

Beyond Objectivity
Language, Truth Production,
and Dominant Narratives in Journalism

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Abstract

Within the past few years, students at universities across the US have been organizing in response to various manifestations of racism and institution-sanctioned, racialized violence. Mainstream news outlets have been characterizing these organized student responses to racism and violence as part of a push toward the elusive concept of political correctness—a term that often functions to write off people who are pushing for a less violent language and ways of relating to one another. This news coverage has, at times, inaccurately pointed to student responses to racism and violence as some sort of general threat to free speech. This discourse flattens differences and specificity, and uses the power of language and knowledge production to trivialize student-organized responses to very real violence, masked by claims to objective reporting and neutrality. What results is a failure by news media to responsibly represent the specificities of student movements without re-inscribing dominant narratives and racialized tropes about violence and resistance.

Through a critical discourse analysis of reporting and national-level writing about the organized student responses to institutional racism and violence at Yale and the University of Missouri, and an examination of my experiences working for a student publication, I explore links between language, power, objectivity, and a supposedly-objective truth. I ask, *Whose voices are given authority and space? What is left unsaid and silenced? What is presented as a claim, and what is presented as fact?*

Answering these questions begins a necessary deconstruction of the presumed existence of a single objective truth, revealing the fallacy of objectivity to both producers and consumers of mainstream media. Ultimately, I conclude that the goals of “fairness” and “balance” in pursuit of objective journalism continue to normalize and uphold systems of oppression, namely white supremacy. This project makes space to begin imagining a future in which specific and experiential knowledge is valued; a future in which the communication of knowledge and information can occur outside hegemonic structures of racism and white supremacy.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Entering the project through key terms	6
Methods	22
Why this project?	25
Chapter Overview	26
I. The New York Times, Hegemonic Truth, and the Erasure of Violence	27
Dehistoricization	31
Euphemism	33
Invalidation	37
False Dichotomy	42
Limitations of national-level reporting	47
II. Local News & Mizzou: Questions of Scale and the Visible	50
Local news and nonscalability	54
“The nomination of the visible”	58
Naming and not naming race	59
Observational writing style	63
III. Student Publications: Limitations and Generative Potential	68
“Fair and balanced” reporting and the imposition of respectability politics	71
Diminishing police violence	71
Policing protest tactics	73
Policing anger	77
Who is able to be objective? Identity and perceived bias in reporting	81
“Conflicts of interest”	83
Generative potential	87
Conclusion	91
Appendix	99
Bibliography	101

Introduction

In the fall of 2015, I was studying in Madrid, Spain, feeling painfully distant from the United States despite being surrounded almost entirely by Americans. I had decided to go to Spain because I was feeling burnt out at Tufts, but hearing about the protests going on at Tufts that semester made me wish I wasn't thousands of miles across the Atlantic. I spent the semester reading countless news articles about those protests, as well as protests at other schools going on at the same time. I remember that what I was reading from institutionalized news sources like *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic* felt contradictory to what I was reading on Twitter and Facebook. On social media, I was seeing information from students directly involved in protests, both at Tufts as well as at other universities across the country. These accounts seemed much more specific and nuanced than the reporting I was reading. I was also seeing criticism about how newspapers were demonizing protesters, misrepresenting events, or not telling the full story.

Because I've been involved with a student magazine, the *Tufts Observer*, since I got to Tufts, the disparities between news reports and student accounts of struggles for racial justice on college campuses led me to think about the choices that go into writing a news story. I wondered specifically why reporters and editors constructed their articles in ways that demonized students. In one of the classes I took when I returned to Tufts, we read Edward Said's *Covering Islam*.

This passage was transformational for me:

...however much we proclaim the contrary, what the media produce is neither spontaneous nor completely "free": "news" does not just happen, pictures and ideas do not merely spring from reality into our eyes and minds, truth is not directly available...television, radio, and newspapers observe certain rules and conventions to get things across intelligibly, and it is these, often more than the reality being conveyed, that shape the material delivered by the media...They do so within a *political* context made

active and effective by an unconscious ideology, which the media disseminate without serious reservations or opposition.¹

Said's acknowledgement—that the interplay of journalistic convention and political context shape the truths produced in news media—contributed to my interest in the political and ideological role of journalism in any given moment. In this case, it was this specific moment of protest at colleges and universities across the US.

This informed my decision to take the news coverage I was reading about student protests and pull it apart to think about choices as small as what word to use, or as large as who to interview, to see how it did or did not align with the political aims of the institutional forces students were protesting. Through a close reading of news coverage of student responses to violence at University of Missouri and Yale University, both in the fall of 2015, I examine how journalistic claims to objectivity—that is, reporting that claims to be fair and unbiased—obscure how language functions to reinscribe dominant narratives about what forms of violence are acceptable and legible to power, and which violences must continue to go unnamed or invalidated in the furtherance of white supremacy. This analysis questions the assumption that it is possible for anyone to be “objective” as it is understood in the field of journalism. It also explores who is typically able to make successful claims to objectivity if, as Said claims, truth is constructed rather than “made directly available.”

Though I would argue that claims to objectivity obscure how language upholds any number of systems of power and oppression, for the purposes of this project I will specifically examine white supremacy. Importantly, this is not an examination of “media bias.” Such an examination would imply that some reporting is “bad” and “biased” while some is not, still

¹ Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Vintage Books, 1997. p. 48-9. Print.

leaving room for the possibility of objectivity to be attainable. Rather, I explore how language and framing do specific truth production work, and I examine the relationship between truth production and dominant ideologies of white supremacy in the US.

Entering the project through key terms

This project sits at the intersection of a number of key terms, an understanding of which is also central to an understanding of the project and its stakes. Here, I explore where my analysis is situated in relation to understandings of violence, white supremacy, objectivity, and journalism, both historically and in the present.

This project is concerned with mapping the erasure of violence through the language of news reporting. Violence is any act or series of acts which, intentionally or not, threaten an individual or group's existence and result in harm. This definition is intentionally broad—it includes anything from murder, which literally ends an individual's existence, to cultural and emotional violence, which threaten individual and groups' existence through invalidation or denial. Importantly, this definition of violence does not assert that there is a spectrum of violence, or varying degrees of violence that make certain kinds of violence somehow “better” or “worse” than others. Different kinds of violence have multiple and different effects on people, all of which are harmful.

Violence has been used historically and in the present as a tool of domination. This can be seen on a variety of scales, from military violence used by the United States to further its “democratizing” projects in places like Vietnam and Iraq, to the innumerable instances of rape and other physical violence that accumulated to a systemic use of violence to enact terror and

repression against enslaved Black people in the United States.² In these cases, violence is enabled by power; the combination of the two is what produces an assertion of domination.

It may be confusing to think of actions that do not result in physical harm as violent, or to think of words as violent, but in these kinds of cases, a threat is still made to the existence of a person or group. Violent language is commonplace. Indeed, language should be understood as violent if it has the potential to produce a violent result. Take, for example, Sylvia Wynter's letter "No Humans Involved," in which she outlines the Los Angeles Police's use of the acronym "N.H.I." ("No Humans Involved") to refer to, as Wynter describes, "any case involving the breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos." She explains how this language use is both reflective of and influential in shaping the way individual officers viewed Black men as inhuman, and how this affected actions groups of police officers took in brutalizing and murdering Black men.³

Actions that do not directly enact physical harm can also be violence. Something like cultural appropriation—the use of people of color's cultural items or practices, usually by White people, as decontextualized and stereotype-based costumes or accessories—is violent because it denies histories of violence and therefore allows violence to continue unchecked. It also makes people's cultures and histories into something to be put on and taken off by White people at will, denying the real violences experienced by people of color for that very same expression of culture. Cultural appropriation simultaneously contributes to the very stereotypes that have been used in the past and present to justify racist violence. Scholar and activist Adrienne Keene explains, "Victoria Secret sending a headdressed bikini clad model down the runway, pocahotties on halloween, Blair Waldorf on gossip girl dressing up like an Indian stripper—these

² Wallace, Michael. "The Uses of Violence in American History." *The American Scholar* (1970): 81-102.

³Wynter, Sylvia . "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Voices of the African Diaspora* 8.2 (1992): 13-18. Web.

images paint Native women as sex objects, as sexual fantasies, as something to be conquered and owned.”⁴

These are examples of cultural violence, which works because the violence itself is not seen as such, or is seen as more or less morally acceptable.⁵ Johan Galtung explains, “Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong...violence studies are about two problems: the use of violence and the legitimation of that use.”⁶ Here, perhaps, is the most potent role of violence that occurs through language or practices—when that violence goes unchecked, it allows for the continuation of those same violences, as well as others.

Additionally, a barrier that often comes up against this more expansive understanding of violence is one that centers individual actions, assuming that violence can only be enacted by one individual onto another individual. This assumption follows the logic of what Alan Freeman calls the “perpetrator perspective.” He talks specifically about racism, though I think the same analysis can be applied to violence. Freeman says,

The perpetrator perspective sees racial discrimination not as conditions, but as actions, or series of actions, inflicted on the victim by the perpetrator...The perpetrator perspective presupposes a world composed of atomistic individuals whose actions are outside of and apart from the social fabric and without historical continuity.”⁷

A perpetrator perspective on violence assumes that violence can only be carried out by individuals, against individuals, obscuring how systems and institutions can enact violence both on individuals and on groups.

⁴Keene, Adrienne. “We Live in a Culture of Violence, and It Needs to Stop.” *Native Appropriations*, December 15, 2012.

⁵Galtung, Johan. “Cultural Violence.” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1990, pp. 291–305.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Freeman, Alan D. “Legitimizing Racial Discrimination Through Anti-Discrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine.” *Critical Race Studies: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. New York: The New Press, 1996. 29-45. Print.

This definition of violence is key to understanding how students' experiences with racism at universities is violence, regardless of whether it produces physical injury and regardless of whether or not any sort of harm was intended. As I will argue, uses of language in journalism that diminish or invalidate those experiences therefore necessarily erase the existence of racist violence at colleges and universities.

As a concept, racism is difficult to define. For this project, I am thinking about the relationship between racism and white supremacy—how they are co-constitutive and can be upheld through interested knowledge. Beverly Tatum explains that "...racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals."⁸ Tatum's definition is helpful because it illustrates the interplay between individual beliefs and actions on the interpersonal level, as well as the way racism manifests and operates structurally as an organizing logic of institutions and everyday life.

Key to this definition is an understanding of white supremacy. Though colloquially the term evokes images of the KKK, Nazis, and the like, white supremacy refers to an ideology that positions both whiteness and individual White people as superior, both explicitly and implicitly. Though KKK members and Nazis would both assert that White people comprise a "superior race," that same assertion is signaled more covertly (though no less strongly) through the "institutional policies and practices" that Tatum references. Adding an understanding of white supremacy to the dictionary definition of racism reveals how racism is a system that specifically

⁸ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Defining Racism." *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations about Race*. N.p.: n.p., 1997. 3-13. Print.

improves what Dean Spade calls the “life chances”⁹ of White people in the united states. With this understanding, the terms white supremacy and racism can be used interchangeably.

Historically, and on the most basic level, white supremacy has been deployed to keep White people—primarily people of European descent—safe, healthy, educated, out of harm’s way, and generally holding power, while simultaneously subjugating people of color. White supremacy is inextricably linked to settler colonialism, genocide, and slavery in the context of the United States; racial categories emerged as necessary to justify the subjugation of what would become racial groups. For example, the category “black” was produced as a contrast to the category “white” in part to justify chattel slavery and the Atlantic slave trade,¹⁰ and immigrants from Asia and South America have been racialized as inferior to whites at times of increased immigration from those regions in the interest of keeping social and economic power consolidated among people racialized as White.¹¹

One way white supremacy is maintained is through the elasticity of “white” as a racial category. Immigrant groups that were initially categorized as non-white, such as Italian and Irish people, as well as Jews from Eastern Europe, have gained access to the power and privilege associated with a White racial identity by buying into the subjugation of people without access to whiteness.¹² This explains why someone like me, with Eastern European Jewish heritage, would pick “White” on a census—no other category exists to encapsulate my racial identity because there is no need for a category other than White now that people like me and my family have been allowed access to whiteness. Other groups have, overall unsuccessfully, attempted to do the

⁹ Spade, Dean. *Normal life: administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011. Print.

¹⁰ Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*, Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2015.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

same through legal challenges and complicity in oppression and violence, which is often anti-Black.¹³

Presently, despite assertions that the United States is post-racial because of the abolition of slavery or the legal victories of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, white supremacy/racism is still one of the preeminent systems controlling life chances in the US. It continues to play out through individuals, in interpersonal relationships and interactions, and on larger scales such as through institutions like the law, schools, and prisons. Gloria Yamato explains that these days, racism takes on all different shapes and forms, from the “aware/blatant” racism when my uncle calls Mexican immigrants “illegals” and “wetbacks,” to “aware/covert” racism of the policies and practices of the bank that gave my parents a home loan at a rate much lower than if they had been people of color, to the “unaware/unintentional” racism inherent when, my first year of college, I wore cornrows in my hair as part of a Halloween costume, to the “unaware/self-righteous” racism that occurs in moments when I, with my college education and large vocabulary, think I can explain racism and oppression better than a person of color who lives it every day.¹⁴

According to Beverly Tatum, “Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air...if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?”¹⁵ This assumed superiority plays out not only through interpersonal interactions, but on a structural level as well. In the present and recent past, white supremacy/racism is no less potent or pervasive, but rather has taken on new forms, such as the mass incarceration of Black and Brown

¹³ Lipsitz, George. "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the "White" Problem in American Studies." *American Quarterly* 47.3 (1995): 369. Web.

¹⁴ Yamato, Gloria. "Something about the subject makes it hard to name." *Making face, making soul* (1990): 20-24.

¹⁵ Tatum 1997.

people through the prison industrial complex, or the murders of Black and Brown people by police, both of which are extensions and permutations of slavery and Jim Crow.¹⁶

White supremacy has a particular and ongoing relationship with violence, both physical and psychic. Violence both reinforces and is justified by white supremacy/racism. For example, Indigenous children forcibly removed from their homes and families and imprisoned in the Carlisle Indian Industrial School and similar “boarding schools” were beaten and had other forms of physical violence enacted on them. Additionally, the schools themselves existed to enact a process of forced assimilation on Indigenous children, a cultural genocide, or a “... purposeful destructive targeting of out-group cultures so as to destroy or weaken them in the process of conquest or domination.”¹⁷

bell hooks equates whiteness and white supremacy in the United States with psychic violence, writing, “All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whites.” She goes on to say, “[White people’s] inability to conceive that my terror...is a response to the legacy of white domination and the contemporary expressions of white supremacy is an indication of how little this culture really understands the profound psychological impact of white racist domination.”¹⁸ Here, hooks points out how histories of White terrorism have profound and long-lasting psychic impacts. She identifies White people’s inability to recognize those impacts as indicative of the partial invisibility of psychic violence, at least in the White imagination. Thus, white supremacy is sustained by continuing to pretend it doesn’t exist and by denying the violence, both physical and psychic, it perpetuates. And, as I argue, it is in part reinforced via the ideal of objectivity.

¹⁶ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2010. Print.

¹⁷ Davidson, Lawrence. *Cultural Genocide*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J., 2012.

¹⁸ Hooks, Bell. "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination." *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Ruth Frankenberg. Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 1997. 165-79. Print.

Objectivity denotes omniscience—an ability to know all aspects of a thing, or an event, or a person or group of people, and to communicate the one real truth supposedly discernable from that omniscience, free from the influence of personal bias or opinion. So defined, objectivity describes an aspirational ideal that does not exist.

Perhaps tellingly, the historical rise of objectivity traced by White philosophers centers whiteness. For example, Stephen Gaukroger writes, “Objectivity came to the fore in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.”¹⁹ Though he doesn’t specify *where* objectivity came to the fore during those times, he later couches the claim in terms of Plato and the ideology of the Christian church at the time, revealing the Eurocentrism of his analysis. In a contradiction, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison locate “the emergence of scientific objectivity in the nineteenth century.”²⁰ While this project looks at the role of objectivity in journalism, objectivity’s historical role in natural sciences was also aspirational:

To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower—knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without interference, interpretation, or intelligence.²¹

Scientific objectivity, like journalistic objectivity, is interested in somehow finding the one real truth, and communicating that truth while simultaneously leaving no indication of who it is being communicated by.

Though its adjective form is often used to describe a state of being—to “be objective”—relationships to objectivity should be seen as property relations—that is, that objectivity exists as something to own, something with value. Through its position as property, the link between objectivity and white supremacy becomes clear. In her essay *Whiteness as Property*, Cheryl

¹⁹ Gaukroger, Stephen. *Objectivity: a very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012: 56.

²⁰ Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books, 2007: 9

²¹ *Ibid.* 17

Harris describes whiteness as “the quintessential property for personhood.”²² She continues, “The law constructed ‘whiteness’ as an objective fact, although in reality it is an ideological proposition imposed through subordination.”²³

While the supposed existence of “objective fact” constructs whiteness, claims to objectivity itself are also property claims, which work in the same way claims to whiteness as property do. Harris writes,

The liberal view of property is that it includes the exclusive rights of possession, use, and disposition. Its attributes are the right to transfer or alienability, the right to use and enjoyment, and the right to exclude others. Even when examined against this limited view, whiteness conforms to the general contours of property.²⁴

Objectivity as property operates in this same way. To be objective is to have a right to define truths, and to exclude others from making the same claim.

Objectivity is part and parcel of whiteness, and both are claimable; the act of claiming is both historical and current: “Claiming is an act of possessing, of making property, of enclosure. Colonizers traveled on boats and horses to claim new lands for old crowns. Researchers make claims for a living. Claiming is public, is personal.”²⁵

The right to claim whiteness includes a right to remain unmarked and non-marginalized. Similarly, the right to claim objectivity also implies a right to remain unmarked; this, in turn, is constitutive of whiteness as unmarked. Additionally, upholding whiteness through the law is contingent on claims to objectivity made by the law. Many legal scholars have argued that there

²² Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁵ Tuck, E., and K. W. Yang. "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 20.6 (2014): 811-18. Web.

are “neutral principles” by which legal decisions, and particularly Constitutional legal decisions, should be made.²⁶

Claims and aspirations to objectivity have direct links with power. Dean Spade’s definition of power is the one I’m using here: “Power is not a matter of one dominant individual or institution, but instead manifests in interconnected, contradictory sites where regimes of knowledge and practice circulate and take hold.”²⁷ One of these sites is objectivity, or routine claims to objectivity from a position of power. Claims can be made by individuals, institutions, or the “regimes of knowledge and practice” that Spade names. To say that someone, a White cis man for example, or the *New York Times*, is able to be objective, uninfluenced by a bias or their own interest, is to claim that they have no interest other than the truth, which is to obscure the ongoing and constant interest they have in upholding white supremacy, for their own continued dominance.

But the ability to lay claim to objectivity is not universally available or attainable. The power to “be objective,” and therefore qualified to speak a truth applicable to everyone, is reserved for those occupying the center in one or more ways. The center should be understood as “...who are members of the ‘us’ of the nation and who are the ‘outsiders’ who must be abandoned or eliminated.”²⁸ This is not to say that someone of a non-marginalized identity is able to truly be objective. Rather, it is a matter of who is able to lay claim to the label of “objective” to obscure the inherent subjectivity of their knowledge and understanding.

This is true even in the case of people claiming to be objectively speaking about subjective experiences—this is the process by which the experiences, vernaculars, cultural

²⁶ Wechsler, Herbert. “Toward Neutral Principles of Constitutional Law.” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 73, no. 1, 1959, pp. 1–35.

²⁷ Spade, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 77

practices, beauty standards, etc. of White people are assumed to be the norm, for example. To expand on this, any dominant identity position, such as being White, or straight, or cis, or non-disabled, is by default unmarked, viewed as normative and neutral. Therefore, people who occupy these identities are more likely to be viewed as objective or able to lay claim to objectivity.

Saying that a cis, White, able-bodied, straight, upper-class man is the person who has the ability to be objective and report in an unbiased way about other people's experiences presents a possible answer to Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"²⁹ Yes, the subaltern—people, communities, and even institutions on the margins—can speak, but can never claim objectivity in doing so. Only people, communities, and institutions in dominant power positions can do that.

On an individual level, claims to objectivity inherently mask the ways in which the experience of all facets of identity, both marginalized and centralized, are constantly influencing perception of truth and reality. On a structural level, claims to objectivity position those "interconnected, contradictory sites where regimes of knowledge and practice circulate and take hold" as the default arbiters of truth. This relationship not only reaffirms power, but also denies lived realities such that the violences inflicted by power are able to persist.

One of the most prolific institutions through which objectivity is reinforced is news journalism. On the most practical level, journalism is a practice that is supposedly invested in reporting facts about "what's going on" either in a specific location or in "the world" at large. This definition broadly refers to any media whose purpose is to communicate "what's going on" to an audience, based in the idea that news is something that can be reported objectively, or that

²⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988): 271-313. Web.

there is a singular reality that can be accurately represented. This includes television news, print newspapers and magazines, radio and podcasts, as well as online news sources that produce video and written content. In the field of Journalism Studies, journalism has been defined in a number of different-but-relating ways: as an ideological practice that exists as a “public service” and values objectivity, reporters’ autonomy, a sense of immediacy, and an adherence to specific standards and ethics;³⁰ as a source of information and a resource for public debate;³¹ a “central foundation” of US culture that has a fraught relationship with the truth.³²

Outlining a singular history of the rise of objectivity as a journalistic ideal is difficult. What is clear is that modes of communicating about what’s “going on” in the world have, and continue to, morph. In his book *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism*, David T.Z. Mindich pinpoints a specific historical moment when, “In his first issue of the *New York Herald*, in 1835, James Gordon Bennett announced his intention to ‘record facts on every public and proper subject, stripped of verbiage and coloring,’”³³ while simultaneously acknowledging that there can be no one starting point in the rise of objectivity. Rather, he points to moments like the establishment of the *Herald*, as well as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, which was “not induced by motives of...party.”³⁴

These examples are demonstrative of objectivity’s roots in dominant American culture, and specifically in discourses both constructed and dominated by white supremacy. Indeed, Mindich argues, “By the 1890s, especially with the rise of the *New York Times* and other papers that shared the ‘objective’ paradigm, what we recognize as the traits of ‘objectivity’ were...all in

³⁰ Deuze, Mark. "WHAT IS JOURNALISM?." *Cultural meanings of news: a text-reader* (2010): 20.

³¹ McNair, Brian. "What is journalism." *Making journalists: Diverse models, global issues* (2005): 28.

³² Goldstein, Tom. *Journalism and Truth: Strange Bedfellows*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U Press, 2007. Print.

³³ Mindich, David T. Z. *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism*. NYU Press, 2000. p. 5. Print.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

place.³⁵ For Mindich, these traits include detachment, nonpartisanship, “fact collecting” and balance.³⁶

Informed by this history, conditions have resulted under which it is possible for Michael Ryan to write, “Objective journalists believe a real world exists and that one can produce a reasonably accurate description of the world,”³⁷ or for Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman to write,

Some journalists have decided that, since the concept of ‘truth’ is too amorphous, they should not rely on standards such as ‘accuracy’ but instead on ‘fairness’ and ‘balance’...A story is ‘balanced’ if ‘both’ sides’ opinions are heard; it is fair if equal time is given to ‘both’ sides as well.³⁸

These same conditions produce Andrew Calcutt and Philip Hammond’s ascription of the word “commendable” to Professor George Brock’s characterization of “‘verification’, ‘sense making’, ‘witness’ and ‘investigation’” as “‘...the elements which make the core of what [journalists] do.’”

Calcutt and Hammond argue that the role of objectivity in journalism should be viewed through a historical lens—they write,

The critique [of objectivity] has long since become the orthodoxy: not only is there a consensus against objectivity among scholars of Journalism Studies, but journalists themselves have internalised the critique and often seem unwilling or unable to offer a robust defence of what was once a defining ethic of the profession.³⁹

Calcutt and Hammond go on to categorize any critique of objectivity in journalism as “redundant.”⁴⁰ If, as they argue, objectivity has been phased out as a journalistic ideal, then it has simply been renamed or replaced with similarly impossible ideals such as “fairness” or

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 12-3.

³⁷ Ryan, Michael. “Journalistic Ethics, Objectivity, Existential Journalism, Standpoint Epistemology, and Public Journalism.” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 16.1 (2001): 3–22. Print.

³⁸ Hearn-Branaman, Jesse Owen. *Journalism and the Philosophy of Truth: Beyond Objectivity and Balance*. Routledge, 2016. p. 37. Print.

³⁹ Calcutt, Andrew, and Philip Hammond. *Journalism Studies: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, 2011. p. 97. Print.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

“impartiality,” which suggest ideological neutrality and a lack of personal or institutional political or ideological interest inherent in the process of knowledge production. Mindich points out that though “objectivity” has been removed from the Society of Professional Journalism’s Code of Ethics, it has been replaced with “words such as ‘truth,’ ‘accuracy,’ and ‘comprehensiveness.’”⁴¹

Perhaps as a reflection of this change, the *New York Times* description of its “standards and ethics” lists “Fairness,” “Integrity,” and “Truth” as some of the publication’s core tenets. Its website reads, in part, “The goal of The New York Times is to cover the news as impartially as possible — ‘without fear or favor,’ in the words of Adolph Ochs, our patriarch—and to treat readers, news sources, advertisers and others fairly and openly, and to be seen to be doing so.”⁴² These principles serve the same purpose as claims to neutrality and objectivity—they imply the existence of a truth that is perceivable, free of the inescapable influence of positionality and lived experience on perception. Indeed, these are some of the very same tenets that Mindich identified as foundational in the very rise of objectivity in the first place. For these reasons, I will continue to use the term to describe the ideal of neutrality claimed by mainstream journalistic publications.

Additionally, though Hearn-Branaman’s book *Journalism and the Philosophy of Truth* lays out a number of different schools of thought to which journalists subscribe,⁴³ examining the ethics codes of mainstream news organizations reveals gestures toward and/or direct references

⁴¹ Mindich, 6.

⁴² “Standards and Ethics | The New York Times Company.” Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

⁴³ Hearn-Branaman outlines Realism, Pragmatism, Antirealism, and Hyperrealism as four epistemologies that inform the practice of journalism. Both Realism and Pragmatism, despite differences that Hearn-Branaman details, both center on providing a reader or consumer of news media with a variety of “perspectives” as a way to avoid “bias” or “imbalance,” though Pragmatists are less sure of the existence of a single indisputable truth. Hearn-Branaman does acknowledge, as well, that the interplay between these two epistemologies is what constitutes “the normative epistemology of Anglo-American journalism” (66).

to objectivity, balance, and fairness. These are clearly still aspirational ideals that inform the practices of reporting and editing.

What this balance-focused approach to journalism fails to acknowledge is the degree to which news reporting and journalism are inherently implicated in knowledge *production*; in the creation of fact rather than the reporting of it—reporting “what’s going on” in the world is influenced by a perception of what “the world” is and what is worthy of being reported. The decision of what to report on is influenced by a wide variety of factors, which change from news outlet to news outlet. Some decisions are swayed by the involvement of corporate sponsors or concerns about ratings, while others are based on a publications’ imagining of who its readership is and what they might be most interested in. For other reporters and news outlets, “speaking truth to power” is prioritized through a focus on investigative reporting.

Louis Althusser argues that, regardless of these varying motivating factors, news media and journalism operate as arms of the state in a role he calls “ideological state apparatuses.” These apparatuses are inherently interested in furthering “capitalist relations of exploitation,” which in this project are understood to be systems of oppression such as racism/white supremacy. Althusser’s “communications” apparatus does this specifically “by cramming every ‘citizen’ with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc. by means of the press, the radio and television.”⁴⁴ This assessment of news media as acting in furtherance of hegemonic ideology and oppressive systems poses a direct challenge to the notion that journalism is solely interested in finding a singular truth.

Stuart Hall expands on the notion that “the press, the radio and television” are all consistently operating in the interest of the state and systems of capitalist oppression: “It would

⁴⁴ Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader* 9 (2006).

be simple and convenient if all the media were simply the ventriloquists of a unified and racist 'ruling class' conception of the world. But neither a unifiedly conspiratorial media nor indeed a unified racist 'ruling class' exists in anything like that simple way."⁴⁵ Rather, news media reflects ideological truths, the dominant narratives in any given society, which are themselves complex and at times contradictory.

Generally, though, since the dominant ideology of the United States is, among other things, racist and therefore interested in upholding current systems of white supremacy and racist subjugation, the overall net result of news reporting is one in which that ideological status quo is upheld. Hall describes a hypothetical in which a "good and honest liberal broadcaster" makes a report about "race relations" and "maintains a scrupulous balance and neutrality when questioning people interviewed for the programme," and yet still implicitly upholds racist assumptions. In this way, even the "fair and balanced" method of reporting falls short in resisting both the influence and reproduction of dominant ideologies through news reporting. The dominant racist ideology goes not only unquestioned, but also continually normalized through

...apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional,' which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded...⁴⁶

Considered alongside Said's point that the truth produced by media is mediated by standards of journalistic practice and "unconscious ideology," both Althusser's and Hall's analyses confirm that even as news journalism makes claims to objectivity, the knowledge it produces is inherently linked to dominant ideologies.

⁴⁵ Hall, Stuart. "The whites of their eyes: racist ideology and the media." *Silverlinings*, London: Lawrence Wishart (1981).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Considering this project through the lens of key terms, we can see how white supremacy is a dominant ideology in the United States, one with links both to violence and the conception of objectivity that is foundational to standard journalistic practices. In this project, I consider how journalistic practice that reproduces dominant ideologies might simultaneously obscure or deny racist/white supremacist violence.

Methods

The focus of this project is informed by the practice of refusal, as described by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their essay “Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research.” Tuck and Yang describe refusal, appropriately, by what it is not:

Thus, refusal is not a code word for critical research, socially engaged, or culturally sensitive research. It is not the reflexive caveat, the hand-wringing, the flash of positional confession before proceeding as usual. Furthermore, the turn toward humanizing the object into a subject—often through the inclusion of people of color, women, youth, and Native researchers—is important work, but not the same as refusal. The goal of refusal is not for objects to become subjects in the academy, but contrarily, to *object to* the very processes of objectification/subjection, the making of possessors and possessions, the alchemy of becoming-claims.⁴⁷

They propose that to practice refusal in academic research is to interrogate power and privilege; it is a turning of the gaze toward systems of oppression, rather than perpetuating the colonialist and essentializing gaze of researcher toward human or community subject.

In the interest of practicing refusal, I am making a choice to examine journalism and news media as hegemonic knowledge-producing institutions. I seek to answer questions about the links between journalism and white supremacy as it is reinforced through dominant narratives. It is important to note that this will certainly not negate how my positionality

⁴⁷ Tuck & Yang, 814.

influences how I write about power and white supremacy. In fact, it would be antithetical to my own argument to presume that I could transcend the limitations imposed by my specific experiences as a White, able-bodied, queer, cisgender woman with class and freedom privilege⁴⁸ at an elite institution—as Gayatri Spivak writes in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “Our privilege is our loss”⁴⁹—there are gaps in my understanding that I will never be able to fill. Rather, it is my hope to avoid perpetuating a colonialist relationship between researcher and subject that would put me in a position to determine whose lives become legible to the academy, whose stories are worth telling, and which voices remain silenced. I hope to follow Tuck and Yang’s recommendation: “Rather than chasing aims of objectivity, we encourage researchers to take up a stance of objection, one that will interrogate power and privilege, and trace the legacies and enactments of settler colonialism in everyday life.”⁵⁰

This project does involve a great deal of research—about power, white supremacy, language, and journalism—which I hope to represent through a citational practice that acknowledges how citation is “a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies.”⁵¹ I intentionally attempted *not* to reproduce the world of this project around White cis men by centering people at various intersections of the identities woman, trans, gender non-conforming, and person of color in my citations. Whereas people at those intersections are, as Sara Ahmed calls it, “screened out,” or pushed to the margins, I am intentionally marginalizing the work of old cis White men whose work has been critiqued and improved upon by countless people. So

⁴⁸ The concept of “freedom privilege” was introduced to me by Talila “TL” Lewis, a guest speaker in a class called Rethinking Disability. TL explained “freedom privilege” to mean all the privileges that come with not being presently incarcerated. I’d also extend this privilege, especially as it applies to myself, to also consider that I have never been incarcerated, and most likely never will be.

⁴⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988): 271-313. Web.

⁵⁰ Tuck & Yang, 814

⁵¹ Ahmed, Sara. “Making Feminist Points.” *feministkilljoys*. N.p., 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 30 Mar. 2017.

why, Ahmed argues, continue centering White cis men theorists if not to continue reproducing disciplines around their bodies? My citational practices endeavor to disrupt that reproduction.

At the same time, because the field of journalism has traditionally been dominated by White cis men, much of the writing done about journalism is also by those men. The same goes for writing about objectivity as a scientific and journalistic ideal. The result of this reality is that much of my writing about those topics *has* been reproduced around the same people whose voices are always heard. My hope is that I was able to temper this by sourcing much of my conclusion from an array of Twitter users who are not all White cis men.

A large part of this project involves engaging in a close reading of news journalism. I'm grounding my reading in a methodology called Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA. CDA emerged out of critical linguistics and is concerned with rhetoric and composition. Recently, CDA has been expanding beyond the written word to examine discourse as it manifests in other forms like images and gestures, as well as "textual silences."⁵² Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon explain that CDA is a form of textual analysis that "aims to explicate abuses of power promoted by those texts, by analyzing linguistic/semiotic details in light of the larger social and political contexts in which those texts circulate." I am choosing to engage in a reading informed by CDA because, as Huckin et al state, "it explicitly draws our attention to issues of power and privilege in public and private discourse,"⁵³ which I see as a central goal of my project. They go on to explain that CDA can "reveal specific ways in which language use reflects power inequalities,"⁵⁴ adding that CDA is particularly well-equipped to engage in analysis of news

⁵²Huckin, Thomas Andrus. "Critical Discourse Analysis and Rhetoric and Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 64.1 (2012): 107–129. Print.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

media.⁵⁵ Overall, this methodology is concerned with looking at not only how language is used—word choice, active or passive voice, what is foregrounded versus backgrounded, etc.—but also at silences in discourse—what gets left out, and why? My analysis is informed by CDA’s commitment to turning the academic gaze toward sites of power, as suggested by Tuck and Yang.

Why this project?

I began this project before the 2016 presidential election, but recent months have made it feel especially relevant. Constructions such as “fake news” and “alternative facts” further complicate the already-complex public consumption of news media. The feeling that the integrity of journalism is under attack can make it seem counterintuitive to critique news outlets that are doing some important investigative work in the face of the current political regime. My feeling, however, is that it is important now, more than ever, to hold journalists and news outlets accountable for their ongoing role in the reproduction of the very conditions that we have always been living under, and that are constitutive of this political moment.

My hope is that this project will be read by people who are involved in journalism specifically, as well as knowledge production more broadly, with the intended result that they might think more deeply about how their decisions—what to write, how to write it—are entirely inextricable from their political context and the many networks of power and domination that organize our lives. I hope my readers will ultimately join me in concluding that a different world is possible, and that one of the many ways we can work toward that world is by reimagining what journalism can be.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 115.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I use *The New York Times*' coverage of protests at Yale surrounding an email from a professor who encouraged students to wear racist Halloween costumes as part of their right to free expression as a case study. I examine how language in news journalism works to invalidate student protesters' experiences of racist violence on their college campuses. In Chapter 2, I analyze coverage of protests at the University of Missouri by two local newspapers. I discuss how the unique methods of local journalism produce writing that appears objective, but ultimately performs the same ideological work as national-scale papers. In Chapter 3, I examine where the hyper-local—the student magazine—fits into this picture of truth production. By analyzing articles published in the *Tufts Observer* and reflecting on my experiences working on the magazine, I outline the shortcomings of attempts at balanced reporting. In this chapter I also look at how insight into decisions made in the name of objectivity reinforce normative ideas of who is allowed to claim objectivity. This, in turn, gestures toward my conclusion, where I explore the possibilities of imagining different practices of journalism that center the voices of people experiencing events often distilled into a “news story.”

I *The New York Times, Hegemonic Truth, and the Erasure of Violence*

Growing up in a White, upper-middle class, suburban New Jersey family, I woke up every morning to copies of three newspapers on the kitchen table: the *Star Ledger*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*. Though my parents, both lifelong Democrats, often encouraged me to seek “balance” in my consumption of news, for example by watching both FoxNews and MSNBC, the *Times* was always the first place to look to find out what was “going on in the world.” In high school at some point I set out to become more “well informed;” my first idea about how to do this was to read the *Times* every morning before school.

The New York Times subscribes to what Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman calls a “Realist” approach to journalism, in which “...the content of newspapers and TV reports is a reflection or accurate representation of Reality, and that the information contained in the news reports is ‘true’ and ‘factual.’”⁵⁶ The paper lists “integrity,” “fairness,” and “truth” on its website under “Standards and Ethics.” The page reads, in part,

The goal of *The New York Times* is to cover the news as impartially as possible — “without fear or favor,” in the words of Adolph Ochs, our patriarch — and to treat readers, news sources, advertisers and others fairly and openly, and to be seen to be doing so...At a time of growing and even justified public suspicion about the impartiality, accuracy and integrity of some journalists and some journalism, it is imperative that *The Times* and its staff maintain the highest possible standards to insure that we do nothing that might erode readers’ faith and confidence in our news columns. This means that the journalism we practice daily must be beyond reproach...As journalists we treat our readers, viewers, listeners and online users as fairly and openly as possible. Whatever the medium, we tell our audiences the complete, unvarnished truth as best we can learn it. We correct our errors explicitly as soon as we become aware of them.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Hearn-Branaman, 25.

⁵⁷ “Standards and Ethics | The New York Times Company.” Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

Claiming to “cover the news as impartially as possible,” the *Times* implies that they both aspire to objectivity and are able to achieve it in their reporting. Their emphasis on impartiality, fairness, accuracy, and “the complete, unvarnished truth as best we can learn it” implies that some sort of absolute truth exists, simply waiting for reporters to find it and share it with the public.

Indeed, as Hearn-Branaman explains, news journalism after the nineteenth century has moved “towards a more professional, nonpartisan news media that deals in the truth.”⁵⁸ This suggests that truth is, or can be, nonpartisan. However, as Foucault writes,

...truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.⁵⁹

Foucault's view implies the existence of what I call hegemonic truths: truths produced by sites of power, and produced for the sustenance and defense of those sites of power. Foucault theorizes how hegemonic truth is produced.

Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁶⁰

This theory can also be applied to the legitimization of news journalism as truth. News media and journalism can be understood as one of the “types of discourse” which society “accepts and makes function as true;” the fact that news reporting is constructed as a search for

⁵⁸ Hearn-Branaman, 26.

⁵⁹ Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books, 1980. p. 131. Print.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 133.

the truth reinforces its role as one of the “procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth.” Because of this, news reporters often occupy the position of “those who are charged with saying what counts as true.”

This régime of truth that Foucault describes explains why I, and my White, upper-middle class family, had always held *The New York Times* in such high regard as a kind of journalistic litmus test—a measure of what was fact, of what was “going on” in the world. Foucault says, “Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.”⁶¹ If truth is constituted by—and constitutive of—power, then it logically follows that my family and I would trust hegemonic truth via the *Times*. We never had reason to question a source of truth production whose truth bolsters the very systems that have privileged and empowered us, both historically and in the present.

One of the truths created by news reporting is that there is such thing as a news story, which has at the very least a beginning, and often an end as well. This concept can be illustrated, in part, by the concept of “breaking news,” which implies that there is a point before which news was not happening, a point at which it happens, and then a point after which it is being reported to the public. The idea of a news story is a genre designed to establish an inherent relationship between the past and observable facts in the present, but one that is strictly chronological; the past is not present at any point other than the past. As I’ll demonstrate later in this chapter, this idea of a news story that can begin and end necessarily erases structural and historical conditions that produce events in the present, and will continue to produce events in the future.

⁶¹ Ibid.

It is difficult to describe the scope of the *New York Times* coverage that began on November 8, 2015, without engaging in reduction myself—I won't claim that the “events” the *Times* sought to report on had some sort of precise beginning or single catalyst. For this reason, I'm looking at the sequence of articles the *Times* published not within an analysis of timeline, or which events led to others, but rather through an analysis of the structure and content of the articles themselves.

It would not be true to say that there were “events” at Yale in November 2015 that “started” with an email sent by the school's administration about Halloween costumes, because that would be to deny the specific and unique context of that moment, both present and historical. It is imperative to acknowledge Yale's particular relationship with slavery, as well as its existence on land stolen from Quinnipiac people in a process of violent colonization, and how the reverberations of those histories affect Yale's campus in the present.

An understanding of how *The New York Times* coverage of student protest at Yale in late 2015 is best framed as an interplay between euphemisms and silences—what is being said, and what is not? How are events and people framed, and which events and people are given space in the pages of the publication? An examination of the placement of content also reveals what content and framings are valued by *The New York Times*. Framings of the events the *Times* was covering at Yale that center a conflict between protesters and free speech, as well as framings that suggest cultural appropriation and hate speech are sources of offense or “insensitivity” are almost ubiquitous throughout the news coverage—coverage that is supposed to be reporting the “unvarnished truth.” Any suggestion that language and violence are directly linked at Yale is relegated to the op-ed section, and even then it is a rare occurrence. Language used in the *Times* coverage of Yale that started in early November, 2015, upholds dominant narratives which

diminish the violence inherent to cultural appropriation and racist hate speech. The *Times* used its positioning as a producer of hegemonic truth to make the racist violence enacted by speech and other forms of expression into myth through various modes of invalidation.

In this chapter, I will show how that invalidation is achieved in a few different ways. First, through dehistoricization, which invalidates by implying that structural racism, and countless modes of resistance to it, did not exist on Yale's campus in the past. Second, through euphemistic language, which invalidates by reducing racism to the personal, evading the role of power and refusing to name the structural. And finally, through language and framing which are, in themselves, invalidating in ways beyond dehistoricization or euphemism. Additionally, I will explore how the creation of a false dichotomy between free speech and protesters produces a reality in which protesting institutional racism at universities is inherently inimical to the exercise of free speech at those universities.

Dehistoricization

A repeated theme in the *Times* coverage is the ahistorical lens through which the paper often frames the events at Yale. In relation to the *Times*' specific role in the production of hegemonic truth, the result of news coverage that ignores or minimizes histories of racism and white supremacy is the production of a truth, and subsequently a reality, in which those histories either did not exist, or were not significant enough to impact the present.

For example, the first article the *Times* published about Yale in November 2015 asserts, "Weeks of simmering racial tension at Yale University boiled over in recent days into a debate over whether the administration was sensitive enough to concerns about Halloween costumes

seen as culturally offensive, students and administrators said.”⁶² To state that racial tensions have only existed for weeks is ahistorical. This kind of de-historicization—taking events out of their historical context—is common throughout the *Times* coverage. Phrases like “the campus is still in turmoil” suggest that there was a time before what the *Times* would probably call “racial turmoil,” suggesting that it is the protesters, rather than an institution founded on White supremacy and slavery, who are causing a sort of temporary discomfort and strife.

This kind of language also erases the historical presence of racism on college campuses. Later in the November 8 article, Stack references “escalating racial tension at college campuses across the United States” and “an increasingly tense racial background at Yale,”⁶³ as if to suggest that not only “racial tension,” but also racism, is a new phenomenon on college campuses. In the second article the *Times* published about Yale in November 2015, Anemona Hartocollis and Jess Bidgood write, “The passion that ousted the heads of the University of Missouri after protests over racial discrimination on campus is spreading to other colleges across the country, turning traditional fall semesters into a period of intense focus on racial misunderstanding.”⁶⁴ Again, the implication is that no one was angry about racism on college campuses before protests at Mizzou that fall.

There is, however, one striking instance in which the historical role of white supremacy is acknowledged: when talking about John C. Calhoun, for whom Yale’s Calhoun college was named, the *Times* routinely calls him a “white supremacist.” Doing this further solidifies their project of anachronizing structural racism. The contrast between the power-cognizant language of “white supremacy” and power-evasive language like “racial insensitivity” or “offensive

⁶² Stack, Liam. “Yale’s Halloween Advice Stokes a Racially Charged Debate.” *The New York Times* 8 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hartocollis, Anemona, and Jess Bidgood. “Racial Discrimination Protests Ignite at Colleges Across the U.S.” *The New York Times* 11 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

costumes” bolsters the work performed by euphemism, which suggests that, in this day and age, individual bigotry—in the form of microaggressions and “personal insult”—is the only remaining vestige of racism. The *Times*’ ability to name white supremacy when it is unequivocally situated in the past gestures toward its inability to name white supremacist structures in the present. Ultimately, this also works to invalidate students who link their experiences to the past, by denying that such a past exists.

Euphemism

Frequently, the *Times* uses euphemistic language in its accounts of race and violence in its coverage of Yale. In this context, euphemism is language that does not directly name violence and racism, or uses a name that makes it possible for a reader to evade any consideration of larger structures of power that might be at play. This makes racism seem as if it only exists on an individual level, masking the complex ways it operates on levels including the personal, but also extending beyond it. Ultimately, euphemistic and inaccurate language also operates to specifically invalidate experiences of racism, both interpersonal and structural.

Evasiveness can be seen in the way protests are framed, and specifically in how reporters describe what the protests were about. This use of euphemism is significant in the context of a Foucauldian understanding of the power of news media in producing truth, and the weight that truth is given. In a publication like the *New York Times*, which describes itself as a platform for reporting facts, these euphemisms become truth—it becomes a fact that racism is limited to interpersonal bigotry or offense.

One way the *Times* uses euphemistic language is to avoid naming whiteness or White people. Christakis is never identified as White, and euphemism is used in place of “White”

multiple times: White children are described as “blond toddlers,”⁶⁵ and a painting in Christakis’ living quarters is a “portrait of a fair-skinned woman.”⁶⁶ While each Black professor and student quoted is identified by race in news stories about Yale and protests on other campuses, White professors and students are identified as such much more unevenly. Besides any other use of euphemism to refer to racism, this insistence on dancing around the naming of Whiteness is indicative of the *Times*’ underlying inability to confront topics of race directly.

This complexity of this inability is evident in further uses of euphemism. In a November 15 article titled “Yale College Dean Torn by Racial Protests,” Rachel Swarns writes of Yale Dean Jonathan Holloway, “...he has also been sharply criticized by some students who say he has failed to do enough to change the racially charged climate on campus.”⁶⁷ The language of a “racially charged climate” implies that what student protesters want changed is simply the feeling that exists on campus at Yale, rather than structural changes to racist policy and administrative practice. “The racial climate” is referenced again, two days later, in an article by Daniel Victor, referencing “...student demonstrations and demands related to the racial climate at Yale University...”⁶⁸ Later in the article, he again references a “racially charged climate on campus.”

The use of the phrase “racial climate” as a euphemism for structural racism at Yale fails in the face of Christina Sharpe’s theorizing about “the weather.” She writes, “...the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black.”⁶⁹ An

⁶⁵ Stack, 8 Nov. 2015.

⁶⁶ Hartocollis, Anemona. “Yale Educator Recounts ‘Painful Experience’ of Halloween Email Furor.” *The New York Times* 6 Feb. 2016. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁶⁷ Swarns, Rachel L. “Yale College Dean Torn by Racial Protests.” *The New York Times* 15 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁶⁸ Victor, Daniel. “Yale Will Strengthen Teaching on Race and Ethnicity, Its President Says.” *The New York Times* 17 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁶⁹ Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *The New Inquiry*. N.p., 19 Jan. 2017. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

understanding of anti-blackness as the all-pervasive climate of daily life in the US allows for a reading of this euphemism that refuses to let it obscure the meaning it attempts to obscure. Indeed, the protests at Yale should be understood in the context of weather that is, and always has been, anti-Black.

Another common theme in euphemism is the use of “offensive” and “insensitive” as stand-ins for “racist.” In the same article, Daniel Victor writes, “In early November, students accused administrators of being insensitive to concerns about Halloween costumes considered to be culturally offensive.”⁷⁰ And in Hartocollis’ February 6, 2016 article, protests at Yale are described as “campus protests...against racial insensitivity.”⁷¹

The euphemism of insensitivity in particular is used frequently in the *Times* coverage. In May 2016, when the Christakis resigned from Yale, Hartocollis used the word multiple times in an article: “The couple stirred debate last fall, after Yale’s Intercultural Affairs Committee wrote a memo warning students against wearing culturally or racially insensitive Halloween costumes,” and “Some students accused the couple of racial and cultural insensitivity and demanded that they resign as heads of Silliman College.”⁷²

Charles R. Lawrence III explains how this focus on offense and insensitivity erases and invalidates the reality of violence enacted by racist expression, which may take the form of hate speech or, at Yale, racist Halloween costumes. He writes,

The word offensive is used as if we were speaking of a difference in taste, as if I should learn to be less sensitive to words that “offend” me...There is a great difference between the offensiveness of words that you would rather not hear because they are labeled dirty, impolite, or personally demeaning and the *injury* inflicted by words that remind the world

⁷⁰ Victor, 17 Nov. 2015.

⁷¹ Hartocollis, Anemona. “Yale Educator Recounts ‘Painful Experience’ of Halloween Email Furor.” *The New York Times* 6 Feb. 2016. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁷² Hartocollis, 26 May 2016.

that you are fair game for physical attack, that evoke in you all of the millions of cultural lessons regarding your inferiority that you have so painstakingly repressed, and that imprint upon you a badge of servitude and subservience for all the world to see.⁷³

The *Times*' framing of racist Halloween costumes as offensive and insensitive enacts the exact kind of erasure that Lawrence describes, while denying the injury—and the violence—of that expression.

The language of offense and insensitivity is used despite the language of student protesters and organizers, which is much more explicit in naming how racist oppression operates at Yale. A November 15 article says, “Hundreds of students signed an open letter, accusing [Erika Christakis] of insensitivity to minorities.”⁷⁴ However, the phrasing “insensitivity to minorities” isn’t used anywhere in that letter; in fact, the word minority is not used at any point in the letter to refer to students of color at Yale. The letter does point out that the email from the Intercultural Affairs Committee was the result of “the repeated requests of many students of color,”⁷⁵ a fact that the entirety of the *Times* coverage ignores in favor of Christakis’ view that the Yale administration is trying to dictate students’ actions. By characterizing the students’ response letter as an accusation of “insensitivity to minorities,” the *Times* ignores the parts of the letter that point to structural conditions of racism at Yale. For example, they write,

To be a student of color on Yale’s campus is to exist in a space that was not created for you. From the Eurocentric courses, to the lack of diversity in the faculty, to the names of slave owners and traders that adorn most of the buildings on campus — all are reminders that Yale’s history is one of exclusion. An exclusion that was based on the same stereotypes and incorrect beliefs that students now seek to wear as costumes. Stereotypes that many students still face to this day when navigating the university. The purpose of

⁷³ Lawrence, Charles R., III. "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus." *Words That Wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the First Amendment*. Westview Press, 1993. Print.

⁷⁴ Swarns, 15 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁵ Wilson, Ryan. “Open Letter to Associate Master Christakis.” *DOWN Magazine*. N.p., 31 Oct. 2015. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

blackface, yellowface, and practices like these were meant to alienate, denigrate, and to portray people of color as something inferior and unwelcome in society. To see that replicated on college campuses only reinforces the idea that this is a space in which we do not belong.⁷⁶

In ignoring this, the *Times* again both reduces racism to an interpersonal matter and invalidates the experiences of racism specifically articulated by students.

The invalidation of student experiences produced by euphemism is directly linked to the production of hegemonic truth. It becomes a fact, which the *Times* was simply reporting, that racist and anti-Black violence experienced by students at Yale was actually just a “misunderstanding,” or a series of “casual insults.” The production of this specific truth means that structural racism at Yale remains obscured, and student experiences with racism in any of its iterations are diminished or erased.

Invalidation

When referring to students’ accounts of their experiences with racism at Yale or on other college campuses, the *Times* often uses language that diminishes the validity of those accounts, calls them into question, or creates doubt about their truthfulness. In the first story the *Times* published in their coverage, Liam Stack describes “concerns about Halloween costumes seen as culturally offensive.”⁷⁷ In addition to using euphemistic language, this description implies that costumes that employ blackface, for example, are only “seen” as “culturally offensive” rather than actually being racist.

Invalidation is enacted in other ways, too. For example, in a November 11 article, Anemona Hartocollis and Jess Bidgood report that at Yale, “Students had even started

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Stack, 8 Nov. 2015.

questioning whether it was appropriate to call the leaders of the university’s residential colleges ‘masters,’ because they thought the term had connotations of slavery.”⁷⁸ In this instance, the use of the word “thought” casts doubt on whether or not the term “masters” actually has connotations of slavery. Removing that word from the sentence, leaving it as “...because the term has connotations of slavery,” would acknowledge the fact that the word evokes slavery-related imagery, or at least that it certainly does for the students “questioning” the appropriateness of its use. Instead, the fact produced by this sentence is that there are students who *think* the term “master” evokes slavery, rather than producing the fact that the term “master” *does* evoke slavery.

Language in the *Times* coverage is used to diminish the violence of speech, making it seem like it is individual rather than systemic: “...the students who gathered on Wednesday spoke of ‘microaggressions’—tone-deaf slights directed toward minority students—and continuing difficulties of being a student of color on a contemporary college campus, and encouraged their peers to raise awareness of them.”⁷⁹ Centering microaggressions in this summary of a student speak-out, and framing them as “tone-deaf slights,” locates racism within an individual, thus obscuring the institutionally racist conditions at a predominantly and historically White institution such as Yale.

Later in the timeline of coverage, microaggressions are referred to as “casual insults.”⁸⁰ The *Times*, however, is legally incorrect in their use of the term “insult.” In his essay “Words That Wound: A Tort Action,” Richard Delgado points out that in the 1977 case *Contreras v. Crown Zellerbach, Inc.*, the Washington Supreme Court held that “racial epithets which were

⁷⁸Hartocollis & Bidgood, 11 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Swarns, 15 Nov. 2015.

once part of common usage may not now be looked upon as ‘mere insulting language.’”⁸¹

Microaggressive speech, which should be understood as assaultive and therefore categorically similar to “racial epithets,” should not be characterized as an insult.

This characterization of microaggressions as “casual insults” also ignores the real harm done by microaggressions and other racist speech. Delgado summarizes “the harms of racism”⁸² that occur via “the psychological impact of [racist] verbal abuse.”⁸³ He quotes psychologist Kenneth Clark, who explains, “The accumulation of negative images...present[s] them with on massive and destructive choice: either to hate one’s self, as culture so systematically demand[s], or to have no self at all, to be nothing.”⁸⁴ Charles R. Lawrence III adds,

Racial epithets and harassment often cause deep emotional scarring and feelings of anxiety and fear that pervade every aspect of a victim’s life. Many victims...have experienced physiological and emotional symptoms, such as rapid pulse rate and difficulty in breathing.⁸⁵

Not only does this invalidating characterization of microaggressions obscure the role systems play in racism on college campuses, but it also denies the existence of the very violence Delgado and Clark describe. This same violence is and has been described by innumerable students at predominantly White institutions across the US; the *Times*’ invalidation of the violence of microaggressions therefore acts to invalidate that wide range of experiences.

Invalidation is also achieved through language used in news coverage that implicitly aligns the reader with school administrations, or at the least, aligns the reader against student protesters. “Student Demands: Who’s Resigned, What’s Renamed” starts with a brief sentence

⁸¹Delgado, Richard. “Words That Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name Calling.” *Words That Wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the First Amendment*. Westview Press, 1993. Print.

⁸²Ibid., 90.

⁸³Ibid., 91.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Lawrence, 74.

which asserts, “This academic year, administrators have wrestled with a deluge of student demands related to cultural and racial issues on campus.”⁸⁶ This framing prioritizes administrators’ point of view, and paints “student demands” as something to be resolved or ameliorated. It also positions the University and its administration as an unmoving, stabilized thing, which in turn positions protesters, their concerns, and their lived realities of racism at Yale as ephemeral—a “deluge” (a word which implies water) is something that overwhelms in the moment, but ultimately recedes, leaving, in this case, the University as it was.

Hartocollis again aligns readers against student protesters in a December 7 article titled “Yale Lecturer Resigns After Email on Halloween Costumes.” She describes Erika Christakis as “A Yale lecturer who came under attack for challenging students to stand up for their right to decide what Halloween costumes to wear, even to the point of being offensive...”⁸⁷ This sentence does a few things. First, it positions Christakis as a victim who “came under attack.” Second, it does not question whether students have a right to wear racist Halloween costumes, referring to “their right to decide what Halloween costumes to wear,” making that right into a fact. Additionally, characterizing Christakis as someone who was “challenging students to stand up for their right[s]...” marks her as an ally to students.

Among all this talk of Halloween costumes and students’ rights to wear what they want, there is no mention of racism or white supremacy. While some of the language used by the *Times* is euphemism that is employed to avoid naming whiteness, this is an example of a time when the stand-ins are eschewed in favor of a total silence. A passage like the one above produces a reality in which not only racism, but race itself, does not exist.

⁸⁶ Sinclair, Kate. “Student Demands: Who’s Resigned, What’s Renamed.” *The New York Times* 3 Feb. 2016. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

⁸⁷ Hartocollis, Anemona. “Yale Lecturer Resigns After Email on Halloween Costumes.” *The New York Times* 7 Dec. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

On February 6, another piece by Hartocollis does similar work. The headline reads, “Yale Educator Recounts ‘Painful Experience’ of Halloween Email Furor,” and the article begins, “Dodging 5-year-olds at the Calvin Hill Day Care Center here, Erika Christakis admired how the teachers celebrated free play as a route to intellectual inquiry, listened to children rather than preaching and stood back to let them find their own way.”⁸⁸ Later in the article, Christakis is called “an unwitting target of campus protests,” putting her in a victim position once again. Again, there is no mention of racism, white supremacy, or race at all.

Coverage that doesn’t center on Yale specifically can still help us understand how language is used to reinforce an implicit disdain for student protesters. Small turns of phrase undercut the legitimacy of the Yale administration’s call for students to be thoughtful when picking a Halloween costume—in a November 28 article about the “Amherst free speech debate,” Hartocollis (who at this point seems to be assigned the Yale story long term) writes this summarization of the events at Yale, which she includes to demonstrate how “the push and pull at Amherst is also taking place elsewhere”: “At Yale, more than 800 students, faculty, alumni and others signed a letter to the president, criticizing student demands like firing a house master who questioned the policing of Halloween costumes and creating a censure process for hate speech.”⁸⁹

Specifically, referring to the administration’s actions as “policing” and using the word “censure” position the reader in opposition to student protesters by evoking a sense of overreaching control on the part of both the administration and the protesters. This particular positioning creates a strange affiliation between the Yale administration and Yale students who

⁸⁸ Hartocollis, 6 Feb. 2016.

⁸⁹ Hartocollis, Anemona. “With Diversity Comes Intensity in Amherst Free Speech Debate.” *The New York Times* 28 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

were making demands to that same administration. This coupling reflects the attitude expressed in multiple op-eds that not only were student protesters crybabies demanding safe spaces and trigger warnings everywhere they went, but that the Yale administration was weak for coddling and appeasing them.

These invalidating uses of language function to shift blame away from perpetrators of racism, whether it is a school administration or a frat boy in blackface, thus allowing white supremacy and racist ideology to go unmarked and unchecked. At the same time, it invests in the perpetrator perspective of how racism unfolds on college campuses—between individuals, and even then, through trivial incidents such as “tone-deaf slights.” And in the case of Yale, this series of invalidations makes it seem as if very real racist violence on that campus was exaggerated, or never occurred at all.

False Dichotomy

From the very beginning of its coverage, the *New York Times* framed the protests at Yale as part of a nationwide debate between proponents of free speech and first amendment rights, and proponents of trigger warnings and safe spaces on college campuses. My goal is not to prove that the first amendment does not or should not protect the use of violent hate speech, nor is my goal to prove why the student protesters at Yale were “right.” That would require an oversimplification of “the student protestors” into a homogenous category with a single shared set of motivations, goals, and experiences. Rather, the very framing of student protests at Yale as a debate over free speech works to mask the ongoing role of white supremacy on a historically and predominantly White college campus, and ignores the specificity of events at Yale as well as the histories that produced them.

Seemingly-trivial word choices contribute to the construction of a nation-wide campus conflict over free speech. The first headline the *Times* published about protests at Yale calls them “a racially charged debate.”⁹⁰ The use of the word “debate” in particular, which gets repeated two more times in the article, evokes a sense of two sides on even footing. “Debate” also implies a resolution, a winner—even something as messy as a presidential debate is concluded with television pundits and opinion polls declaring who has won. All of this works to create a specific truth about the students and administrators at Yale, one in which the two parties are on equal footing, and in which there are only two parties or two sides in the first place.

The first op-ed published on the topic, written by Nicholas Kristof, is titled “Mizzou, Yale and Free Speech.”⁹¹ In fact, each op-ed published in the days following November 8, when the story broke, focuses on an aspect of the so-called free speech debate on college campuses. The content of op-eds reflects the ways in which the *Times* framed events at Yale as a debate between proponents of free speech and proponents of safe spaces & trigger warnings. Though the *Times* published op-eds arguing points on “both sides” of that debate, in doing so they reinforced the existence of such a debate in the first place. This is the story as the *Times* understood it, and therefore as they presented it—a debate between two sides, with clear arguments for and against on both sides. This reduction reflects what Hearn-Branaman calls the “Pragmatist” view and practice of journalism, in which readers are presented with “both sides” of a story and left to draw conclusions for themselves.⁹² Also in the opinion section, letters from readers about protests on college campuses are grouped together under common headlines. The

⁹⁰Stack, 8 Nov. 2015.

⁹¹Kristof, Nicholas. “Mizzou, Yale and Free Speech.” *The New York Times* 11 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁹²Hearn-Branaman, 61-3.

November 13 headline reads “Racial Justice and Freedom of Speech: Readers on Missouri and Yale,”⁹³ and the November 21 headline is simply, “Debates on Campus.”⁹⁴

While the *Times* did publish one op-ed on February 12, 2016 (three months after the *Times* coverage began) suggesting that “the issue” at hand might not have been free speech at all, the *Times* continued to uphold the dichotomy between free speech and safe space. An August 1 “Education Life” feature by Cecilia Capuzzi Simon titled “Fighting for Free Speech on America’s Campuses” is a profile of what the *Times* calls “the free-speech watchdog FIRE.”⁹⁵ In the article, which is not billed as an opinion piece, Simon writes, “In many ways, their [FIRE’s] work has become even more complicated. Most significantly, students are, wittingly or not, becoming vocal opponents of free speech by demanding protections and safe spaces from offensive words and behaviors.”⁹⁶ I note that the piece is not billed as opinion because this signals to the reader that what is presented therein should be understood as fact. With this in mind, Simon is therefore presenting as truth that protesters at Yale are opposed to free speech.

The majority of the *Times* coverage of Yale subscribes to this reductive view of protests as a debate over first amendment rights. While much of the framing that specifically categorizes Yale as part of a trend of free speech debates cropping up at universities is done through opinion pieces and op-eds, the *Times* itself is no less implicated. The presence of op-eds upholding the false free speech/safe space dichotomy is the result of decisions made by the *Times* editorial staff. There are no op-eds by students at Yale or any other university, and there are fewer than five op-eds that discuss events at Yale outside of the free speech debate framework.

⁹³ Tessier, Marie. “Racial Justice and Freedom of Speech: Readers on Missouri and Yale.” *Taking Note*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁹⁴ “Debates on Campus.” *The New York Times* 21 Nov. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁹⁵ Simon, Cecilia Capuzzi. “Fighting for Free Speech on America’s Campuses.” *The New York Times* 1 Aug. 2016. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

This creation of a false dichotomy between free speech and safe spaces/trigger warnings on college campuses produces a hegemonic truth which, according to Lawrence, "...makes heroes out of bigots and fans the flames of racial violence."⁹⁷ He later explains what this focus on first amendment right has to do with racism on college campuses: "...the debate that has followed [racist] incidents has focused on the first amendment freedoms of the perpetrators rather than the university community's responsibility for creating an environment where such acts occur."⁹⁸ Here Lawrence points out how the focus on a free speech debate that we see in the *Times* coverage ignores the power-holders and is misdirected. And, as he says, "The question of power, of the context of the power relationships within which speech takes place, and the connection to violence must be considered as we decide how best to foster the freest and fullest dialogue within our communities."⁹⁹ To center a reductive portrayal of student protest in which student protesters are a threat to free speech is to ignore the power dynamics that exist, and have always existed, at Yale.

Reporting that treats events at Yale as part of a large, national trend also erases the specificity of both Yale's history and the present lived realities of its students. Attempts to equate events at Yale with protests and organizing at other universities results in reporting that is often inaccurate. In a May 20, 2016 article, protests and student demands across a number of schools are summarized in a single sentence: "At some schools, students have gone further, demanding 'safe zones' and 'trigger warnings' to protect themselves against speakers, references and material they consider offensive."¹⁰⁰ The title of this article is "At Yale, World Crises Take a Back Seat to Campus Concerns," yet the demands released by Yale students on November 13,

⁹⁷ *Words That Wound*, 58.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰⁰ Bohlen, Celestine. "At Yale, World Crises Take a Back Seat to Campus Concerns." *The New York Times* 30 May 2016. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

2015, do not mention trigger warnings or safe spaces. In fact, a December 9, 2015 op-ed published in the *Times* which analyzed student demands across the country revealed, “Surprisingly rare, too, in the data are the buzzwords often highlighted in articles about campus activism: ‘microaggressions’ appears in only 15 percent of petitions, and ‘trigger warning’ isn’t used once.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, implying that protests at Yale are almost interchangeable with protests at other schools is factually inaccurate, and operates only to contribute to the truth-production project of the *Times*, in which student protesters’ demands for safe space and trigger warnings fly in the face of free speech rights.

This happens again in the November 28 article about the “Amherst free speech debate.” Hartocollis writes this summarization of the events at Yale, which she includes to demonstrate how “the push and pull at Amherst is also taking place elsewhere”: “At Yale, more than 800 students, faculty, alumni and others signed a letter to the president, criticizing student demands like firing a house master who questioned the policing of Halloween costumes and creating a censure process for hate speech.”¹⁰²

This example shows how viewing the events at Yale as interchangeable with other schools is inherently reductive—student protests at Yale become a point of comparison with Amherst, despite historical and present-moment contexts that were distinct and different. On the most basic level, demands at Amherst included abandoning a mascot that celebrated Lord Jeffrey Amherst, an advocate of Indigenous genocide. The specificity of this demand means it is impossible that it was replicated at other schools, and at Yale specifically—students at Yale did not make any demands regarding their mascot, which is a bulldog. The histories of the two

¹⁰¹ Pierson, Emma and Leah Pierson. “What Do Campus Protesters Really Want?” *On the Ground*. N.p., 1449695576. Web. 29 Mar. 2017.

¹⁰² Hartocollis, 28 Nov. 2015.

schools, while certainly similar in some ways, are also distinct and produce different and distinct present realities on both campuses.

Treating the protests at Yale as an interchangeable piece of a homogenous, nation-wide debate on college campuses invalidates the specific experiences of students at Yale that are produced by the specific conditions at Yale. In doing so, it produces a reality for *New York Times* readers in which students are not protesting racism, but rather free speech.

Limitations of national-level reporting

The New York Times' use of language in its coverage of student protests at Yale, starting in November of 2015, is part of a project of truth production in which the violence inherent to racist and culturally appropriative Halloween costumes, and other kinds of racist expression, does not exist. In the reality produced through hegemonic truth, student protesters are anti-free speech, rather than anti-racism. This effect is achieved through various methods of invalidation, produced by seemingly-small choices in language and framing. The combination of dehistoricization, euphemism, and challenges to the validity of protesters' experiences all further this project of invalidation.

Additionally, *The New York Times* treats the events at Yale as interchangeable with protests at other universities in order to frame it as part of a homogenous debate over free speech sweeping the nation's universities, and to obscure systemic violences that actually do impact students across the country. This further obscures the specific experiences of Yale students and resists acknowledging the effects of systemic racism at Yale or at any other college or university.

An examination of my path of information gathering and research on background information about Yale reveals the shortcomings of large news entities like the *New York Times*

in their attempts to “report the facts.” I looked to a friend’s Facebook page as an entrypoint, to find the hashtags that were being used at Yale in the fall of 2015. What this gestures toward is the inherent disconnect that exists specifically between reporters (at the *Times* but also ostensibly at many publications) and their subjects, particularly when those subjects are college students. As a college student, this (though infinitely complicated by racial and gender identity, class status, disability, etc.) is my community much more so than it is the community of the people reporting on student protests for the *Times*. This is not to discount the innumerable contextual specificities of the conditions, both historical and contemporary, at Yale in November of 2015, but rather to highlight how the reporting in this instance contrasts to my research, which is based in a sense of community. Meanwhile, reporting—seeking out a source, conducting an interview—thereby creates a subject and subsequently a sense of discomfort that can act as a barrier to communication.

Additionally, if a reporter for the *Times* had ever taken the time to scroll through Instagram and Twitter posts by Yale students, they might not have picked up on the ways those feeds of information and snippet-sized moments of an un-summarizable reality refuse synthesis. I hope not to fall into that trap, however, and would direct any interested reader to look through posts under hashtags such as #MarchofResilience and #WeAreYale. Neither of the feeds you will find present a whole picture of what has happened, and is surely still happening, at Yale, but neither will a full and close reading of *The New York Times*’ coverage of those events, as I have found. Rather than trying to detect trends, make generalizations, or draw conclusions, perhaps we can simply see those posts for what they are, individually, and in relation to one another.

The content of these kinds of posts reveals silences in the *Times* coverage, gaps that most likely could never have been filled. For example, it might not be the *fault*, per se, of the *Times*

that there are no op-eds by Yale student leaders, and seemingly minimal quotes from anyone directly involved in writing demands or planning marches. This may be the case because none of those students wanted to write an op-ed for an institution like *The New York Times*, which itself would be incredibly telling. As an entity, the *Times*' privilege is its loss in many ways. There are spaces and knowledges that a publication like *The New York Times* can never and will never have access to. There is a clear refusal taking place in their research project, their project of truth-production. It seems clear that this is one of the many costs of journalistic claims to objectivity—that in an attempt to present “both sides of the story” in the words of objective reporters, an entity like *The New York Times* loses access to ways of knowing and understanding that are decidedly non-neutral.

On the one hand, it is clear that an erasure of the racist violence students experience on predominantly and historically White college campuses is part of a larger project of hegemonic truth, one which works to deny or make invisible the existence of structural and institutionalized conditions of racism that continue to inform all aspects of life at private, elite universities such as Yale. On the other hand, this examination of *The New York Times*' attempt to cover protests at Yale reveals how large-scale, national news reporting is inherently ill-equipped to understand—or even engage in an honest attempt to understand—“what’s going on” at a given time in a specific place and moment. For me, this created a question in my research: if national-scale news reporting has all these barriers to their ability to understand the specificity of something like the protests at Yale, is there a different method of information gathering that could transcend those barriers? In the next chapter, I look at local news reporting as I continue towards an answer to this question.

II Local News & Mizzou: Questions of Scale and the Visible

In thinking about the role of language in national-scale news reporting like *The New York Times*, I felt an inherent gesture towards some sort of opposite; I wondered if reporting as different as possible from the *Times* might produce an equally different result. The most logical counterpart seemed to be local news. I remembered that when I was reading news stories as they came out in the fall of 2015 (a time when I was not living in the US), there seemed to be a focus on a few key players in these nation-wide protests about race. Of course, it was the very process by which national news outlets like the *Times* created a national-level story that I came to think of protests Yale in the same category as protests at the University of Missouri (Mizzou) around that same time.

If local news is the counterpart to national news, then in many ways the University of Missouri is a counterpart to Yale. Where Yale is private, Mizzou is public. Yale has around 5,000 undergraduate students, while Mizzou has more than five times that number. Yale is in the northeast, Mizzou in the south.¹⁰³ Yale was founded nearly one and a half centuries before Mizzou. But in other ways, the schools are linked (as are many, many colleges and universities across the US) by shared histories of violence and white supremacy.

In particular, both institutions' foundings cannot be separated from their complicity in, and direct benefit from, transatlantic slavery. Yale's complicity and profit from slavery is well-documented: Many of the early chancellors, faculty, governors, and trustees of the college owned slaves, and wealthy slave traders saw the school as a place to send their children to educate them

¹⁰³ I've left this here although it was pointed out to me that Missouri is really in the Midwest—It seems significant that I conceptualize it as being in the south despite knowing its location intellectually (I got perfect scores on all my fifth grade geography quizzes).

in how to continue the family's profits from the sale of humans through future generations.¹⁰⁴

The school itself also profited directly from slavery, renting out various parcels of land it owned to slaveholders as plantations or smaller farms; Yale also received a small library as a gift from the director of the Bank of England, which "catered to the wealthy planters of the British West Indies."¹⁰⁵

The University of Missouri is similarly entrenched in histories of slavery. At the time of the University's founding, at least two enslaved people were forced to work as janitors at the school.¹⁰⁶ The man nicknamed the "father" of Mizzou enslaved 34 people on his plantation in Columbia, and the majority of the money raised to build the university itself was donated by a number of wealthy slave owners.¹⁰⁷ In light of all this, Mizzou made sense as my next point of examination both for the ways it is incredibly different from, as well as the ways it is inextricably connected to, Yale.

In my research about *The New York Times*' coverage of Yale, I felt like I understood my positioning in relation to the source material both geographically and experientially. I felt like I had some context through which to analyze the *Times* reporting. On the other hand, I feel an overall lack of localness when it comes to Mizzou as a campus and Columbia as a city. In terms of physical distance, the closest I have ever been to Columbia, Missouri is Chicago. I don't know much about Columbia as a city, or even much about Missouri as a state. Before the fall of 2015, the University of Missouri was only a familiar name to me insofar as I knew that it is where my dad went to journalism school. I have never heard him talk much about his time there and I think

¹⁰⁴ Wilder, Craig Steven. *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013. Print.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Webner, Richard. "Descendant of MU Founder Atones for Family's Slave-Owning Past." *Columbia Missourian*. 20 Jan. 2014. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

he moved away soon after he got his degree. So, as I entered into my research for this chapter, I felt worried that I had no understanding of a context through which to analyze what I was reading. I had made a decision to look at local news coverage because I wanted to use a different angle than in my chapter about Yale, but I found myself questioning whether this made sense in light of the lack of localness I was feeling. How could I have anything to say about local newspapers in a place I had never been and felt no connection to? Surely anything I had to say would only be conjecture, and I would be totally out of line to draw any conclusions.

These feelings of disconnect from local Missouri newspapers led me to wonder why I felt so much more connection to a national, “big-name” paper like *The New York Times*. Something about my perception of its scale is certainly part of it. The *Times*, in my mind, covers “everything,” and this is because of the geographic scope of their coverage. They report on stories all over the US and internationally. Meanwhile, local news seems more “limited” in its scope and capacity for reporting, and that sense of limitation is produced by its much smaller geographic focus. Events that seem to occur locally are certainly produced by specific contexts, but are simultaneously produced by global networks of domination like white supremacy and capitalism. The entire concept of news that is “local” is a construction that makes the majority of a population—say, the population of the US—feel disconnected from it. *If news is local to Columbia, MO, then it can't possibly have anything to do with me*, the thinking goes. In fact, the construction of “the local” and news that is only relevant to a small geographic segment of the global population can make it hard to identify how events that play out in specific contexts are linked to global white supremacy or other structures that transcend geography.

Despite specificity of context, people who may be geographically distant from an event or set of events are nonetheless deeply implicated in them by the threads woven by networks of

white supremacy and systems of racial domination; these are networks I am personally implicated in. In relation to Mizzou, I attend Tufts University, which is built on the former site of the Ten Hills Farm plantation.¹⁰⁸ The advantages I will (and already do) gain from a college education are built on the legacy of slavery, as well as the land theft and genocide of Indigenous people that led to the acquisition of this land by White settlers in the first place. While the protests and conditions of institutional racism at Mizzou are specific, anti-Blackness is just as deeply entrenched at Tufts. Through these entanglements alone, it is abundantly clear that I am complicit in the same systems that produce specific conditions at Mizzou, though constructions of the local make me feel distant.

My reading of local news can be simultaneously outside my personal locality and therefore unknowable to me, and also linked to things nationally that I am deeply implicated in. And as I will discuss, there are links between local and national news coverage through their joint participation in truth production that denies systemic violence and erases the role of institutions and structures in upholding white supremacy.

In this chapter, I use concepts of “(non)scalability” and Foucault’s “nomination of the visible” to explore how the specific characteristics of local news reporting in Columbia, Missouri produce writing that seems to be both acknowledging the specificity of the events at Mizzou while also presenting “just the facts” in news stories which, as a result, appear to be objective. While there could, perhaps, be a way to both acknowledge the specificity and therefore locality of the protests at Mizzou in 2015, that is not the case with the local reporting done at the time. As with *The New York Times* reporting on Yale, the local papers I analyze also engage in a truth production that minimizes or erases the role that structural racism and white supremacy play in the lives of students at Mizzou.

¹⁰⁸ “A Peculiar Plantation: 17th Century Medford.” *Medford Historical Society & Museum*. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

The two local papers I will be looking at in this chapter are the *Columbia Missourian* and the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. The *Missourian* is linked to (and funded by) Mizzou’s journalism school—according to their website, all the reporters are students at the journalism school, while the editors are professionals.¹⁰⁹ All the editors whose pictures are included on the website appear to be White or White-passing, and all the reporters whose work I analyzed seem to be White as well. The *Tribune* is a more conservative-leaning paper, owned by GateHouse media, who publish hundreds of local papers across the US.¹¹⁰ Like the *Missourian*, the *Tribune*’s editorial staff appears to be entirely White, with a reporting staff that is also almost totally White.

Though there is a long history of Black students protesting on Mizzou’s campus, the coverage from these papers that I have analyzed begins in September of 2015 and focuses largely on actions by a group called Concerned Student 1950 and Black graduate student Jonathan Butler’s hunger strike to remove University of Missouri System President Tim Wolfe, a White man, from office.

Local news and nonscalability

The coverage of protests at Mizzou published by the *Columbia Missourian* has a different feel than the *New York Times* coverage about Yale that I discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike the *New York Times* coverage, the *Columbia Missourian* does much less work to try and make the things they are reporting “scalable,” a term Anna Tsing defines as “the ability to expand [something]...without rethinking basic elements.”¹¹¹ There’s little-to-no attempt to take

¹⁰⁹ “About the Missourian.” *Columbia Missourian*. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

¹¹⁰ “About Us.” Gatehousemedia.com. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

¹¹¹ Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. “On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales.” *Common Knowledge* 18.3 (2012): 505. *commonknowledge.dukejournals.org*. Web.

the events they report and zoom them out into something applicable on a national scale such as a “debate” about free speech taking place in the same way on college campuses all over the US.

The events at Mizzou in the fall of 2015, just like the events at Yale happening at the same time, speak to what Tsing would call the “nonscalability” of protests on college campuses in the US. She explains that scalability (the opposite of nonscalability) works by “blocking our ability to notice the heterogeneity of the world; by its design, scalability allows us to see only uniform blocks, ready for further expansion.”¹¹² Unlike *The New York Times*, the *Columbia Missourian* does much less to try and create those “uniform blocks,” allowing space to see the heterogeneity present across very specific contexts such as Yale and Mizzou. I wouldn’t argue that the events at Mizzou in the fall of 2015 were intentionally treated as nonscalable. Rather, this seems to be a product of the dichotomy between national and local news—because “the local” encompasses a smaller geographic area, there is a larger ability to leave room for nuance or provide more detail, simply by dint of there being less geographic area, and therefore fewer stories, to cover.

Additionally, while the added contextualization and specificity produced by treating events as nonscalable certainly creates more room for nuance and deeper understanding, it by no means eliminates the erasure of violence and centering of privileged voices characteristic of other types of coverage. The following examples are illustrative of this complicated interplay.

Rather than engage in the kind of summary produced by *The New York Times*, the *Missourian* seems to put forward information in its entirety. For example, a November 9 article titled “Politicians, administrators, alumni weigh in on Wolfe’s resignation” simply lists the names of different people followed by the full text of their statements. Treating this kind of information as non-summarizable is a way to treat it as nonscalable. When information is

¹¹² Ibid.

summarized and distilled, it becomes easier to try and scale it out and apply it to issues that are perceived to be national, like the national debate over free speech constructed by the *New York Times* coverage.

This local method of presenting information nonetheless privileges voices of people who, because of their positions, are seen as locally-recognizable “authorities” with important things to say. Politicians and administrators fit the bill because of their positions of power within the University or the community at large, while alumni are perhaps considered able to be more neutral or objective because of their distance from the school and the perspective that supposedly would give them. In contrast, no students are quoted, either student protesters specifically or students at Mizzou more generally. The same goes for community members who do not hold some position of power.

Another way the *Missourian* treats the protests at Mizzou as non-scalable is through attention to details specific to the events at the University. The paper published a detailed timeline of events that spans from September 12 to Wolfe’s resignation on November 9, which is broken down by dates and short headings like, “Oct. 24: A swastika using human feces is drawn on a bathroom wall in MU’s Gateway Hall” and “Evening of Nov. 2: Students camp on Carnahan Quadrangle in support of the hunger strike and Wolfe’s removal from office.”¹¹³ Focusing on the events happening in one specific location—the University of Missouri—is a product of the *Missourian* being a local paper. I can imagine that a similar timeline in *The New York Times* might include protests at various universities, so that something so complex like the hunger strike and associated protests at Mizzou might get a single mention. Because a paper like

¹¹³ VanDelinder, Emma. “Racial Climate at MU: A Timeline of Incidents This Fall.” *Columbia Missourian*. 6 Nov. 2015. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

the *Missourian* is interested in a specific geographic locality, this much more detailed and site-specific timeline is produced.

However, the language of the timeline itself still reflects the framing used in national news coverage. Euphemistic language of the kind used by *The New York Times* can be found in the article's title ("Racial climate at MU: A timeline of events this fall") as well as in the small paragraph that frames the timeline: "The racial climate at MU has been tumultuous for months, but with recent events...conversation and action have hastened."¹¹⁴ In addition the way the language of "racial climate" obscures the operations of structural racism, the implication that there has been tumult for months, rather than centuries, also engages in the same kind of de-historicization produced by *The New York Times*.

While this use of language does not seem to change between local and national coverage, the way information is organized in articles is unique. Another November 9 article titled "Gary Pinkel and Mack Rhoades address football situation at news conference" arranges information under two headings, "What was said" and "What wasn't said." Under the first heading is a sub-heading, "Other issues that were discussed," followed by a bullet-pointed list. Bullet points are used again under the "What wasn't said" heading. This is notable for a few reasons. First, the use of bullet points breaks up more traditional paragraph structure that lends itself to making a point, rather than relaying information as the bullet point lists do. These bullet point lists are used in multiple *Missourian* articles. Second, telling readers "what wasn't said" at a press conference in addition to what was said—"...Pinkel said he and his staff discussed how many practices they'd have to miss before they'd have to forfeit the game. He didn't provide details of that or the number they agreed upon," for example—gives readers the ability to ask further questions and

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

seek out more information. Again, it is the volume of detail that gestures toward the specificity of events at Mizzou that are nonscalable.

Somewhat ironically, the heading “What wasn’t said” also opens up space to consider what the *Missourian* itself is not saying, or is unable to say, about the protests at Mizzou. As I discuss in the following section, there is much that local reporting in Mizzou did not, and at times perhaps could not, capture.

“The nomination of the visible”

While reporting that does not attempt to make things scalable can do more to account for nuance and specificity, it still falls short at making the structural visible in a way that is consistently legible. In my analysis, I found that both papers use a very observation-based writing style, which seems to be a result of news that is written from a local perspective and treated as nonscalable. While it is important not to generalize from the specific, there must simultaneously be acknowledgement of the overarching structures that produce those specific circumstances and contexts. Both papers are engaged in reporting that claims to be objective by way of doing reporting that seems to be based in observation, which masks the connections between the nonscalable local and global structures, or structures that manifest on local scales. It also inherently does not name what is invisible, thus allowing the particulars of white supremacy to continue unmarked and unnamed.

I will be looking at two different ways that an observational writing style, which seems to simply name what the reporter sees, does very specific ideological work through that naming. First, I look at how racial classification systems are reproduced through language. Then, I

explore how a writing style that seems to report “just the facts” is engaged in truth production that obscures how structural oppression operates at Mizzou.

Naming and not naming race

One way racial classification systems are reproduced is through naming groups of people as “black” and “white.” In an October 2, 2015 *Columbia Daily Tribune* article titled “Black students protest racial climate on campus at MU Student Center,” Roger McKinney (who is optically White¹¹⁵) writes,

A few dozen black students, joined by a few white students, called on their peers to act against racism during a march Thursday at the University of Missouri Student Center. “No justice, no peace. White silence is violence,” marchers chanted as they made their way around the building several times starting at 1 p.m.¹¹⁶

What McKinney seems to be doing here is simply listing some facts—there was a march that took place on Thursday, it was at the Mizzou Student Center, it started at 1 in the afternoon. But there are a few facts in particular that I want to focus on—that the march consisted of “a few dozen black students, joined by a few white students,” as well as what McKinney reports he heard the protesters saying during the march. This translation from observing the protest to naming of protesters as “black” and “white” evokes what Foucault theorized about scientific classification in his work *The Order of Things*.

For Foucault, the abilities to name and to classify go hand in hand—to be able to do one is to be able to do the other.¹¹⁷ And further, naming denotes knowing—to name something (dictated by systems of classification) one must know a thing or two about it. So for the

¹¹⁵ Meaning that he appears to be White, and it can be reasonably assumed that he is treated as a White person in his daily life.

¹¹⁶ McKinney, Roger. “Black Students Protest Racial Climate on Campus at MU Student Center.” *Columbia Daily Tribune*. 2 Oct. 2015. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

¹¹⁷ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012. Print.

Columbia Daily Tribune to name protesters as “black” or “white” implies the reporters’ knowledge about what both those classifications mean, and the characteristics of someone that make them classifiable as “black” or “white.” To observe and then report a “group of black protesters” claims to know what “black” looks like, what it “is.” The point here is not whether all the individual protesters observed might self-identify as Black. Rather, it reveals how racial classifications in the US rely in large part on the visual, particularly when it is White people doing the visualizing. Here, the reporters engage in what Foucault calls “the nomination of the visible,” implying that what is seen is all there is at play. So in this instance, to rely only on visual observation to categorize protestors as “black” and “white” erases all the nuance of how blackness and whiteness as social constructs are both malleable (rather than static) and transmittable (rather than inherent).

In the *Tribune* coverage, this insistence on race as a means of phenotypic categorization happens multiple times. Interestingly, people are often only identified by race when they are in a group. In the October 2 article, McKinney describes groups of people who are “black” and “white,” but does not identify individual interviewees by race. Two people, Reuben Faloughi and Danielle Walker, are described as “student organizer[s];” while I can’t say how either of these people identify racially, based on images of them I would guess that they are racialized as Black and that the reporter racialized them that way. Yet, McKinney writes,

Danielle Walker, another student organizer, said the march was a reaction to what she said was the administration’s lackluster response to Missouri Student Association President Payton Head being called a racial slur last month. Several black students say they have experienced similar treatment on campus.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

The second sentence here is of interest to me—it does not say “Several *other* black students say,” but rather “Several black students say,” which could be read to imply that Danielle Walker is not Black. At the very least, it is a refusal to acknowledge her racial identity or attempt to name it.

More than one reporter only notes race in reference to groups of people. In an October 11, 2105 article, Caitlin Campbell (who is also optically White) mirrors what McKinney did in the October 2 article. She refers multiple times to “black students”—“Black students have organized several demonstrations...,” “...black students rehearsing for a Homecoming play at Traditions Plaza...”¹¹⁹ But her passages that quote “activist Traci Wilson-Kleekamp” do not identify Wilson-Kleekamp by race. However, Campbell does identify one individual as White:

Race relations are also a major topic in municipal government after Dale Roberts, the executive director of the Columbia Police Officers’ Association, caused an uproar by declaring “Darren Wilson Day” on Aug. 9, the anniversary of the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, in honor of the white police officer who killed the black teenager.

Roberts is white. [emphasis added]¹²⁰

There are surely lots of possible reasons for this stylistic inconsistency, but one that would be consistent with the general trends of this coverage is that only White people are granted individuality in a body of writing that thinks of Black people only in terms of population-categories.

Naming populations of students that are Black and White does the additional work of reinforcing a Black-White racial binary that leaves little room for racial liminality, people of multiracial identities, and people of non-White identities other than Black. In a November 8, 2015 article titled “Missouri football players threaten boycott,” David Morrison (who is optically White) quotes a statement written by players on the Mizzou football team who came out in

¹¹⁹ Campbell, Caitlin. “Groups Make Statements about Race at University of Missouri Homecoming Parade.” *Columbia Daily Tribune*. 11 Oct. 2015. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

support of Jonathan Butler’s hunger strike: “The athletes of color on the University of Missouri football team truly believe ‘Injustice Anywhere is a threat to Justice Everywhere...’”¹²¹ However, in the paragraph directly preceding this quote, Morrison writes, “Missouri’s *black* [emphasis added] football players joined the Concerned Student 1950 protest effort Saturday night, sending out a message via social media...” What is remarkable here is that even though the students identified themselves with the more broad category of “athletes of color,” Morrison insists on identifying them all as Black. He follows the excerpt from the statement by saying,

Multiple Tigers football players sent out the statement along with a picture of about 30 of them linking arms with Jonathan Butler, the MU graduate student who began a hunger strike Monday, pledging he would not eat as long as Wolfe was still the president.¹²²

For Morrison, it is what is visible and legible to him via the photo, rather than what is clearly said in the athletes’ statement, that is the factual, reportable reality—all the football players are Black. This is more easy to digest in the context of a narrative that binarizes Black and White, and creates populations of Black student protesters. To suggest a multiracial coalition of athletes of color would be too complex. Here, Morrison plays out the patterns of eighteenth century naturalists who constructed racial classifications based on the visible in order to prove the existence of discrete, biologically-based racial categories.¹²³ This, in turn, informed the scientific racism of the twentieth century that was used to naturalize the racist idea of inherent differences between “the races,” resulting in many cases in the enactment of racist policy structurally¹²⁴ and racist violence interpersonally. Returning to Foucault’s concept of the “nomination of the

¹²¹ Morrison, David. “Missouri Football Players Threaten Boycott.” *Columbia Daily Tribune*. 8 Nov. 2015. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Gissis, Snait B. “Visualizing ‘race’ in the Eighteenth Century.” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 41.1 (2011): 41–103. Print.

¹²⁴ Dennis, Rutledge M. “Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 64.3 (1995): 243–252. *JSTOR*. Web.

visible” as the way natural scientists used observation to create biological categories of living things, the connection is clear.

The effect here is that race only exists to define groups—populations—rather than individuals who may have specific and non-scalable life experiences. Particularly the choice of not identifying individuals as Black does nothing to disrupt the ways in which the White gaze conceptualizes Blackness through stereotypes and controlling images devoid of nuance or individuality. Additionally, these news stories become part of a much larger population-creating project that continues to enable functions of the white supremacist state in the US, through means such as surveillance or targeted violence.

Observational writing style

Reporting that assigns racial categories to groups of people seems, in this case study, to rely on reporters’ observations and interpretations of what they see. Reporting that relies on observation—relaying what a reporter saw and heard at an event like a protest—will always be a practice that names the visible (and in this case audible). This, then, means that inherently it is the *invisible* that remains unnamed, and that a second layer of invisibilization is also produced when reporters do not name things that are visible (sometimes incredibly so) to people who occupy other positionalities. Though my focus has been on the *Columbia Tribune*, both papers participate in observation-based reporting. This is also not to say that only these two papers employ this reporting style. In fact, the entire concept of news reporting is based on the idea that it’s possible to observe a situation or compile a set of facts and then report those facts to “the public” in a way that is objective and unbiased. But, as with other kinds of writing that also lay claim to objectivity such as writing in *The New York Times*, these articles that present “just the facts” are nonetheless producing knowledge that upholds a specific version of truth.

For example, in an October 10 article in the *Columbia Missourian*, Ruth Serven and Ashley Reese write,

As Kenney’s group carried its banner along the parade route, a few blocks away at the intersection of University Avenue and Ninth Street, a group of students wearing black shirts and wielding bullhorns linked arms in front of the red convertible carrying UM System President Tim Wolfe...Some parade spectators joined the protesters, filling the intersection. Homecoming organizers eventually diverted the parade through the adjacent Domino’s Pizza parking lot, but Wolfe’s car wasn’t able to maneuver away from the protesters.¹²⁵

The inclusion of very specific details—the students are wearing black shirts, we know the precise intersection, Wolfe is not just in a car, but specifically a red convertible, the parade diverted through a Domino’s Pizza parking lot—makes the reporting seem based in observation. Serven and Reese are simply relaying to the reader what they saw, so that the reader can understand what happened or know what they would have seen had they been at the parade themselves.

This writing style links to so-called “objective” journalism, which is often portrayed as “just the facts,” without an identifiable spin or bias. Some journalists, for example, see their role as “simply bearing witness” to events.¹²⁶ However, this veneer of objectivity masks the other ideological work performed by “observations” like Serven and Reese’s. This is why the question of objectivity becomes so important—if news reporting is supposed to be an objective account of what is observed, how can we take into account that which inherently cannot be observed? This is exactly why (or is one way in which it is exactly why) the veneer of objectivity is so dangerous and insidious—by naming the visible, you’re inherently not naming the invisible, and

¹²⁵ Reese, Ruth and Ashley Serven. “In Homecoming Parade, Racial Justice Advocates Take Different Paths.” *Columbia Missourian*. 10 Oct. 2015. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

¹²⁶ Hearn-Branaman, 76.

even in naming the visible “objectively” there are things you’re not naming that are visible to others.

For example, a different account of the same parade described in the *Missourian* reveals events that play out differently than Serven and Reese observed:

After three minutes, two white men came out and tried to move the students aside, drawing cheers from the crowd. Then the driver of Wolfe’s car tried to drive around them. The students moved their line, arms linked, to block the driver, who continued to try to push forward. The driver again tried to get through a moment later, coming in contact with one of the students. At that point, an older white man came out and physically pushed several of the students away with his body. A few other white men and women then came out and formed their own human chain, linking arms and standing between the students and the car to allow Wolfe’s vehicle to get through.¹²⁷

This description is a stark contrast to the observation that “...Wolfe’s car wasn’t able to maneuver away from the protesters.”¹²⁸ While both accounts describe the same moment, the latter makes visible some dimensions of the situation that are invisibilized in the *Missourian* account, yet were certainly hypervisible to people like the protesters and the various White people from the crowd. The *Missourian* account leaves out a number of actions taken by White people to intimidate and physically harm, as well as ultimately attempt to thwart the efforts of the protesters, by vaguely stating that the car “wasn’t able” to change course. This is not to say that the account published on *Huffington Post* that I use here is necessarily better, or that it is a complete and accurate version of events either. Rather, it serves to demonstrate one way in which observational, seemingly-objective and fact-based reporting can nonetheless render events or dimensions of a situation totally invisible.

¹²⁷ Kingkade, Tyler. “The Incident You Have To See To Understand Why Students Wanted Mizzou’s President To Go.” *Huffington Post* 10 Nov. 2015. *Huff Post*. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

¹²⁸ Reese & Serven, 10 Oct. 2015..

The contradiction inherent to reporting that names the visible while leaving the invisible unmarked lays bare the ways in which objectivity is both unattainable and an incomplete method of reporting. It would not be seen as objective to name structural white supremacy, to acknowledge that Mizzou exists on stolen land, or to explicitly refer to Mizzou's historical ties to slavery, but those are invisible factors that must not be discounted in order to more fully understand the events these papers claim to be objectively, and therefore “factually” and “truthfully” reporting.

The style of objectivity produced in these local news reports is likely produced by the “inverted pyramid,” a kind of template for “objective” journalism that instructs reporters to focus on the “who, what, when, where, and why” of a news story.¹²⁹ David Mindich argues that this kind of journalistic convention produces reporting that is very specific and detailed,¹³⁰ much like the coverage of Mizzou. He uses reporting about violent, racist lynchings in the 1800s as an example of how the use of the inverted pyramid produces writing that is anesthetized of violence in the name of objectivity. He also points out that while the reporting appeared objective, it still had white supremacist undertones:

Reading about a lynching through articles written in an inverted pyramid, “objective” form is a queer and unpleasant experience: there was no outrage. The first reason there was no outrage is that the ethic of “objectivity”...discouraged writers from expressing “views.” The second reason is that many whites, even in the North, even in newspaper offices, were not entirely antilynching, as these pages will show.¹³¹

The implications of an observational, seemingly-objective style of writing therefore have clear historical and white supremacist roots, and continue to erase racist violence, albeit violence in a different form, in the present day.

¹²⁹ Mindich, 117.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 118.

While the production of local news has the potential to treat an event or series of events as nonscalable and unique in their context, thus avoiding the ways *The New York Times* ignored the specificities of context at Yale, there's still the potential for local news to claim objectivity by reporting "just the facts" while simultaneously leaving structures of white supremacy invisible. My reading of local news coverage of Mizzou revealed how, similar to the *New York Times* coverage, uses of language and claims to objectivity ultimately did not acknowledge histories of systemic racism at the University, and implicitly reinforced various modes of racist domination.

I wonder, though, how my reading of these articles might have been different if I was a student at Mizzou, or a resident of Columbia, MO. I leave my analysis with unanswered questions—what would a local reader's interpretation of the methods and style of the local coverage be like? How do local readers process the "objective" style? How do they respond to it and what effect does it produce? Does it produce a distance between Columbia residents and Mizzou students (acknowledging that there's overlap between the two) or does it produce more potential for connection? As someone who is not physically local to Columbia and doesn't have the experiences of a resident there, I can only speculate. However, in the following chapter and final case study, my analysis comes from the most local position possible—a reader and producer of student journalism on my own campus.

III Student Publications: Limitations and Generative Potential

While the protests at Yale and University of Missouri garnered national and local news attention, they were also being covered in a different, perhaps more intimate way—by student publications on each respective campus. In contrast to *The New York Times*' coverage that almost completely excluded the voices of Yale students, articles by the *Yale Herald* were largely student-centric. While newspapers like the *Times* and local Columbia papers attempted to produce “objective” reporting, multiple letters from the editors of the *Herald* took definitive stances in solidarity with student protesters at Yale.¹³²¹³³ Reporting on the protests used more clearly opinionated language. One feature reads, “A safe campus culture requires the participation of all its members. A number of women who spoke emphasized the need for the acknowledgement and support of intersectionality at Yale,” and later, “To effect the kind of change called for on Wednesday, Yale needs an army of allies—committed, effective, educated allies.”¹³⁴ The article includes quotes from a number of students.

At Mizzou, a variety of less conventional methods were used by the student publication *The Maneater* to cover the hunger strike and protests. One article is comprised almost entirely of screenshots from Twitter, with the caption “Here's how campus responded to one student's hunger strike.”¹³⁵ Another is an interactive timeline of events that connects protests in the fall with cuts to graduate student healthcare over the summer, a connection mostly absent from local coverage.¹³⁶

¹³² Rossler, David. “Letter from the editor.” 7 Nov. 2015. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

¹³³ Katsev, Libbie. “Letter from an editor: November 6, 2015.” 6 Nov. 2015. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

¹³⁴ Chanen, Emma. “Voicing change.” 6 Nov. 2015. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

¹³⁵ Loutfi, Elizabeth. “STORIFY: Students Demand Wolfe’s Resignation.” N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

¹³⁶ “A Historic Fall at MU - The Maneater.” Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

I felt a deep sense of recognition reading through the student reporting at Yale and University of Missouri. Something about the tone and writing style felt so familiar. The sincerity and incisiveness of the *Yale Herald* letters from the editor in particular reminded me of things I have written in my work on the *Tufts Observer*, a bi-weekly student magazine at Tufts. It is not that any of these publications necessarily did a *better* job covering the events on their campuses as compared to other news outlets, but their coverage does specific work that is very different from other publications. It is more context-specific, for one, and the language used is often more clearly opinionated.

These characteristics are what remind me so clearly of the *Observer*, and what make me feel in some unexplainable way connected to the work students are doing at Yale and Missouri. In an interview, the managing editor at Mizzou's *The Maneater* talks about their coverage of the hunger strike, and how it was hard to figure out how to balance an increasing need for coverage with classes and other commitments. She reflects on uncertainty about how to cover the story, and wishes they'd had more time to plan.¹³⁷ All of this—feeling disorganized and unprepared, trying to balance reporting work with schoolwork, even the tone and style of the writing itself—is so familiar to me, and therefore feels so characteristic of student journalism. This is produced by the unique position student journalism occupies: it is specific in scope, and its production is heavily influenced by the ebbs and flows in the lives of the students who produce it.

The scope and idiosyncrasies of a student publication like the *Tufts Observer* means that it exists at a unique intersection of journalistic convention and transformational potential. In some ways, the *Observer* publishes writing that does similar ideological work to *The New York Times* and local papers in Missouri—some writing similarly erases or calls into question the

¹³⁷Mullin, Benjamin. "For Mizzou's Student-Run Newspaper, University Tumult Helps Shake off Weekly Print Mentality." *Poynter*. N.p., 16 Nov. 2015. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

existence of racialized violences. This happens largely through attempts to use our perception of standard journalistic practice as a guide for how to write articles. A few times in my experience working on the *Observer*, however, the same conditions that often produce the aforementioned results have also enabled us to make content that gestures toward a practice of information gathering and sharing that does not necessarily uphold white supremacy, does not necessarily deny racialized violence.

In using the *Tufts Observer* as a case study, I am focusing mainly on writing I have done myself as well as pieces I have edited. I also use excerpts from journal-style writing I did during the semester I was Managing Editor of the magazine to provide background for decision-making processes that have to do with the content I analyze. Through these case studies, I observe two distinct patterns. First, that many articles attempt to achieve reporting that appears to be “balanced,” by giving space to two opposing viewpoints—telling “both sides of the story.” Second, in the name of avoiding perceived “conflicts of interest,” stories are often told by a reporter who, by dint of not occupying any number of different marginalized identities or because they are an outsider to an involved group or groups in a particular story, is seen to be capable of achieving objectivity in reporting. In both cases, these attempts to follow journalistic protocol on being “fair and balanced” and avoiding conflicts of interest result in writing that minimizes racist violence and/or leaves dominant positionalities such as whiteness unmarked and seemingly-neutral. In doing so, the *Observer* is part of the system of knowledge production that allows racial domination to continue in the United States through masking the ways in which it operates.

“Fair and balanced” reporting and the imposition of respectability politics

One thread through many of the articles I have been involved with writing or editing is an attempt at achieving “balanced” reporting. At the same time, the language use in these articles does not read as “objective;” in fact, many articles that we publish read as editorial despite being billed as local news or campus news. At times, this seemingly-contradictory combination of conventional and unconventional reporting and writing styles does have the potential to generate something other than dominant narratives, as I discuss later on. However, in the following examples, the writing denies or downplays racialized violence in ways similar to other publications I have discussed.

Diminishing police violence

One memory stands out in my mind about the pressure to produce a “balanced” article. I wrote an article with my friend Kat, an Asian-American cis woman, about the Tufts Police Department’s community policing program.¹³⁸ While the article is certainly critical of the program, overall it accepts the premise that although the current community policing program at Tufts or other systems of policing might not be working well at the moment, the police should exist and that there might be a “good” way to do policing. These assumptions erase the reality that, in the words of a number of public thinkers,¹³⁹ systems of policing and criminal “justice” in the United States are “doing exactly what [they’re] meant to do”¹⁴⁰—they act in furtherance of the murders and mass incarceration of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people.

This reality is also erased even as we attempt to point out the flaws in Tufts’ community policing program. In an interview, the then-director of the Tufts LGBT Center described the

¹³⁸ Feldberg, Eve, and Katharine Pong. "Community Policing at Tufts." *Tufts Observer* 28 Mar. 2016: 18-20. Print.

¹³⁹ Burneko, Albert. “The American Justice System Is Not Broken.” *The Concourse*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Mody, Reetu. “The Criminal Justice System Is Not Broken, It’s Doing Exactly What It’s Meant To Do.” *Kennedy School Review*. N.p., 5 Dec. 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

center's relationship with their "TUPD Liaison," and cited trainings he helped conduct with TUPD on "pronoun fluency" and "gender dynamics and expression 101."¹⁴¹ In the following paragraph we write, "However, this kind of productive relationship does not exist across the board. Rubén Salinas Stern, director of the Latino Center, told the *Tufts Observer* that the Latino Center currently does not have a TUPD liaison, and that no one from TUPD has reached out to initiate a relationship."¹⁴² The assumption we construct in this section of the article is that there could be such thing as a "constructive relationship" between LGBT students and the police, and that the Latino Center could similarly have a "constructive relationship" if only they had a TUPD liaison. This assumption is predicated on the erasure of racist and ableist police violence against Latinx and/or queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people—to acknowledge that violence would be to acknowledge that there can never be the "productive" relationship with police that we suggest.

In addition to the language used in the article, the way space is allocated also reveals the failure of "balance." In print, the entire first page of the article is spent explaining what community policing is. These paragraphs include quotes from the Tufts Police Department (TUPD) website, a former police chief from St. Louis, and a TUPD officer. The effect is that community policing as a concept is legitimized for this first, long portion of the article. It is not until the second page of the article that we present the question, "...to what extent are these initiatives effective—and to what extent are such perceptions of effectiveness subjective? Several aspects of TUPD's community policing initiatives...are worth a closer look."¹⁴³

When I analyzed the article to see the percentage breakdown of how much space was devoted to portraying community policing in a positive light, I was surprised to find that only

¹⁴¹ Feldberg & Pong, 28 Mar. 2016.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

38% of the article did so in light of how much space is initially devoted to legitimizing community policing. In my initial analysis, 55% of the article consisted of criticism of the community policing program at Tufts, community policing programs more broadly, and the police as an institution. That 55%, however, can be broken down into three general categories: negative interactions with police, “unproductive” or nonexistent relationships between Tufts police and Tufts students or institutions, and arguments in favor of abolishing the police. Police abolition took up only 9% of the article, while those other two negative categories still rely on the assumption that policing could be done better or more successfully if relationships and interactions with the police could be improved.¹⁴⁴

This implication engages in respectability politics in that it implies that there might be something people are doing wrong to make those interactions and relationships negative. As I use the term here, respectability politics are “concerned with management, self-correction, and adaptation/submission to dominant discriminatory frameworks”¹⁴⁵ in order for people of color, and historically Black people in particular, to be seen as worthy of life and basic rights in the eyes of racist social structures.

Policing protest tactics

This investment in respectability politics is replicated in our coverage of student protests that took place at Tufts in the fall of 2014. G.B.’s¹⁴⁶ article “Not in my Backyard”¹⁴⁷ was written

¹⁴⁴ Looking back at an older version of the article, the Editor-in-Chief at the time commented that our section about police abolition seemed “disjointed;” she told us to cut it entirely. It took a lot of back-and-forth and certainly some bruised ego on her part, but we ended up telling her that we were going to keep that section in and she could delete it herself later if she wanted but we wouldn’t. I remember feeling so confused at the time about what could seem disjointed about a mention of police abolition in an article about the police. Ironically, what could have made it seem less disjointed is if we had devoted much more space to the idea, and introduced it from the beginning.

¹⁴⁵ Obasogie, Osagie K., and Zachary Newman. "Black Lives Matter and Respectability Politics in Local News Accounts of Officer-Involved Civilian Deaths: An Early Empirical Assessment ." *Wisconsin Law Review* 2016.3 (2016): 541-74. Web.

¹⁴⁶ I am using initials in this chapter because many of the people whose work and actions I critique are current Tufts students.

about a few different direct actions organized by the group Indict Tufts, which coalesced at that time in response to the murders of Black men by police and Tufts' lack of response to those murders. In my memory of that time (my sophomore Fall term), there was a series of direct actions that took place, including marches through high-traffic areas on campus, a daily eulogy procession, vigils on the library roof, and coordinated travel to a protest organized at Harvard. G.B. is a White cis woman; her article includes interviews with a few students involved with Indict Tufts, three Tufts deans, and a few other students who were not involved with Indict.

G.B.'s article is written specifically about actions that moved through the library, a dining hall, and Dowling Hall (an administrative building) where students were doing work. I remember that much of the commentary I was exposed to about those actions, particularly on an anonymous social media app called Yik Yak, characterized the actions as "too disruptive." This is the commentary that G.B. tries to cover in the article—in one of the first paragraphs she puts forward what seems to be the thesis statement of the article: "[Indict Tufts'] methods of protest have sparked a serious conversation about deliberate disruption in the name of a cause." The article employs what seems to be an attempt to use the "fair and balanced" method of reporting that Hearn-Branaman describes.¹⁴⁸ G.B. interviews students involved with Indict, as well as various Tufts students and school administrators who critique or question the protest tactics and view them as an unnecessary disruption. These are, seemingly, the "two sides" of the story.

This attempt at balanced reporting actually results in the voices of administrators and students who felt the protests were "too disruptive" being privileged in the article. Reinforcing the narrative that protest tactics are "too disruptive" simultaneously reinforces a respectability politics being imposed on protesters as if to dictate that there is a "proper" way to object to racist

¹⁴⁷ G.B.. "Not in My Backyard." *Tufts Observer* 3 Feb. 2015: n. pag. Print.

¹⁴⁸ Hearn-Branaman, 62-3.

state violence. Additionally, the amount of space devoted to the “two sides” she constructs is not equal. Quotes from students involved with Indict and writing that generally affirms the protest comprises about 29% of the article, while space given to respectability politics and delegitimization of protesters takes up 59% of the article’s text.

Beyond this initial failure to achieve an actual balance, the language G.B. uses to describe the protests and their tactics place blame on protesters and imply that the protests were in some way an overreaction. She starts the article by using two quotes that explain a bit about why Indict Tufts formed and why the interviewees are involved in it—about 170 words are dedicated to this. She then follows up those quotes by saying,

The protesters forced peers to take time out of their meals, lose focus on their studying, and for a few students who require special academic accommodations, to pause their testing in Dowling. The question remains whether the impact of the “Indict Tufts” protests are worth their magnitude.¹⁴⁹

Though the article is not billed as an opinion or editorial piece, certain word choices read as editorializing: using the word “forced” to describe the effect of protests on students suggests that protesters were in the wrong for disrupting student spaces such as the dining hall or library.

This tone is compounded by asserting that there is a question of whether “the impact of the ‘Indict Tufts’ protests are worth their magnitude.” This question in particular implies that protesters are overreacting, that whatever it is they’re protesting does not match the magnitude of “forc[ing] peers to take time out of their meals, lose focus on their studying” or “to pause their testing in Dowling.” The article itself never says exactly what the purpose of Indict Tufts is, but it makes reference to police brutality and the murders of Black people by police. To juxtapose that violence with an interrupted meal or study session and then ask whether the protests are

¹⁴⁹ G.B., 19.

worth their “magnitude” or worth this disruption implies that students’ sense of comfort is more important than the fight to end police brutality.

Supporting this juxtaposition, three Deans are quoted, all offering explanations as to why the protests were too disruptive or why students spending immeasurable time and energy organizing and attending protests should not be excused from exams or coursework. One dean is quoted at length about a “disruption.”

However, Dean of Academic Advising & Undergraduate Studies Carmen Lowe explained one way in which the protesters may have been unintentionally troublesome: “The disruption that I found to be especially problematic was the disruption of students with disabilities who were taking final exams in Dowling Hall. Despite the signs posted quite visibly asking for quiet while students were taking exams, the protesters stood right outside the doors where students were taking exams and shouted loudly for several minutes... These students were startled by the protestors and could not continue their exams until the shouting stopped.” This, more than the others, appears to be a moral case against the protests on campus.¹⁵⁰

Characterizing this as the “moral case against the protests” puts the onus on protesters to self-police their tactics, rather than on administrators who could have acknowledged the disruption and give students a few extra minutes to finish their exams in light of the interruption.

Additionally troubling is the use of students with disabilities as a triangulator against a group of mostly Black protesters, which simultaneously implies that no protester might be both Black and disabled. In this context, using the language of morality suggests that it is immoral to disrupt a disabled student taking a test because they are disabled. This quote should not primarily be read as administrators’ genuine concern for disabled students’ test taking schedule, but rather as their unhesitating willingness to exploit disabled students in order to demonize Black protesters.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Though this article attempts to engage in “fair and balanced” reporting by quoting students who seem to be both “for” and “against” the protests and specific disruption tactics, nearly twice as much space is given to quotes and editorializing that reinforce respectability politics by implying that protesters’ choice of tactic is not commensurate with what they are actually protesting. In doing so, the article diminishes the severity and violence of police brutality and implies that students’ comfort in common spaces on campus should be prioritized over a collective response to racist violence. The attempt to present a “balanced” view inherently fails so long as the article was framed via the question G.B. asks, “...whether the impact of the ‘Indict Tufts’ protests are worth their magnitude.”

In some ways, the use of a less traditionally “objective” tone could result in more transparency in this article—it could be more clear what the writer’s intentions are. This would not make the content of the article any less antagonistic to protesters, but the angle would be more clear. However, the attempt to give a “balanced” look at the story as constructed in the article utilizes the veneer of objectivity to obscure the writer’s point of view even as she uses more opinionated language. G.B., and by extension the *Observer*, are able to claim objectivity by way of practicing “balanced” reporting that acknowledges “both sides,” but protesters still come out demonized. Racist violence is still minimized or erased, albeit in a slightly different way than in the national or local case studies of previous chapters.

Policing anger

G.B.’s article is not the only one I can remember that denies or downplays the existence of racist violence while attempting to be fair and balanced. In the journal excerpt from October 5 that I include on the following page, I reflect on an article that was written as the feature piece—

the longest piece in the magazine and the one that comes first.¹⁵¹ The article was pitched as a look at the different ways Tufts students choose to engage online when someone says something they disagree with.

The idea for this article was not solidified until very soon before we were going into production on the issue. We had a pretty tense meeting where, if I remember correctly, I tried to get the writers to stray away from this idea, and one of the writers was pretty adamant about writing it. Because of the condensed timeline, once they wrote a draft of it there was not enough time to make substantial changes to it before we had to go to print, and so it remained how it was. Even something as seemingly mundane as a printing schedule, though, impacts what content gets published. Deadlines, a regular release schedule, a standardized number of pages that need to be filled, are in reality all totally arbitrary, but are so institutionalized into the practice of producing the *Observer* that we allow subpar content to be published rather than printing a magazine with fewer pages, or changing our printing schedule.

This was my reflection on how the article came out:

I've been having a lot of conversations this week (and probably before, but everything feels like it happens in weeks that only exist as long as they are happening) about positionality and news reporting and whether it's possible for someone in the position of reporter can remove themselves from what they are writing and the way they are presenting information...A.A. and M.P. wrote a feature that heavily quoted a few people who are talking about all the ways that they choose to respond to posts on Facebook that are violent or bigoted or fucked up in some way, and how their choice is to be respectful and try to change people's minds and not make "personal attacks" etc. etc. There was a small section of it that quoted some people who begin to touch on how important anger

¹⁵¹ When this article was published, I was the managing editor of the *Observer*. This meant I was in a decision-making position and that I, along with the editor-in-chief, had the final say on most of the magazine's content. I have a number of journal entries from that time in which I write about these questions of identity, objectivity, and journalism.

can be in the face of violence, but I really came away feeling like overall the piece was an implicit argument in favor of respectability politics, coming from two White women who won't just come out and say that they wish their own comfort was being more prioritized when marginalized people are all too often called upon to educate others about the conditions of their oppression.

My observation in this entry—that there was only a “small section” of the article that focused on anger as an important tool in the face of violence—was correct. Only 7% of the entire article affirms the importance of anger as a defense against violent speech. In contrast, 56% of the article in some way reinforces the idea that the only legitimate way to respond to violent speech online is by being civil or attempting to achieve an exchange that is “productive.”

Similar to G.B.’s article, A.A. and M.P. engage in a fair degree of editorializing in this piece. In both cases, this is partially a result of the idiosyncrasies that come with working on a student-run publication. At the *Observer*, we often end up with a wide variety of writing styles because we do not have set standards for writing style, and anyone at Tufts can write for us. In this case, as with G.B.’s article, they attempt to claim objectivity by showing “both sides” of the story. However, there is clearly an opinion the writers wanted to reinforce by writing this article: that certain ways to engage with others online are right, and others are wrong.

For example, at the beginning of the article they write,

The difference between fundamental disagreement and pure hate speech can be difficult to pinpoint. When this ambiguous language appears online, things can get even messier, given the public nature and quick type-and-enter posts and comments. These aspects of online engagement create a discourse that can be overwhelming to navigate. Yet, there are trends and guidelines one can use to engage conscientiously in these virtual forums.¹⁵²

The suggestion that there are “trends and guidelines one can use to engage conscientiously” online suggests that there are a limited number of “correct” ways to engage online, which in turn

¹⁵² A.A. and M.P. "Your Opinion is Now Live." *Tufts Observer* n.d.: n. pag. Print.

implies that there are “wrong ways.” In this example, A.A. and M.P. focus primarily on uses of anger. Later on, the article says, “While focus on form can’t dismantle hate speech, the use of anger in response to controversial or violent content is more nuanced. Anger was considered by some students to be a potentially ineffective, if not harmful, form of engagement, especially when it takes the form of a personal attack.” On one hand, A.A. and M.P. do acknowledge the possibility that certain ideas or language can be violent. On the other hand, at the very same time that they acknowledge that speech or online content can be violent, they also question the use of anger in response to violent content.

In this way, the article once again engages in the reinforcement of respectability politics, specifically by policing the tone of people responding to violent comments online—according to Michelle Smith, one of the particular characteristics of respectability politics is that they “question the utility of rage, especially that of the black underclass.”¹⁵³ In the end, both G.B.’s article and A.A. and M.P.’s article engage in policing the tone and anger of people of color responding to violence, which implicitly calls into question the severity or even the very existence of that violence.

It would be easy to assume that something like truly “fair and balanced” reporting could be achieved, if only equal space was given to both sides of a story. Couldn’t a 50-50 split produce the kind of neutral reporting that would allow readers to draw conclusions for themselves? This question assumes a few things. First, that any given story only has two sides to report; second, that those two sides exist either in a vacuum, isolated from the power imbalances that define our world, or that those two sides are on some sort of level playing field. While there may be a small number of instances in which both these caveats are true, that is certainly not the

¹⁵³ Smith, Michelle. "Affect and Respectability Politics." *Theory & Event* 17.3 (2014): 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.

case in the articles I have examined thus far. Each of these articles further demonstrates how attempts at “fair and balanced” journalism fall short in the face of the very real conditions of structural inequality under which they are inevitably produced.

Who is able to be objective? Identity and perceived bias in reporting

One question that has come up repeatedly in the time that I have been an editor on the *Observer* is the question of who is qualified to report on a story, and who is able to be unbiased in reporting on a story. In my experience on the *Observer*, I have seen people denied the opportunity to write about their own experiences in the name of avoiding a conflict of interest. Oftentimes, the result is that people of a variety of marginalized identities are labeled as biased or unable to avoid a conflict of interest in writing a story because of those identities.

Objectivity linked to White cis masculinity

In the following journal excerpt, I reflect on an article that was originally going to be written by two Black women who produce a docu-series that focuses on the experiences of people of color at Tufts:

They wrote their own article about their own project and why it was important to them stemming from their own experiences, and then C.O. said that she thought it wasn't journalistically sound for us to publish it because people would read it and think it wasn't credible, because they were biased in their writing—as if anyone wouldn't be! This is the thing that's really wild to me. How do we assume that some people, just because they have a degree in journalism or their name is on some masthead or they're a “well-spoken” “good writer” White man, are the most qualified (or at least more qualified) to communicate about something that is happening in the world?

The “solution” that was originally proposed was for a White man to re-write the article, interviewing the two women and writing an article about their project, the idea being that his article would be less biased as a result of him writing it. This proposal falls into the trap of

assuming that non-marginalized identities are somehow unmarked or neutral, and the only people who are able to be objective. As Michael S. Kimmel writes, “This notion that middle-class white men are objective and everyone else is biased is the way that inequalities are reproduced”¹⁵⁴—to leave privileged identities such as whiteness and cis male-ness unmarked is to ignore the ways people such as White cis men experience race and gender just as much as anyone else; to ignore this reality is to ignore a large dimension of the way race, class, and gender organize life and death in the US.

In the case of this particular article, a Black woman on staff pushed back on the idea of having a White man re-write the article; instead the two of them interviewed the original writers, with the Black woman asking most of the questions. Rather than interpreting the interview and turning it into an article, the interview was published in a Q&A format, and a video of the full interview was published online. Many of us on staff agreed that this was the best possible outcome, yet I wonder why it was necessary to change the format of the article in the first place. It seems that having the third-party “reporters” asking questions somehow mediated the concern about potential bias or conflict of interest.

This moment brings me back to questions of scale. It opens up questions about what the *Observer*’s ambiguous relationship to scale produces both in content and in decision-making. In this case, the ambiguity is, in part, what produces an attempt at scalability. The issue is not necessarily that we treat stories as scalable in the same way *The New York Times* does, but rather that we treat *ourselves* as such. We attempt to make our reporting scalable by adhering to the same principles and sets of rules used by journalists who report on a national scale. The issue is that college journalism is decidedly *nonscalable* precisely because of its ambiguous relationship with scale—sometimes we report on national-level stories, sometimes we do reporting that is

¹⁵⁴ Kimmel, Michael S., and Abby L. Ferber, eds. *Privilege: A reader*. Westview Press, 2016.

incredibly campus-specific. Unlike the confines of location somewhere like Columbia, MO, the hyper-localness of campus reporting necessitates a reach beyond the borders of a college campus, if not for any other reason than a lack of content that would result otherwise.

“Conflicts of interest”

The question of bias also comes up in relation to group membership, as I discuss in a journal entry from November 18, 2016:

C.O. told me that someone came up to her after reading my article about the David Horowitz posters, and told her that they thought the article was “good” and “not biased” but that they were skeptical at first because “Eve is in SJP.” I’m actually not in SJP [Students for Justice in Palestine], what does it mean for this person to read the article and think I am in SJP? To them, it seemed like a marker of bias, membership in the group I was writing, in part, about. But what about the fact that, though I’m not in SJP, I consider myself anti-Zionist/pro-BDS? The fact that I’m Jewish? The difference is that one bias is public, while the others are, to varying degrees, less so. Membership in an organization is official, some kind of irrefutable “proof” of subjective perception of a series of events, a negation of the objective ability to “report.”

The article I wrote was about posters put up on campus by the David Horowitz Freedom Project, an Islamophobic hate group¹⁵⁵ with a pro-Israel stance that characterizes groups that work for Palestinian liberation, such as SJP, as anti-Semitic.¹⁵⁶ I remember that when C.O. and I had this exchange, she was alarmed because she thought that I actually *was* in SJP, and said she would not necessarily have given me the go-ahead to write it if she had known that. I was so fascinated by this exchange because the person she had spoken with had actually praised the article for being “not biased,” but it seemed to me that if I had, in fact, been a member of SJP,

¹⁵⁵ "David Horowitz." *Southern Poverty Law Center*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Mar. 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Feldberg, Eve. "Posting Hate: Campus Activism and the Radical Right." *Tufts Observer* 7 Nov. 2016: n. pag. Print.

then the article would automatically become biased regardless of how readers were interpreting it and regardless of the actual content of the article.

I also felt dissatisfied hearing this, because I didn't want readers to come away feeling like they had heard "both sides of the story" about these racist posters. I wanted readers to come away understanding what was so deplorable about the posters themselves, as well as what was deplorable about the tactic of publicizing student activists' names as a form of intimidation, which is what the posters did. It may be, of course, that many readers did get some of that from reading the article. However, what I took away from this exchange is that even when I did not attempt "balance" or assume that there were two equal sides to a story about racist posters, it was possible to read an attempt at objectivity onto my writing. My takeaway from this conversation about whether I was in SJP, then, is that a writer's identity or public group membership is perhaps more readily interpreted as bias than the actual content of an article.

As I point out in the journal entry, while public membership in a group or visible occupation of any number of marginalized identities may be interpreted by a publication's readership as bias, in reality there is no less bias in being White, wealthy, straight, cis man, non-disabled, etc., or in having no public membership in a group of any sort. It is just that these positionalities are marked by absence, and are therefore less likely to be interpreted as bias.

Of course, my experience was not the only time when group membership has been interpreted as inherent bias, and therefore as a conflict of interest. In this journal entry I write about an article that was originally going to be written by someone in the campus group United for Immigrant Justice (UIJ).

We are planning to put out an article about the recent walkout in support of making Tufts a sanctuary campus for undocumented students and community members. An initial idea in the brainstorming process was to have someone from UIJ write the article—my

thinking in particular was that someone in UIJ is more likely to have knowledge about the sanctuary campus movement happening on various campuses nationwide, and would likely have relationships with people who could be interviewed for the article, and might be someone interviewees are more comfortable talking to.

Apparently, though, “journalistic convention” dictates that if someone in the group were to write about what the group is working on, or about the issue more broadly, that would have to be an opinion piece because there is a “conflict of interest.” This is a coded way of saying that a member of UIJ could not be objective in writing an article about the walkout, undocumented students on campus, etc.

This is an example of how attempts to adhere to what we perceive to be “journalistic standards” became limiting. As a student publication, we generally are not scrutinized in the same way a national or local news publication is. In fact, the often-opinionated tone of our news stories has the potential to leave room for more flexibility when it comes to something like a “conflict of interest.” In the context of who we are as a publication and how we’re perceived, it would not have been outrageous for a member of UIJ to write that article. In fact, in the February 8, 2016 issue of the *Observer*, we published a piece written by two of the organizers for Indigenous People’s Day at Tufts about the movement for IPD at Tufts and at other universities.¹⁵⁷ This does not mean that the article was automatically unproblematic, but the authors were able to interview people who an uninvolved reporter might not have known to reach out to or who might not have trusted a reporter enough to agree to an interview.

In contrast, the Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ) links to an article with suggestions on how to avoid conflicts of interest. These suggestions include “Don’t donate money to political and activist groups” and “Don’t engage in political activity.”¹⁵⁸ It is this kind of standard that results in the characterization of my alleged membership in SJP or someone’s

¹⁵⁷ Kraus, Benya, and Parker Breza. "No Longer in the Third Grade: The Movement for Indigenous People's Day at Tufts." *Tufts Observer* 8 Feb. 2016: 10-11. Print.

¹⁵⁸ Rogers, Tony. “6 Ways Reporters Can Avoid Conflicts of Interest.” *ThoughtCo*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

involvement in UIJ as a “conflict of interest.” Standards like these are likely followed by reporters at both *The New York Times* and local papers in Columbia, MO, but as college students, this feels largely unrealistic. Many of us are politically involved in some way—one editor is the president of the Tufts Democrats, another launched a public campaign to abolish Greek life at Tufts, another was an organizer with Indict, I’ve been active in the Tufts Labor Coalition...the list goes on. None of us are employed at the *Observer*, and only a small number of us call ourselves “journalists.”¹⁵⁹ In recent semesters, we are also being viewed increasingly on campus as a publication with an interest in leftist activist causes and prioritizing marginalized voices. We have a clear political bent, so it makes little sense to try to fit our square peg into the round hole of standardized journalistic practice.

According to the SPJ, another way to avoid conflicts of interest is to not get “too chummy with the people you cover.” The article further advises,

It's important to establish a good working relationship with the sources on your beat. But there's a fine line between a working relationship and a true friendship. If you become best friends with a source you're not likely to cover that source objectively. The best way to avoid such pitfalls? Don't socialize with sources outside of work.¹⁶⁰

This kind of advice is laughably impractical on a college campus where social networks and personal relationships are largely how we find sources and people to interview in the first place. If I tried not to “socialize with sources outside of work,” I could hardly leave the house. Not to mention that my involvement on the *Observer* is part of my social life; it is not a job that can be separated from my personal life in the way that this article suggests. Yet, time and again we hold

¹⁵⁹ Those that do are often gunning for journalism careers; this kind of characterization is typically reserved for their LinkedIn profiles and cover letters.

¹⁶⁰Rogers

ourselves to these very kinds of journalistic standard, despite the fact that they are not well suited for our specific context.

Generative potential

The article about the sanctuary campus movement also raises questions about how to redistribute the power of knowledge production and control of narratives. There is, of course, more nuance to this than just saying the answer (to use this case as a metaphor of sorts) is that someone in UIJ or someone who is undocumented or someone who participated in the walk out or some intersection of these should always write the article. That takes substantial work and time, and the *Observer* doesn't pay our writers (or anyone on staff for that matter). And another vector to consider is the social capital we gain, as a publication as well as a collection of individuals, when we publish "rad" articles. There have been multiple instances this semester where I or others who work on the magazine have been praised by people who are part of the leftist/activist/radical social circles at Tufts for "improving" the *Observer*, for making it "more rad," for "publishing important content."

All of this coalesces into a picture wherein on the one hand, having an "outsider," so to speak, report on something like the UIJ walkout, feels exploitative of members of UIJ in a way similar to what Tuck and Yang describe in "Unbecoming Claims," if we thinking of journalism in the same way they characterize social science research:

Inquiry as invasion is a result of the imperative to produce settler colonial knowledge and to produce it for the academy. This invasion imperative is often disguised in universalist terms of producing "objective knowledge" for "the public." It is a thin disguise, as most research rhetoric waxes the poetics of empire: to discover, to chart new terrain, to seek new frontiers, to explore, and so on. The academy's unrelenting need to produce "original research" is what makes the inquiry an invading structure, not an event. Social science

hunts for new objects of study, and its favored reaping grounds are Native, urban, poor, and Othered communities.¹⁶¹

Additionally, it is more likely that a reporter's lack of knowledge and/or racist and xenophobic ideologies (which may be subconscious) will influence what they write and how they write it, what they leave out, what gets centered, what is granted credibility and authority, etc. But on the other hand, insisting that someone in UIJ or someone who is undocumented write the piece is demanding unpaid and uncompensated labor from someone, and feels like an exploitation of their experiences and positionalities, just in a different way.

The SPJ seems to attempt to counteract this kind of harm, but ultimately, standard journalistic practices that attempt to minimize harm fall into the same patterns identified by Tuck and Yang. On the SPJ website, the section titled "Minimize Harm" includes the suggestion that a reporter "Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort."¹⁶² The page's focus on how to "minimize harm" against individuals evokes Tuck and Yang's assertion in "Unbecoming Claims" that "Human subject protocols establish that individuals must be protected, but not communities."¹⁶³ The result, as Tuck and Yang explain, is that "individuals are empowered to give away the community's stories" for the benefit of, in this case, a news story.

The SPJ page on minimizing harm links to a few different articles, only one of which suggests that journalistic practice could result in harm to an entire community. That article, however, poses the question "How much harm is acceptable?"¹⁶⁴ The question demonstrates the assumption that there is some level of harm to a community that is acceptable, so long as the

¹⁶¹ Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Unbecoming Claims." *Qualitative Inquiry* 20.6 (2014): 811-18. Web.

¹⁶² "Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness." *SPJ Ethics Code*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Mar. 2017.

¹⁶³ Tuck & Yang, 812.

¹⁶⁴ Seaman, Andrew. "Ethics Week 2015: Like a surgeon." *Code Words*. N.p., 01 May 2015. Web. 19 Mar. 2017.

result is, as the article's title suggests, "to serve the greater good." But as Tuck and Yang point out, this "greater good" is most often for the benefit of settler-colonizers, the academy, white supremacy. When we talk about following journalistic protocol on the *Observer*, this is the kind of thinking we are prioritizing.

Yet, there have been many times when the very characteristics of a student publication have created the potential for us to imagine something outside of journalistic standards and impossible claims to balance or neutrality. I am reminded of the days following the presidential election this past November. We had an issue scheduled to be produced the following week. Writers were working on their articles, requests for art and photos were due the next day. We knew that with our limitations as a student publication there was no way we could pull together 32 pages of post-election reporting, and especially not 32 pages that would be any different from a national publication with more resources and trained reporters. We also decided that it felt wrong to go about business as usual, so we decided to solicit submissions from students in the form of poems, prose, and art to document people's responses to the election.

This was possible precisely because of our specific conditions as a student publication. Our lack of resources was, in this instance, generative of something contextually unique and at the same time nationally relevant. We were able to engage in a knowledge production outside the confines of journalism and reporting, and I think we were able to say something much more true as a result. And just like those editors at the *Yale Herald*, I wrote a (perhaps too) sincere, idealistic letter from the editor that I am sure could have been written by any college magazine editor, but was, I hope, interpreted by readers within the specific context of Tufts.

In looking at some of my work on the *Observer* over the years, it is clear that student publications' unique status and circumstances do not exempt them from the pitfalls of knowledge

production seen in case studies of *The New York Times* and local papers in Columbia, MO. At the same time, however, those unique circumstances do gesture toward an ability to produce something more than, or at least other than, standard journalistic fare. There is the possibility to affirm the existence of racist violence rather than deny it, to celebrate student protest and collective action, and to communicate “what’s going on” without silencing the voices of those directly affected.

Conclusion

Through these case studies, I have found that national-level, local, and student journalism work in distinct and interconnected ways to reinforce the dominant ideologies of white supremacy. On the national level, *The New York Times* purports to be committed to objectivity and says it strives for balance and fairness, but an analysis of their use of language in coverage about student protests at Yale reveals that their reporting is not “neutral.” Rather, through various language choices, the paper consistently invalidates protesters and calls into question the validity of student experiences with racism and racist violence on campus. As a national-scale newspaper, the *Times* decontextualizes the events at Yale in order to construct a narrative about debates over free speech at colleges across the US, obscuring the specific demands and experiences of students at Yale.

I found that although the scope of local news allows for the treatment of news stories as non-scalable, leaving more room for specificity where *The New York Times* did not, this did not ultimately allow for reporting that challenges or disrupts dominant narratives or white supremacy. Through an approach of “just the facts” reporting methods, local papers in Columbia, MO, reinscribe racial classification systems and do not name structural racism. On the hyper-local level of student journalism, attempts to follow journalistic protocol on being “fair and balanced” and avoiding conflicts of interest result in writing that minimizes racist violence and/or leaves dominant positionalities such as whiteness unmarked and seemingly-neutral.

In all this, I know there must be the potential to do things differently. I am certainly not the only person thinking about the impossibility of objectivity and the links between news reporting and dominant narratives of white supremacy. Much of this thinking also happens

outside the bounds of “the academy” or academic writing as it is understood traditionally to be papers, lectures, academic journals, or even news articles. To conclude my project, I turn to the invaluable work done by people on Twitter who are thinking journalism and news reporting differently, imaginatively, and transformatively. In fact, a medium like Twitter itself should also be understood as having transformative potential and enacting transformation in how news—information about what’s “going on”—is shared across space and time.

I have seen countless critiques on Twitter of objectivity as a journalistic ideal. This tweet



calls attention to the absurdity of attempts at “balance” in news reporting:

The tweet references a *New York Times* article titled “On Campus, Trump Fans Say They Need ‘Safe Spaces’” (the irony of which is most certainly not lost on me). Through a succinct use of sarcasm, @CartaMonir points out how ridiculous it is to equate racist death threats with being called racist. The

implication is that there is not an equality between these two experiences—it is actually much more terrifying, terrorizing, and violent to be targeted for wearing a hijab as opposed to pointing out the fact that it is racist to support a racist candidate. This analysis is cognizant of power and where it lies—with the person who threatened to light the student on fire for wearing a hijab, and also with the students who support Trump. It then follows to think that if the purpose of journalism is to “speak truth to power,” then the *Times*’ attempt at “balance” in this example is incompatible with that goal.

Following this thinking, people are challenging the need to be “balanced” or show “both sides of the story,” pointing out that, among other results, this leads to the reproduction of racist ideas in print. For example, @runolgarun wrote a thread in response to letters to the editor



published in the *LA Times* under the headline “Were the stories about Japanese internment during World War II unbalanced? Two letter writers think so.” @runolgarun further explains that the specific issue is that a platform is given to ideas that excuse incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII. The irony in this case is that in attempting to achieve “balance,” the *LA Times* publishes a

critique that accuses them of imbalance; yet, as this example demonstrates, attempts at balance often do not take into account *imbalances* that exist between two so-called “opinions.” In this



case, the argument that incarcerating Japanese Americans was a necessary part of the “war effort” is historically inaccurate and takes an apologist stance on racist government policy. @runolgarun really says it best: in doing this, the *LA Times* is not being balanced, they’re just “giving a platform to clueless racists.”

The objectivity supposedly achieved through balance is, in reality, “interested knowledge” that reinscribes racist narratives. This is particularly insidious in 2017, when the possibility of a “Muslim registry” is very real; justifying this kind of history makes room for its repetition.

In a thread that is both complex and, of course, imperfect, @ptrmsk suggests that the future of journalism is one where balance

and objectivity are necessarily abandoned.¹⁶⁵ The thread confronts the

construction of unbiasedness as

predicated on the occupation of

privileged and empowered identities

such as being White or a cis man.

Accepting the premise that every

reporter brings their lived experiences to

their writing, this thread points out that

the lived experiences of, for example, a White cis man journalist, are not perceived as affecting

his ability to be journalistically objective because objectivity is simply code for dominant

ideology. This bias often remains invisible because it aligns with dominant narratives and

therefore doesn’t seem out of the ordinary; logically, then, the more people of marginalized

identities are doing reporting the more reporting could start to seem more “biased,” the only

difference is that this bias is more visible. @ptrmsk articulates queerness—and by extension,

other occupations of marginalized identities—as inherently a disruption to objectivity in

journalism.



¹⁶⁵ See Appendix for the full thread.

Analysis of journalism on Twitter also includes ideas for how journalistic practice could both acknowledge and begin to counteract historic and therefore present imbalances of power. In reflecting on my work on the *Observer*, I discussed how journalistic convention assigns the label of “conflict of interest” to people reporting on their own experiences. However, @bad_dominicana suggests that people should not only be able to tell their own stories but also



be compensated for it. This thread suggests compensation as an alternative to the exploitation of, in this case, femmes of color by White women writing articles about their experiences. An extension of @bad_dominicana’s argument could be that the White woman should not be writing the article in the first place, since she can’t escape the “white lens” and needs to rely on the labor of someone like @bad_dominicana to understand what she’s trying to write about in the first place.

It was at Mizzou that students suggested that there is not an inherent need for news reporting or reporters at all, or at the very least that there could be an alternative way for news reporting to be conducted. When the students camped out in support of the hunger strike blocked reporters from entering the campsite, it became another site for the “free speech debate” narrative to be reinforced.

@ConcernedStudent1950, the Twitter account for the movement at Mizzou, pushed back against the idea that the movement exists for media or public



consumption. @BernardHayman further suggests that protesters should be able to control their



Journos understandably upset at being denied access, but I don't think it's too much for movements to demand control & care for themselves



portrayal in the media. The thread points out how student protests are profitable material for papers to cover, and questions whether it's really so far-fetched for protesters to have a say.

Within the paradigm of journalistic protocol and “best practices,” the idea that protesters could have a say in how a story is

presented would almost certainly be considered a conflict of interest, a breach of objectivity, and

perhaps even a discredit to the professionalism and reliability of a newspaper or other news outlet. Yet, this is predicated on the assumption that there is equal access to power between the reporter and the subject; as @ptrmsk points out, “journalists are supposed to be some kind of arbiters of normalcy, their subjects are the other.” As with the idea of compensating people to write about their own experiences, this proposal could begin to confront historical power imbalances in a transformative way.



Today, the news—“what’s going on”—is shared in so many different ways that do not depend on journalism as an institution, certainly most prolifically through social media. Videos, photos, and tweets are all circulated through people’s personal networks and connections. This is not to say that the entire institution of journalism is obsolete. Particularly, investigative

journalism is incredibly important under the current political regime (or any political regime).

But, as I have demonstrated, choices in language can uphold dominant narratives even as reporting might be attempting to speak “truth to power” or cover an important protest movement.

I came into this project hoping to explore how claims to objectivity mask the ways in which news journalism upholds the dominant narratives of white supremacy in the US. In some ways, this formulation was helpful and sufficiently specific. But ultimately, more than operating as a mask, objectivity as it has been traditionally constructed in journalism simply fails—both as

an aspirational ideal and as an analytic. Without even an attempt to understand the multiplicity of power imbalances that organize our world, the ideals of fairness, balance, and a singular unbiased truth remain impossibilities. As I have shown, attempts to achieve these impossibilities ultimately result in the reproduction or reinforcement of the very same systems of domination that produce the conditions under which the kind of objectivity valued by journalistic norms is impossible.

What is most clear to me is that there are so many ways people are already generating different means of communicating information and sharing stories. Ultimately, I think, these reflections on the failures of objectivity and balance, and the ability to imagine the practice of journalism differently, suggest the transformative potential in a practice of journalism that abandons objectivity as an ideal and moves toward a focus on justice.

Appendix

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

apropos of nothing: it's hard to be queer and a journalist

4 2 14

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

journalists are supposed to be some kind of arbiters of normalcy, their subjects are the other

1 2 6

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

but as a queer person, i'm also the other, which makes interviewing people really hard

1 2 8

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

not a problem of narrowmindedness of subjects, but of the tradition of journalism, which sees the world in opposition to white, maleness

1 1 7

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

the baseline perspective of journalism is: things are weird and noteworthy if they do not align with the viewpoints of powerful white men

1 3 17

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

so a journalism that's inclusive of different races, sexualities, gender identities isn't just about diversity



triscuit lover 3000
@ptrmsk

 Follow

you can't have a truly diverse journalism and remain "unbiased" because unbiasedness is a construction based on white maleness

RETWEETS

13

LIKES

30



11:34 AM - 10 Oct 2016

2

13

30



Tweet your reply

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

Replying to @ptrmsk

feels impossible to operate as a queer journalist within unbiasedness because unbiasedness (at least until recently) excluded queer people

1 3 11

 **triscuit lover 3000** @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

which makes it all the more silly that as mainstream news orgs try to become diverse, they hold onto these ridiculous tenants of unbiasedness



triscuit lover 3000 @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

which makes it all the more silly that as mainstream news orgs try to become diverse, they hold onto these ridiculous tenants of ubiasedness

← 1 ↻ 5 ❤️ 8



triscuit lover 3000 @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

unbiased = what's normal and uncontroversial to straight, white men. so that used to mean that "is racism bad" was a legit question

← 1 ↻ 5 ❤️ 11



triscuit lover 3000 @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

unbiasedness used to mean "gay people deserve AIDS" was a statement worthy of debate

← 3 ↻ 3 ❤️ 8



triscuit lover 3000 @ptrmsk · 10 Oct 2016

cc: [@BuzzFeedBen](#)

← ↻ ❤️

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