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# Tag–Untag: Two Critical Readings of Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Digital Social Media

Paul W. Eaton, Sam Houston State University

## Abstract

This article utilizes post-qualitative inquiry, providing two critical readings – one from a critical-cultural poststructural perspective (rooted in intersectionality theory) and one from a critical post-humanist perspective – of one student's relationship to race, class, and ethnicity across distributed social media spaces. The act of tagging-untagging as described by Miranda is central to unpacking the two critical readings offered in this article. How students understand, articulate, and potentially unpack race, ethnicity, and class in the digital age requires college student educators to move beyond traditional developmental theories, exploring and engaging the ambiguity of these socially constructed concepts in a technologically mediated world. This article advocates that discussions of race, ethnicity, and class in the 21st century must account for digital social media spaces as well as new forms of inquiry - reading and plugging data into multiple theoretical perspectives.

## Keywords

social media, post-qualitative, critical posthumanisms, intersectionality

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The point of critical theory is to upset common opinions (doxa), not to confirm it.

Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 87

My recent inquiry (Eaton, 2015) into college student use of distributed social media spaces—by which I mean engagement with multiple social media platforms—focused on disrupting traditional theoretical, philosophical, and methodological approaches to the study of what college student educators have traditionally termed “identity.” In a world of social media ubiquity, with adoption among college student users reaching nearly total population saturation (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Pew Research Center Internet and American Life Project, 2013), new questions arise. As the “individual human” becomes disembodied, disjointed, and digitized within vast networks of intra-acting (Barad, 2008) architectural landscapes, I propose reconsidering the normalizing developmental discourses of higher education and student affairs, rethinking how students learn, enact, perform, articulate, and grapple with complexities of race, ethnicity, and class. Simultaneously, distributed social media ecologies challenge qualitative methodologies, including terminology now often taken for granted by researchers. Representation, voice, data, analysis, essence, and replicability are disrupted, ushering in possibilities for multiplicitous (re)engagement on and through social media space(s) as well as via theoretical and philosophical perspectives challenging us to think (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; St. Pierre, 2011, 2014) or to wonder (Snaza & Weaver, 2015) what might be different in the digitized realities within which our students flow? What happens to race, ethnicity, and class across digital social media ecologies? What possibilities exist for rethinking our essentializing, normative languages, models, and theories of race, ethnicity, and class, as

embodied, disembodied, digitized, shifting phenomena, moments, or events?

As educators operating within frameworks of “educational outcomes” straddling traditions of positivism, postpositivism, and social constructionism, digital social media challenge us to reconsider what we do with race, ethnicity, and class on our campuses, in our communities of practice, and with our students. How do college students understand, perform, challenge, or disrupt race, ethnicity, and class within shifting and proliferating digital landscapes? What is our ethical responsibility toward reconsidering our practices, models, and theories regarding race, class, and ethnicity, which were developed in a predigital world? Although several scholars have examined whether social media spaces become exploratory or representational sites for construction of social identity (Everett, 2008; Poletti & Rak, 2014; Turkle, 1995, 2011), it remains important to question our assumptions about how college students explore, understand, interrogate, embrace, or reject what we call (social) identity. Until recently (Guidry & Ahlquist, 2016; Junco, 2014), college student educators have largely ignored the digital shift and its potential impact(s) on normative theories and models of social identity development or only briefly mention its growing importance (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Further, the shifting and constantly proliferating nature of social media ecologies—digital migrations across platforms, shifting patterns of use and intra-action between platforms, and new platforms rising to prominence and dominance—make asking questions regarding social identity exploration and (re)presentation on and through social media continuously important.

Given these realities, developing a definitive model or theory of digital identity development becomes complicated, if not impossi-

ble (Ostrow, 2015). Educators and researchers should persistently question what, how, and why students are using social media in relation to a broad continuum of educational objectives, including what we have traditionally termed identity~subjectivity<sup>1</sup>. One approach to opening such disruptive space is explored in this article: thinking through and with data utilizing post-qualitative readings. Post-qualitative reading (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; St. Pierre, 2011, 2013; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) disrupts the gravitational pull of methodocentric research~inquiry (Snaza & Weaver, 2015), inviting us to engage in deep thinking by reading data through already established theoretical or philosophical perspectives. Further, post-qualitative reading disrupts our learned desires for reducing the unfolding world to implications that are generalizable and replicable.

In this article, I argue that unsettling and disrupting race, ethnicity, and class within digital social media ecologies should occur post-qualitatively, within an entangled nexus of theoretical–philosophical traditions. Embracing Jackson and Mazzei’s (2012) call for “plugging” data into multiple theoretical perspectives, I offer two critical readings on race, ethnicity, and class that arose during my inquiry into college student use of distributed social media spaces. The first reading centers critical cultural–post-structural studies and student development modeling, rooted in intersectionality theory and the model of multiple dimensions of identity—scholarship that arose largely in a prenetworked age (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000). The second reading wrestles with critical posthumanisms, including conceptualizations of postidentitarian becoming—a term being philosophized across broad

spectrums of academic disciplines, including the humanities, ecological and physical sciences, and now education (Braidotti, 2013; Galloway, 2012).

The two critical readings offered in this article center one human becoming (participant): Miranda<sup>2</sup>. I provide substantive segments of dialogue between Miranda and me, referred to as intra-active interviews, where issues of untagging oneself from certain photos and posts on social media are discussed. Miranda’s discussion of tagging–untagging provides a particularly useful set of insights regarding race, class, and ethnicity in physical and digital contexts, which is why I center her interview. I, then, plug this interview text into the two aforementioned theoretical perspectives, offering a post-qualitative reading of Miranda’s untagging. In offering these two critical post-qualitative readings, I wonder (Snaza & Weaver, 2015) whether college students operating in, on, and through nebulous and porous digitized social media ecologies are interrogating the possibilities and limitations of these entangled theoretical–philosophical traditions.

In this article, I embrace the term wonder as synonymous with deep, speculative thinking; with curiosity; and with admiration for the awe that comes with living and becoming as a researcher–educator–pedagogue uncomfortable and unwilling to embrace pressures to know or operate as an expert. Wonder gives us permission to be continuously engaged in the world’s radical alterity, shifting dynamics, and multiplicities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Wonder provides the space(s) necessary to continue reading, thinking, writing, and challenging normativity, essence, and our taken-for-granted assumptions. Wonder allows us to follow

<sup>1</sup> The use of ~ instead of – as a connecting punctuation denotes movement and fluidity, and is increasingly being used by some post-qualitative scholars (e.g., Sellers, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and engage in research~inquiry practices that embrace persistent questioning, dialogue, and the importance of being ontologically engaged with the many forces—human and nonhuman—that comprise our shifting and unfolding realities.

## Intra-Action and Post-Qualitative Research

### Approach to Inquiry

This article emerges from an inquiry (Eaton, 2015) that sought to examine college student identity in the digital age. I sought to answer three research questions: first, how researchers, educators, and practitioners might explore college student identity~subjectivity issues accounting for distributed digital social media spaces; second, how college student identity~subjectivity might work from nondevelopmental normalizing perspectives; and third, how we conduct holistic research on identity~subjectivity issues in the digital age on and through digital social media spaces. In the larger study (Eaton, 2015), I immersed myself in reading theory and philosophy on identity~subjectivity from transdisciplinary perspectives, including complexity sciences, quantum physics, and non-Western views (Cilliers & Preiser, 2010; Dillard, 2012; Morin, 2008; Osberg & Biesta, 2010; Wallace, 2003; Zohar, 1990). I recruited seven college students to participate in a four-month digital immersion experience, which included my active following of their various social media accounts, two intra-active interviews (Kuntz & Presnall, 2012), and a debriefing session. All of the seven college students who participated in the larger inquiry were selected based on their high engagement on multiple social media platforms and completed informed consent. These seven college students were geographically dispersed across the United States, with one studying abroad at the time of inquiry.

My inquiry embraced Karen Barad's (2008) notion of intra-action. Utilizing Niels Bohr's understanding of quantum physics, Barad discusses the entanglement of matter and meaning as ongoing processes. According to Barad, ethical research should account for relationality, recognizing that "individual" entities do not exist. Rather, relationships across space and time allow for momentary intelligibility of the world's ongoing unfolding, or becoming (Barad, 2008; Braidotti, 2011, 2013). This means, first, that research participants and I do not exist as separate entities, but unfold and become through our entangled relationship with each other. Hence, throughout and within my research I refer to participants as human becomings.

Relationships extend beyond human-to-human intra-actions. My inquiry recognized that making momentarily intelligible any potential insights regarding college student use of distributed digital social media spaces must also account for "more-than": digital spaces must be conceived and examined as necessarily entangled actors. Thus, my inquiry called for digital immersion, a form of ethnography where I intra-acted with distributed social media spaces of the human becomings who participated in the study, over the course of four months. Accounting for multiple digital social media spaces was critical to this process. Each of the seven human becomings participating in the larger inquiry was actively engaged on between three and eight social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, blogs, Snapchat, Hinge). Each platform harnesses unique architectural affordances (Morrison, 2014), performing and enacting agency. Thus, being immersed and intra-acting with each social media space was important and necessary for thinking through how college students understand, articulate, perform, and harness social media toward ends of performing identity and subjectification (Biesta, 2014),

as well as how social media platforms enact agency, controlling or releasing possibilities for identity~subjectivity of human users. During the immersion portion of this inquiry, I documented material artifacts, tweets, retweets, photos, status updates, blog posts, shared items, likes, notifications, and endorsements for each human becoming. This documentation occurred in a variety of ways, including quantitatively, through research journaling and by creating visual maps of social ecologies for each human becoming. Each became important, critical components of the intra-active data set.

Further, I conducted two intra-active interviews with each human becoming who participated in the larger study. These intra-active interviews also occurred within digital spaces: in chat rooms and via Zoom, a web-based video recording tool. Recognizing social media spaces and technological platforms as entangled actors during this inquiry accounted for technological agency, opening new possibilities for disrupting the centering of human action~agency. This is necessarily part of research on and through digital platforms. Although not the focus of this article, I have discussed elsewhere in my research (Eaton, 2015) social media spaces as becoming, extending conceptions of entangled genealogies articulated by Barad (2008).

### Post-Qualitative Research

Intra-action is vital to the critical post-qualitative readings of this article. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) argue that reducing data to themes, codes, or interpretational essences “precludes dense and multi-layered treatment of data” (p. vii). Advocating for processes of plugging data into multiple theoretical–philosophical positions, post-qualitative research seeks to “diffract, rather than foreclose thought” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 5). Research, too, becomes

an entangled, shifting, contingent set of relational possibilities (ontological) rather than tidy, static, essential, or reduced ways of knowing (epistemological). The process of reading and rereading data through various theoretical–philosophical traditions embraces the contingent unfolding of the world. This is what Karen Barad (2008) calls the onto-epistemological: being entangled as part of momentary intelligibility. Post-qualitative readings embrace the contingency of research as processual assemblage and have been approached from multiple perspectives by educational researchers (Jackson, 2013; Lather, 2013; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; Martin & Kamberelis, 2013; St. Pierre, 2013). There is no method for doing post-qualitative readings, but rather an embrace of opening possibilities within assembled data, material, and theoretical–philosophical positions (St. Pierre, 2011).

### Untagging in Social Media: Miranda’s Perspective

This article centers two intra-active interviews with one human becoming from the larger study: Miranda. At the time of inquiry, Miranda had recently relocated from Texas to the East Coast of the United States to attend graduate school. Demographically, she described herself as female (gender), Hispanic (racial/ethnic), straight (sexual orientation), agnostic (religious/spiritual affiliation), and from a middle-class family (socioeconomic status). For purposes of later discussion, it is important to note that Miranda attended college at an elite private institution in the Southern United States. Her social media use spans multiple platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Hinge), and she reported spending between three and five hours per day engaged in some form of social media activity.

In what follows, I provide substantive

portions of dialogue between Miranda and myself from each of our two intra-active interviews. The first intra-action was a conversation between Miranda and me conducted via Facebook chat; the second intra-action was a follow-up dialogue conducted through Zoom.

Beginning with the voice and perspectives of Miranda is an ethical obligation. Allowing Miranda the space to speak her own complicated relationship between social identities and social media recognizes the importance of “working through” that occurs as part of intensive research processes. Further, providing space for Miranda honors the often-complicated, power-dominant hierarchies so prevalent in research. Allowing Miranda to “speak” here avoids the gravitational pull toward reductionist coding inherent in qualitative research processes—processes that inherently privilege my voice and interpretation over and above the perspective of Miranda (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lather, 2013; Taguchi, 2013). Finally, bringing these intra-actions into this written space recognizes the continual unfolding of research narratives as entanglement (Alhadeff-Jones, 2013; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Entanglement recognizes that readers of research become critical actors in the unfolding of the world, what Barad (2008) calls the world’s becoming momentarily intelligible. Thus, providing Miranda’s own voice allows readers of this article to intra-act with Miranda, thinking through perspectives on race, ethnicity, class, and distributed social media spaces prior to offering my own post-qualitative readings.

### First Intra-Active Interview

During our first intra-active interview, I asked Miranda to discuss some social identities she considered important. Miranda expressed her shifting identity from undergraduate to graduate student and her

Hispanic identity as most salient. Although we spent some time chatting about how a student identity is portrayed on and through social media, our conversation quickly turned to Miranda’s Hispanic identity and its potential importance in social media space. In response to my question about consciously or unconsciously presenting aspects of her Hispanic identity in social media spaces, Miranda replied:

I wouldn’t say that I intentionally post things to convey that part of my identity. For most people it’s not something they look at me and immediately categorize me as, but they usually realize it when they learn my last name. However, I have “hidden” pictures of posts from family members that I’ve been tagged in if I didn’t want others to see those aspects of my life.

I immediately sought to better understand what Miranda meant by keeping photos hidden, to which she replied, “I would remove them from my timelines or remove the tag on the photo.” Removing a tag is a unique architectural affordance provided by most social media platforms, allowing users to disassociate from content posted by others with which they become associated. In this case, Miranda actively untagged herself from specific pictures posted by her family.

Such action by Miranda is precipitated by a confluence of factors: race, ethnicity, institutional affiliation, and importantly, socioeconomic status.

Miranda: I don’t enjoy saying this, but I want to be as honest as possible. [My university was] largely made up of students of high financial status, and it was difficult to be in that environment when I wasn’t in the same socioeconomic status as my classmates. It was never a pressure that people applied directly, but it was obvious with the things that my friends had that I did not. For instance, my friends did not often consider financials when we

planned spring break, when that was a huge deal for me. My family is not poor by any means, but we aren't in a place where we can spend lots of money either. My friends in college had photos that conveyed that they were of higher financial status.

Paul: This is incredibly important. Incredibly. So—you seek to keep “hidden” your socioeconomic status in some ways.

Miranda: I didn't want them to realize that I was of a lower financial background, so I would hide photos from my profile that portrayed that. Yes, absolutely. I would say that's what I keep hidden the most from people. My close friends have an understanding of it, because I know that doesn't matter to them, but I prefer for other people not to know about it. I grew a lot closer to my extended family over this past summer (because I was home for such a long period of time), so I'm more willing to include them in my social media presence. However, socioeconomic status is a pretty sensitive subject for me, so I might continue to be hesitant to post anything that conveys that.

## Second Intra-Active Interview

During our second intra-active interview, Miranda and I returned to the topic of untagging, exploring further the dynamic, shifting, and contingent relationship between social identities, social media spaces, environmental influences and contexts, and Miranda's own becoming—by which I mean her identity and subjectivity as emergent phenomena (Barad, 2008; Braidotti, 2013). I asked Miranda to further explain untagging as a form of what she described as “control.”

Miranda: It mostly happened I would say while I was in high school and in the first few years of my undergraduate career probably when I was

a little bit more uncertain about my own identity and so being a lot more cautious in how others perceived me and what they saw popping up, um, so, yeah, it was an unfortunate reality that, uh, being associated with, um, being a Latina at my institution and even in my high school, um, automatically associated you with being less educated, or likely of a lower socioeconomic background . . . since I do have much lighter skin than for instance my mom or my brother, um, most people can often uh, can think that I am, um, white<sup>3</sup>, or that I am Hispanic, but if they think I'm white they might, you know, say something, um, that suggests that they don't, that they're not quite as accepting of the Latino population, uh, which is very unfortunate obviously and I think there's still a lot to unpack in terms of my emotions in blocking those photos and things like that, but I just never wanted . . . I never wanted to be discounted, um, based on any of those things, and it was unfortunate that they were perceived in a negative light at my school, especially my high school, um, but that's sort of just the way it was, and I never wanted, um, that to be a part of my identity, I just wanted to be able to prove things for myself, and so I removed anything from my Facebook that might suggest that I would be of that background and therefore of a lower socioeconomic status of a lower educational background or any of those things.

Paul: So I'm just curious for you, how do you identify racially? I guess this builds on the conversation in terms of, you know, by untagging yourself or whatever how do you see either racism or ethnocentrism or any of these other constructs we talk about playing out in behaviors on social media. I mean, maybe you haven't thought about it,

<sup>3</sup> Following Lin, Kubota, Motha, Wang, and Wong (2006), I do not capitalize “w” for the word “white” in this article in order to counteract the colonial convention of capitalizing whiteness and white people.



but if you want to just talk off the top of your head.

Miranda: I would say I identify as, um, a Latina, so someone who is Mexican American more specifically . . . I'm trying to think about it in terms of, on, social media, because to be honest, I don't have any other friends, like close friends from college or high school for that matter, that identify as being some form of Hispanic, uh, and so really only my, the only pool I could pull from then, about their engagement on social media would be my family. So there is kind of that dynamic in and of itself, um, most of my friends that did attend [my university], because it's a private elite institution, were of a much higher socioeconomic status than I was, who was on scholarship to be there, so I think that kind of plays out in just even who I even associated with and who I really am even "friends" with and "highly engaged" with on Facebook. You'll see when it's mostly my friends they are usually white or Asian and then with my family, it's very obvious by the last names that they are Hispanic.

### Reading I: Critical Cultural–Poststructural Perspective

As educators, how do we reconcile, relate with, and examine Miranda's practice of untagging on social media? Miranda's shifting relationship with her racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status might easily be read within dominant normative frameworks of identity development—particularly various perspectives on ethnic, Latina, racial, or class development (Evans et al., 2010; Ortiz & Hernandez, 2011; Payne, 1996; Torres, 2003). In this first critical reading, I apply a critical cultural–poststructural perspective, drawing on intersectionality theory as applied to the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Intersectionality theory centers the experi-

ence(s) of marginalized populations, particularly students of color, while emphasizing macro, intersecting systems of privilege and oppression across shifting contexts (Crenshaw, 1995; Lynn & Dixon, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013). Context might be variously defined, such as physical environment(s), geographic proximities, and historical period—including paradigmatic perspectives dominating social intra-action and discourse. Technological environmental context(s) as represented in use of distributed social media spaces would also be important to discussing Miranda.

The model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) has represented the continuing attempt of college student educators to examine multiple identities, their intersections and salience in student development, and the role of environmental contexts in shaping various intersecting identities. Beginning with the reconceptualized model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013), student meaning-making capacity (Baxter-Magolda, 2009)—defined as a student's ability to develop self-authorship and retain internal authentic congruence regarding identity—has served as a "filter" in examining the developmental narratives and trajectories of college students.

In their book *Identity Development of College Students: Advancing Frameworks for Multiple Dimensions of Identity*, Susan Jones and Elisa Abes (2013) further reconceptualize the model of multiple dimensions of identity through the critical cultural perspectives of intersectionality theory, critical race theory, and queer theory. Utilizing these theoretical perspectives might be viewed as a form of post-qualitative inquiry: the authors are plugging the model into critical theoretical perspectives. For Jones and Abes (2013), as well as their contributing coauthors, these critical readings raise "assumptions and questions about power structures" (p. 129),

highlighting “race, class, and gender as systems that reflect privilege and oppression rather than individual identities” (p. 139).

From the perspective of the intersectional model of multiple dimensions of identity, focus should be placed on the entanglement of “the micro and macro” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 162). Thus, Miranda’s discussions regarding race, ethnicity, and class should be viewed not as identities she possesses, but rather enactments or performances situated within larger socio-cultural-environmental contexts of privilege and oppression surrounding the social constructs of race, ethnicity, and class.

One contribution of this article to discussions of college student identity issues is my assertion that educators begin including environmental contexts of digital social media spaces in such analyses. There is ample empirical evidence and theorizing that structural inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, and class have perpetuated, if not exacerbated, in digital contexts (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). These structural inequalities (the macro) impact the behaviors, attitudes, and decisions of social media users (the micro). For example, danah boyd (2014) has written extensively about the intricate identity management behaviors of youth in social media spaces. She refers to fears of context collapse as important in unpacking identity constructions, behaviors, and performances in social media spaces. Context collapse can be broadly defined as the disruption of identity performances between different environmental contexts. For boyd (2014), identity and subjectivity in digital social media spaces appear to be carefully managed by youth in order to avoid a potential collapse of those performances in physical spaces.

### Miranda as Intersectional

We can examine Miranda’s narrative and begin understanding her decisions to tag-untag, through macrosystemic-microsystemic analyses, including fears of context collapse. Miranda’s physical environmental contexts—her high school and her university—upheld white, middle-to-upper class power structures. First, Miranda’s assertion that “being a Latina at my institution and even in my high school . . . automatically associated you with being less educated, or likely of a lower socioeconomic background” exposes ongoing cultural narratives and structures of white privilege (Foley, 2016; Rothenberg, 2016) and class structures being determined by racial or ethnic markers. Being educated means being white or Asian, not Latina, Black, or other racial and ethnic markers. Further, Miranda’s statement that “most of my friends they are usually white or Asian” is a statement highlighting education’s role in perpetuating whiteness, myths of the model minority, and ongoing systemic inequalities in access to institutions of higher education. At Miranda’s private, elite university, most students were white or Asian.

The inextricable connections between race, ethnicity, and class are evident in Miranda’s narrative as well. Class issues became important to Miranda once she matriculated to her university environment. “Most of my friends that did attend [my university], because it’s a private elite institution, were of a much higher socioeconomic status,” Miranda stated. Her potential shame, being a “scholarship” student in this environment, forced her to make certain decisions to uphold the classist structure of the university environment. For example, she made decisions to participate in spring break activities, although such decisions may have been financially difficult. “It was never a pressure that people applied directly, but it was obvious with the things that my friends

had that I did not. For instance, my friends did not often consider financials when we planned spring break, when that was a huge deal for me.”

Within physical environmental contexts that privilege whiteness and oppress or marginalize people within lower socioeconomic strata, we can begin to unpack Miranda’s decisions to untag across social media spaces. Miranda sought to distance herself from identities as lower socioeconomic status or Latina to avoid being “discounted.” From an intersectional perspective, Miranda’s decisions in social media space are more importantly viewed through macrosystemic perspectives. Societal and institutional power dynamics associated with the privileging of whiteness and upper-class mobility structure Miranda’s micro-level decisions in social media spaces. In mediated digital spaces, Miranda untags herself from photos that may align her with either the identities of Latina or middle class to avoid context collapse (boyd, 2014) in the physical spaces of her educational environments.

I just wanted to be able to prove things for myself, and so I removed anything from Facebook that might suggest that I would be of that background and therefore of a lower socioeconomic status of a lower educational background or any of those things.

The oppressive structures of society—racism, ethnocentrism, and classism—all powerfully operate in Miranda’s digital spaces. She actively untags herself in digital spaces to avoid aligning herself with social identities that may discredit her being within the physical environmental spaces of her educational institutions.

One must also speak of Miranda’s privilege, particularly related to perceived racial identity. Issues of colorism are tightly bound up with macrosystemic structures of white privilege (Trucio-Haynes, 2000; Rothenberg, 2016). Miranda’s light skin complexion

provides opportunities to participate in the white power structure; opportunities that are not afforded her brother or mother, for example: “I do have much lighter skin than for instance my mom or my brother.” Miranda clearly harnesses this privilege in her decision to untag herself from photos in digital social media environments. Thus, although she identifies as Latina, “Mexican American specifically,” in social media environments she harnesses tagging–untagging in an inadvertent perpetuation of white, upper-class power structures. For this, she recognizes a cost: “I think there’s still a lot to unpack in terms of my emotions in blocking those photos and things like that.”

## Reading II: Critical Posthumanisms

In Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White’s (2012) book *Race After the Internet*, many contributors raise questions about the ongoing utility of critical cultural perspectives as the epistemological position from which to understand race, and I would argue class, in a digital age. Tara McPherson (2012) refers to cultural studies and poststructuralism as “powerful operating systems that have served us well . . . in desperate need of updating and patching” (p. 35). McPherson traces the historical development of UNIX operating systems alongside the cultural and identity political revolutions of the 1960s, arguing that analyses of race in digital space focusing solely on visual representation/nonrepresentation miss the point by failing to account for coding and architectural boundaries of digital spaces. UNIX—a programming code designed specifically with efficiency in mind—is a model of computer programming that compartmentalizes and fragments operations. Modularity leads to lenticular logic, “a way of seeing the world as discrete modules or nodes, a mode that suppresses relation and context” (McPherson, 2012, p. 25). UNIX, McPherson argues, has

shaped our contemporary digital and social architectures in profound ways, including our thinking about race: “[UNIX] structures representations but also epistemologies. It also serves to secure our understanding of race in very narrow registers, fixating on sameness or difference while forestalling connection and interrelation” (McPherson, 2012, p. 25).

Posthuman philosophy–theory seeks to question, disrupt, and deterritorialize (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) such fragmented thinking, focusing on relationality, ontology, and onto-epistemology, rather than solely epistemological issues (Barad, 2008; Braidotti, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Snaza & Weaver, 2015; Wolfe, 2012). Of particular importance to the present discussion is the role of posthumanisms in disrupting identity and subjectivity, projects that education, and college student educators in particular, have spent considerable energy seeking to understand. Rosi Braidotti’s (2013) call for “post-identitarian, non-unitary and transversal subjectivity” (p. 172) arises not only to disrupt critical cultural and poststructural theoretical approaches but also to account for the more-than-human relational ecologies entangled in processes of becoming.

For Braidotti (2013), accounting for becoming includes examining the increasing role of technological mediation. Identity and subjectivity in the digital age cannot be understood solely from embodied individualistic perspectives. Technological innovations, including digital social media, have resulted in disembodiment, hybridity, and nomadism. Constantly shifting patterns of relationality in digital spaces complicate questions of identity and subjectivity as static, essential, or unitary. Naylor (2010) asserts as much, stating the “disembodiment, corporeal transcendence, and augmentation result in posthuman identity” (p. 3).

What Braidotti calls for, and believes is offered through critical posthumanisms, are opportunities “to become the sorts of subjects who actively desire to reinvent subjectivity as a set of mutant values” (p. 93). Such opportunities are rooted in an ontological ethicality more pleasurable than “the perpetuation of familiar regimes” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 93). These “familiar regimes” are unitary, embodied, and possessive individualisms of critical cultural and poststructural identity politics—race, ethnicity, and class being three examples. What Braidotti calls for in her critical posthumanism is “becoming-minoritarian or becoming-nomad” (p. 53). This call is partially rooted in greater understanding and examination of technologically mediated relationships.

Braidotti (2011) articulates her “critical theory of becoming” (p. 29) by directly challenging normative conceptions of the subject rooted in what we now refer to as identity. Becoming, which Braidotti (2011) situates in her cartographic method of nomadism, begins with “empirical minorities” (p. 29) including women, people of color, those who bend gender or sexuality, and nonhuman entities such as molecules, animals, and plants. As a conceptual framework, becoming theorizes radical alterity and movement as ethical foundations working against normative constructions of self so constitutive of Western and modern notions of identity. Rather than perpetuating self-sameness toward ends of conformity, becoming releases creative potential to reimagine the subject not in dualistic terms [I am this, therefore, I am not that], but as unfolding within entanglements of relationality.

Becoming occurs only as one works against defining self in comparative terms—a project that even Braidotti (2011) admits is complicated. Working against comparison begins first by dislodging our cognitive constructions of identity and counteridentity

positions because both are rooted in power structures of “the majority: white, heterosexual, property-owning” (p. 31). Thus, although Braidotti (2011) articulates that becoming might be conceived of as starting with “empirical minorities” mentioned above, this is only possible if and when minorities work against unitary visions of identity and “the black hole of counteridentity claims” (p. 32) that perpetuate societal power dynamics associated with racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and other –isms.

Aaron Galloway (2012) addresses more completely than Braidotti (2013) the pragmatic applications of posthumanist approaches to issues of race and class in digitized spaces. In “Does the Whatever Speak?,” Galloway contends that technological mediation has reversed questions of identity and subjectivity away from visibility and toward a desire for invisibility. Whereas “the civil rights movement, the gay liberation movement, or the women’s movement” (p. 116) all sought assertion of subaltern identities and affects, “technicity” has afforded subaltern subjectivities unending possibilities to speak.

In digitally mediated spaces, subaltern identities and subjectivities speak through the marking of bodies. “A body has no choice but to speak. A body speaks whether it wants to or not,” states Galloway (2012, p. 121). In digital spaces, the body becomes “cybertyped . . . tagged with a certain set of affective identity markers (gendered, ethnically typed, and so on)” (Galloway, p. 121). Cybertyping leads to predictable outcomes: racism and classism among them. The importance of understanding cybertyping is discussed at great length not only in Galloway’s work but also the work of Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2008, 2010, 2014). The visual of digital spaces becomes a new form of oppression precisely as bodies and visual cues become immutable standard-bearers for the assignation of traits. In other words, our

oppressive social systems, rooted in centuries of privilege, stereotyping, objectification, and hierarchical power dynamics, move into digital spaces through the marking of visual, digitized bodies. Although Galloway focuses on how such processes occur in video games and digital animation, the very same argument can be made regarding visual images of digital social media spaces.

The continuity of oppressive social structures in digital spaces is partially responsible for the rise of critical posthumanisms, according to Galloway (2012). There exists a desire to transcend unitary, essentializing “menu-driven identities” (p. 119). However, such transcendence becomes difficult in digital spaces where coding, architectural affordances, historical structures of oppression, and visual cues all entangle to mark our digitized bodies. Emphasis on race, class, and classification—the hallmarks of critical cultural and poststructural perspectives—led to the fragmented lenticular logics of digital coding (McPherson, 2012). Critical posthumanisms seek “a politics of subtraction or politics of disappearance” (Galloway, 2012, p. 116) from such perspectives.

What continental philosophers and critical posthumanists are attempting is a shift back toward singularity—toward ontology. This is what Galloway (2012) refers to as “the whatever” of critical posthumanisms. Emphasizing relationality, contingency, ceaseless unfolding, becoming, and enduring entanglements, critical posthumanisms “abstain from the bagging and tagging of bodies. This does not mean that all bodies are now blank. Quite the opposite. All bodies are full. But their fullness is a generic fullness, a fullness of whatsoever they are” (p. 123). The whatever, as a political and ethical positionality, seeks to untag bodies from the oppressive social structures associated with marking along racial, class, or other social identitarian categories, “avoid[ing] the

trap of racialized universalism” (Galloway, 2012, p. 125).

### Miranda as Critical Posthumanist

Miranda’s active untagging of self from particular photographs on Facebook might be understood as an act of critical posthumanism—a process of becoming as articulated by Braidotti (2011) and removal from cybertyping and menu-driven identity as discussed by Galloway (2012). Galloway’s (2012) contention that digital spaces lead to desires for a “politics of subtraction” (p. 116) is represented by Miranda’s actively untagging herself from specific photos that may assign and mark her body within particular racial, ethnic, or class positions. Asserting she “removed anything from Facebook that might suggest that I would be of . . . a lower socioeconomic status of a lower educational background” is partially rooted in the continuity of oppressive racist and classist social structures between physical and digital spaces discussed earlier. However, such untagging of self, when one is capable, able, and privileged to do so, might also “reject the symbolic violence of Facebook” (Galloway, 2012, p. 125) associated with assignation of traits through cybertyping. Thus, when Miranda states that she “just wanted to be able to prove things for myself,” she may be engaged in a critical posthumanist process of rejecting, removing, and subtracting from the digital space assumptions about her abilities based on stereotypical, oppressive social structures that have literally been programmed into social media.

The role of entangled relationality is critical to understanding Miranda as critical posthumanist. In our conversations, Miranda noted that family members would often tag her in posts and pictures that she would then actively untag, stating “I have ‘hidden’ pictures of posts from family members that I’ve been tagged in if I didn’t want others to see those

aspects of my life.”

In digital spaces, digital shadows (Qualman, 2011)—information, photos, and news related to who we are or might be as individuals—often appear without our knowing or permission. Agency is not possessed solely by an individual human actor (in this case Miranda) but becomes entangled with other actor’s agency (Miranda’s family or friends who have tagged her in photos and posts). Resultantly, our digital identity is not possessed or controlled solely by an individual user but rather is constituted of an entangled network of relationships that become highly visible across social media ecologies. Miranda’s decision to untag is not a choice of dispossession—she stays networked and connected to her family—but becomes critically posthumanist as part of her process of becoming. The action of untagging is personal and political. Miranda asserts agency in digital spaces “to prove things for myself.” She seeks to unmark her body from oppressive societal structures that limit and consign her to stereotypes of racism and classism. This is particularly true related to issues of class. Miranda states “socioeconomic status is a pretty sensitive subject for me, so I might continue to be hesitant to post anything that conveys that.”

Miranda’s critical posthumanist stance of untagging comes both with possibilities and with limitations. The possibilities, already articulated, reside in the political act of removing oneself from societal oppressions surrounding being Latina and socioeconomically middle class in a classist, racist, and ethnocentric educational environment. The limitations reside in potential emotional and psychological realms, in addition to the loss of potential cultural networks. Thus, when Miranda states, “there’s still a lot to unpack in terms of my emotions in blocking these photos,” she recognizes the potential emotional–psychological impact

of distancing herself from family. Similarly, stating “I don’t have any other friends, like close friends from college or high school for that matter, that identify as being some form of Hispanic,” Miranda acknowledges the potential consequences associated with the lack of cultural community among her peer network.

The role of technological mediation should be addressed as part of unpacking Miranda’s critical posthumanism. Although insights from Miranda have thus far focused exclusively on Facebook, it is important to note Miranda’s active engagement across distributed social media spaces, including LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Instagram. Boundaries of social media platforms have become increasingly blurred. For instance, Miranda’s social media platform of choice is Instagram; however, her Instagram account is connected to Facebook. Thus, what appears on Instagram becomes embedded in Facebook. Clearly this is important to the discussion regarding the posting and tagging–untagging of photos. Miranda does not actively post photos, and actively untags photos, that may mark her body within specific racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic strati. Facebook and Instagram’s relationship—their intra-action through connectivity for Miranda—makes choices of tagging–untagging partially embedded in the architectural affordances, or agency, of these two digital social media platforms.

However, returning to Rosi Braidotti’s (2011) discussion of nomadism, we must not forget that Miranda’s social media involvements extend beyond the realm of Facebook and Instagram. Engagement across distributed social media spaces becomes important to this critical posthuman reading. Different spaces create different versions of self. I am not making a technologically determinist argument here. Rather, I am arguing that participation across distributed spaces becomes

an act of critical posthumanism by allowing users such as Miranda to become polyvocal. Miranda is a “non-unitary subject” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 100) in digital spaces. Her various relationships—with family, peers, colleagues, and social media platforms—are rooted in an “ontological relationality” (Braidotti, p. 100) critical to her ongoing becoming: her identity not as static, essential, or predictable but as an emergent phenomenal unfolding through intra-active relationships with human and nonhuman actors across physical environments and distributed social media ecologies.

### Critical Posthumanism: Perpetuating Oppression?

You may be asking: Is critical posthumanism simply perpetuating colorblindness thereby upholding a white supremacist system within digital realms? Aren’t Miranda’s actions of untagging herself from photos associated with her Latina background or socioeconomic status buoying larger systemic structures designed to perpetuate racism and classism within digitized–capitalistic society? A case might be made for either or both positions.

Both Braidotti (2013) and Galloway (2012) address these concerns directly. Neither advocates for ignoring or dismissing critical cultural–poststructural examinations of digital spaces—which is why one critical reading of this article examines Miranda’s actions from this set of theoretical perspectives. “I want to stress that awareness of a new (negatively indexed) reconstruction of something we call ‘humanity’ must not be allowed to flatten out or dismiss all the power differential that are still enacted and operationalized through axes of sexualization/racialization/naturalization,” states Braidotti (2013, pp. 86–87). Arguing for hybridity, nomadism, and a reconstruction of identity and subjectivity beyond the possessive

individual re-emphasizes relationality while arguing against “the perpetuation of familiar regimes” (Braidotti, p. 93). For Braidotti, this may mean giving up our possessive investment in unitary identity and subjectivity. We may need to operate within a different, more fluid, less fragmented code of social relationality—not just with other humans, but with nonhumans such as sentient animals, material objects, and technologically mediated environments.

Aaron Galloway’s call to return to singularity, the whatever, is a call against the practice of labeling identity and subjectivity toward ends of new ontological relationality. The whatever is an attempt “to avoid the trap of racialized universalism” (p. 125). For Galloway, digital spaces are the new oppressive regimes of racism and classism precisely due to their marking of bodies with assigned traits, avoiding the nuances of fluidity and nomadism that should be characteristic of a networked age. The whatever is not a call to “eliminate difference,” but a “practical suggestion” aimed at ceasing participation “in the system of subjective predication” (p. 125). I have written elsewhere about how critical posthumanism works for those whose bodies are not so easily unmarked in digital spaces—in particular, bodies that are raced or gendered in particular ways (Eaton, in press).

Like McPherson’s (2012) call to update our programming code beyond critical cultural–poststructural analyses, Nathan Snaza (2015) recognizes the importance of attempting to unpack the notions of critical posthumanisms:

Progressive and radical educators would do well to engage posthumanist philosophies in order to extend the political projects of feminist, antiracist, anticolonial, queer, and Marxist pedagogies. This is especially important because often these politicized educational praxes are staged around a notion of

humanization that ends up reinscribing the same structural mechanism of dehumanization they purportedly critique. (p. 17)

In other words, if what we truly aim to achieve is fluidity, performativity, hybridity, or nomadism, then we should consider looking beyond static notions of identity, subjectivity, and the human, often codified, implemented, and policed through normative developmental theories and models of identity~subjectivity. Look to the more than—the relational spaces and networks that entangle in our ongoing becoming.

### **An Entangled Nexus: I Wonder**

These readings make me wonder (Snaza & Weaver, 2015) whether students are operating in the complicated space between critical cultural–poststructural and critical posthumanist ways of being and becoming. Are distributed social media spaces opening new modes of being and becoming? Miranda’s action of tagging–untagging in social media spaces provides one powerful example for considering such questions.

As educators and researchers, we may need more complicated analyses, readings, and insights into student understanding of race, ethnicity, and class. More importantly, we should begin accounting for the contexts of digital social media spaces in our thinking, theorizing, and praxis. My embrace of post-qualitative readings, plugging in one segment of interview data to a critical cultural–poststructural and critical posthumanist perspectives, provides one attempt toward this disruption. I question what limiting our analyses of race, ethnicity, and class in digital space solely to developmental models, visual representations, or analyses rooted in critical cultural–poststructural insights might miss. Critiques, questions, and insights from such work is important and necessary yet might miss important new perspectives and questions.



Miranda is entangled in rethinking the ethics of identity~subjectivity. Particularly in higher education, we should continue such rethinking ourselves. This means embracing rhizomatic thinking (Braidotti, 2013) and deterritorializing (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) those programmatic codes regarding race, ethnicity, and class that have been our operating system for the past 60 years—the timeframe that best encapsulates what we think of as modern student development theory (Evans et al., 2010). This means embracing new theoretical–philosophical perspectives in our unpacking of race, ethnicity, and class.

Although we should continue to advance critical readings from cultural–poststructural and intersectional perspectives, I have argued in this article for also proceeding with critical posthumanist perspectives. Critical posthumanisms advance Braidotti's (2013) call for disrupting traditional approaches to critical perspectives and Hayles's (2012) notion that “the posthuman evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means” (p. 20). My critical posthuman reading is only one theoretical–philosophical analysis; other readings can and should be undertaken. Future critical research in higher education and student affairs should not only account for digital social media spaces in our thinking about identity~subjectivity but also should consider embracing and reading identity~subjectivity from nondevelopmental, transdisciplinary perspectives. Critical posthumanisms is but one perspective, and one that I have only begun interrogating in this article. Future inquiry into college student use of digital social media spaces as well as more engaged, post-qualitative readings from new perspectives outside the disciplinary structures of traditional higher education and student affairs will advance our work beyond the normative

developmental discourses that often guide our profession. Such post-qualitative approaches advance our profession's ability to be engaged in the ethical processes of the world's continual unfolding while embracing the relationality necessary to rethink identity and subjectivity outside the boundaries of reductionist, predictable control, into a continual process-oriented becoming.

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