GRAPPLING WITH THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH: ASIAN AMERICAN FOOD BLOGGERS' ACTIVISM THROUGH BLACK LIVES MATTER ON INSTAGRAM.

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Asian American food bloggers constitute an overrepresented racial minority within the predominantly white, middle-class and heteronormative food blogosphere. The whiteness of this digital culture is a function of its allegiance to aspirational and commercialised postfeminist (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007) and postrace (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Joseph, 2018) discourses, and Asian American participation therein is often understood as 'ethnic entrepreneurialism' in which race is commoditised for the assumed white imagined audience. While the confessional tone and the focus on mundane, gendered experiences across the lifestyle blogosphere has been described as radical for women (Lopez, 2009) and instrumental in generating communities of support for girls and women (e.g. Makinen, 2021; Keller, 2016), these findings of everyday politics and subversion are not similarly impactful for bloggers of colour. Food blogs rarely constitute productive spaces for discussing or building community around Asian American experiences even when published by Asian American bloggers. This study addresses the need for further intersectional analyses of food blogs that specifically take into account the racial discourses generated and circulated in this culture.

This presentation explores the racial discourses generated by Asian American food bloggers participating in Instagram conversations around #BlackoutTuesday and Black Lives Matter in 2020. Although the demographic focus is on food bloggers, I base the current analysis on Instagram as an essential cross-promotional platform for food bloggers, due to its popularity and emphasis on visual storytelling (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020), and as it was the platform around which the #BlackoutTuesday action was centered. I analyse 33 posts on the topic of #BlackoutTuesday, Black Lives Matter or race that were published in June 2020, based on a sample of 17 Asian American food bloggers who were *Saveur* Food Blog Award finalists between 2009-2019, currently maintain active food blogs, and have corresponding branded Instagram accounts. I perform a thematic and semiotic analysis of data produced including

Instagram images, posts, hashtags and comments, which were interpreted in conjunction with the contextual reading of the associated food blogs.

I found that most bloggers in my sample felt compelled to participate in this action, referencing an understanding of this moment as an 'awakening' that digital influence could and should be used to disseminate social activism messages. Their contributions could be characterised as earnest and action-oriented, demonstrating a self-reflexivity about existing scepticism of 'performative activism' by influencers. Additionally, I found that Instagram and the #BlackoutTuesday action authorised the discussion of race in a way that was not previously visible in the food blogosphere – for instance, Asian American food bloggers used Instagram posts in these conversations to identify with the political identity term 'Asian American,' while most reference to race on food blogs included terms such as 'Korean,' 'fusion,' 'pan-Asian,' and 'Asian-inspired,' which were more aligned with the commodification of Asian culture. Additionally, 'Asian' and 'Asian American' were invoked as collective identity terms to inspire solidarity and action amongst the Asian American community in support of Black Lives Matter, for instance through the use of hashtags including #AsiansforBlackLivesMatter and the more controversial #yellowperilforblacklives, a way of interpellating a specifically Asian American audience, whereas corresponding food blogs were often oriented towards an imagined white audience, thus limiting possibilities for generating Asian American community.

At the same time, these conversations about race also demonstrated the internalisation of the model minority myth, in which Asian Americans are presented as 'exemplary' and successful minorities as a rhetorical strategy that upholds white supremacy by positioning minority groups – typically Asian Americans and Black Americans – against each other in the US context (Park, 2008). While many Asian American food bloggers drew on the blogosphere's conventions of personalization and intimacy to document their shock and grief in response to George Floyd's murder, as one of the main catalysts for #BlackoutTuesday, very few shared their own experiences of racism. Instead, Asian American food bloggers distanced themselves from the structural racism experienced by Black Americans in subtle ways such as distinguishing between the microaggressions they had experienced and the 'more serious' racism and threats faced by Black Americans. Asian American food bloggers also acknowledged their many privileges and, while it is true that Asian American food bloggers – as with the majority of food bloggers – tend to be socioeconomically privileged given the cultural capital, skills and resources currently required to maintain a professional food blog, when they acknowledge their privilege in conjunction with their identification as Asian American, this works to conflate the myth of Asian American exceptionalism that discounts the distinct socioeconomic bifurcation and heterogeneity within the Asian American community. Moreover, the perpetuation of model minority narratives – particularly as they are deemed to come directly and authentically from Asian American representatives – disguises the continued precarity of Asians within white settler colonialism racial landscapes, which became apparent as large numbers of Asian Americans becoming victims of racially-motivated fatal violence during the pandemic.

What this data demonstrates is that the racial experiences of Asian American food bloggers continue to be silenced or diffracted within the food blogosphere and its

supplementary content, largely due to the ways that Asian American participation is structured through assimilation and racial commodification in this predominantly white commercialised digital culture. However, despite the limitations of these discussions of structural racism within the Asian American community, this conversation has value in contributing to visibility around minority allyship within the Black Lives Matter movement – which has contributed greatly to mainstream discourse on structural racism – while also challenging the long-held premise within the blogosphere that the digital influence of minority bloggers is predicated upon their political silence.

This focus on Black Lives Matter discourse on Instagram relates to the conference theme of decolonising the internet by centering the firsthand and intimate perspectives and experiences of racial minority food bloggers working in a predominantly white lifestyle blogosphere and discussing the continued limitations and constraints of diverse racial voice and representation due to the commercialised conventions and trend-based content production of influencer culture.

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