

Traveling across Racial Borders: TripAdvisor and the Discursive Strategies Businesses Use to Deny Racism

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Abstract

Travel and leisure activities can bring many rewards, and yet for those deemed “racialized Others,” these same activities can be fraught with anxiety and tension. As in all aspects of society, racism mediates the rewards of travel and leisure. Decisions about when and how to confront racism are central in the lives of those considered racialized Others. Given a wish to de-escalate racist situations and respond later, some individuals are using online platforms to call out racism. Using a digital discourse analysis, the author explores TripAdvisor, as a site and context in which racial confrontation happens. Interracial couples facing discrimination during leisure activities may choose to confront businesses after the fact through an online platform. When businesses respond, they follow a pattern that defensively separates “service” from racism and ultimately denies racism entirely. The author begins with an analysis of the TripAdvisor platform, including the affordances and constraints. Next, the author uses a digital discourse analysis of the review-response interaction. As with other forms of colorblind racism, a close read of the content is needed to highlight racist practices. The author shows that the structure of TripAdvisor, including the quantitative ratings and rankings and written reviews and responses, works to legitimize the platform and build trust across a Eurocentric global community. This sense of community and trust is denied and remains elusive to those suffering as a result of racist abuse.

Keywords

border patrolling, TripAdvisor, digital discourse analysis, racism, travel, interracial

Travel and leisure activities can bring many rewards, including escaping the everyday, expanding individuals’ awareness and understandings of the world, increasing social status through cultural capital, creating a sense of spontaneity, romance, and perhaps building social networks across differences. As in all aspects of life, these rewards are racialized. Although travel to and dining in new and unfamiliar places may be experienced as excitement and spontaneity by White travelers (Torres 2016), racialized Others (or those individuals deemed outsiders to normative whiteness) have “heightened safety concerns” (Lee and Scott 2017:387). In an attempt to ameliorate the fear and increase the possibility of enjoyment and relaxation and experience the rewards of travel and leisure

time activities, individuals develop strategies for managing the racism they experience. In his research on middle-class Blacks facing racism in public, Feagin (1991) identified a range of strategies including, “withdrawal, resigned acceptance, verbal confrontation, or physical confrontation” (p. 103). He found that other responses may be used after the fact, including filing a lawsuit. When

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confronted with racism and border patrolling, Black-White interracial couples used similar strategies described by Feagin and also used the strategy of “tripping on”—making fun of or joking about the racist; at times they also attempted to educate racists (Dalmage 2000). Similar to Feagin’s findings, many interracial couples decided to “let it slide” in the moment as a way to avoid confrontation and escalation (Dalmage 2000:121). Each of the strategies is used only after careful analysis of the context. Moreover, because the “confrontation response is generally so costly in terms of time and energy...acquiescence or withdrawal are common options” (Feagin 1991:106). Social media platforms, such as TripAdvisor and Yelp, are online spaces through which racism can be explicitly called out, without the potential high cost of face-to-face confrontation. Through reporting, blogging, and sharing experiences, individuals are able to more safely and with less emotional cost confront racism and racists and, in some cases, have a public online interaction. My research explores the context of a specific online interaction: business responses to being called out or confronted as racist through TripAdvisor reviews.

Each social media platform has particular affordances and constraints that shape how information is presented and the way users interact. Users choose differing social media to reach particular “imagined audiences” in particular ways (Comunello, Mulargia, and Parisi 2016). The online interaction is shaped by the structure of the platform. TripAdvisor, for instance, is structured in a way that allows individuals to rate businesses and write reviews, and the site encourages businesses to respond to reviewers. Interaction online happens within general and specific racialized contexts, bridging offline experiences of racism into the online interaction or confrontation. Importantly, as Trevor Jamerson (2017) argues, the reviews and quantitative measures used by TripAdvisor delineate expertise, trust, and legitimacy of the reviewers and the platform. And yet, as Flowers and Swan (2016) argued, “the Internet is a race-making technology, reproducing offline stereotypes online, and reconfiguring them as cyberetypes through distinct media processes and affordances” (p. 207). The affordances, often invisible, mask the (re)production of racism, as it is “configuring the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement (boyd 2010:40). In short, calling out racism online as strategy is undermined by the very affordances and constraints—the structure, rules, and style of interaction—of a platform that supports and is supported

by Eurocentric normative framing of the global community.

In White-dominated nations, including the United States and other “deep settler societies” (Steyn 2001), race has been defined in hierarchical fashion with borders between categories upheld through legal and extralegal means. The history of colonization and Western capitalism at the intersection of racialized boundaries shapes all aspects of life. Racial borders include the contested, patrolled, and often hostile spaces near the color line. Historical creations, borders have become institutionalized and internalized (Dalmage 2000:36). Abby Ferber (1998) argued that the construction of race “requires a policing of the borders, a maintenance of the boundaries between ‘one’s own kind’ and others” (pp. 123–24). Regardless of the nation-based particularities of the construction of race, people who cross racial borders in intimate relationships are conspicuous racial transgressors perceived by single race people as threats to their identities (Childs 2005; Ferber 1998). Research shows that many single-race people are not comfortable with interracial couples (Childs 2005, 2016). As a result, interracial couples face pervasive border patrolling and intensified racism (Dalmage 2000). Border patrolling can take many forms, some less subtle than others, including stares, comments, negative service, being ignored or denied access, and physical violence. The context and reason for patrolling varies, but in all instances, the goal is about enforcing racial boundaries and a demand that individuals “stick with their own” (Dalmage 2000). In their recent research, Skinner and Hudac (2017) found that single-race people experience a significant feeling of disgust when they are confronted with interracial couples. The disgust leads to a process in which the interracial couple, as a “social unit,” is dehumanized. Citing the work of Cuddy, Rock, and Norton, Skinner and Hudac argued that people are less willing to help those they see as less human. This certainly matters a great deal when we are analyzing the racialization of leisure and hospitality in which “helping” and service are of central concern. Given their unique position in a racially divided and hierarchical world, interracial couples think about, experience, and reflect upon leisure time in a way that is “distinct from those of same-race couples and families” (Hibbler and Shinew 2002:145). As is the case for most racialized Others, the fear and enactment of racism mediates interracial couples’ ability to experience rewards of travel and dining (Dalmage 2000; Hibler and

Shinew 2002; Stephenson and Hughes 2005; Torabian and Miller 2017). Stephenson and Hughes (2005) found that for racialized Others, “unless travel events are well organized and very secure, racialized realities can overshadow the experience of visiting other cultures and communities” (p. 150). Even when travel is well planned, interracial couples will likely face some form of racism and border patrolling and need to have strategies to manage.

In this article, I focus on interracial couples specifically, as racialized Others, confronting businesses through the review-response platform of TripAdvisor. Given the racial border politics of whiteness and race, interracial couples (as a social unit signifying racial transgression) are Othered. I primarily use the term *interracial* when discussing self-identified couples. I also use *multiracial* (often used with families and the collective movement) and a variety of other terms, including *biracial* and *racialized Others*. Finally, although confronting racist businesses is not new, the TripAdvisor platform as a context in which confrontations are happening has not been previously explored. In this article, I use a digital discourse analysis to explore the online “confrontation” between the reviewer and the business responder on the travel site TripAdvisor, a site that claims to be a “trustworthy source for our global community” (TripAdvisor 2018).

In early 2000 the multiracial movement was in full swing. Cynthia Nakashima (1996) defined the multiracial movement broadly as

the emergence of community organizations, campus groups, magazines and newsletters, academic research and writing, university courses, creative expression, and political activism—all created and done by mixed-race individuals and members of interracial families, with the purpose of voicing their own experiences, opinions, issues and interests. (p. 80)

Prior to Web 2.0 and the technology that allowed online user interaction, multiracial families came together in physical spaces defined specifically for the purpose of exploring shared experiences. Most interracial couples and families live in predominantly single-race or monoracially structured extended families and communities; even in integrated neighborhoods, only a small percentage of residents are interracial families (Dalmage 2004). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as the first generation of post-*Loving* children were becoming teenagers, multiracial family organizations sprung

up across the United States. These organizations were places for primarily Black-White interracial families to share information, network, parent, find safe housing and schools, learn where to spend leisure time and socialize, and to identify safe restaurants and places to travel (Dalmage 2004; Williams 2006). The organizations also served as places to learn strategies to manage the unending insults, affronts, stares, and intrusions and find respite from a racist and racially divided country.¹ The Internet has allowed folks identifying with multiracialism to connect and interact across the world (Nakamura 2008). Not coincidentally, by 2017, the 50th anniversary of the *Loving* decision, and 17 years since the introduction of TripAdvisor, many face-to-face multiracial family organizations had been disbanded, and instead individuals have turned to online spaces to connect, network, “bring discrimination to public attention” (Feagin 1991:106), and get advice about travel and leisure.

This research supports the assertion made by Hughey and Daniels (2013) that “race and racism persist online in ways that are both new and unique to the Internet, alongside vestiges of centuries-old forms that reverberate both offline and on” (p. 696). Using “digital discourse analysis” (Recuber 2017), this article takes seriously the call to interrogate racism and whiteness on the Internet (Daniels 2012). By analyzing the business response to reviews by interracial couples, in this article I will show that the TripAdvisor platform, including quantitative ratings and rankings, tips and rules, and the review-response interaction, and TripAdvisor’s goal of gaining traction in the lucrative online travel booking market work together to reproduce racism though color-blind racism and race-denying discourse. In their analysis of race and Twitter, Sanjay Sharma and Phillip Brooker (2017) pointed to a lacuna in the literature about how race is denied while being reproduced through online interaction: “While there is research examining explicit modes of internet racism, the more coded practices of expressing racist comments, while simultaneously denying racist intent, is far less understood in terms of its online manifestations” (p. 467).

My research addresses this gap. A close examination of the TripAdvisor review-response within the larger travel site will illustrate that the platform itself, including the rules, tips, and coaching of businesses about how to respond to reviews, work to (re)inscribe, (re)enforce, and (re)create racism and border patrolling. On the TripAdvisor platform, as in the offline world, businesses’ responses to being called out for racism are structured to dismiss

racialized Others as problematic and isolated wolf criers in an otherwise color-blind, good service, travel and leisure world.

TRIPADVISOR

When walking into a building, the architecture creates a feeling, a vibe. Similarly, each social media platform has its own architecture, its own vibe (boyd 2010). If interracial couples are looking for empathy and support, for instance, Facebook may be a desired platform. Facebook is a “personal social media” that requires networks, connections, and a greater sense of intimacy and thus creates among users a sense of homophily (Okazaki, Andreu, and Campo 2016). Facebook uses filters that “provide a user experience that tends to reinforce users’ opinion” (Comunello et al. 2017:519) and thus reinforce homophily. Among users who identify as part of a community, the sharing of experiences will be met with understanding, believability, and a shared sense of pain and outrage. In circular fashion, the sharing will facilitate the development of a greater sense of community among people in the group. However, if the goal for the interracial social media user is to confront a racist business, and warn others, then TripAdvisor or Yelp may be a better (or additional) preferred online space. Interracial couples can imagine businesses reading the public review, possibly facing negative outcomes, such as a drop in business because of the review and/or being compelled to change their racist practices. TripAdvisor, Yelp, and other travel sites are “public social media” or content-based platforms in which anyone can participate. Unlike the social networking sites (such as Facebook), travel review sites have platforms that “allow consumers to search for information and post comments” publicly they need not be connected to particular “friends” or groups (Okazaki et al. 2016:107).

Although both TripAdvisor and Yelp provide venues for consumers to review businesses, the affordances of each shape the way data can be collected. Yelp allows reviews and searches for a particular neighborhood and a particular type of leisure, chosen from a drop-down menu. The Yelp platform allows the study of race, for instance, in specific neighborhoods and through an exhaustive read of the reviews in a specific geographic location (see, e.g., Zukin, Lindeman, and Hurson’s [2015] study of race making through analysis of Yelp reviews in Brooklyn). However, Yelp requires a specifically defined geographic range and does

not allow word searches outside of its preset filters and drop-down categories. Unlike Yelp, the TripAdvisor platform allows worldwide single and multiple word searches. The ability to search for particular terms associated with identity groups has enormous advantage for researchers using digital discourse analysis about a specific group across a broad geographic range. My sample includes only those using particular labels in their reviews: *interracial*, *inter-racial*, or *biracial*. The use of the label by the reviewer indicates recognition of a shared racialized location in the world.

The TripAdvisor Platform Explored

TripAdvisor reports itself to be “the world’s largest travel site,” with “535 million reviews and opinions,” with “415 million average unique monthly visitors” and “over 7 million accommodations, airlines, attractions, and restaurants” (TripAdvisor 2018). Travelers, diners, and others can access forums and reviews and read establishment responses to reviews, as they decide how to spend their leisure time and money. The site allows users to preplan trips, to find activities and lodging along the way, and then to review afterward. Consumers may write about their experiences, and others can read and “extract useful insights” (Lei and Law 2015). In a 2015 “tip sheet,” TripAdvisor claimed that 88 percent of users “say reviews have an impact on their accommodation choices” (TripAdvisor 2018). By 2015, TripAdvisor was explicitly developing its application programming interface to build its “instant booking” revenues (Seave 2015). According to Seave (2015), TripAdvisor uses software that is meant to capture “customers, selling them services and then selling them more services.” Affordances must be understood through the lens of TripAdvisor’s business goals. The goals shape the structure of the site and the tips, rules, and guidance provided for users, businesses in particular. Next, I will delineate the context of the “confrontation” between the racialized Other reviewer and the business responder.

Reviews. After traveling or dining, a reviewer can log onto TripAdvisor and write a review. Above the review section in boldface type is the sentence: “Your first-hand experiences really help other travelers. Thanks!” Reviewers are then directed to fill in the “Title of your review” and then prompted to “summarize your visit or highlight an interesting detail.” Next the reviewer fills in the “Your Review” box and is prompted, “Tell people about

your experience, describe the place or activity, recommendations for travelers?" Reviewers must write at least 100 characters and may follow a link to "Tips for writing a great review," if they choose. In the guidelines, reviewers are encouraged to "keep it PG-13" and avoid any "personally insulting language, smear campaigns, or any personal opinions about politics, ethics, religion or wider social issues." Finally, TripAdvisor notes that it has the right to remove a review or a management response at any time for any reason. Once they have created and logged into their accounts, reviewers may write about their experiences. Reviewers are warned that anyone may report their reviews as violating the terms of this "global community" and may be removed by TripAdvisor at any time, for any reason. The actual decision to remove a review is made by TripAdvisor. Visitors to TripAdvisor cannot know what or how many reviews have been removed. From time to time the process is made public. For instance, despite a highly public battle with a business owner in the United Kingdom, TripAdvisor initially fought removing a review that called out racism. In the end, TripAdvisor relented and removed the review, stating that the person had not actually stayed at but rather merely toured the establishment. The review included the following language: "I think I'll be staying away and would recommend to any other 'ethnics' to do the same. I don't think they like our sort around here" (Gerrard 2010).

As part of the review, TripAdvisor prompts reviewers to give a numeric rating between 5 and 1 (5 = excellent, 4 = very good, 3 = average, 2 = poor, and 1 = terrible; zero is not an option). By offering a consumer-driven quantified ranking, TripAdvisor builds a sense of trust by offering users "objectivity and rationality of hard numbers" (Jeacle and Carter 2011:305), while legitimizing the basis of trust in this travel site (Jamerson 2017). TripAdvisor gives each business a "summary" score based on the ratings from all of their reviewers. Through the review platform and numeric ranking, TripAdvisor is "able to engender discursive authority at both the individual and collective levels" (Jamerson 2017:120). When visiting a business page on TripAdvisor, the name of the business is listed in boldface type, and under the name is the average rating with the overall number of reviews the establishment has received. Each business will have both the summary rating and individual customer reviews and ratings. The summary rating is then used by businesses to show their attractiveness to future customers (e.g., they may post their TripAdvisor

average ratings on their premises and Web sites). In 2017, TripAdvisor reported that 83 percent of customers believe the rating is significant in their choice of hotel, 70 percent in their choice of restaurant, and 58 percent for choice of activities (TripAdvisor 2018).

Responses. Businesses are given an opportunity to respond to consumer reviews. Research shows that negative reviews can have a "significant impact on hotel sales" (Nunthapirat 2016), while responding to reviews can have a measurable positive increase of business. Medallia (2015) found that when hotels respond to online reviews, travelers are "65 percent more likely to book" that hotel. TripAdvisor reports that in a study of 2,100 travelers, 79 percent said that management response to a negative review reassured them (Craig 2011). A cottage industry has sprung up to help businesses manage the online reviews and their online presence. Businesses are offered a range of services, tools, and tips. The tips include how quickly to respond and how to respond to different types of reviews. TripAdvisor warns businesses that once written, a review is not editable, so they should carefully construct their responses and should have a "property representative" with good grammar and social skills in charge of responding. Businesses are also advised to respond to negative reviews in a general rather than specific manner. For instance, one of these travel sites management companies, Travel Media Group, has created a "guide to responding to hotel reviews" and advises businesses on "basic rules": (1) do not explicitly reference negative points made; (2) refer to good reviews as "reviews" and bad reviews as "feedback"; and (3) be unique, genuine, and specific (i.e., travelers will "look down on a hotel giving the same cookie cutter response"). TripAdvisor also offers tips and tools. In a section titled "How should I respond to a negative review?" TripAdvisor (2014a) suggests the following: be prompt, be positive and avoid being defensive, because potential visitors will be turned off by defensiveness; be empathetic, if possible; express appreciation to the reviewer; explain steps taken to address issue; and highlight any positive comments the reviewer made. Absent from the business information and advice is a discussion about race, racism, and/or how to respond to charges of racism. In other words, the platform remains color-blind even in the coaching businesses receive. In fact, TripAdvisor (2014a) specifically states, "Keep in mind that Management Responses can be found by search engines. If

something negative comes up in a review, avoid repeating it in your response.”

The tips and tools offered are geared toward enhancing the economic future of the business (and thus TripAdvisor). The TripAdvisor (2014b) advice states, “the most important thing your response should do is to answer unknown questions for future guests that the original review implied.” The goal of the response for businesses, then, ought to be about protecting and building their business, with the future imagined traveler (or diner) as the intended audience. The businesses, according to this travel site, should consider, “Who am I writing for? Am I addressing their core concerns? Am I showing that we care? Are we truly sorry?” The imagining of the future customer is central to the response. Jessie Daniels (2012) contextualized the analysis of race and the Internet through the concept of “imagined community” where acceptance is granted to those deemed “normal,” while maintaining boundaries that exclude Others. The process of jettisoning the Other through imagining, interaction, quantification, and discourse on social media “is deeply rooted in power” (Torabian and Miller 2017:934) and reflects histories of global race making (Daniels 2012).

METHODS

In this research I use a digital discourse analysis, a

method [that] seeks to deeply understand one aspect of social life online: how meaning gets made through texts. Digital discourse analysis accomplishes this by systematically collecting, reading, and analyzing what gets left behind in the small, sometimes forgotten sites of online discourse that are scattered throughout the World Wide Web (Recuber 2017:49).

I adhered closely to Recuber’s three steps to conducting digital discourse analysis. First, I chose a data set with 233 cases. I was able to carefully read and code each case in detail. Second, I read each case for themes and how the affordances of TripAdvisor shaped the meaning making within the site. Third, using the broad themes that arose from the careful read and coding, I was able to analyze, in depth, the discourses and interplay between the online and offline interactions and structures (Recuber 2017:53). Specifically, accessing TripAdvisor over a four-day period from July 30, 2017, through August 2, 2017, I searched, under the geographic designation “worldwide,” for the terms *interracial*,

inter-racial, and *biracial*. These searches returned 233 cases that involved interracial couples dining or traveling between 2010 and 2017. There were no reviews prior to 2010. Thus the 233 reviews represent all reviews returned for the search terms across a seven-year period. To avoid getting duplicate cases and a shifting sample, I left my computer on and did not refresh the server until all 233 cases were captured. Cases that included the term *inter-racial* to address historical events or interactions and were not about interracial couples or families were excluded. Each of the 233 reviews was cut and pasted into a master document, numbered 1 to 233. I categorized the reviews by location; date; whether the business was a restaurant, a hotel, or another type of business; overall numeric rating; and specific rating by the interracial reviewer. I copied and coded the comment and establishment response sections. I carefully read each review and response for themes. Finally, I coded for patterns across the reviews and responses.

Sample Overview

Seventy of the 233 reviews of establishments were outside the United States. All review-responses were in English (or translated to English). Of the 233, 20 included interracial gay or lesbian couples. Ten included single-race people who were with or observing interracial family members being mistreated. In 49 cases (21 percent of the total sample), the reviewer gave the establishment the same or higher rating as the overall average rating. The average rating for all establishments in this sample was 4.0 (very good), while the average rating from interracial couples, for the same establishments, was 2.4 (poor). Businesses responded to 50 of the reviews (21 percent). Of the 50 establishment responses, eight were responses to positive reviews and 42 to race-based negative reviews. The responses came primarily from hotels ($n = 36$); only eight restaurants responded. Six responses came from establishments that were neither restaurants nor hotels (they were tourist sites), yet only ten reviews fit that category.

Analyzing the Sample

Each of the 50 review-responses included in the study had a similar structure. Reviewers included written responses of at least 100 characters (most were much more), and businesses responded within a week (generally). I analyzed the types of responses engaged in by the establishments’ representatives

and show that they follow a discursive pattern built around a race-denying approach (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Dalmage 2004; Hughey and Daniel 2013). Through this approach, race is dismissed as a factor while the business and its employees are painted as good people who provide universal good service to all customers. The race-denying strategy serves to pathologize and isolate the interracial couple (Childs 2016). In short, analyzing the responses provides a lens into discursive strategies used by businesses to explain away race-based negative service. The review connects discrimination in the offline world to the online forum, and the business response (which cannot be edited once posted) represents both the ways establishments imagine future “guests” and think about, manage, and engage in racism. And businesses can rely on the affordances of TripAdvisor to provide the impression of “neutral” and trustworthy backdrop and a “collective authority” (Jamerson 2017).

BUSINESS RESPONSES TO RACE-BASED NEGATIVE REVIEWS: PLATFORM, PATTERNS, AND THE DISMISSING OF RACE

Although the tone of the business responses varies, a close look at the responses shows discursive strategies used. I analyze four overlapping strategies: (1) You are wrong! I am not a racist; (2) There is a non-race-based explanation; (3) We treat “all” people and “everyone” the same; and (4) You either misunderstood (thus misfelt) and/or could have avoided the negative experience if only you would have acted properly. The pattern of response shows that when racialized Others—in this study, interracial couples—call out or confront businesses on TripAdvisor about negative race-based experiences, they are questioned, denied, isolated, and dismissed.

I Am Not Racist: You Are Wrong and Insulting!

The first group of business responses can be categorized by their tone of anger, outrage, and insult. The business responder expresses personal offense at receiving the race-based negative review. The responder gives details, lays out proof of his or her racial goodness, and then dismisses the reviewer. Below are two examples of this review-response pattern, the first from the United States and the second from France.

In October 2013, an interracial couple prepaid and arrived at a bed and breakfast with a 4.5 summary rating (between excellent and very good) in Kentucky (coded #98). At check-in, a female clerk directed them to a different and much less desirable “cottage” than they had paid for and expected. The couple was told they would not get the cottage only after the clerk saw them in person. The reviewer asked, “Is it because she didn’t know we were a black and Asian couple?” and lamented that they were sent to a place that was “an OUT house! It was very small cottage, it looked like it was built as a car garage...if you are an interracial couple, don’t stay here.” They gave the establishment a numeric rating of 1 (terrible).

Within days the owner responded, “My wife and I do not discriminate against anyone.” He then detailed why the couple was given an inferior cottage, explaining that for myriad reasons, it was the only cottage available. He concluded by stating,

I am a retired Military Desert Storm Veteran and I served with many men and women. I fought for your freedom as well as anyone else... We welcome all people as God welcomes all people. Jesus commands us to love one another as He loves us. Our world today has no place for hatred or fear. We are the United States. And God Bless you.

The response follows a recognizable pattern of (1) denying discrimination and expressing outrage, (2) providing details to show that it was not race and that the reviewer is “wrong,” (3) claiming that they give acceptance and equal service to all people, and (4) using details in points 2 and 3 as proof that racism would be impossible. Here the responder does not offer to make amends or speak to how he will ensure that it does not happen again. Instead of speaking directly to the ways this couple felt slighted because of race, and then empathizing with the experience, he lectures them and then invokes Christianity and patriotism as proof that the reviewers’ racial read of the experience is wrong.

In October 2016 an interracial couple visiting Normandy, France, went to a 4.5-rated (between excellent and very good) wine-tasting café (coded #5). After receiving poor service and being chastised by the owner of the establishment for misunderstanding the process of the wine tasting, the couple left without service. Detailing the experience of poor treatment, the reviewer states, “we felt treated like two insolent teenagers, though we are a friendly, French-speaking interracial couple in our 40s.” The reviewer concludes that it ruined their

“moment.” They gave the establishment rating of 2 (poor).

The café owner’s response was prompt. The response appears on the site in English with some awkward phrasing, though the content is clear. The response follows the pattern of the previous review-response, with an added apology for the reviewer’s feelings, rather than the actions by the establishment. “Dear customer, I’m sorry if you feel that my reaction was rude. I was at the cashier and busy.” The responder then details why the reviewer’s perceptions were wrong and states,

Now concerning the pretend racist behavior of the owner [*sic*]. I just inform you that I am a member of different associations fighting racism. And just before opening this shop, 3 years ago I worked for 10 years for Doctor Without Borders. So I’m really shocked that you passed this misunderstanding of possible racism. The best would be definitely that we meet again because we are sympathetic too.

The owner responded with an apology for the couple’s feelings, gave an alternative explanation of events, and provided “proof” that racism was not possible. Moreover, the responder expresses a feeling of “shock.” Rather than addressing the damage caused by the negative experience, the responder is claiming injury because of the reviewer’s comments and perceptions. Being called out for racism and discriminatory behavior is emotionally difficult for the business responder, and the difficulty becomes part of the story, the evidence, that she is not racist. As such, the business’s reputation is redeemed, the global community assured of the responder’s goodness, and the racism and the interracial reviewer are cast as problematic and false (not trustworthy).

We Serve Anyone and Everyone, Therefore You’re Wrong!

Another common discursive strategy used by establishments is the claim to a commitment of universal good service. The logic is that because “all” customers matter and are treated the same, any accusations of race-based negative service and experiences are false. I include two cases, both in the United States, one in Texas and the other in Maryland.

In July 2016 an interracial couple stayed at an RV park with a rating of 4 (very good) in Texas. The reviewer stated that overall, the RV park was not good, citing small-sized campsites and poor roads (coded #26). And they did not feel that they

were welcomed. “The elderly women in the office were very bothered by us and to be honest very rude to us! I’m guessing because we are an interracial couple. They never gave us ANY eye contact during check in.” The reviewer gave the RV park a rating of 1 (terrible).

Within a day, the general manager of the RV park thanked the reviewer for visiting, defended the park and then wrote,

We at [the RV park] take great pride in being friendly and helpful to ANYONE that walks in our office, so making a statement as to you being an interracial couple is irrelevant as far as we are concerned and take offense that you would insinuate that being an issue with us... Please accept our apology for you not feeling welcomed by us appropriately, and we do appreciate you coming. Happy trails, and we hope you make many fond memories in your travels.

The responder uses color-blind discourse and circular reasoning to dismiss the reviewer’s experience. As stated, because the establishment is friendly and helpful (capital letters) “to ANYONE,” it is not possible that they would discriminate. The claim of a universal service standard becomes the “proof” that allows the responder to dismiss this interracial couple by directly stating, “so making a statement as to you being an interracial couple is irrelevant.” Moreover the responder is offended and, like other responders, paints the RV park staff as victims of the interracial reviewer. The responder ends by apologizing for the reviewer’s feelings rather than his or her own actions.

In May 2017, a young interracial family wrote in a review about the difficulty they faced at a resort with a rating of 4 (very good) in Maryland (coded 221). Concluding with,

What really made this stay terrible was the fact that when we were leaving and my husband loaded our things into the truck, I watched as the valets offered a cart and assistance to every other traveler, but completely ignored and neglected to offer my African American husband any service... I would certainly not recommend this to any other interracial or black families. Why give your money to people who don’t ever think you deserve the same service as Caucasian families visiting the same hotel.

They gave the resort a rating of 1 (terrible).

Within two days, in May 2017, the manager responded as follows:

Ms. [Customer], thank you for your patronage as well as taking the time to make us aware of your opinion. Ms. [Customer], *I have been with the hotel for 24 years* and I think your comment is untrue and unfair. We have staff as well as guests from every country and ethnicity possible. *ALL guests are offered service* in the order of their arrival; not based on any other criteria. You have made an accusation based on a few moments you were preparing for departure without knowing any facts. Additionally, luggage is not off loaded *if the guest's rooms are not ready*. We are dedicated service professionals with *outstanding rankings and reviews* and we certainly could have not achieved that level of success since our opening in 1991 if we did not provide all customers our best service. I do hope that on your next visit to Ocean City that the suites, service and staff exceed your every expectation. [Emphasis added]

The responder presents evidence that legitimizes her claim to non-race-based and universal good service. She begins by citing her 24 years of experience as evidence of her expertise. Next, she explains that “ALL guests” are offered service—“if” their rooms are ready. By using the word *if*, the responder implies that the reviewer did not follow the rules and caused the problem for herself. This discursive maneuver shifts the burden from the racist actions of the establishment, to the problematic guest. In short, it is not about race, it is about the shortcomings of the reviewer’s behavior because “ALL guests” are offered service. Finally, using the affordances of TripAdvisor, she draws the reader’s attention to the hotel’s summary rating (a quantitative measure) to legitimized her claim of consistent and universal good service. On the basis of this evidence available through the TripAdvisor platform, she argues that race was not a “criterion” and that the review is both “unfair” and “untrue.” Again, the responder uses race-denying discourse to admonish and dismiss the reviewer. The ratings and reviews used collectively to engender a sense of trust in among users are wielded against the reviewer. The trustworthy, global community is held in tact by jettisoning the racialized Other. The borders that maintain race offline, are being created in new ways through the TripAdvisor platform.

Interestingly, of the 50 business responses in this sample, eight responses were to reviews that

indicated that service was rated very good or excellent by the interracial couple. In each of these eight reviews, the reviewer mentioned race explicitly, for example, “They didn’t care one bit that we were an old interracial couple” or “I was a little nervous because we are a young, interracial couple and we’ve run into some tricky situations over this.” Each of the business responses to the eight positive reviews began by thanking the reviewer and then explaining that the great service the couple received both exemplifies and is an outcome of the businesses universal great service to all customers. Race was not mentioned or addressed in any of the eight business responses, although one responder from a hotel in South Africa wrote, “We genuinely welcome everyone—even aliens.”

“This Could Have Been Avoided if Only You Would Have...”

In addition to the claims to universal service standards—backed by quantitative evidence of very good to excellent service, and explicit lectures and denials, business responders also blame the interracial couple. Specifically, responders delineated how reviewers could have helped themselves and avoided the negative experiences. By shifting the focus to the reviewers’ alleged actions or inactions, race as the basis for the negative experience is removed and the myth of universal good service to all is upheld. Below I highlight two responses that use this particular strategy, the first from Wales and the second from the Czech Republic.

In November 2015 an interracial couple had their breakfast in a café with a 4.5 rating (between excellent and very good) in Wales “spoilt by the racist ranting of bigoted woman on the next table” (coded #72). The reviewer notes that the food was “well presented by smiling efficient staff.” They gave the café a rating of 3 (average).

Within two days the owner of the café responded,

We are very sorry for your experience. If you felt that strongly about the person at the next table you should have informed a member of the staff as we would have either asked for an apology or asked them to leave. I’m also sad that you will not call again, that makes good people put in the same category as the bigots.

The responder apologizes for the experience and then lectures the reviewer on how they mishandled the negative race-based experience. The responder,

however, seems to lack awareness of and empathy for the pervasiveness and threat of racism. This couple could have chosen a different way of responding, but which? A chosen response will depend on the context (Dalmage 2000) and how safe a couple feels and how they perceive the potential costs of time and energy (Feagin 1991). And although the couple may be discriminated against as a “social unit,” they are two individuals. If one person wishes to confront and the other wishes to “let it slide,” the couple faces additional layers of stress and tension within the relationship (Dalmage 2000; Feagin 1991). They may attempt to de-escalate, perhaps say nothing in an effort to just get through the experience without having more of their time and energy tied up into it, or they may remain silent if they sense they do not have allies in the café. The responses are complicated and include the struggle within the couple. The responder seems unaware of these layers yet feels confident to lecture the couple on how they should have managed the discrimination. As such, the responder redeems the racial reputation of the café (the café staff would have acted if only they knew) while dismissing the interracial couple for mismanaging the situation.

In September 2016, after making a reservation, an interracial couple visited a restaurant with a rating of 4.5 (between excellent and very good) in Prague (coded #222). They wrote,

[We] walked in with a reservation for two. We were looked up and down by the maître d’, given a disgusted look (we are an interracial couple) told we can stay for only an hour and were guided into the back of the otherwise beautiful restaurant, past all the Caucasian guests at the front. Here we sat amongst a few other non-Caucasian guests for over 10 minutes without a wink from the waiter. We walked out at this point.

They gave the establishment a rating of 1 (terrible).

Within a day the manager of the restaurant responded,

Dear Mr.[Customer], thank you very much for your review here....I am really sorry our hostess left the bad impression. I have already talked with her about the improvement. Regarding your “racist issue,” I have to say we were shocked as well, but other way round.

The responder then delineates the events to show that it was not about race and mistakenly argues that

the couple did not make a reservation. “You saw empty tables, but they were expecting the guests who made reservations in advance.” Then continues, “Your accusations of sorting our guests as per skin color is, in our opinion, the subjective point of view and from our point of view, unfortunately absurd. Frankly, we cannot understand how you thought such a thing.”

Here the “sales and marketing manager” begins the response by apologizing for the reviewers’ “bad impression,” and explains that she spoke with the maître d’. The responder then engages in the discursive maneuvers to remove race as the basis for the negative experience. This responder denies racism, provides a brief lecture, and then refers to the reviewer’s perspective as “absurd.” Despite the reviewers stating that they had a reservation, the manager explains that the better located tables were for guests with reservations. In other words, the establishment ignored a fact in the review (that the couple had a reservation) in order to imply that the couple created the negative experience. The reviewers are dismissed along with the critique of racially biased negative service.

Because businesses rely on the summary ratings, they can avoid taking responsibility for racism. The TripAdvisor platform gives them strength in numbers against the lone reviewer. An overall or summary rating of 4.5 (very good to excellent) can be used by the establishment to discredit reviewers that call out racism and rate their experience as terrible or 1. Moreover, the structure of the confrontation gives businesses the final word, in a global offline and online context in which Whites already strategically ignore, distrust and lack empathy for the experiences of racialized Others (Maly and Dalmage 2016; Mills 1997; Steyn 2012).

The Gentler “I’m Sorry You Felt Bad, but You Are Wrong”

In these responses, the approach is polite although ultimately following the same discursive pattern of race-denying and dismissing, while apologizing for the ways the reviewer felt. The next two responses are from the United States: Georgia and New York.

While visiting a Christmas shop with a rating of 3.5 (between very good and average), in June 2015 in Helen, Georgia (coded #29), the reviewer noted,

I wanted to purchase several things, but the cashier stood back and NEVER spoke, not even a grin! Saying hello is free and making us feel

welcome would have led into us spending tons of cash. We noticed that Helen isn't friendly to interracial couples, period.

They gave the store a rating of 1 (terrible).

Here the manager's response did not deny that racism may have occurred, instead they "prove" that the reviewer had the wrong establishment.

I am terribly sorry you had this experience in Helen. However, I do believe that you have the wrong Christmas store. We are the house on the left just North of town with the big Santa and sleigh in the yard. We make an effort to speak to EVERYONE that walks through the door. Please feel free to visit us next time you are in town! We will be glad to assist you in Christmas needs.

Like others, the responder points out that they speak to "EVERYONE"; in other words, all people get the same service (all customers matter), and thus it would not be possible for them to mistreat an interracial couple. The responder does not deny racism, but suggests it must have happened in another store.

Another "polite" you-are-wrong response and apology was extended in November 2014 to an interracial couple out to celebrate their anniversary (coded #149). They went to a restaurant with a rating of 4 (very good) in Lockport, New York. The meal and service were reportedly great,

until the end of the night. As we were dining, I watched the Chef—in her red chef jacket—walk around to all the tables in our section and ask how their meal was... she never came over to our table... maybe she didn't like the fact that we were an interracial couple dining at her establishment?

They gave the restaurant a rating of 3 (average).

The chef and owner replied within four days,

Wow, I am so very, very sorry!!! Believe it or not, I am actually a little shy, and I do not automatically assume that every table wants to speak with me. I guess I sometimes feel that I am being a little pompous cruising around the dining room acting like the owner. (I know I am but I am still not really used to it.) When I do go out to speak with tables I usually start with friends, and family, and repeat customers who I know. Many tables will flag me down, or give

me a look and then I know they want to talk to me. I certainly did not mean to make you feel left out! I greatly appreciate your visit and the fact that you shared your anniversary with [us].

She invites the couple back because she wants "to make up for my neglect of you and your anniversary. I would love to meet you and share a limoncello with you after your meal!! Please come back!"

The response seems genuine and the couple is extended an invitation to return. The incident is directly discussed, even as race is not mentioned. The responder notes that she is shy, stating that she starts with people she knows, family, friends, and then folks who flag her down and "give her the look" so she knows she's welcome. In short, although regrettable, this is about shyness, not race.

CONCLUSIONS

Research shows that racism in the restaurant industry is pervasive and that Black customers consistently receive inferior service (Brewster 2012; Brewster, Lynn, and Cocroft 2014; Brewster and Rusche 2014). Recently the U.S. State Department issued the following warning for travel to Mongolia: "Unprovoked xenophobic attacks against foreigners also occur. The attackers often target Asian-Americans and interracial couples... for verbal or physical abuse" (U.S. Department of State 2016). Whether it is restaurants in the northeast of the United States, attacks in Mongolia, rejection from multiple Airbnb sites in Buenos Aires (Clarke 2016), or travel warnings from the NAACP in Missouri (Suhr 2017), racism is global and pervasive across the travel and hospitality sector.

Time spent traveling and dining out has the promise of rewards. Yet for interracial families and couples, fear and anxiety (and actual discrimination) diminish and deny these rewards. In short, the freedom to engage in and rewards of travel and leisure are curtailed by racism (Brewster 2012; Dalmage 2000; Feagin 1991; Lee and Scott 2017; Torabian and Miller 2017; Stephenson and Hughes 2005). When interracial couples dine out and travel, they are visible markers that race matters, boundaries exist, and racial hierarchies can be challenged. The conspicuousness of interracial couples means that they evoke a response.

It is not possible to know the number of interracial travelers who do not write reviews (or use other online platforms), those who did not face noticeable racism, those who did not identify as

“interracial,” or those whose reviews were removed. However, this research shows that the engagement through TripAdvisor, using the affordances of its site, create an online interaction in which racialized Others were dismissed.

The TripAdvisor business goal of “instant bookings” is built on a model in which customers are encouraged to feel a sense of community built on trust. TripAdvisor’s platform with the individual and collective traveler reviews and ratings is meant to create a sense of trustworthiness (Jamerson 2017). Jeacle and Carter (2011) showed the ways “calculative practices” built into the review process are used to elicit trust and show the credibility of this platform. Trust and community are, however, deeply ruptured in a White supremacist, racialized world (Hooker 2009), where colorblind practices are used to ignore racism while upholding White universal goodness. The TripAdvisor platform works well in a neoliberal White world, in which community is defined through consumption and race structures and is structured by capital. When businesses respond to race-based negative reviews, they can rely on (in their attempts to ameliorate the possible damage and redeem their “goodness”) the broad distrust of racialized Others (Hooker 2009), a lack of racial empathy, and strategic racial ignorance (Mills 1997; Steyn 2012). In short, they can know that the sense of community, solidarity and empathy is bounded by race (Maly and Dalmage 2016).

And although the TripAdvisor platform creates a possibility for calling out and reading about racism in the review, it is the case that of the 535 million reviews on TripAdvisor, my search for *interracial*, *inter-racial*, and *biracial* returned just 233 reviews worldwide. Individuals who may benefit from reading the reviews have, globally, a 1 in 22,961.37 chance of reading a review by a self-designated interracial couple, unless they explicitly search for reviews that include interracial couples. (In fact, they would have a greater chance of getting struck by lightning: 1 in 13,983.82 over an 80-year lifetime, as reported in 2017 by the National Weather Service). In other words, although the affordances of TripAdvisor create a path for reporting and confronting, the warnings will likely go unheard and the points buried by sheer number of other reviews and ratings. Moreover, with a broader search, such as for *racism*, only 3,679 reviews are returned (1 in 1,454.20). The question must be asked about how TripAdvisor returns searches and removes reviews.

The process of dismissing and denying race assumes the pathologizing of interracial couples

and racialized Others. The myth of a color-blind world is upheld through claims of universal service standards defined by numbers and decontextualized interactions, a world in which all human beings (and aliens) receive the same service. Sharma and Brooker (2017) argued, “As expressions become less explicitly racist, they become increasingly difficult to identify and interpret by the social researcher” (p. 468). When these expressions are nestled in a site that manages millions of reviews and mobilizes efforts toward a profit motive, we need digital discourse analysis. The racial borders, developed through colonization and global capitalism and infused into identities, ideologies, and institutions, are now being created in new and not so new ways online, and this can be understood through digital discourse analysis, in these “hard to reach or hard to understand” (Recuber 2017:50) places on the Internet.

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NOTE

1. See Kim Williams (2006) for a critique of multi-racial organizations that prioritized White mothers in interracial families. See also the present author’s anthology *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking* (Dalmage 2004) for a broad critique of the multiracial movement.

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