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# #Ferguson:

## Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States

### ABSTRACT

As thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, to protest the fatal police shooting of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown in the summer of 2014, news and commentary on the shooting, the protests, and the militarized response that followed circulated widely through social media networks. Through a theorization of hashtag usage, we discuss how and why social media platforms have become powerful sites for documenting and challenging episodes of police brutality and the misrepresentation of racialized bodies in mainstream media. We show how engaging in “hashtag activism” can forge a shared political temporality, and, additionally, we examine how social media platforms can provide strategic outlets for contesting and reimagining the materiality of racialized bodies. Our analysis combines approaches from linguistic anthropology and social movements research to investigate the semiotics of digital protest and to interrogate both the possibilities and the pitfalls of engaging in “hashtag ethnography.” [*digital anthropology, digital activism, social movements, social media, semiotics, race, Twitter, Michael Brown, United States*]

**O**n Saturday, August 9, 2014, at 12:03 p.m., an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a small town on the outskirts of St. Louis. Within the hour, a post appeared on the Twitter social media platform stating, “I just saw someone die,” followed by a photograph taken from behind the beams of a small wooden balcony overlooking Canfield Drive, where Michael Brown’s lifeless body lay uncovered, hands alongside his head, face down on the asphalt.<sup>1</sup> Immediately following the incident, community members assembled to demand an explanation for why this unarmed 18-year-old had been seemingly executed while reportedly holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender, pleading “don’t shoot.” The impromptu gathering soon turned into a sustained protest marked by daily demonstrations and violent confrontations with highly armed local police—all of which were documented in detail across social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Vine.

Occurring on the heels of other highly publicized killings of unarmed black men—such as Eric Garner (who died as a result of an illegal chokehold by New York City police just weeks before the events in Ferguson), Oscar Grant (whose death was emotionally portrayed in the award-winning film *Fruitvale Station* released just one year prior), and 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (whose 2012 killing sparked national outcry and spurred numerous forms of activism)—the death of Michael Brown quickly captured the imagination of thousands across and beyond the United States.<sup>2</sup> Protestors from around the nation flocked to Ferguson to participate in demonstrations calling for the arrest of the officer responsible for the fatal shooting. Television viewers tuned in across the country to watch live news coverage of the violent confrontations between the protestors and the highly armed local police. Images of these confrontations circulated widely in national and international news coverage, and news of these events quickly went “viral” across social media. During the initial week of protests, over 3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter documenting and reflecting on the emerging details surrounding Michael Brown’s death;

by the end of the month, “#Ferguson” had appeared more than eight million times on the Twitter platform.

These statements are simple facts, but the meaning and consequences of these facts will be occupying social analysts for years to come. Much will be written about Michael Brown: about his portrayal in the media, his treatment by the police, and both the circumstances and consequences of his death. Much will also be written about the protestors who immediately gathered at the site of his killing and about those who remained, under intense police harassment, long after the media spotlight faded.<sup>3</sup> But what are we to make of the eight million tweets? What do they tell us about this event, its place in the social imagination, and about social media itself as a site of both political activism and social analysis?

In 1991, a homemade VHS tape of Los Angeles resident Rodney King being brutally beaten by four police officers sparked outrage across the country and galvanized thousands in what is widely recognized as one of the most influential examples of citizen journalism in the United States (Allan and Thorsen 2009).<sup>4</sup> Today, 56 percent of the U.S. population carries video-enabled smartphones, and the use of mobile technology is particularly high among African Americans.<sup>5</sup> The increased use and availability of these technologies has provided marginalized and racialized populations with new tools for documenting incidents of state-sanctioned violence and contesting media representations of racialized bodies and marginalized communities. In many cases—such as police officers’ use of a chokehold in the murder of Eric Garner—the use of mobile technology to record and circulate footage of events has played a key role in prompting public outcry.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Ferguson, video footage of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown has yet to surface, but informal journalism was used to document the scene in the direct aftermath of his murder, to publicize the protests that ensued, and to bring attention to the militarized police confrontations that followed.<sup>7</sup> Through social media, users were able to disseminate these accounts to a broad audience and to forge new mediatized publics that demand anthropological attention. In this essay, we explore how and why platforms like Twitter have become important sites for activism around issues of racial inequality, state violence, and media representations. We examine the possibilities, the stakes, and the necessity of taking these forms of activism seriously while remaining attentive to the limits and possible pitfalls of engaging in what we describe as “hashtag ethnography.”

### Can a hashtag become a field site?

In thinking critically about social media as a site of analysis, the first question to ask, for anthropologists in partic-

ular, is what kind of field site does a platform like Twitter represent?<sup>8</sup> Is Twitter the ultimate “non-place” (Augé 2009) of super modernity, a transient site of fleeting engagement, or is it an instance of a “virtual world” (Boellstorff 2008), with its own set of socialities and forms of engagement? And is the study of an event through social media a return to a previous era of “armchair anthropology”? Or is hashtag ethnography the next logical step in an anthropology of the 21st century, one that has become increasingly concerned with the ontological implications of digital practices (Horst and Miller 2012)?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to begin by distinguishing the town of Ferguson, Missouri, from “hashtag Ferguson” and to recognize how each of these contributed to the formation of the larger “event” of Ferguson. As those familiar with Twitter know, the hashtag symbol (#) is often used as a way of marking a conversation within this platform. The hashtag serves as an indexing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense. In the clerical sense, it allows the ordering and quick retrieval of information about a specific topic. For example, in the case of Ferguson, as details were emerging about the protests forming at the site of Michael Brown’s death, users began tweeting out information with the hashtag #Ferguson. The hashtag in this case provided a quick retrieval system for someone looking for updated news on the unfolding events. But, in addition to providing a filing system, hashtags simultaneously function semiotically by marking the intended significance of an utterance. Similar to the coding systems employed by anthropologists, hashtags allow users to not simply “file” their comments but to performatively frame what these comments are “really about,” thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent. Hence, someone could write, “Decades of racial tension and increasing suburban poverty boiled to the surface last night” followed by the text “#Ferguson,” as a way of creating a particular interpretive frame. Hashtags thus operate in ways similar to library call numbers: They locate texts within a specific conversation, allowing for their quick retrieval, while also marking texts as being “about” a specific topic.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, hashtags have the intertextual potential to link a broad range of tweets on a given topic or disparate topics as part of an intertextual chain, regardless of whether, from a given perspective, these tweets have anything to do with one another. Thus, a tweet in support of Ferguson protestors and a tweet in support of Officer Darren Wilson could both be coded and filed under #Ferguson. Moreover, a tweet about racial disparity in Missouri, such as “racism lives here,” and one about a night out on the town in St. Louis could both be marked #STL.

This insight requires anthropologists to carefully consider the variety of uses in play for any given hashtag as

well as the stances and perspectives associated with any given use. In the case of #Ferguson, patterns emerged in which Twitter became a platform for providing emergent information about the killing of Michael Brown and for commenting on the treatment of the officer who shot him. For example, one user posted, “Prosecutors get real friendly when they have to adjudicate one of their own. But they’ll move heaven and earth hunting POC down. #Ferguson.”<sup>10</sup> In contrast, other tweets recontextualized the situation in Ferguson as part of global affairs (e.g., “#Egypt #Palestine #Ferguson #Turkey, U.S. made tear gas, sold on the almighty free market represses democracy”), while others critiqued the appropriation of this event (e.g., “seriously though, @FCKH8 never posted ANYTHING on their Facebook page in support of #Ferguson until it was time to sell some t-shirts”<sup>11</sup>). Meanwhile, some tweets combined these genres, such as those involving self-promotion of one’s own broader commentary on Ferguson (e.g., “People are talking about #Ferguson all over the world. Here’s a interview I did for a newspaper in Italy,” along with a link to an Instagram photo of a newspaper story) and juxtapositions of #Ferguson with commentary on mundane aspects of one’s everyday life (e.g., “It’s 3:30 ... I’m acting like I don’t gotta be up at 7:30 #Ferguson #HandsUp #MichaelBrown”). This range of uses of #Ferguson, which encompasses both prevailing and emergent scripts, demonstrates the importance of considering perspective and function in analyzing intertextual links between tweets.

In addition to these intertextual considerations, hashtags also have the interdiscursive capacity to lasso accompanying texts and their indexical meanings as part of a frame. Linkages across hashtags and their accompanying texts—which comprise both other hashtags (e.g., #Ferguson, #MichaelBrown, #HandsUp, etc.) and additional commentary—frame #Ferguson as a kind of mediatized place.<sup>12</sup> It is in this sense that much like one could go to the library, stand in front of a call number, and find texts on a particular subject, one could go onto Twitter, type #Ferguson, and find a large number of posts on the subject at hand. But what is the relationship between this mediatized place—as it is experienced from outside the boundaries of the geographical context with which it is associated—and everyday life in what might be understood as Ferguson proper? How does the mediatization of Ferguson, Missouri, through #Ferguson lead to the formation of new “ad hoc publics” (Bruns and Burgess 2011)?<sup>13</sup>

The types of publics created by Twitter emerge from the hashtag’s capacity to serve not just as an indexing system but also as a filter that allows social media users to reduce the noise of Twitter by cutting into one small slice. However, this filtering process also has a distorting effect. Social media create a distorted view of events, such that we only get

the perspective of the people who are already in our social network (Garret and Resnick 2011; Pariser 2012; Sunstein 2009). This effect should signal one of the first cautions for anthropologists interested in social media: We must avoid the common slippage made by journalists and others who tend to represent Twitter as an unproblematized “public sphere” without taking into account the complexity of who is on Twitter, as well as how people are on Twitter in different ways (e.g., some are constant users, others tweet infrequently, some do so from their phone, some from their office, etc.).<sup>14</sup>

Part of the problem of engaging in hashtag ethnography, then, is that it is difficult to assess the context of social media utterances. Moreover, a simple statement of fact—for example, that there were eight million Ferguson tweets—tells us very little. How many were critical of the police? How many were critical of the protestors? How many were posted by journalists (both professional and amateur)? Beyond knowing that people tweeted, we know little about what those tweets meant to their authors and their imagined publics. We do not know, for example, how many of the eight million tweets were aimed at a national audience (and thus appropriately hashtagged for quick retrieval and retweet) versus how many were aimed at a smaller group of followers with the contextual information necessary to assess both the explicit and implicit uses of hashtags and other references.

In thinking about the hashtag as a field site, these questions and the competing perspectives they highlight demonstrate the importance of reorienting social media ethnography from an emphasis on “network and community” toward a focus on individual experiences, practices, and socialities (Postill and Pink 2012:124). For example, some have argued that in assessing the importance of Twitter in the Ferguson protests, we must take into account that, despite the enduring digital divide within the United States, the percentage of African Americans who use Twitter (22 percent) is much higher than that of white Americans (16 percent; Bryers 2014). While these simple figures tell us little about the ways and frequency with which these groups use the system and to what ends, the significance of what has been called “Black Twitter” (Florini 2014; Sharma 2013) should not be overlooked. As we discuss below, Twitter affords a unique platform for collectively identifying, articulating, and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations. Whereas in most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Ferguson, it is worth noting that, at least initially, the most common use of the #Ferguson hashtag was to convey information about the unfolding events.

Before the mainstream media had caught up to what was happening, the mass of hashtagged tweets was a way of calling attention to an underreported incident of police brutality. Well aware of the algorithmic nature of Twitter, users were purposefully hashtagging to make Ferguson “trend.”<sup>16</sup> However, once Ferguson had stabilized as an important news event, many began tweeting about the events without necessarily marking their posts with a hashtag. Some local residents, for example, marked their tweets #STL (i.e., the common hashtag for a post referencing St. Louis), and others did not mark their tweets at all. The only way to really know what these tweets were “about” was to view them in the context of the individual tweeters themselves: when they were posting, what they had previously posted, who they had begun following, and what they were retweeting.

By looking only at tweets marked #Ferguson, one would miss out on a large number of posts that were “about” Ferguson even though they were not marked as such.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, these tweets form part of the nonplace that is #Ferguson, much as diasporic communities are part of a place called “home.” If we are to take a hashtag seriously as a field site, we must thus not assume its fixed and stable boundaries—any more than we would with other field sites, which can also appear to be isolated, bounded, and homogenous but are, in practice, much more dispersed, interconnected, and diffuse (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Trouillot 2003).

However, recognizing that hashstags can only ever offer a limited, partial, and filtered view of a social world does not require abandoning them as sites of analysis. Rather, we must approach them as what they are: entry points into larger and more complex worlds. Hash-tags offer a window to peep through, but it is only by stepping through that window and “following” (in both Twitter and non-Twitter terms) individual users that we can begin to place tweets within a broader context. This kind of analysis requires us to stay with those who tweet and follow them after hashtags have fallen out of “trend.” Only then can we better understand what brings them to this virtual place and what they take away from their engagement.<sup>18</sup>

### The whole world is tweeting

Social movements have long used media and technology to disseminate, escalate, and enlarge the scope of their struggles: Transistor radios allowed Cuban guerrilla fighters to transmit from the Sierra Maestra; television coverage transformed the riots in Selma, Alabama, into a national event; and e-mail accounts allowed Zapatistas in Chiapas to launch global communiqués. #Ferguson did what many of these other tools did: It allowed a message to get out, called global attention to a small corner of the world, and at-

tempted to bring visibility and accountability to repressive forces.<sup>19</sup>

One of the differences between Twitter and these earlier forms of technology, however, is its multivocality and dialogicality (Bakhtin 1981). Twitter does not just allow you to peer through a window; it allows you to look through manifold windows at once. On #Ferguson, you could watch six simultaneous live streams. You could read what protestors were tweeting, what journalists were reporting, what the police was announcing, and how observers and analysts interpreted the unfolding events. You could also learn how thousands of users were reacting to the numerous posts. In the era of transistor radios and television sets, one did not necessarily know what listeners or viewers yelled back at their machines, but on Twitter one can get a sense of individual responses to mediatized events.

E-mail, television, radio, and print have long managed to open up windows into the experience of social movements, but the dialogicality and temporality of Twitter create a unique feeling of direct participation. Twitter allows users who are territorially displaced to feel like they are united across both space and time. For example, during the 2014 World Cup (just a month before the events in Ferguson), the Nigerian American novelist and avid tweeter Teju Cole encouraged his followers to post pictures of their individual views of the matches and to mark these posts with the hashtag #The time of the game.<sup>20</sup> “We live in different time zones, out of sync but aware of each other,” he wrote, “then the game begins and we enter the same time: the time of the game” (Meyer 2014). For Cole, the point was to highlight how a global audience could enter into a shared temporality that he described as “public time” (a counterpart to public space).

#Ferguson and its attendant live streams created a similar feeling of shared temporality—particularly during the protests and confrontations with police. As opposed to someone who might *post about* Ferguson on Facebook, users on Twitter felt like they were *participating in* #Ferguson, as they tweeted in real time about the unfolding events, rallied supporters to join various hashtag campaigns (discussed below), and monitored live streams where they could bear witness to the tear gassing and arrests of journalists and protestors. Engaging in these activities is akin to participating in a protest in the sense that it offers an experience of “real time” engagement, community, and even collective effervescence. Through this form of participation, users can experience the heightened temporality that characterizes all social movements: the way days marked by protest become “eventful,” distinguishing them from quotidian life. The “eventfulness” of protest-filled days cannot be easily summed up in dated news bulletins; indeed, they often challenge calendrical time itself—thus, not coincidentally, social movement actors often develop their own revolutionary calendars,

chronicles, timelines, and alternative forms of marking political time.<sup>21</sup> It was partly because of this heightened temporality that, as others have noted, the news surrounding Michael Brown's death dominated Twitter much more than Facebook.<sup>22</sup> Facebook moved too slowly for the eventfulness of Ferguson. For the denizens of #Ferguson, the posts on Facebook were "yesterday's news"—always already superseded by the latest round of tweets.<sup>23</sup>

### Hashtag activism versus "real" activism?

Many have disparaged hashtag activism as a poor substitute for "real" activism, and, indeed, some suggest that the virality and ephemerality of social media can only ever produce fleeting "nanostories" (Wasik 2009) with little lasting impact. However, it is important to examine how and why digital activism has become salient to particular populations. It is surely not coincidental that the groups most likely to experience police brutality, to have their protests disparaged as acts of "rioting" or "looting," and to be misrepresented in the media are precisely those turning to digital activism at the highest rates. Indeed, some of the most important hashtag campaigns emerging out of #Ferguson were targeted at calling attention to both police practices and media representations, suggesting that social media can serve as an important tool for challenging these various forms of racial profiling.

The first of these campaigns was inspired by eyewitness reports that Michael Brown had his hands up in the air as a sign of surrender and had uttered the words *don't shoot* just before he was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson. Initial activism around Michael Brown thus revolved around the hashtag #HandsUpDontShoot, often accompanied by photos of individuals or groups of people with their hands up.<sup>24</sup> One of the most widely circulated images from this meme was that of Howard University students with their hands up. (See Figure 1.)

Through this campaign, users sought to call attention to the arbitrary nature of racialized policing, the vulnerability of black bodies, and the problematic ways in which blackness is perceived as a constant threat.<sup>25</sup> Because Michael Brown was allegedly shot while holding his hands up, #HandsUpDontShoot also became a tool for contesting victim-blaming or respectability narratives rooted in the belief that one can control the perception of one's body and the violence inflicted on it. These efforts echoed a previous "meme" that emerged in response to the killing of another unarmed African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, two years earlier.<sup>26</sup> Shortly following Martin's killing, a recording of the 911 call made by George Zimmerman, the killer, describing Martin as someone "suspicious" wearing a "dark hoodie," circulated widely in the press. Fox News commentator Geraldo Rivera suggested that the hoodie was "as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George

Zimmerman" (Geraldo Rivera: "Leave the Hoodie at Home" 2012). Rivera argued that hoodies had become emblematic of criminal behavior, given their ubiquitous presence in crime-suspect drawings and surveillance footage of petty theft. This argument elides the role that race plays in structuring the hoodie's alternate status as an innocuous piece of clothing versus a sign of criminality or deviance. That is, hoodies are only signs of criminal behavior when they are contextualized in relation to particular racialized bodies.<sup>27</sup> Many commentators sought to draw attention to this point. In the wake of Trayvon Martin's death, the hoodie became a powerful symbol, with events like the "Million Hoodie March" drawing hundreds of supporters. Online activism at the time included the circulation of images of users wearing hoodies, marked with the hashtags #HoodiesUp and #WeAreTrayvonMartin in a sign of solidarity.

Immediately following Trayvon Martin's killing, many social media users changed their profile pictures to images of themselves wearing hooded sweatshirts with the hoods up. Similarly, in the wake of Michael Brown's death, many posted profile pictures of themselves with their hands up. These instances show how the seemingly vacuous practice of taking "selfies" (i.e., photos of oneself) can become politically meaningful in the context of racialized bodies. These images represent acts of solidarity that seek to humanize the victims of police brutality by suggesting that a similar fate could befall other similarly construed bodies.<sup>28</sup>

Two of the other popular memes that emerged in the wake of #Ferguson also focused on representations of black bodies and, specifically, on media portrayals of Michael Brown. The first of these emerged as a response to the photograph that mainstream media initially circulated in the wake of his death. The image sparked controversy because it showed Michael Brown making a hand gesture that, for some, represented a peace sign and, for others, a gang sign. Like Trayvon Martin's hoodie, the very same hand gesture could be alternately interpreted as a sign of peace or criminality depending on the racialized body with which it is associated. In response, Twitter users began using the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to post contrasting pictures of themselves along with various versions of the question "which picture would they use?" For example, 18-year-old Houston native Tyler Atkins (featured in a *New York Times* article about the meme) posted a picture of himself after a jazz concert in his high school, wearing a black tuxedo with his saxophone suspended from a neck strap. This was juxtaposed with a photo taken while filming a rap video with a friend, in which he is wearing a black T-shirt and a blue bandanna tied around his head and his finger is pointed at the camera. (See Figure 2.)

Once again, these images represent an act of solidarity. They suggest that anyone could be represented as either respectable and innocent or violent and criminal—depending on the staging of the photograph. This campaign





**Figure 1.** Image of students at Howard University with their hands up. Posted to Twitter on November 16, 2014, by David Flores with the text “#100DaysOfInjustice #Ferguson #HandsUpDontShoot.” (Image courtesy of David Flores.)

speaks to larger concerns over privacy in an era when private photos and surveillance footage are routinely leaked, hacked, and repurposed to nefarious ends. More importantly, it also speaks to an acute awareness among young African Americans of how black bodies are particularly vulnerable to misrepresentation by mainstream media (Vega 2014).

The final hashtag campaign we mention here speaks directly to this issue. It emerged in response to a *New York Times* profile of Michael Brown released on the day of his funeral, which described the 18-year-old as “no angel” (Elignon 2014). The piece suggested that Brown “dabbled in drugs and alcohol” and had been involved in “at least one scuffle with a neighbor.” Many saw this as a tasteless, unfair portrayal and an extension of the attempted smear campaign carried out by the local police, who had released what they themselves admitted was “unrelated” surveillance video of a purported act of shoplifting at a convenience store. In response, Twitter users began using the hashtag #NoAngel to highlight the mainstream media’s inability to acknowledge the possibility of black victimhood or innocence. For example, one person tweeted, “I am #NoAngel, so I guess I deserve to be murdered too. Yep, perfectly acceptable to gun down a person if they aren’t a Saint.”

The use of hashtags such as #HandsUpDontShoot, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and #NoAngel speak to the long history of inaccurate and unfair portrayal of African Americans within mainstream media and to the systematic profiling and victim blaming suffered by racialized bodies. Their use suggests that while social media might seem like a space of disembodied engagement, for many, social media can become an important site in which to foreground the particular ways in which racialized bodies are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, surveilled, and

positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence.<sup>29</sup> These hashtag campaigns, which seek to identify the insidious nature of contemporary racism, can thus be understood as a powerful response to the “racial paranoia” (Jackson 2008) associated with African Americans’ ongoing experiences of abject inequality in an age of alleged colorblindness.

The effort to bring attention to this inequality is powerfully captured by the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which emerged in July 2013, after George Zimmerman was acquitted of Trayvon Martin’s murder. Many Twitter users also drew on this hashtag in response to the killing of Michael Brown. It is important to understand #BlackLivesMatter not simply as a general statement about the inherent value of black life in the face of state-sanctioned racial violence but also as a reflection of the ways that social media can become a site for the reevaluation of black materiality. As illustrated in the memes described above, participants often used photos of themselves to contest the racialized devaluation of their persons. Whereas, in face-to-face interactions, racialized young people like the ones described above might not be able to contest the meanings ascribed to their bodies (or impede the deadly violence exerted on them by the police), through their creative reinterpretations on social media, they are able to rematerialize their bodies in alternative ways. With these creative acts, they seek to document, contest, and ultimately transform their quotidian experiences by simultaneously asserting the fundamental value and the particularity of their embodiment both on- and off-line.

### All that is tweeted melts into air?

It is clear that platforms like Twitter have become essential to contemporary social actors, but the long-lasting effects of digital modes of activism remain hotly debated. For some,



**Figure 2.** Image tweeted on August 10, 2014, by Tyler Atkins with the post “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown which picture would they use.” (Photo courtesy of Tyler Atkins.)

these acts represent fleeting moments of awareness, quickly replaced by the customary innocuousness of social media pleasantries. For others, however, participation in forms of digital activism prove transformative in unpredictable ways. For, although Twitter activism is said to be fleeting by nature, it is also inherently aggregative. It is thus important to recognize that the reactions to the death of Michael Brown did not spark in a vacuum; they were fueled by accumulated frustrations over previously mediatized moments of injustice and guided by previous digital campaigns. This aggregative effect powerfully positions different instances of racialized brutality not simply as isolated contemporary phenomena but as long-standing systematic forms of violence associated with what has been described as a “state of racial expendability” that is fundamental to the logics of U.S. sovereignty (Marquez 2012).<sup>30</sup>

As Johnetta Elzie, a 25-year-old protestor profiled in the magazine the *Nation*, explained, “We saw it with Trayvon Martin. We saw it with Jordan Davis—but I always felt away from everything. Then I saw Brown’s body laying out there, and I said, ‘Damn, they did it again!’ But now that it happened in my home, I’m not just going to tweet about it from the comfort of my bed. So I went down there” (Hsieh

and Rakia 2014). Elzie’s words hint at how face-to-face and digital forms of activism work in interrelated and aggregative ways. Although she draws a distinction between tweeting from the comfort of her home and physical presence at an event, her narrative shows how these contexts are interrelated and build on each other—even beyond the confines of one particular historical event or hashtag campaign.

The article goes on to describe how Elzie encountered other activists involved in the protests through their shared use of social media, stating, “They quickly developed a tight-knit community, sustained by their addiction to social media. Together, they live-tweeted, Vined and Instagrammed every protest, through the sweltering days and tumultuous nights, as well as the direct actions taking place elsewhere in the St. Louis area.” The group eventually took on the name Millennial Activists United and shifted their role from “documenting” their actions to “generating” new forms of social community, for instance, through the use of #FergusonFriday to create a space for reflection on the movement, the creation of a daily newsletter *This Is The Movement* to spread news and reflection pieces about unfolding events, and the organization of national

“fireside” conference calls during which activists based in Ferguson could speak directly with those following the events from afar.<sup>31</sup> The ways these activists shift seamlessly across spaces and modes of engagement underscore the slippery boundary between analog and digital forms of activism. Indeed, it is unclear if #HandsUpDontShoot and #JusticeForMichaelBrown represent the use of political slogans as hashtags or if they represent the use of hashtags as slogans. This ambiguity reflects the dynamic, multimodal nature of these activist efforts.<sup>32</sup>

Most observers of contemporary social movements would agree that what is needed is not simply “internet ethnography” but “internet related ethnography” (Postill and Pink 2012:3) that follows users across multiple online and off-line communities to better understand how digital and analog forms of engagement are mutually constitutive (Juris 2012:260). In the wake of Michael Brown’s killing, new sites of struggle have appeared, fueled by both the events in Ferguson and by the events of #Ferguson, #HandsUp, and #JusticeForMichaelBrown. Some of these efforts are visible through digital windows like #BlackLivesMatter, #FergusonOctober, and #FergusonFriday, but others are not necessarily marked and codified for easy digital retrieval. Anthropologists interested in these social worlds should thus remain attentive to the possibilities of hashtag ethnography while still being prepared to read between and go beyond the digital lines.

Supplemental material for this article is available on the AE website. For links to further resources on the Ferguson protests; tweets, videos, and images circulated during the period; and websites where readers can follow the Ferguson story as it continues to unfold, see <http://americanethnologist.org/2015/ferguson-digital-protest-february-2015/>.

### Postscript

On November 24, 2014, after a grand jury released its decision not to indict Darren Wilson, Ferguson went viral once again, with over 3.5 million tweets appearing in a matter of hours under the hashtag #FergusonDecision. That evening, and in the days that followed, protestors took to the streets across the nation and beyond to decry the decision, the overall handling of Michael Brown’s case by the justice system, and racialized police brutality more broadly. Demonstrators staged “death-ins” at city intersections and shopping malls, they lined suburban sidewalks face down in memory of Michael Brown’s lifeless body, and they brought traffic in several cities across the United States to a halt, shutting down multilane highways, bridges, tunnels, and modes of public transportation. Many wore T-shirts proclaiming “I am Mike Brown” and held signs calling for the

need to “Indict America.” These demonstrations led social media users to claim that “#Ferguson is everywhere,” emphasizing the connection between online and offline forms of protest.

The release of the grand jury hearing transcripts also offered a new view of the events as narrated by Darren Wilson, who had until that moment remained silent. His testimony—particularly his description of Michael Brown as “a demon,” as a larger-than-life figure, and his use of the pronoun *it* to refer to the 18-year-old—offered further insight into the distorted lens through which black bodies are read by representatives of the state. Michael Brown and Darren Wilson were both 6’4” tall and weighed 290 pounds and 210 pounds, respectively, yet, in his testimony and in television interviews, Wilson said he felt like “a 5-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan.” Wilson’s characterization of himself as a child and of Brown as a superhuman monster became part of an exculpatory narrative in which the unarmed teenager was framed as the true threat, not the police officer who shot and killed him. In his testimony, Darren Wilson affirmed that he had done nothing wrong and expressed no remorse for his actions. Describing the moment of Michael Brown’s death, he stated that, as the bullets entered the young man’s body, “the demeanor on his face went blank, the aggression was gone, it was gone, . . . the threat was stopped.” Wilson’s reverse logic, sanctioned by the state, presents a narrative in which an unarmed teenager is a terrifying aggressor and an armed police officer is an innocent victim. This inversion underscores the significance of affirming that #BlackLivesMatter in a context where they are disproportionately viewed as threats by state forces and mainstream institutions.

The same week of the Ferguson grand jury decision, news broke of the fatal shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by Cleveland police after a 911 caller reported a “guy” with a gun. The gun was probably fake, the caller had said, and “it” (referring to Rice) was “probably a juvenile,” but, still, the mere sight of the boy with a toy gun “is scaring the shit out of me,” the caller insisted. Police were dispatched, and they shot the boy dead within two seconds of encountering him. This event made clear once again state agents’ distorted views of black Americans, especially teenagers—how their very bodies are perceived as looming, larger-than-life threats and how any objects in their possession (e.g., candies, sodas, toys, articles of clothing) are read as weapons.

Once again, the media focused not on state action but on the worthiness of black bodies. Local news immediately ran profiles of Rice’s parents, noting that they both had “violent pasts” (his father had been charged with domestic violence and his mother with drug possession). This history, reporters argued, could help explain why Tamir Rice would be inclined to play with a toy gun in a public place. Under fire for its coverage, the Northeast Ohio Media Group claimed, “One way to stop police from killing any more



12-year-olds might be to understand the forces that lead children to undertake behavior that could put them in the sights of police guns.” There was no discussion of a national “gun culture,” as there often is in incidents involving youth and guns (though, in this case, the “gun” was a toy), nor was there any discussion of the structural violence that Rice and his family engaged with on a daily basis or of the distorted ways young black bodies are viewed when they end up “in the sights” of police guns.

Within this context, social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences and the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations. Upon announcing the Ferguson grand jury decision, St. Louis prosecutor Robert McCulloch claimed that media coverage, and particularly social media, had posed “the most significant challenge” to his investigation. Social media cast a spotlight on this small Missouri township, but more importantly, by propelling Ferguson into a broader, mediatized, virtual space, social media users were able to show that “#Ferguson is everywhere”—not only in the sense of a broad public sphere but also in the sense of the underlying social and political relationships that haunt the nation as a whole.

Links to sources and additional information regarding the grand jury verdict and the protests that followed are available on the *AE* website: <http://americanethnologist.org/2015/ferguson-digital-protest-february-2015/>.

## Notes

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1. For a timeline of events in these early moments, see Laurie 2014. At present, it remains an open question to what extent Twitter posts should be treated like confidential “data” obtained from human subjects or like quotations from published texts. Throughout this article, we have thus thought carefully about when to quote, cite, or paraphrase from Twitter posts. We have used the real names of Twitter users when discussing tweets that went “viral” or were featured in mainstream media reports. However, when quoting or paraphrasing from unreported tweets, we have chosen not to reproduce the username of the author—errring on the side of privacy at the expense of offering proper attribution. Legally speaking, Twitter users have agreed to publish their posts by accepting the platform’s “terms of service,” and in this sense tweets operate similarly to YouTube videos, which are publicly available, archived, and citable. Indeed, the Library of Congress is currently in the process of archiving all public tweets dating back to 2006. However, it is unclear whether individual users of the service are fully aware of this archival possibility and its implications. For, although Twitter posts are public, they are not necessarily imagined to be permanent: At present, any post can be retroactively deleted, usernames can be easily changed, and entire accounts can be erased. (These actions are achieved much more easily on Twitter than on

Facebook.) Among journalists, these questions have been hotly debated. Although one can easily cite Twitter users without their permission, some feel that “journalists should let people know when they’re performing journalism,” as one commentator suggests (Chittal 2012). Among scholars, there have been similar debates. Many argue that researchers should not depend on corporate user agreements and should instead obtain informed consent from individual users before harvesting posts as “data” (see boyd and Crawford 2012; Zimmer 2010; Zimmer and Proferes 2014). This issue becomes all the more complicated as we increasingly learn of how corporations like Facebook and Twitter are harvesting their own data for internal research, marketing, and development purposes.

Although it is important to debate the ethical concerns surrounding “Twitter research,” we would caution against viewing these as entirely new, or disconnected from previous methodological and ethical debates in social science research. The fact is, these issues speak to long-standing anthropological concerns regarding “misinformed consent” through either a user agreement or a signed institutional review board form (du Toit 1980; Sankar 2004; Wax 1980), the implications of using “naturally occurring” versus “elicited” communication (Dobrin 2008; Wolfson 1976), and the larger question of the general role and purpose of the “native voice” in anthropological texts (Bonilla n.d.; Trouillot 2003). Engagement with these questions in the context of digital platforms should thus not be set apart from discussions of “analog” methods and ethical concerns.

2. Some commentators have noted the greater attention directed toward these events as compared to miscarriages of justice involving black women, such as Renisha McBride (who was murdered while seeking help following a car accident), Marissa Alexander (who was not afforded access to the same “Stand Your Ground” defense used to exonerate George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin; she received, instead, a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years for firing a warning shot in the air after she was attacked by her husband), and Mariene Pinnock (whose beating at the hands of California Highway Patrol officers was captured on video). For a discussion of the intersectional politics of race and gender that shape this disparate coverage, see Gebreyes 2014.

3. The protests in Ferguson did not quickly fade. Indeed, as this article was being drafted, a new hashtag, #FergusonOctober, began trending as people from across and beyond the United States gathered in Ferguson from October 10 to October 13, 2014, “to build momentum for a nationwide movement against police violence.” See Ferguson October 2014.

4. One could go even further back historically and examine how the image of Emmett Till, released by his mother for publication in *Jet* magazine, served as an important catalyst for the Civil Rights movement. See Adams 2004 to listen to firsthand accounts of this decision and its impact.

5. A recent study by the Pew Research Center (Smith 2013) indicates that 53 percent of white Americans, 64 percent of African Americans, and 60 percent of U.S. Latinos/as own smartphones.

6. While some audiences have interpreted increased mediatization of such events as a sign of increased rates of police brutality, many others have pointed out that police brutality has always been rampant in communities of color, particularly African American and Latina/o communities. These perspectives represent contrasting, racialized chronotopes (Agha 2007; Bakhtin 1981; Silverstein 2005), or space-time constructions. From the vantage point of predominantly white communities that have not faced it, police brutality is often viewed as a practice taking place “there” and “now” (i.e., a specifically contemporary phenomenon in communities of color); from the vantage point of people of color who have faced

police brutality in their communities for generations, such brutality is often viewed as a practice that has “always” taken place “here” (i.e., it is a long-standing, ongoing phenomenon in predominantly minority communities). These contrasting racialized chronotopes shape perceptions of the scale of police brutality and responses to it.

7. The importance of citizen journalism and journalistic uses of social media became even more evident once it was revealed that local police and the U.S. government collaborated to establish a no-fly zone over the Ferguson area in efforts to resist aerial media coverage of confrontations between protestors and the militarized police force (Gillum and Lowy 2014). For more on the tactics used during the Ferguson protests and their possible violation of civil rights, see the report released by Amnesty International (2014). It is worth noting that Ferguson marked the first time the organization deployed observers within the United States.

8. While a full assessment of Twitter is beyond the scope of this article, a few demographic trends are worth noting. Despite early statistical dominance, the United States is no longer the per capita leader in Twitter activity; however, it remains the nation with the highest number of users (Lipman 2014). Within the United States, urban dwellers are much more likely than suburban or rural residents to use Twitter, a fact that is certainly relevant to any comprehensive account of social movements (Duggan and Brenner 2013). There is also a seeming feedback loop between political unrest and language usage: For example, the use of Arabic surged in 2010 as Twitter became a clearinghouse for information about demonstrations in Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, and beyond (Seshagiri 2014). And, within different languages, some studies suggest the hashtag itself functions differently (see Weerkamp et al. 2011). As anthropologists grapple with virtual field sites, it will be important to keep in mind how geographic differences contour the experience of online interaction.

9. They thus recall Stephan Palmié’s (2013) description of the Library of Congress call number BL2532.S3 as a place where Santería resides.

10. POC is an acronym for people of color.

11. “@FCKH8” is the Twitter handle of a company that sells T-shirts with activist themes. The author of this tweet is accusing the company of using the events in Ferguson as an opportunity to generate profit.

12. John Postill (2014) has noted the ways that the use of multiple, novel hashtags reflects savvy social media users’ understanding that Twitter rewards novelty over raw numbers in its trending algorithms. The relationships between these hashtags and their accompanying texts can be conceptualized as comparatively “type-” and “token-” oriented interdiscursive links (Silverstein 2005). Whereas token oriented interdiscursivities highlight particular events (e.g., accounts of the shooting of Michael Brown and specific police responses to protests in a given moment), type-focused interdiscursivities address issues related to genres of communication and interaction (e.g., police brutality in general, patterns in media coverage surrounding the victimization of racialized peoples). Collectively, these interdiscursivities constitute the mediated eventness of #Ferguson (Agha 2011) and the potential ways it can be recontextualized in relation to other such particular events and genres of events (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

13. Crucially, the leaky boundaries that correspond to publics more broadly certainly pertain to mediated publics (Gal and Woolard 2001). That is, the publicness and counterpublicness (Warner 2002) of #Ferguson must be understood as a performative context with the potential to be mobilized as part of social projects across individual and collective scales.

14. For more on the challenges these kinds of questions pose to studies engaging “Big Data” such as Twitter analysis, see boyd and Crawford 2012 and Reyes 2014.

15. In addition to “Black Twitter” we must also think about “Media Twitter” and how journalists negotiate professional norms in their Twitter use (Lasorsa et al. 2012). In the context of the Ferguson protests, several journalists used Twitter to document the challenges they were facing as they covered the events, including the possibility of arrest. Attention to these practices is essential to the project of “provincializing” digital media (Coleman 2010:489).

16. Trending is also achieved through “retweeting”—a crucial aspect of Twitter engagement. Any user’s tweet can be “favorited,” “retweeted,” and “quoted” by another user. The number of favorites and retweets, which can be seen on the original tweet, is often interpreted as a sign of a given tweet’s popularity. Abbreviations such as MT (i.e., modified tweet) and RT (i.e., retweet) can be used to manually quote or retweet. This range of quotation practices leads to debates about authorship and disputes over whether users are strategically quoting popular users to attract more followers. In the context of #Ferguson, particular users, such as Antonio French (alderman of St. Louis’s 21st Ward) and Wesley Lowery (a reporter for the *Washington Post*), emerged as key informants whose on-the-ground accounts in Ferguson were retweeted by thousands of Twitter users. As an article in *USA Today* documents, over the course of the Ferguson events, Antonio French experienced a huge surge in popularity, going from around four thousand to 121 thousand followers in less than a month. See Mandaro 2014. This surge did not go unnoticed by local residents, some of whom have tweeted that politicians used the events to further their own careers.

17. This point is not exclusive to posts about Ferguson. Broadly speaking, in analyzing Twitter usage, we must think carefully about when and why users feel the need to hashtag their posts. For example, users who post commentary about a specific TV show while that show is being broadcast often do not use a hashtag, presumably because they are tweeting to followers who are also watching the show at that moment in time. These tweets are not retrievable through hashtag searches, and, indeed, it is impossible to know what they are “about” unless one is viewing the tweets in real time or carefully reading a given user’s timeline. Thus, the hashtag is just one possible way of creating eventness via Twitter.

18. Among those who write about “digital worlds” there is significant debate about the kinds of lines that should be drawn between “online” and “offline” realms (see Horst and Miller 2012). However, it is worth noting that many who tweeted about #Ferguson from outside Missouri eventually felt the need to visit the town of Ferguson and noted a sharp difference between these two sites. (See, e.g., Browne 2014; Cooper 2014.) Jalani Cobb (2014), who wrote about Ferguson for the *New Yorker*, argued that, during his reporting on the events, he developed a “between-the-world-and-Ferguson view of the events.”

19. In considerations of the use of social media to articulate shared interests and mobilize political action, the recent history of its role in antiauthoritarian movements throughout the Middle East and Africa looms large. On the one hand, it is revealing to draw transnational connections between movements opposing closed regimes abroad and the struggles of subjugated populations within liberal democratic states. In the case of the Arab Spring, many studies point to the constitutive role of social media in not only information dissemination but also tactical maneuvers and strategic negotiations (see Howard et al. 2011; Lotan et al. 2011). On the other hand, it is methodologically dangerous to always jump to the scale of the “global rhetoric of ‘spectacle,’” as Nishant Shah (2013:667) puts it, by rendering all such movements comparatively legible under broad monikers like “digital activism.” Hence, the task of

assessing the limits and promises of #Ferguson as a field site requires sensitive attention to how technological changes run up against the persistent and embodied legacies of structural violence.

20. The collection is viewable at <https://twitter.com/tejucole/timelines/486562343044669442>, accessed October 15, 2014.

21. On the need for methodological accounts of the “eventful temporality” of social movements, see Sewell 2009 and McAdam and Sewell 2001; for more general discussions of alternative temporalities and sociopolitical challenges to the status quo, see Icaza and Vázquez 2013 and Dinshaw et al. 2007; finally, for discussions of the importance of time marking in national identity formation and challenges to the nation, see Olick 2003.

22. Several commentators at the time noted how the Ferguson events played out differently on Facebook versus Twitter. One researcher compared the “virality” of Ferguson on Twitter with that of the “Ice Bucket Challenge” on Facebook—a digital activism campaign that sought to raise awareness about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). While there were, overall, many more news articles written about Ferguson than about the Ice Bucket Challenge in August of 2014, stories about Ferguson generated an average of 256 Facebook referrals compared with 2,106 referrals for stories about the Ice Bucket Challenge. Ice Bucket stories on Facebook also received a much larger number of “likes,” “shares,” and comments than Ferguson stories. One proposed reason for the pattern is Facebook’s much more restrictive algorithms, but, more generally, Facebook is not regarded as a forum for hard news, tending more toward “friends and family and fun” (McDermott 2014). The fact that Ice Bucket Challenge posts often used the native video app within Facebook (rather than linking to an outside service) also explains why they dominated users’ news feeds, as these types of posts are given priority within the Facebook algorithm. Notably, one user tried to “hack” the Facebook algorithm by faking a change in marital status and using the fake announcement to post commentary on Ferguson. See Warzel 2014. Others tried to “hack” the Ice Bucket Challenge itself; for more, see <http://www.icebuckethack.com/>, accessed October 15, 2014.

23. The “slowness” of Facebook vis-à-vis Twitter is generally attributed to the Facebook algorithms. Unlike Twitter, which shows all posts in reverse chronological order, Facebook orders posts using an algorithm that takes into account a user’s behavior on the site and across the web. Some argue that Facebook’s algorithm operates as a form of censorship, weeding out controversial topics and racially charged posts. See Tufekci 2014.

24. For more on the story behind the production of this image, see Lee 2014.

25. For a historical analysis of the production of “black criminality,” see Muhammad 2010.

26. Memes might be best understood as mediatized tropes. That is, memes are citational representations that circulate in forms such as hashtags, photos, and videos. In some cases, such representations are explicitly recognized as memes. See Know Your Meme 2007–14.

27. Like Trayvon Martin’s hoodie, whose sign value was construed in relation to race, the meaningfulness of the bag of candy and can of iced tea he was carrying with him at the time of his death were also racially construed and, in fact, rematerialized altogether as weapons and drug paraphernalia. George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin’s killer, allegedly thought that the candy and can of iced tea were potentially guns or other weapons; other commentators speculated that Martin was using these items to make recreational drugs. Here, ideas about race transform not just a sign’s value (e.g., as a relatively unremarkable piece of clothing or a sartorial practice associated with criminality, as in the case of the hoodie) but the fundamental ontology of a given sign (e.g., as

a bag of candy or a gun, a can of iced tea or drug paraphernalia), thus reflecting the semiotic power of race and racialization (Rosa 2010).

28. Perhaps the most recognizable of these images was a photo of the Miami Heat basketball team wearing hooded sweatshirts with the hoods up that famed NBA player LeBron James posted to Twitter with the hashtag #WeAreTrayvonMartin. See ESPN.com 2012.

29. Some commentators have pointed to the importance of the body not simply as a vehicle for marches or demonstrations but as a strategic choreographic tool deployed through practices such as the gestures associated with #HandsUpDontShoot. See Kedhar 2014.

30. Twitter also became a site in which to draw connections between what was taking place in Ferguson and state-sanctioned violence in other political contexts. Some Twitter users suggested that the killing of Michael Brown and militarized police response to protestors was analogous to the Israeli treatment of Palestinians. This was evident in posts such as “Where I come from, what some call ‘rioting’ we call an uprising #Ferguson #Gaza #Palestine #intifada” and “The Palestinian people know what it means to be shot while unarmed because of your ethnicity #Ferguson #Justice.” Some Palestinians took to Twitter to offer those in Ferguson advice on how to avoid and respond to tear gas, including messages such as “#Ferguson solidarity,” “To #Ferguson from #Palestine,” and “#Palestine stands with #Ferguson.” Meanwhile, other posts pointed to the U.S. involvement in both of these situations; one user, for instance, posted a picture of a teargas canister with the message, “Made in USA teargas canister was shot at us a few days ago in #Palestine by Israel, now they are used in #Ferguson.” See Molloy and agencies 2014.

31. The phrase #Ferguson has been used not only on social media but also on other canvases such as posters and T-shirts. During October 2014, #Ferguson morphed into #FergusonOctober as a temporal rallying cry for demonstrations against police violence held in Ferguson throughout the month in preparation for the announcement of whether Officer Darren Wilson would be prosecuted for the killing of Michael Brown. In addition to this adaptation of #Ferguson, #HandsUpDontShoot has been invoked on posters and other organizing materials urging interested parties to text “HANDSUP” to a particular number for updates on what is going on in Ferguson and in the broader effort to eradicate police violence. Thus, there are powerful coordinating relationships between digital and offline contexts such as #Ferguson and Ferguson proper as well as relationships between digital modalities such as the circulation of information via Twitter and cellular text messages.

32. For more on these activities, see <http://www.hashtag-ferguson.org/> and <http://fergusonfireside.org/>.

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