

ISSUE NO. 6

Introduction: Hacking the Black/White Binary

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We began discussions of this special issue on “Hacking the Black/White Binary,” less than one week after George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old, unarmed Black teenager from Florida. The duration of our editorial process for the issue has been undertaken in the midst of another police killing of an unarmed Black teenager, 18-year-old Michael Brown from Missouri. And now, we complete this introduction upon the announcement in the wake of the failure of a St. Louis County grand jury to bring charges against Officer Darren Wilson for Michael Brown’s murder. A few days after the announcement for Michael Brown’s case, we are pressed to return to this introduction to include another failure by a grand jury to bring charges for another incident of police brutality: the chokehold death of unarmed, father of six, Eric Garner in New York City. In a tragic viral video of the incident, Garner can be heard saying repeatedly, “I can’t breathe,” as a police officer applies a chokehold.

These killings, the grand jury’s repetitive failures to bring charges, and the frequency of police brutality against Black men have sparked protests around the country. Most of these protests have been peaceful, even as they have been met with severe tactics of police repression, including the use of tanks, stun grenades, and tear gas. The protests have relied on digital and social media, viral videos, and hacking to bring visibility to these injustices and to mobilize protesters not only in the United States but also in Britain, Germany, Japan, and Palestine. The optics of this moment, engaged uncritically, might lead us to conclude that America had revisited the severe racial politics of the 1960s, an era characterized by overt suppression of the rights of Black people by White people. It is this narrative of racial suppression – that of Whites oppressing Blacks – that inheres in our easy recourse to binary racial logics. Indeed, Ferguson reminds us of all the ways in which we as a nation have not “hacked” the White/Black binary.

In light of the frequency and brutality of racialized violence, our special issue aims to hack the conversation on the Black/White binary through a feminist lens. This theoretical and political move is critical, as the binary racial logics that organize this country are utilized to uphold anti-Black racism, and at the same time, elide the racialized experiences of Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Indigenous Peoples. This elision reinforces a white supremacist binary logic and political reality where police brutality against men of color persists without any justice or accountability. While the

racial binary may be useful in highlighting continued racialized violence against African American and Black diasporic communities within the U.S., this frame simultaneously obscures multiple structural logics of hegemonic power. For example, there have also been numerous reports of police brutality against male members of the Latino, Native, and Asian-American communities. In 2012, Anaheim police shot and killed in two separate incidents but in the same weekend, unarmed Manuel Diaz, and unarmed Joel Acevedo. These incidents of excessive police force against Latino men also led to mass protests in the city of Anaheim. Moreover, there have been numerous reported incidents of violence and sexual assault against women of color by the police that have remained unaccounted for by our system of “justice.” Most recently, an Oklahoma police officer was accused of assaulting more than 13 Black women in his custody. In this same moment of Ferguson, President Obama, whose administration has been characterized by the largest number of deportations of undocumented immigrants in U.S. history, is now under fire for issuing an executive order granting temporary residential status to immigrants who have been in the country for more than five years. The struggle to create a just immigration policy is also central to the American democratic narrative.

These current political battles remind us that binary racial discourses elide our struggles for justice. Moreover, they reinforce the importance of feminist critique and activism in engaging and resisting these interlocking logics. Feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1989 introduction of the term intersectionality might be viewed as one of the earliest ways in which feminist frameworks sought to hack the binary logics of race and gender, by making clear that gender as a category did not only include white women, and race, as a category did not only include Black men. Along with Crenshaw, feminist theorists such as **Patricia Hill Collins** (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patricia_Hill_Collins) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn also utilized intersectionality to intervene in feminist and ethnic studies through the analytic inclusion of race and gender. We see theoretical concepts such as intersectionality as technological and ascritical interventions we must continue to stay in conversation with and build upon. Several contributors to this issue consider the complex interplay of categories of race, gender, class and sexuality, and even new debates on intersectionality, as a way to resist the obscurantist thrust of an uncritical invocation of black/white racial frameworks.

Recognizing the continuing effects of anti blackness and white supremacy on racialized subjects in the U.S. is critical. In this issue, we seek not to move “beyond” the Black/White binary but rather to offer hacking as an analytic and technological tool that

can richly complicate a multi-dimensional analysis of U.S. racial politics. Indigenous and feminist scholar Andrea Smith cautions us not to adopt the language of moving “beyond” the Black/White binary, because moving “beyond” fails to recognize the centrality of the Black/White binary and other binary logics that undergird Orientalism and settler colonialism. In light of persistent anti-Black racism and racialized violence, we ask how do we hold central our struggles against anti-Black and comparative racial and gender oppressions in the U.S., while “hacking” the Black/White binary? Hacking the Black/White binary then, is a conceptual retooling and a politically resistant act that moves not simply to dewire but also to rewire our current hegemonic binaristic system into one of justice and transformative feminist possibility.

In addition to a feminist lens, the pieces in the issue argue that current anti-racist movements must be theoretically hacked through a digital lens. For example, protests in Ferguson, the city in which Michael Brown was slain, demonstrate the power of social media, such as Twitter, to hack hegemonic racial discourse through the hands of movement builders. The hashtags #Ferguson, #JusticeforMikeBrown, and #BlackLivesMatter told the story of Michael Brown and informed us about the protests in Ferguson. Social media kept our eyes trained on Ferguson, as police brought out their rubber bullets, dogs, and tear gas canisters. Tweets from Palestinian youth struggling for justice in Gaza alerted Ferguson youth to the powers of milk and Maalox to relieve the effects of tear gas. Where corporate media channels failed to cover the protests in hundreds of cities after the Ferguson grand jury decision, Twitter stepped in, allowing hundreds of activists to post pictures and Vine videos of protesters blocking interstates, staging “die-ins” and facing down heavily armed police. Moreover, Anonymous, the global hacker network hacked computer systems in Ferguson, Missouri, shutting down email systems and releasing personal information about officers when the police attempted to conceal the identity of Darren Wilson. As our contributor micha cárdenas argues in her piece, “Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis,” “As Anonymous demonstrate, the ability to shift between informatic opacity and spectacular visibility is what matters most for a contemporary political movement to enact change within a neocolonial regime facilitated by global digital networks.”

This current political moment places questions of racial logics, technology, communicative practices, structural violence, and feminism at the center of this special issue. The nearly four months of waiting that the citizens of Ferguson endured in anticipation of a decision from a grand jury, and the failure of the grand jury to charge

Wilson, return us to the classic Audre Lorde axiom that framed the call for this issue: “the masters tools can never dismantle the master’s house.”

Perhaps then, it is time to hack the house to pieces.

Hack (Oxford English Dictionary)

1. *cut with rough or heavy blows.*

2. ^[I]_{SEP} *use a computer to gain unauthorized access to data in a system.*

New media theorists Beth Coleman and Wendy Chun argue race can be thought of as tool. Articulating techne as race, we appropriate the term “hack” — hack in the utilization of the digital for feminist gain, and hack, as the theoretical “cut,” as theorized by Fred Moten. The ideological concept of race has violently produced physical pain and untimely deaths to bodies of color. We build upon this formulation of race as tool together with a desire to “hack the binary” to ask how feminist of color critique utilizes, reshapes, and creates new technologies to combat the dehumanizing effects of racism in our digital age. Hacking has largely been depicted and practiced as overtly masculinist and white. However, our contributors reimagine new forms of feminist and racial liberatory praxis by way of technology, the digital, and hacking. The contributors in this issue problematize hacking, retheorize hacking, and envision new feminist imaginaries of another world, by way of their critique and praxis.

The broad ranging conversations on “hacking” undertaken here engage its implications both for theory and for praxis, the two main pillars of feminist theorizing. Our contributors use the hack in myriad ways. Contributors hack not only real-life and theoretical problems, but they also hack academic problems as well, particularly those related to arcane ways of conceiving and delivering scholarly ideas. They consider how queer subjects, trans and cis people of color, and gender non-conforming people use hacks in both their scholarship and activism. These essays carve a window into a myriad of new and evolving, creative, scholarly approaches to questions in critical race theory, feminist studies, ethnic studies, and digital humanities. These pieces demonstrate masterfully that when intersectional frameworks are employed to ground technological conversations, a whole new world of scholarly inquiry emerges, with new questions begging to be asked.

In “Hacking Binaries/Hacking Hybrids: Understanding the Black/White Binary as a Sociotechnical Practice,” Laura Forlano and Kat Jungnickel compellingly approach the racial and feminist question of hybrids and hacks using frameworks from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and auto-ethnography. Forlano and Jungnickel suggest that theoretical and methodological hacking around the Black/White binary deconstructs many other kinds of social binaries including public/private, global/local, and amateur/professional. They demonstrate how a range of hybrid configurations, including technological, human, and posthuman ones, challenge our insistence on binary logics. Paralleling Forlano and Jungnickel’s focus on hybrids, Nathan Rambukkana asks us to consider the ways in which President Barack Obama’s multiply-mixed heritage constitutes a hybrid configuration. In “Mutt, Monster, or Melting-Pot? Mixed-Race Metaphor and Obama’s Ambivalent Hybridity,” Rambukkana considers three ways in which new media engagements with Obama’s racial identity constitute a kind of “dermographia” or skin-writing that renders the president as “monster, mutt, or melting pot.” Through his provocative theorization, Rambukkana deconstructs the Black/White binary by way of the hybrid identity and “monstrous chimera.”

Regina Bradley’s innovative digital submission “A Look In Our Lives” itself hacks traditional scholarly boundaries, challenges notions of authorship, resists strict binaries of research and subject matter, and blends academic and digital forms of knowledge production. Her 4991 series uses a livestreamed, recorded, digital panel, distributed via social media tools YouTube and Twitter to ascertain the importance of Black women’s cultural production in the late twentieth century. Bradley’s digital submission challenged the process of peer review, in part because this work also features the work of other scholars, who exceed neat categories of researcher or research subject. In doing so, Bradley’s piece extends our imagination of envisioning feminist and ethnic studies scholarship through digital means. Continuing the trajectory of academic work taking digital forms, micha cardañas’ “Shifting Futures” utilizes the digital publishing tool Scalar to hack traditional scholarly forms while also masterfully theorizing what it means for women of color to hack racial binaries. Like Bradley’s essay, cardañas mines the cultural production of black women artists like Janelle Monae to consider new configurations of black humans, transgender women, and post-human cyborgs and to interrogate the ways that these figures disrupt notions of temporality as well. Moreover, cardañas interrogates the work of “female android hackers,” and the ways in which their gender presentation vis-a-vis Janelle Monae’s music videos, “hacks” limiting ideas of Black femme gender performance and offers new models for women of color trans praxis.

Continuing our discussion of feminist hacking, Long Bui's essay, "Sex Hacker: Configuring Chinese Women in the Age of Digital Penetration," interrogates the role of Asian women within gaming culture who act as "sex hackers." Bui highlights the methods women of color use to reappropriate harmful stereotypes in order to enact power and agency in inhospitable spaces. Using the experiences of Chinese women within gamer culture, Bui "hacks" facile binaries of hypersexuality and normative sexuality, making clear that Asian sex hackers routinely subvert the limiting identities circumscribed by these representations. The ingenuity of Asian sex hackers point us to Leonie Maria Tanczer's interview contribution, "Hacking the Label: Hacktivism, Race, and Gender" conducted with new media artists and hacktivists carmin karasic and micha cardenas of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre. We see the rich discussion shared by Tanczer, cardenas, and karasic as theory-in-practice, a dialogue that opens up further discussion on the Black/White binary and feminist hacking. Both Tanczer and Bui's contributions lead us towards the work of the anonymous contributor who co-created the Feminist Phone Intervention project, also known as the "bell hooks line," as a hack for women enduring sexual harassment. As a technological hack, the bell hooks line is a phone number, which women give to their unwanted suitors, who then receive text messages or voice messages quoting bell hooks' feminist theory. In their powerful personal and critical essay, "The Voice on the Line: A Reflection on Creating the *Feminist Phone Intervention*," the creators of the bell hooks line consider questions of race, agit-prop, and anonymity as a feminist strategy that hacks the racial binary and misogyny.

In addition to the issue's full-length articles, we aimed to continue this practice of hacking traditional academic formalities with a section we call "Feminist Hacks" — short theoretical provocations and art pieces that meditate on the Black/White binary through a feminist lens. Some of these creative pieces take on the issue of the Black/White binary centrally, while others deconstruct the politics of binary logics through their textual, visual, and digital experimentation. Moreover, all contributors demonstrate the powerful resistance work of the "feminist" and "hack," by retooling and rewiring. In her experimental pieces, "RT@Phylliswheat," and "like seeds," Alexis Pauline Gumbs provides a powerful Black feminist hashtag and "footnote poem" that reimagines a letter from Phillis Wheatley to another enslaved woman named Obour Tanner. Similarly, Barbara Jane Reyes' experiments with feminism, race, and visibility, through her poetic piece "10 F Philippines" for the virtual girl Sweetie utilized to fight webcam child sex tourism in the Philippines. In "Bodies and Spaces of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" Maria Fiani's feminist hack uses new media and text to outline how the

Black/White binary is upheld within definitions of PTSD. Moving into fiction, Maile Arvin hacks the well known science fiction Philip K. Dick novel *Do Cyborgs Dream of Electric Sheep* in her story “Do Cyborgs Dream” via an Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and feminist lens. In “Welcome to the Queer Rebellion” Celeste Chan and KB Boyce, who make up the queer of color arts organization Queer Rebels, outline their hacking the binary manifesto through moving visuality and poetics.

Our special issue asks us to think broadly across disciplines about what tools digital humanities and digital frameworks might offer to the study of race and gender. Many of the articles in the issue also ponder the converse question, placing various technological schemas and approaches in conversation with critical race theory, women of color feminisms, queer of color critique, critical media studies, and postcolonial studies. In this way, we hope this issue opens up a paradisciplinary conversation about the Black/White binary. That our yearlong work of editing this special issue was bookmarked by a series of national controversies around Black lives and police brutality simply reinforces the urgency of our academic and political engagements with the logics that structure white supremacy. Is it not long overdue to acknowledge the systematic and structural violence of racism and the limitations of a Black/White binary through a feminist digital lens? Feminist hacking is one way we can deconstruct a system that functions on binary logics. We hope this special issue leads to a continuing conversation on how we can hack the Black/White binary into a politics and critical engagement of transformation and transgression. Consider this our demand for new ways of blending scholarship, digital domains, and social justice, in order to build the world we want to see.

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We dedicate this issue to the anti-racist feminist activists, scholars, and artists hacking the black/white binary, imagining otherwise.

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Dr. Cooper is co-founder along with Dr. Susana Morris of the Crunk Feminist Collective, a feminist of color scholar-activist group that runs a highly successful blog. Three members of the CFC were recently profiled in Essence Magazine's list of Young, Black, and Amazing women under age 35 (August 2012 issue). The CFC blog was also named as one of the top 25 Black blogs to watch in 2012 by The Root.com and one of the top "Lady Blogs" by New York Magazine in November 2011. The Collective also does speaking tours, conducts workshops, and engages in a range of activist causes related to women's issues. Professor Cooper blogs for the CFC as "Crunktastic."

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