Global Communication and the Scalar Politics of Race: Tensions in Transnational Articulations of (Anti)-Racism(s)

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The media and cultural imperialism paradigm's reliance on Marxist world-system analysis and class, alongside the globalization paradigm's faith in cosmopolitanism, has made debates on race relatively uncommon in global media and communication studies. Recent literature on race and digital technology has placed race more firmly on the map within our wider field, but the bulk of this work remains nation-centric and has not addressed the tensions in transnational articulations of (anti)-racism(s). This article develops an analytical framework—"the scalar politics of race"—to understand how various actors strategically deploy scale to address race via social media, legacy media, and physical space. I apply this framework to 3 case studies, examining the global disciplining of national forms of racism, the hegemony of transnational forms of anti-racism and solidarity, and translocal appropriations of anti-racism.

Keywords: race, racism, anti-racism, scale, digital, transnational, global communication

The #BlackLivesMatter protests in 2015 and 2020 created a global moment of racial reckoning that also accelerated scholarship on race and digital technology, culminating in the subfield of digital Black studies. Despite some work addressing the transnational dimensions of #BlackLivesMatter, the bulk of this work remains remarkably nation-centric, focusing primarily on the U.S. context (Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2020; Jackson et al., 2020; Noble, 2018; Steele, 2021). This nation-centric focus arguably echoes the strong U.S. roots of fields like critical race theory (CRT). Writing from sociology, Meghji (2020) suggests that influential CRT concepts, such as "racial formation" (p. 647; Omi & Winant, 1986) and the "racialized social system" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, pp. 21–58), have helped to reproduce a nation-centric focus. Decolonial scholars, on the other hand, have adopted a historical and global lens to interpret race as constitutive of the modern, capitalist world system (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 217), which,

according to Meghji (2020), could complement "CRT's 'presentist' focus on national racialized social systems" (p. 647).

The global historical context in which race emerged as a category of difference, alongside the intensified global circulation of both racist and anti-racist discourses through social media, legacy media, and physical space, suggests that a more transnational approach to analyzing racism, anti-racism, and global communication is urgently needed. Global media and communication studies is particularly well-equipped to address these questions. However, its two most influential paradigms since the 1970s until today—the media and cultural imperialism paradigm and the globalization paradigm—have not centered race in their analytical frameworks for different reasons. The media and cultural imperialism paradigm strongly relied on Marxist world-system analysis and its analytical focus on class, while the globalization paradigm's faith in cosmopolitanism and the emergence of a sense of global citizenship ensured that debates on race and racism remained relatively uncommon in global media and communication studies.

Girginova et al. (2025) describe global media and communication studies not as a subfield, but as an epistemology—a standpoint that could benefit research across the wider field of media and communication studies. They identify four key strengths of global media and communication studies: "contextually rooted, historically grounded, attentive to power, and engaged with issues of relationality and comparison" (Girginova et al., 2025, p. 193). As I argue in this article, these strengths can also contribute to a critical, historicized, contextual, and comparative approach to racism, anti-racism, and global communication. However, such an approach would benefit from closer attention to scale.

While scale was central to the globalization paradigm in the early 2000s, debates on scale have waned in media and communication studies since the 2010s. With the rise of social media, scalar analyses have increasingly made way for approaches that emphasize horizontal networks rather than vertical power hierarchies. Scholars of the Internet inaugurated new concepts such as "networked publics" (boyd, 2010) and "networked activism" (Castells, 2012) and renewed older methodologies like network analysis. While media and communication scholars imagined the Internet through the metaphor of a network (often from *nowhere*), geographers emphasized that "[t]he Internet is not an amorphous, spaceless, and placeless cloud. It is characterized by distinct geographies. Internet users, servers, websites, scripts, and even bits of information all exist somewhere" (Graham, 2014, p. 99). Geographers also continued the debate on scale and critiqued earlier approaches that treated the global, national, regional, and local as preset, taken-for-granted, and hierarchical categories.

Drawing on debates on scale in geography, this article develops an analytical framework to explain the tensions in transnational articulations of (anti)-racism(s). The "scalar politics of race" refers to how various actors strategically deploy scale to address race via social media, legacy media, and physical space. To help elucidate the proposed analytical framework, I discuss three case studies that highlight different forms of scalar politics. Case studies bring conceptual ideas to life and demonstrate the relevance of the framework. Three specific cases were selected in which George Floyd's killing in May 2020 emerged as a pivotal moment in the scalar politics of race. Selection was guided by my strong familiarity with these contexts. I was born in the Netherlands and lived there until my mid-20s. I have researched, visited, and worked in South(ern) Africa at different periods since my early 20s. Furthermore, I have lived in Greenwich,

London, for the past two decades. Evidently, other cases could have illustrated the argument in this article equally well.

The first case highlights how national forms of racism—expressed through the use of Blackface in the annual Sinterklaas children's festival in the Netherlands—are challenged through global anti-racist critiques. The second case demonstrates how contestations over South Africans' transnational solidarity with victims of U.S. police brutality ultimately increased visibility for and solidarity with local victims. The third case discusses how the reuse of Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser's yellow #BlackLivesMatter mural in a London borough's town square masks the square's colonial naming and the local area's embeddedness in global histories of colonialism and empire.

Before discussing the analytical framework and case studies in more detail, the next two sections examine more closely (1) why global media and communication studies has so far not paid extensive attention to race and anti-racism, and (2) how the subfield has engaged with questions around digital technology. These sections argue that the strengths of the media and cultural imperialism paradigm (its concern with critical analysis of global power relations) and the globalization paradigm (its focus on scale) could help address both the relative silence on race and (anti)-racism in global media and communication studies and the nation-centric nature of digital Black studies.

Race and Global Media and Communication Studies

Since the 1970s, two paradigms have dominated global media and communication studies, but for different reasons, these have not centered race in their analytical frameworks. The media and cultural imperialism paradigm drew on Marxist world-system analysis, adopting class as a key category of analysis. The globalization paradigm vested hope in cosmopolitan forms of belonging and hybrid identities, rendering ongoing forms of racism somewhat invisible. It is important to consider why these paradigms did not address race in significant ways, especially because both paradigms continue to circulate and have been revived in the context of the digital turn (as is discussed in the next section).

The media and cultural imperialism approach, dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, examined the unequal flows of information, news, and cultural products between the Global North and South. These threatened the cultural independence of formerly colonized countries and hindered their efforts to build viable news agencies and media and cultural industries (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Schiller, 1976; Tomlinson, 1991; Tunstall, 1977). Media and cultural imperialism scholars were inspired by Marxist dependency scholars like André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, whose world-system theory emphasized the ongoing economic dependencies between the center (the "West") and the periphery (the "Rest"). They extended these arguments to explain global power relations in the media and cultural industries. Media and cultural imperialism scholars conducted quantitative analyses demonstrating the unbalanced, unidirectional flows of TV programs and foreign news from the "First" to the "Third World" (Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974; Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985), alongside more qualitative, ideological critiques revealing how cultural products reproduced capitalist values (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975). Research on media and cultural imperialism rarely discussed media content or cultural products as racialized content. U.S. drama series such as *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz, 1990), for example, were described as "Western culture" rather than as implicated in reproducing

"whiteness." The debate was framed in terms of "culture" and "cultural values," which threatened the authenticity of "Third World" societies. Despite the relative silence on race, the media and cultural imperialism paradigm highlighted the inequalities between the "First" and "Third World," which continued to inform more contemporary critical analyses of global power relations in media and communications (see the next section).

The globalization paradigm emerged in the early 1990s and sought to analyze "the growing interconnectedness of different parts of the world" (Thompson, 1995, p. 149). Against the background of the end of the Cold War, the sharp rise in international trade, global mobility, and the emergence of new information and communication technologies created the need to move beyond older models—such as world system theory—to better explain global power relations. Global media and communication scholars examined how the growing availability of satellite television and new information and communication technologies worldwide helped to disrupt processes of identity formation and created post-national, cosmopolitan, and hybrid identities (Appadurai, 1990; Tomlinson, 1999). In particular, research on cultural globalization aimed to complicate the fixed national identities assumed by media and cultural imperialism scholars. Concepts such as cosmopolitanism emphasized post-national modes of belonging and the emergence of global citizenship, while hybridization challenged negative assumptions about cross-border cultural influences and their threat to cultural authenticity. As scholars began to complicate understandings of identity formation, the globalization paradigm's hegemony as an explanatory model in the social sciences during the early 1990s further displaced attention to race. As Shome and Hegde (2002) warned at the time, "to suggest that taken for granted notions of race become problematized in globality is not to suggest that racialization disappears or becomes insignificant" (p. 179).

Digital Technology and Global Media and Communication Studies

Since the 1990s and 2000s, global media and communication studies has arguably not witnessed a new, clearly identifiable paradigm, but "has suffered from post-paradigmatic fragmentation" (Kraidy, 2018, p. 339). In recent years, the subfield has increasingly been eclipsed by a focus on data, digital technology, and platforms in media and communication studies, which now dominates knowledge production in our field. The digital turn has reproduced a degree of technological determinism and dampened the big questions and heated debates that characterized the shift from "international communication" in the 1970s to "global media and communication studies" in the 2000s.

Rather than provoking a new paradigm, the digital turn has revived concepts associated with the two older paradigms. The concept of media and cultural imperialism has gained a new life through notions such as platform imperialism and digital colonialism, which highlight the disproportionate power wielded by a handful of Big Tech companies and digital platforms (Davis, 2023; Jin, 2015; Thussu, 2024). Other scholars have focused on the geopolitics of Internet infrastructure (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016; Kumar, 2021; Winseck, 2017) and the shift from a unipolar world order dominated by the United States to a multipolar world in which BRICS countries wield increasing power (Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015; Thussu & Nordenstreng, 2020). These newer studies have continued to engage with the global power relations that were central to the media and imperialism paradigm.

An important contribution of the globalization paradigm was its attention to different scales of analysis—local, national, and global—which helped unpack power relations between and across different levels (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996). Globalization scholars highlighted that

> the concepts of the global and the local were as important as those of the national and international, that they were interwoven in multiple ways and to such an extent that it was no longer always possible to separate them from each other. (Rantanen, 2019, p. 5)

This produced many studies that focused on how the global and local were mutually shaping each other (Robertson, 1995).

Again, these themes have been adopted by scholars unpacking recent protests like #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) in 2015 and 2020 and #MeToo in 2017, reinvigorating analyses of the transnational nature of activism that emerged alongside globalization theory in the late 1990s (della Porta et al., 1999; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Analyses of #BLM returned to scale and examined the efforts of the movement to "scale up" or expand its operations (Mundt et al., 2018), the resonance of global movements such as #BLM with local concerns (Shahin et al., 2021), and the importance of national characteristics in shaping the recontextualization and adaptation of #BLM (della Porta et al., 2023). The main aim of these analyses was to explain why and how particular forms of activism spread or "diffused" globally, somewhat reminiscent of earlier approaches to global media and communication associated with the modernization paradigm that dominated the 1950s and 1960s (see also Roy, 2016, p. 293).

A key aim of modernization scholars was to understand how innovations spread from one community to another. Rogers (1962/2003), in his seminal book *The Diffusion of Innovations*, defined diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (p. 35). The diffusionist model adopted today by transnational digital activism scholars suffers from several limitations. First, it risks indirectly centering the Global North, or the United States more specifically, as a beacon of anti-racism activism set to enlighten the rest of the world. Such a focus overemphasizes the transformational nature of #BlackLivesMatter and marginalizes less visible forms of anti-racist activism in other parts of the world (see Roy et al., 2022, pp. 3–4, who invoke a similar argument on #MeToo).

Second, the focus on (digital) diffusion ends up reproducing a sense of technological determinism by focusing attention exclusively on the role of social media in "spreading," "diffusing," or "scaling up" #BLM and downplaying the role of physical space in protest. This bias is reinforced by methodological decisions to deploy computational methods in analyzing diffusion processes within large social media data sets. This contrasts somewhat with earlier work on digital activism provoked by the Arab Spring in 2011, which emphasized the continued importance of street protests in physical space. Scholars subsequently highlighted the hybrid co-constitution of protests across digital and physical spaces, alongside mainstream media (Chadwick, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2012; Treré, 2018).

Third, the focus on diffusion ignores that "racialization is at its core a global process because it is grounded in an equally global system of colonization and white supremacy" (Ludwig, 2019, p. 2733).

Similarly, efforts to counter racialization have always been transnational and global, as evidenced by the tradition of Black internationalism (Gilroy, 1995; Makalani, 2011) and the history of global abolitionist and anti-apartheid movements (Klotz, 2002). Finally, a (digital) diffusionist "simple local-global model" is not "able to capture or adequately represent the complexity of these transnational connections and modes of meaning-making" (Roy, 2016, p. 303). This requires a more nuanced analysis of scalar politics that goes beyond the local-global binary and brings in the transnational.

As Sorce and Dumitrica (2022) argue,

[T]he transnational lens preserves a sensitivity to the partiality and local specificities of these linkages and flows—instead of merely describing or approaching issues or activism as "global," it draws attention to the different pathways through which an incomplete (and potentially unjust) 'global' is constructed. (p. 166)

A detailed scalar analysis of transnational articulations of (anti)-racism should move beyond a focus on the digital and consider the crucial role of legacy media and physical space in transnational activism. Because of its historical focus on global power relations (media and cultural imperialism paradigm) and scale (globalization paradigm), global media and communication studies is particularly well-placed to analyze transnational articulations of (anti)-racism in a way that is contextual, comparative, historically grounded, and focused on power. The next section further develops this approach through "the scalar politics of race."

Toward a Scalar Politics of Race

When global media and communication scholars invoked scale in their analyses in the early 2000s, they drew on a debate that critical geographers were engaged in at the time on "the politics of scale." This term refers to "the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies *among* geographical scales" (Brenner, 2001, p. 600, as cited in Herod, 2008, p. 221). While debates on scale have waned in media and communication studies since the 2000s, geographers have continued to debate scale and critique earlier approaches that understood scale as a neutral measure of size or geographic distance and treated the global, national, regional, and local as preset, taken-for-granted, and hierarchical categories. MacKinnon (2010) distinguished two approaches in the ongoing debate: political-economic approaches that offer "an ontological sense of scale as a set of material relations" and post-structuralist approaches that consider "the epistemological construction of scale through particular social representations and discourses" (p. 23).

Combining these two approaches and bridging their differences, MacKinnon (2010) proposed treating scale as a construct that is both materially and discursively produced. His notion of "scalar politics" refers to the "ability of particular social actors, organizations and movements to harness and manipulate the discursive and material dimensions of scale effectively in pursuit of their agendas" (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 30). Such an approach enables us to better understand how scale is strategically deployed by a range of different actors to address race via social media, legacy media, and physical space. Rather than a passive focus on diffusion and adoption, scalar politics emphasizes how scale is actively mobilized and embedded within different power relations. Another advantage of MacKinnon's (2010) approach to scale is its

acknowledgement of the "influence of and effects of pre-existing scalar structures, created by past processes of social construction" (p. 30), which he refers to as "inherited scalar structures" (p. 30). Given its entanglement with slavery and colonialism, this historical approach is particularly suitable for understanding the contemporary scalar politics of race.

Drawing on three case studies, the following sections reveal how unpacking the scalar politics of race illuminates the tensions between different forms of racism and anti-racism. Focusing on scalar politics enables a shift from a nation-centric approach to a transnational approach, highlighting the dialectical and tenuous links between the national and transnational. As Sorce and Dumitrica (2022) argue, "[s]ensitivity to how activists connect and organize across borders allows scholars to focus on linkages and flows between different localities, while also paying more attention to the specific localities that are thus being brought together" (p. 166).

Case 1: The Global Disciplining of National Forms of Racism

The Sinterklaas children's festival, which originated in the 19th century, is a popular annual celebration in the Netherlands. Traditionally, Sinterklaas was accompanied by "Black Pete," an assistant—if not servant—who distributed presents to children, but also disciplined them if they misbehaved. "Black Pete" acted childlike, spoke in broken Dutch, and appeared in Blackface, wearing a black curly wig and large painted red lips. The overtly racist dimension of this festival has provoked critiques since at least the 1960s, for example, from M. C. Grunbauer, who proposed a plan for "White Pete" in 1968 (Helsloot, 2005, pp. 253–254). From the 1980s and 1990s onward, migrants from former Dutch colonies, such as Surinam and the Dutch Caribbean, settled in the Netherlands. Black activist groups from these newly independent countries—such as the Solidarity Movement Surinam in 1981 in Utrecht, the Movement Surinam Left in 1981, and the Black Pete = Black Grief Activist Committee in Amsterdam in 1986—began protesting the racist nature of the celebration in major Dutch cities (Helsloot, 2005, pp. 256–259).

While these all represented relatively local anti-racist initiatives, the 2010s saw the emergence of a national "debate" on whether "Black Pete" was racist or not and whether the celebration in its current form should be abolished, continued, or amended. In November 2011, two Black activists, Quinsy Gario and Jeffrey Afriyie, staged a protest at the official national arrival event of Sinterklaas, wearing t-shirts with the text "Black Pete is Racism." They were arrested after they refused to take off their t-shirts, and footage of the arrest began circulating on social media, provoking global media coverage. Gario's and Afriyie's engagement in scale jumping, understood as "the ability of certain social groups and organizations to move to higher levels of activity [. . .] in pursuit of their interests" (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 24), made them a bigger threat to the status quo.

Both television talk shows and social media—and, in particular, the rival Facebook groups Pete-ition (in favor of Black Pete) and Black Pete is Racism—played an important role in further enabling the so-called debate on a national scale. In "debating" whether the practice was racist, there was often a reluctance to accept Black people as conversation partners. Since they were not recognized as part of the nation, they were deemed not to have a place in the national debate. As Hilhorst and Hermes (2016) have argued, this demonstrates that "nationalism has become acceptable again, manifesting itself as the forceful exclusion of

the sentiments of non-White Dutch" (p. 218). As they point out, "[t]he passionate defence of national heritage appears to be built on a sense of (White) suffering, which simultaneously excludes the possibility of non-White suffering" (Hilhorst & Hermes, 2016, p. 218). Those supporting and defending Black Pete presented themselves as white victims of a threat to nationalism while delegitimizing the pain and suffering experienced by people of color exposed to the festival. By condemning and criminalizing the nonviolent anti-racist protests of Black activist groups—and by not treating them as equal conversation partners—racism reproduced itself in the response to anti-racism.

The national debate over Black Pete emerged in an increasingly polarized society where right-wing populist forces had begun to gain ground. This political shift coincided with the rise of social media, which enabled these groups to mobilize (Hermes, 2020). Those defending Black Pete denied any links between Black Pete and racist, caricatural representations of Black people, highlighting the importance of this national childhood tradition. They were unwilling to accept that Black Pete's existence and appearance had been shaped by much longer histories of colonialism and slavery (Helsloot, 2012; van der Pijl & Goulordova, 2014). This denial is what Wekker (2016) describes as "white innocence," a paradox in which racism and colonial violence are passionately denied alongside aggressive racism and xenophobia.

However, global pressure also helped curtail the festival's racist nature, which necessitates situating this case within a more transnational framework. On two occasions, the UN spoke out against the "Black Pete" tradition after receiving complaints from individuals and civil society organizations. In November 2013, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGPAD) issued a statement that they "were deeply troubled by the virulent intolerance expressed by those who could not understand that there might be problems with the way Zwarte Piet [Black Pete] is presented or that the presentation might be perceived negatively" (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2013, para. 6). They encouraged the Dutch government

> to support and facilitate an open debate in Dutch society, with a view to creating an understanding of how this tradition is perceived by different groups and to identify steps that might respond to the views and concerns of all. (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2013, para. 11)

In August 2015, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended that the Dutch government

> actively promote the elimination of those features of the character of Black Pete which reflect negative stereotypes and are experienced by many people of African descent as a vestige of slavery. (United Nations, 2015, p. 5)

Given the status of the UN, these occasions further helped to make Dutch practices visible across both legacy and social media.

Gradually, local municipalities in major cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht decided to abolish the use of Blackface in their Sinterklaas arrival ceremonies. By 2017, only

"roetveegpieten" (Pete with soot smudges) were featured. In 2019, the official national Sinterklaas arrival in Apeldoorn, broadcast on public television, and the daily Sinterklaas news bulletin also featured only "roetveegpieten" (NOS Nieuws, 2019). The killing of George Floyd in May 2020, and the subsequent #BlackLivesMatter protests, provoked another moment of racial reckoning, a growing awareness of structural racism in the Netherlands, and a push to create more inclusionary spaces and practices (Ghorashi, 2020). It was probably no coincidence that a few weeks after Floyd's killing on June 5, 2020, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte finally announced that he had changed his opinion about Black Pete and now understood the racist nature of the celebration (Mebius, 2020). This contrasted with an earlier statement he made in October 2013 that "Black Pete is Black and I can't change that" (NOS Nieuws, 2013, para. 1).

Therefore, scale is crucial in understanding the complex dynamics between local, national, and transnational dimensions of (anti-)racist articulations. While older generations of activists criticized the Black Pete tradition locally, a new generation of activists jumped scale to a national level in 2011 by targeting Sinterklaas's national arrival event. Global pressure from the UN, #BlackLivesMatter, and international media coverage in the late 2010s ultimately facilitated more sustained changes to the practice. Although global critique might have backfired in the context of a former colony, a lapsed world power such as the Netherlands was keen to be seen as globally relevant and compliant with international anti-racist standards, highlighting the importance of inherited scalar structures.

Case 2: The Hegemony of Transnational Forms of Anti-Racism and Solidarity

The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, became a global moment for reflection on the continuation of different forms of racism worldwide. Floyd's death provoked protests under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter in an estimated 93 countries worldwide (Pressman & Devin, 2023, p. 559). However, it also revealed the uncomfortable truth that a killing in the United States would provoke a higher level of prominence and visibility than a similar murder elsewhere, reflecting the geopolitical power that the United States wields (Pillay, 2022). At the same time, many other killings in the United States did not receive the same level of visibility as Floyd's murder. Floyd's murder represented a particular moment—or conjuncture, in Stuart Hall's terms—shaped in part by several months of pandemic life, which had revealed racialized inequalities, such as the higher COVID-19 death rate among people of color.

Tensions around visibility and hierarchies between Black lives surfaced sharply in South Africa following Floyd's killing. Just weeks earlier, on April 10, 2020, Collins Khosa was assaulted and beaten with a rifle by members of the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF) in Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg marred by high levels of poverty (Reuters, 2020). Soldiers had allegedly entered his home because he was in possession of alcohol, which was banned under the strict COVID-19 lockdown imposed by the South African government. Khosa died from the assault.

A week after Floyd's killing, on June 1, 2020, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party posted a statement on Twitter calling on "all Americans and their government to seek an amicable solution to the current racial impasse" (ANC, 2020). The statement noted the increase in police brutality in the United States and urged the South African government "to engage with the American government through

established diplomatic channels to diffuse racial tensions and build social cohesion among different races" (ANC, 2020). The ANC actively jumped scale and framed its struggle against what it referred to as "racial supremacy," which the ANC would normally present as restricted to its national borders. Following the press release, South Africans on social media began comparing the ANC's response to Floyd's killing with its response to Collins Khosa's killing. One Twitter user, for example, tweeted, "South Africans, if you didn't do or say something after Collins Khosa's murder, where do you even begin to jump on the George Floyd's *[sic]* bandwagon, you hypocritical opportunist?" (wa kwaUliwa, 2020).

Subsequently, newspapers began to pick up the issue. *The Times* newspaper conducted a poll asking, "Are South Africans more vocal about American police brutality issues than local ones?" (Bhengu, 2020), and several opinion and analysis pieces compared the two deaths (Balthazar, 2020; Buccus, 2020). In an interview on the national television station, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), Collins Khosa's partner, Nomsa Montsha, stated:

> We also lost our loved one. People are talking about it out there, but South Africa where are you? We also lost someone that we wanted to be with. Is it because we are from a poor family who comes from Alexandra township? (SABC News, 2020, para. 9)

The opposition Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party then announced that it would sue the government over Khosa's death (Mvumvu, 2020). It called for a national day of action in solidarity with George Floyd and Collins Khosa. During a protest at the United States Consulate General in Sandton, Johannesburg, EFF's Deputy President, Floyd Shivambu, argued as follows:

> Our solidarity with all the oppressed people of the world does not mean that we do not care about what is happening in South Africa. It is not either or. It is not that because we are now pledging solidarity with the people of America on the matter of George Floyd, we do not care about what is happening here in South Africa [. . .]. [I]t must be the beginning of ending white supremacy all over the world. (TimesLIVE, 2020, 00:01:01)

In this way, Shivambu engaged in "scale bending," defined as how "certain social groups and individuals challenge and undermine existing arrangements which tie particular social activities to certain scales" (MacKinnon, 2010, pp. 24–25). He actively connected scales by framing the national struggle against racism in South Africa as part of a wider global struggle against racism and American imperialism. In the same speech, he acknowledged the solidarity South Africans received from abroad in dismantling Apartheid, thereby invoking the scalar structures inherited through a longer transnational history of anti-racism.

Initially, ANC's expression of solidarity with Floyd was perceived by many South Africans as engaging with transnational anti-racist activism at the expense of national expressions of solidarity. This response was also shaped by the hegemonic role of the United States as a world power, which contrasts with South Africa's relatively insignificant place on the world stage. The opposition EFF effectively framed Collins Khosa's murder through a transnational lens, linking both cases to gain visibility and presenting both killings as outcomes of a global system of white supremacy. Furthermore, the EFF actively denounced the

U.S.' hegemonic role in the world and invoked longer histories of anti-racism that bound the United States and South Africa together.

Because of this rescaling effort, a national killing in South Africa gained more visibility only after a similar murder in the United States—also committed by the state—received global media attention. Highly visible killings, such as George Floyd's murder, can make other acts of violence more visible when framed together, thus highlighting how social media discussions over perceived hierarchies in solidarity and visibility—also known as "oppression Olympics" or "diaspora wars"—can be appropriated by party political forces for their own political gain.

Case 3: Translocal Appropriations of Anti-Racism

On June 5, 2020, almost two weeks after George Floyd's killing, Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser tweeted footage of a large yellow mural reading "Black Lives Matter" on a road renamed "Black Lives Matter Plaza" (Bowser, 2020). The mural, commissioned by the mayor, was painted on the road outside the White House, the residence of populist and right-wing President Donald Trump. In a news article, she explained her initiative as follows: "As Washingtonians, we simply all want to be here together in peace to demonstrate that in America, you can peacefully assemble, you can bring grievances to your government, and you can demand change" (BBC News, 2020, para. 7).

A little over a week after this announcement, on June 13, 2020, London's Greenwich Council launched a yellow #BlackLivesMatter mural in General Gordon Square in Woolwich "to demonstrate solidarity but also encourage reflection" (Thorpe, 2020). The mural was inspired not only by Washington's "Black Lives Matter Plaza" but also by other initiatives of the Greenwich Council, such as the rainbow crossings in June 2019 (Hennings, 2019a) to celebrate Pride and the Black History road crossings (painted red, green, yellow, and black to signify Pan-African colors) in October 2019 to mark Black History Month (Hennings, 2019b). Danny Thorpe, the leader of Greenwich Council, justified the #BlackLivesMatter mural as follows:

> One in five of our residents are from Black backgrounds and in light of recent events, including the Black Lives Matter protests across the globe, we want to strongly reaffirm our commitment to eradicating racism and discrimination in our society. (Bennett-Ness, 2020, para. 6)

While in Washington, DC, the mural carried a defiant message outside the White House, the Woolwich location lacked the same symbolic relation to national politics, although it may have been intended as a subtle critique by a Labour Party-dominated borough to a Conservative Party-ruled national government. The main aim of the mural appeared to be as a site for reflecting on ongoing local forms of racism. Hence, it could be argued that the mural lost some of its original meaning in its transnational adoption.

Just before the mural's launch, another significant event captured headlines in the United Kingdom and beyond: the toppling and "burial" of the statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in a Bristol canal. This dramatic act of "historical poetry"—in the words of Bristol's mayor Marvin

Rees (Morris, 2020)—provoked a debate over the celebration of colonial heroes. More importantly, it forced connections between Colston's continued presence in urban space and Britain's record of racist police violence, racial profiling in arrests, and the disproportionately high COVID-19 death rate among Black communities.

Responding to the spectacular removal of Colston's statue, Labour councils announced on June 9, 2020, that they would review all statues and monuments in local areas (Rodgers, 2020). For the Borough of Greenwich, more specifically, Danny Thorpe admitted that

> [I]t is an uncomfortable truth that our borough, with its rich Maritime history, has ties to the slave trade. We will be reviewing the whole of our public realm to identify these links and develop a way forward. Our history is important, and we are not looking to rewrite or forget the past. But we do have a responsibility to question and discuss the place of commemorative structures from bygone eras in our borough's future. (Chamberlain, 2020, paras. 8–9)

However, the council's anti-racist efforts overlooked the connections between the #BlackLivesMatter mural and its location, General Gordon Square. Major General Charles George Gordon, born in 1833 in Woolwich, is considered one of Britain's key imperial heroes (Jones, 2015). After serving in the army during the Crimean War, as well as in China and Egypt, he died in 1885 resisting the rebel army of the religious leader Muhammad Ahmad in Khartoum, Sudan. Woolwich is key to Britain's national military history, hosting the Royal Military Academy, the Royal Regiment of Artillery, and the Royal Arsenal, which produced the bulk of armaments that enabled the British Empire to defend and expand itself throughout the 19th century.

Furthermore, Woolwich's demographic makeup has been profoundly shaped by the British Empire's history, with this part of Greenwich hosting a significant community of ex-Gurkha soldiers from Nepal and other communities with origins in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, and Somalia—all former colonies of Britain. Hence, the #BlackLivesMatter mural in General Gordon Square appears paradoxical. If Black lives mattered, the Square would have been renamed rather than continuing to celebrate Gordon's imperial legacy. Ultimately, this local anti-racist mural ended up masking the global scale that had historically implicated the area in colonialism and racialization processes.

Conclusion

More than a decade ago, Shome (2010) signaled the "implicit tendency to territorialize race where race becomes synonymous with the boundaries of the nation-state" (p. 149). She argued that "[s]uch a framework ends up shoring and maintaining a US centered ethos in our understanding of race" (Shome, 2010, p. 149). While Shome's comment concerned the wider field of media and communication studies, this article observed a similar tendency in work on race and digital technology. However, somewhat paradoxically, this same body of literature has made a crucial contribution to putting race on the map in our field, albeit in a nation-centric way. This is important, given that "our field maintains an attachment to a

theoretical canon that systematically disavows the centrality of colonialism and race" (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020, p. 211).

Drawing on debates in geography (focus on scalar politics), and the strengths of the media and cultural imperialism (concern with global power relations) and the globalization paradigm (focus on scale), the analytical framework proposed in this article—"the scalar politics of race"—contributes to a contextual, historicized, and comparative account of how transnational forms of (anti)-racism are embedded in different power relations. More specifically, this framework provides a better understanding of how the local, national, and global intersect in the way a range of different actors address race. This understanding is crucial in transnational solidarity and coalition building to dismantle structural racism. The case studies pointed to the malleability and contingency of scalar politics and how the deployment of specific scales resulted in the silencing of other potential scales. Scalar politics highlights the active processes in which scale is mobilized, as opposed to the fixed and hierarchical nature of scale in diffusion and adoption studies.

Such an approach is crucial in the present conjuncture, which has witnessed a global resurgence of the far right across different contexts, such as Argentina, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Turkey, and the United States. This resurgence has often coincided with a defence of white supremacy (or other forms of identity-based domination) and a clampdown on the rights of racialized minorities. While these movements are frequently considered nationalist in character, they maintain numerous links and connections across multiple scales (Abrahamsen et al., 2024), amplified by a common or overlapping social media supporter base. Future research could examine how far-right actors strategically deploy scale to address race in their alliances and networks with like-minded actors elsewhere. Additionally, scalar politics can be expanded to interrogate how scale is deployed through other identity markers, such as gender, class, or caste.

Scalar analysis is also crucial for analyzing social media platforms, which are often imagined as both deterritorialized and producing deterritorialization, resulting in the collapse of scale. Digital, data, and platform studies continue to suffer from digital universalism. The nonsituated nature of this scholarship has—despite decolonial aspirations—often reproduced "knowledge from nowhere" (Willems, 2021, pp. 1689–1690; see also Mumford, 2021). Given its historical concern with global power relations and scale, global media and communication studies is particularly well-placed to contribute to scalar and situated analyses of digital technology and its uses because "the digital remains entrenched in hierarchies and power structures that impact the success and visibility of activist organizing on many levels" (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022, p. 170).

At the same time, the digital should not displace important global questions, nor should global media and communication studies be reduced to digital questions. Legacy media continued to provide coverage of street protests and hosted "debates" on racism. Several anti-racist protests, including #RhodesMustFall, Kick Out Black Pete, and #BlackLivesMatter, crucially addressed the lingering presence of colonial monuments in physical space and the continued use of Blackface in annual outdoor celebrations. Hence, it is essential to examine the digital alongside legacy media and physical space in transnational articulations of (anti)-racism.

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