digital technologies, so do qualitative inquirers’ options for interacting within our virtual world. Many participant communities and researchers live and work in complex postdigital spaces where our daily lives, artifacts, and realities exist in fluid, multi-mediated interactions. Researchers experiment with creatively adapting digital sites from emergent platforms to traditional ones, shifting

platforms from user interfaces to research design tools (Jandrić et al., 2018). Regardless of how intertwined researchers and participants are in digital spaces, we cannot assume that platforms are innocent devices. They have unique characteristics, infrastructures, and cultures created within and through complex arrangements merging people with people and people with objects. These mergers occur within spaces designed for commerce and are used by people with specific objectives for engagement, from maintaining social ties to influencing for money and power. Within these transactional spaces where anything seems possible, users are enclosed in the specificities of the platform, instructing them on how to behave and if they belong.

Multiple ethical considerations emerge when conducting digital research. Questions arise regarding the intersections between human and non-human engagements (Paulus et al., 2017), the practice of textual harvesting of social media content as data (Tiidenberg, 2018), and the complications in applying traditional research ethics in digital inquiry (Lester, 2020). Primarily, these ethical tensions position platforms as “hybrid assemblages of users, algorithms, and data (among other things)” (Pearce et al., 2020: 164)—that is, devices disconnected from context, place, and culture. By focusing only on the platform’s technological features, we neglect the specificities of their relational-cultural affordances, including the underlying systems and structures encouraging the reproduction of embedded oppressive ideologies (Willems, 2021).

In this article, I described how platforms designed within the United States are spreading globally and recreating the logics of colonialism and whiteness. What does this mean for qualitative researchers utilizing digital tools and spaces? First, we must critically engage with the platforms, tools, and “data” we encounter. As Milan and Treré (2019: 323) write in their discussion of big data and the Global South, this is a relational and ethical query that “forces us to position ourselves... in relation to the situations of alterity, coloniality, inequality, or resistance we encounter in our research,” including the agendas of those building the platforms we use. Many postdigital critiques of platforms’ whiteness and coloniality have come from debates about big data, infrastructure, and the increasing power of artificial intelligence—debates relatively detached from the intimacy of qualitative inquiry. To ethically engage in these spaces, we must account for the platforms as field sites where the power dynamics, cultural ideologies, performances, and tensions of colonial whiteness endure unchanged (Milan and Treré, 2019).

First, researchers working in countries depicted as Globally Southed (Bhattacharya, 2021) can use locally developed platforms. While these platforms might resemble those built in Westernized countries, they mark local initiatives to gain independence from globalized platform dominance to develop a self-determined network. For example, WhatsApp has been positioned as a powerful tool for qualitative research in different African countries owing to its presence and accessibility in participants’ lives (Colom, 2021). However, platforms such as Ayoba!, provide a similar interface that merges features of WhatsApp and Instagram while offering the ability to customize the app to use diverse languages, from Cameroonian pidgin to Xhosa (Adebowale, 2019). Utilizing these platforms would not be a panacea for the ongoing colonialism of digital spaces. Nevertheless, it could both signal to participants the recognition that platforms are not universal and avoid relying on resource-extractive platforms.

While the choice of platforms in a country is essential, a potentially more crucial question rests in our ability and entitlement to do distanced research. When we conduct research via digital platforms, are we reproducing the long colonial tradition of creating knowledge about a people in an Othered place? For decades, qualitative researchers have been coming to terms with the harms of safari or parachute research. Now, through digital means, we are emboldened to reengage with this tradition as we do not have to be “there,” regardless of where there is. On the one hand, digital research provides an opportunity for citizen science (Paulus et al., 2017) and putting the power of knowledge development into the hands of the communities of study (Mwambari et al., 2022). However, while digital connectivity allows us tremendous power to reach more people through platforms, distanced research limits intimate knowing, the ability to gauge risk, and grounded interpretations (Moodley, 2020), which can lead to “top-down, etic knowledge, ‘universal theoretical models’ privileging dominant epistemes, and technical/non-critical paradigms” (Mwambari et al., 2022: 974).

The decontextualization of knowledge folds into issues of ontological expansiveness and one’s belief in one’s ability to master any space, claiming it as one’s own. For qualitative researchers conducting digital ethnographies of “naturally occurring cultures,” how does this recreate the logic of safari research, creating non-emic knowledge of Othered cultures? We should question how we position ourselves as able to or entitled to master an Other’s culture through silent observation. We must consider what it means to have access to users’ content simply because it is made available to us on public platforms. In what ways do we see a content thread not intended for us as a point of data rather than a person’s specific performance? How do we decide that we have the right to such “data” to monetize someone else’s knowledge for our gain, and what does it mean to decontextualize this knowledge?

Finally, qualitative inquirers working in these spaces must examine how the technologies the platforms employ perpetuate racism and whiteness, transforming racialized oppression into technological tools (Hamilton, 2020). Qualitative inquirers reaching for tools such as generative AI (e.g., Christou, 2023; Owoahene Acheampong and Nyaaba, 2024; Parker et al., 2023) need to deeply consider how racist stereotypes and implicit biases are both overtly and covertly reproduced within their work, to further consider their potential roles in disrupting such biases. We find ourselves in an era of increased surveillance attributed to the neoliberal capitalist values of marketing and selling within digital spaces. At the same time, digital platforms play a role in environments wherein new technologies and new uses of technologies control and regulate political, economic, and cultural beliefs and behaviors (Gray and Stein, 2021). The surveillance mechanisms of social media platforms have at least two implications for qualitative researchers studying in online spaces. First, digital ethnographers and netnographers studying how cultural norms and meanings emerge within the online interactions of social media, seeking to say something about co-located and co-created technocultures, must consider how the spaces studied are not naturally occurring but heavily constrained, influenced, and influential of those interactions. Second, researchers utilizing social media platforms for data generation and participant interaction must consider how inviting participants into these spaces of enforcement, surveillance, and whiteness risks signaling that we are ignorant of or condone these actions. In this light, researchers must consider how the space of the platform:

does not simply exist as a given but is constructed and affects (and is affected by) those with the most power. Space is not just a passive backdrop to human behavior and social action but is constantly produced and remade within complex relations of culture, power, and difference. (Gray and Stein, 2021: 543)

Scholars have described how researchers studying the dynamics of culture on digital platforms and using digital tools significantly lack reflexive dialogue with their work and can continue to reproduce whiteness and coloniality (Kwet, 2019; Leurs, 2017; Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). We must begin these dialogues with ourselves, our participants, and our readers to attend to how racism and whiteness are built into platforms' design and governance. Having explicit conversations about the spread of racism and whiteness throughout online spaces and the precariousness of engaging within these spaces for research might seem out of the scope of a particular research project. And yet, such a discussion is warranted as it is not any less important than a discussion of risks and benefits within the informed consent process. A postdigital anti/colonial response should center the researcher's and participant's relationality to each other and to the platform, questioning the role and entitlement of the researcher, the history and contemporary legacy of the platform, and how both interrelate in online spaces with user content and data generation.

Rather than abandon digitization altogether, we must reflexively consider the assumed universalism of digital platforms, recognizing the heterogeneity in how and why people use platforms, have access to them, and the meanings imbued within their use. Technology should not be treated ahistorically, operating outside the confines of culture, politics, and economies, but as field sites imbued with power dynamics.

Rather than provide guidelines for qualitative inquirers, my goal in this article is to stimulate dialogue on the critical concerns about platforms within digital research. In part, this dialogue is the engagement of intentional reflexive awareness of the meaning and processes of those platforms. In Table 1, I offer prompts as an invitation to those who conduct research online to consider how we should move forward ethically, critically, and intentionally.

To date, the expansion of digital platforms is projected as a radical project of democracy (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). However, this project is marked by the Westernized sense of "discovery" and the colonial ideology that one people are entitled to master the land and knowledge of another. Platforms reproduce racialized injustice through their design and governance while encroaching on localities' abilities to develop and profit from their ways of knowing and digital doing. Simultaneously, owing to the reach of platforms developed in the United States, a unique form of "Americanness" is infused into Othered cultures. As responsible researchers and methodologists, we can challenge the assumed universalism of digital platforms to recognize the heterogeneity in how and why people use them, have access to them, and the meanings imbued within their use. Rather than treating technology as an ahistorical artifact, we can deeply engage with the confines of its culture, politics, and economies to design projects intentionally and ethically. By asking ourselves what our role is in disrupting these systems, we can call attention to and confront the globalization of platforms to combat new forms of safari research and detached knowledge extraction.

Table 1. Reflexive Prompts for Ethical, Critical Postdigital Qualitative Research.

Tension	Goal	Reflexive prompts
Colonial whiteness positions platforms as universal and for the public good yet continues systems of domination and oppression.	To confront the belief that a platform is a universal, placeless, and raceless device, void of politics, history, and culture.	How do you approach a platform as ahistorical, apolitical, or imbued with a particular history and culture? How did you come to know platforms in this way? What are the values of the specific platform you engage with? How are these values enacted and reproduced through platform design, intended use, and reinforcement methods? How can you learn these values if you do not know? How can you explore the platform you use as a field site inclusive of complex, intersectional, and competing human and non-human actors? How do the contours of the platform determine how people interact in creating “organically occurring” data? How do you contextualize the platforms for readers of your research?
The public availability of social media content merges with digital colonialism and ontological expansiveness, engendering the belief that content is extractable data.	To question the ethics of extracting and harvesting content as data and consider the limits of our knowing.	How do you determine whose voices are privileged on the platforms you use? How do you consider how digital data is an artifact of performativity, constitutive of the values and boundaries of what is and what is not allowed? What erasures might you ignore or reproduce by treating user content as data. Knowing that users with specific social identities are more likely to be banned and their content removed? How does harvesting something not meant for us

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Tension	Goal	Reflexive prompts
Platforms are often enforced through a carcerality which mimics the values and goals of colonial whiteness, therefore reproducing societal, political, non-digital harms in digital spaces.	To challenge white, colonial, carceral logic by recognizing how surveillance in colonial eras, as it does today, is predicated on the desire to control populations and how this desire is replicated in digital surveillance, shaping user engagement.	(e.g., social media data created by and for the user) recreate white colonial ideologies? How does doing digital ethnography via detached lurking on social media platforms recreate the logic of safari or parachute research? What risks do you run for participants, yourself, and your research when designing research for carceral online spaces? What does an interview mean when conducted at a distance, between screens, guided by the unseen logics of control, exclusion, oppression, and privilege? How does digital research on platforms knowingly grounded in white coloniality determine participant worth and belonging and impact information flow and exchange? Who is and who has the right to surveil your virtual activities within these platformed systems?
The assumed neutrality and universalism of platforms tends to position digital ethics as merely adaptations of traditional ethics, overlooking the unique ways in which virtual research denies identities, place, and knowledge systems.	To hold epistemic and relational accountability to our participants, foregrounding self-determination, and an ethic of care.	How does meeting on platforms to develop data position the participant as only a “data source”? What counts as “data” and how might your definition of data shape your ethical decision-making processes? What does making data out of something never intended for research mean? How do you keep to the fore ethical

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Tension	Goal	Reflexive prompts
The increasing use of artificial intelligence often appears to overlook how bias, especially bias built out of ideologies of colonialism and whiteness, is trained into the systems, in turn leading to biased outputs.	To question the ethics of utilizing generative AI platforms that reproduce overt and covert white supremacy and racism through their various outputs (text, images, decisions), and to disrupt these outputs through careful AI prompting, discussion with participants, and developing critical self-awareness.	decision-making based on the knowledge that social media content is not simply a data trace but the representation of a person living in a specific time and place? What does an ethical relationship of care look like within the platform that you are using? How did you gain access to the people you wish to develop knowledge about? Were you invited, or did you “find” pertinent data? How does harvesting social media content disregard the rights of the person who created it? What role do you have in determining what sacred knowledge is and in protecting this knowledge? What role do you have in protecting participants from mass data experiments, manipulation of content, targeted advertising, and hate speech easily encountered on digital platforms? How can you learn about the large language models that train AI to interrogate how the data utilized can reproduce and maintain racism and colonialism? What trainings have you engaged with on the ethical use of AI? In what ways does your use of AI factor into your informed consent process and document? When and how will you share that you employ AI in your research with participants? Will

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Tension	Goal	Reflexive prompts
		participants be able to freely withdraw if they are uncomfortable with this use? How will you engage with critical transparency and trustworthiness about the tools, the purpose, and the prompts you use? What tools are available for you to learn how to prompt AI responsibly while maintaining a critical lens on how AI use might feed back into your potential biases?

There is no one answer or best answer to these provocations, and the answer is certainly not to eschew digital research altogether. Instead, a postdigital anti/colonial approach incites us to consider how we leverage the promise of digital research while contextualizing and problematizing the platforms in which we conduct our fieldwork to understand how these structures mediate social identities, realities, and cultures.

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Note

1. As Bhattacharya (2021) discusses, the slash, rather than dash between anti and colonialism, recognizes the fluidity and amorphous interweaving that is colonial oppression and resistance, blurring the distance and acknowledging the connection between colonizer and colonized.

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