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## **Technological Elites, the Meritocracy, and Post-Racial Myths in Silicon Valley**

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### **Abstract**

Among modern digital technology elites, myths of meritocracy and intellectual prowess are used as racial and gender markers of white male supremacy that disproportionately consolidate resources away from people of color, particularly African Americans, Latino/as and Native Americans. Investments in meritocratic myths suppress interrogations of racism and discrimination even as the products of digital elites are infused with racial, class, and gender markers. Longstanding struggles for social, political, and economic inclusion for African Americans, women, and other legally protected classes have been predicated upon the recognition of systemic exclusion, forced labor, and structural disenfranchisement, and commitments to US public policies like affirmative action have, likewise, been fundamental to political reforms geared to economic opportunity and participation. The rise of the digital technocracy has, in many ways, been antithetical to these sustained efforts to recognize race and gender as salient factors structuring technocratic opportunity and inclusion. This chapter explores some of the ways in which discourses of Silicon Valley technocratic elites bolster investments in post-racialism as a pretext for re-consolidations of capital, in opposition to public policy commitments to end discriminatory labor practices. Through a careful analysis of the rise of digital technology companies, and a discussion of how technology elites work to mask everything from algorithmic to genetic inscriptions of race embedded in their products, we show how digital elites elide responsibility for their post-racial re-inscriptions of racial visibilities (and invisibilities). Using historical and critical discourse analysis, the chapter reveals how myths of a digital meritocracy premised on a technocratic colorblindness emerge key to perpetuating gender and racial exclusions.

"Silicon Valley has this way of finding greatness and supporting it... It values meritocracy more than anywhere else."

-- Joseph Ansanelli, Greylock Partners<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Post-racialism fits within a neoliberal anti-regulatory stance and technolibertarian belief system that technological solutions can remedy social ills. In this way, it operates in a circuit of paradoxical recognition and denial of racism as a problematic organizational or operational force. When these technolibertarian positions fail, the roots of the ideology are stripped bare, and its promulgators are revealed as holding good-old fashioned racist (and sexist) positions. In this case, the maintenance of power and control is done under the cover of technologically-mediated neutrality. In this chapter, we seek to crystalize an understanding of how post-racialism is enacted and performed in Silicon Valley, such that the attendant interventions and efforts to disrupt such commonplace thinking can be taken up by information and technology workers.

As critical race theorist and feminist legal scholar Sumi Cho defines it, post racialism is a “twenty-first-

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah McBride, “Insight: In Silicon Valley Start-up World, Pedigree Counts,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-startup-connections-insight-idUSBRE98B15U20130912>.

century ideology that reflects a belief that due to the significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action.”<sup>2</sup> Cho’s definition of post-racialism serves as the throughpoint of our analysis of race and post-racialism in the American technology industry, as represented both figuratively and concretely in the place, practices and products of Silicon Valley. There, the ideology of post-racialism serves as a key principle that both supports and perpetuates a lack of racial and gender representation and pluralism in tech – after all, if there is no longer a “race problem,” what is there to fix? As Cho succinctly states:

“First, post-racialism obscures the centrality of race and racism in society. Second, it more effectively achieves what the Racial Backlash movement sought to do over two decades ago--forge a national consensus around the retreat from race-based remedies on the basis that the racial eras of the past have been and should be transcended. Third, post-racialism as an ideology serves to reinstate an unchallenged white normativity.”<sup>3</sup>

As a legal scholar, Cho is primarily concerned with remedies and actions taken by the state. These remedies and actions have governed practices across both public and private sectors throughout the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, via affirmative action, equal opportunity hiring mandates, and non-discriminatory protections. Yet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s post-racialist climate, “race does not matter, and should not be taken into account or even noticed.”<sup>4</sup> This represents a major ideological leap beyond the related, but distinct, ideological phenomenon of colorblindness. Colorblindness, while fundamentally flawed, acknowledges the existence of race and racism, but denies structural and other components of race and racism beyond an individual level and a visual read, and attributes the problems of racism to the discussion or acknowledgement of it.

Post-racialism, on the other hand, dispenses with discussion of race altogether. This leads to an inevitable end of any action that can be taken to reverse inequities or broaden representation as concrete, tangible or laudable goals. In this way, post-racialism is the ideological basis for maintaining a racially unjust status quo, at best, and is often a mechanism for turning back the clock on a variety of gains made toward broader justice and inclusion on racial terms. Cho describes the operationalizing of post-racialism as a form of racial backlash that reverses the gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States since the at least the 1980s:

According to post-racial logic, the move is to effectuate a “retreat from race.”<sup>5</sup> This retreat from race takes at least three forms: material, as the retreat from state-imposed remedies; sociocultural, as the retreat from white liberal/progressive deference to Black normativity on the meaning of racial equality and justice; and political, as the retreat from collective political entities organized along racial lines and agendas as a legitimate protest or reform vehicle.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sumi Cho, “Post-Racialism,” *Iowa Law Review* 94 (2009 2008): 1594.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1593.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1595.

<sup>5</sup> Cho invokes sociologist Dana Takagi's turn of phrase, coined by the latter in her 1993 book on affirmative action and Asian Americans, *The Retreat from Race: Asian-American Admissions and Racial Politics*.

<sup>6</sup> Cho, “Post-Racialism,” 1594.

We use Cho's definitions and framings of both post-racialism, as differentiated from colorblindness, to deconstruct and operationalize the ways that cultural practices in Silicon Valley are explicitly working as a convenient "retreat from race, and as a cover for overt racism. We argue that these logics can also be extended to other categories like gender bias, too.

### **Activating Silicon Valley's Race/Post-Race Paradox**

This conceit to be both post-racial and simultaneously racially aware is evident in the ways that Silicon Valley both represents itself and is represented by others in a variety of registers and dimensions. As a physical, geographically identifiable place and space, Silicon Valley is circumscribed by architectural contours serving as racial boundaries, from its physical encroachments upon historically African American neighborhoods and cities like East Palo Alto and its policies of white racial containment and control of Palo Alto, to its creeping cultural and economic impact to the north, via displacement of Latino/a residents in the Mission District in San Francisco.

The criticisms of lack of hiring of underrepresented employees, again, namely Black, Latino/a, and Native American have garnered national news media headlines, and its employment discrimination against women has resulted in a federal investigation. Reporters from major technology news outlets and blogs have been reporting on the problems of hiring bias against women, African Americans and Latinos for years, in an effort to dislodge the pervasive notion that the Valley is a meritocracy. In 2012, Andrew Keen reported for *Techcrunch* on entrepreneur Vivek Wadhwa's critique of the tech industry as a "white boy's club" that has investors who openly discriminate against minority- and women-led tech companies.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite the evidence of race- and gender-discrimination in Silicon Valley, technology CEOs and investors cling to notions of the industry as a meritocracy in order to justify their investment choices in people like themselves.

In early August, 2017, an "anti-diversity manifesto" was authored by a Google software engineer, James Damore<sup>8</sup>. Initially posted internally for other Google employees to see, Damore's manifesto went viral within the company, throughout Silicon Valley, and, ultimately, globally, laying bare the extent to which many believe that efforts to include women and underrepresented minorities are "discriminatory" (apparently to White men). The anti-diversity manifesto, as it has come to be known, argues that any remedy of hundreds of years of historical discrimination in the United States labor market is discriminatory against the presumed majority of "nonprogressives," even when complying with federal law:

"Discriminating just to increase the representation of women in tech is as misguided and biased as mandating increases for women's representation in the homeless, work-related and violent deaths, prisons, and school dropouts. There's currently very little transparency into the extend (sic) of our diversity programs which keeps it immune to criticism from those outside its

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Keen, "Keen On... Vivek Wadhwa: Why There Are So Few Black or Female Entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley [TCTV]," *TechCrunch*, accessed August 19, 2017, <http://social.techcrunch.com/2012/04/03/keen-on-vivek-wadhwa-why-there-are-so-few-black-or-female-entrepreneurs-in-silicon-valley-tctv/>.

<sup>8</sup> Damore's manifesto was reproduced, with additional contextual notes and responses, by Gizmodo. Kate Conger, "Exclusive: Here's The Full 10-Page Anti-Diversity Screed Circulating Internally at Google [Updated]," Gizmodo, accessed August 19, 2017, <http://gizmodo.com/exclusive-heres-the-full-10-page-anti-diversity-screed-1797564320>.

ideological echo chamber. These programs are highly politicized which further alienates nonprogressives. I realize that some of our programs may be precautions against government accusations of discrimination, but that can easily backfire since they incentivize illegal discrimination.”<sup>9</sup>

Based on his manifesto, author Damore appears to be totally unaware of the longterm history of women in computing, as just one example of a historical and factual inaccuracy in the document. These contributions have been articulated by numerous scholars over past decades, to include Jennifer Light and her key paper, “When computers were women,”<sup>10</sup> and Marie Hicks’s recent book-length history of women in Great Britain’s computation teams in its Civil Service, *Programmed Inequality*.<sup>11</sup> Despite its numerous factual and logical inaccuracies, Damore’s manifesto enjoyed a great deal of support among Google employees and throughout Silicon Valley. Its uptake illuminates the ideological investments of many elite technology workers in a belief that addressing the systemic and structural exclusion of women and people of color through their hiring can “incentivize illegal discrimination.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, not only have the cultures of Silicon Valley companies been places that deny meaningful participation of underrepresented people of color, many of these companies have traded on white supremacy and post-racialism by allowing and fomenting racial hatred, and in some cases, right-wing fascist and neo-Nazism through architectural mechanisms and platform characteristics that allow for anonymity and articulations of being content-neutral. Such characteristics are considered as design features in many mainstream Silicon Valley products, when they are considered at all, and ensure companies can eschew their responsibility for trafficking in hate content while continuing to neatly profit from it.

Occasionally, a momentary breakthrough in awareness of bias and exclusion occurs, mostly in service of White women, rather than African Americans or Latinos. Venture capitalist and Netscape founder Marc Andreessen, commenting on Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 book, *Lean In*, said:

“Before Sheryl’s book, for 20 years, the answer has been, ‘Be gender blind...Be gender blind.’ It’s not important; in fact, it’s not to be discussed. It certainly should not be brought into the hiring criteria and certainly should not influence how people manage. And basically have a straight meritocracy and ignore gender. Sheryl has provided a very, very provocative set of arguments that 1) That’s not actually working and 2) That managers, both female and male, actually have to take gender on squarely... We’ll have to completely retrain managers and executives of all kinds to be able to do this,” he continued. “[Sandberg] argues very persuasively that it’s necessary, but it’s like landmine central with the way employment law works these days.”<sup>13</sup>

This sentiment of not seeing gender or gender or color is a familiar mantra that provides cover for and a direct relationship to the more blatant sorts of misogyny (and racism) that have resulted in high profile

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer S. Light, “When Computers Were Women,” *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (July 1, 1999): 455–83.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Hicks, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (MIT Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Conger, “Exclusive.”

<sup>13</sup> Billy Gallagher, “Marc Andreessen: The World Would Be Much Better If We Had 50 More Silicon Valleys,” *TechCrunch*, accessed August 19, 2017, <http://social.techcrunch.com/2013/04/20/marc-andreessen-the-world-would-be-much-better-if-we-had-50-more-silicon-valleys/>.

sexual harassment lawsuits against two major Silicon Valley venture capital firms, Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, and CMEA Capital.<sup>14</sup> Despite Andreessen's enlightenment-via-Sandberg about gender bias, he is but one of many Silicon Valley gatekeepers that struggle with acknowledging the possibility that Silicon Valley may not be a meritocracy. Indeed, there are numerous public examples of racism and gender discrimination in Silicon Valley that emanate from technology company executives and board members themselves, which, in turn, are echoed in manifestoes such as Damore's. After 50 years of civil rights legislation to protect women and people of color in the workplace from discrimination, Andreessen described its results in saying, "it's like landmine central with the way employment law works these days."<sup>15</sup> The "landmines" to which Andreessen referred were not the discriminatory practices in hiring, but the legislation and legal impositions brought about intended to counteract them. In Andreessen's eyes, the obstacles are not discrimination, but remedies to it.

### **"Culture Fit"**

"Like a lot of the investments that have come our way, a friend of a friend talked to us about it, and told us about it, and encouraged the founder and the CEO to come and chat with us...one thing led to another."

-- Mike Moritz, Partner, Sequoia Capital<sup>16</sup>

As of May 2014, only 30 percent of Google's workforce was comprised of women. In July 2016, the company released updated employment numbers; in the two years since its last release, the employment of women at Google had increased by one percent, to 31%. Additionally, only three percent were Latino, and only two percent were African American. Given the culture of meritocracy at play, how can this underrepresentation be read in the context of the purported commitment to meritocracy in hiring and retention? Based on numbers alone, the Silicon Valley meritocracy does not find value in inclusion of African Americans or Latinos as a part of its post-racial moment.

While Silicon Valley executives and venture capitalists cling to their investments in "gender-blindness" and "colorblindness" the evidence of their lack of bias is demonstrable, in that, they only find merit in funding start-ups and companies *not* founded by African Americans and Latinos. Meanwhile, there is disproportionate representation of East Asian and South Asian employees and leadership, which often confuses and masks the hostile disposition of Silicon Valley toward historically underrepresented minority communities in the United States that fall into federally protected classes. This is no mistake; a fundamental part of the logic of post-racialism is that it refuses to deal with not only the contemporary realities of race in American society, but also with the more than three hundred years of legal discrimination and disenfranchisement of African Americans, Latino/as and Native American Indians, while pointing to the increasing numbers of South Asian, East Asian and Asian and South Asian Americans participating in the tech sector labor force as evidence of success in diversifying across racial lines. Yet the paradox of upholding Asian Americans, Asian nationals, and South Asians, Brazilians,

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<sup>14</sup> Nina Burleigh, "What Silicon Valley Thinks of Women," *Newsweek*, January 28, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/02/06/what-silicon-valley-thinks-women-302821.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Gallagher, "Marc Andreessen."

<sup>16</sup> Moritz, as quoted by McBride. Sarah McBride, "Insight: In Silicon Valley Start-up World, Pedigree Counts," Reuters, September 12, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-startup-connections-insight-idUSBRE98B15U20130912>.

Russians, and various foreign nationals and J-1 visa holders as model minorities serves to mask the exclusion of domestic minority groups in the United States that have been structurally marginalized without reparation and excluded from nearly every aspect of long term social, political, educational, and economic opportunity.

Myths of a digital meritocracy premised on a technocratic post-racialism emerge key to perpetuating gender and racial exclusions. Measures of success are made on the basis of economic valuations, ability to attract investors, acquisitions, and bank account balances. Researcher Jessie Daniels articulated the functions of colorblind ideology in Silicon Valley and its embeddedness within the Internet, and within the culture and practices of digital technologies, in her 2015 article, “‘My Brain Database Doesn’t See Skin Color’: Color-blind Racism in the Technology Industry and in Theorizing the Web.”<sup>17</sup> In this work, she details the ways that whiteness is embedded in the architectures of the web—from “master” and “slave” drives—to deep social inequality among technology workers from the Global North to the Global South. She points to the investments made in middle-class and affluent immigrant labor (e.g., South Asian; Russian; Brazilian), for example, at the expense of Black and Latino employment, because these investments are consistent with the “mythology of the United States as a land of opportunity...thus eschewing charges of bias in hiring and promotion.”<sup>18</sup>

This takes place in situations such as when investors, in their own words, fund people through their networks who are part of the well connected, known-circles within which they conduct their personal and professional lives. Often, code words like “culture fit” are ways of sorting for people most like themselves, or most like the networks they engage. Heather Hiles<sup>19</sup>, one of the only openly gay Black women tech leaders in Silicon Valley put it this way:

“I don’t live next door to the polite white men who tout the virtues of meritocracy while pouring billions of dollars into their buddies’ companies. They live in insulated little worlds, and it’s hard to see color when there is none around them. Funding one’s friend isn’t inherently bad...but I challenge them to look outside their circles and also support other types of businesses — like those owned by women of color. It might be convenient to use their limited experiences to convince themselves we don’t exist. But we do.”<sup>20</sup>

Hiles’s *Recode* post about the kinds of financial redlining Black women tech leaders experience went viral in March of 2015. In it, she described how her degrees from Berkeley and Yale and her extensive experience had very little bearing on her ability to fairly compete in securing venture capital for her company. “Culture fit,” in her case, was less about being an Ivy League graduate. Hiles said:

“...the anemic flow of capital to the diversity of society is a symptom of an inherently biased country and a world that shows its true nature by inefficiently investing in and giving

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<sup>17</sup> Jessie Daniels, “‘My Brain Database Doesn’t See Skin Color’: Color-Blind Racism in the Technology Industry and in Theorizing the Web,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 11 (October 1, 2015): 1377–93, doi:10.1177/0002764215578728.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1380.

<sup>19</sup> Hiles is the founder and former CEO of Pathbrite, a San Francisco-based educational technology firm.

<sup>20</sup> Heather Hiles, “Silicon Valley Venture Capital Has a Diversity Problem,” *Recode*, March 18, 2015, <https://www.recode.net/2015/3/18/11560426/silicon-valley-venture-capital-has-a-diversity-problem>.

opportunities and power to familiar, heterosexual white men. It's a hoarding of the resources that could spawn creativity and expanded opportunities for everyone. And it's a diminishing return."<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, culture fit becomes a means of instantiation of white, male, heteronormativity that is explicitly, negatively felt by many of those who do not fit those identities. It is one of the many ways that bias is operationalized in Silicon Valley, yet its poetic rendering as a simple matter of shared taste and worldview obfuscate the discrimination that are part of a larger American culture and is both reflected and reified in Silicon Valley's. Nevertheless, some efforts have been made to identify and remediate the crisis rendered by post-racialism in the tech industry. The Kapor Center for Social Impact, founded by Mitch Kapor and Freada Kapor Klein in 2001, was created expressly to address issues of implicit bias in the tech industries. In a 2013 article entitled, "Bias and Meritocracy Don't Mix," the Institute reported that one most powerful startup accelerators in the Valley since 2005, Y Combinator (YC), has not funded a single African American woman, bearing out Hiles's experience in stark relief.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the rationale for YC's funding decisions is the notion that "fit" is part of what makes one successful in the tech industry. The Kapor Center included YC founder Paul Graham's own description, as reported in the New York Times, of culture fit as bias:

"I can be tricked by anyone who looks like Mark Zuckerberg. There was a guy once who we funded who was terrible. I said: 'How could he be bad? He looks like Zuckerberg!'"<sup>23</sup>

YC has spun off many successful companies: Airbnb, Reddit, and Dropbox to name a few. But in his assessment of YC's success, Graham focused not on shared features of technology or innovation that had made those firms household names, but instead on certain personal characteristics Graham believed were predictors of success in Silicon Valley tech, including being younger than 32 years of age, and not having an accent: "You have to go far down the list to find a CEO with a strong foreign accent," Graham told the Times, 'Alarming far down — like 100th place'".<sup>24</sup>

As exceptional as it often sees itself, the Silicon Valley technology sector is not the only site of elite industry access being predicated on unnamed racialized notions of meritocracy. One excellent analogous case can be found just down the California coast, in Hollywood's entertainment industry. UCLA's Hollywood Diversity report<sup>25</sup>, released annually for the past four years by sociologist Darnell Hunt and his colleagues, methodically demonstrates how the lack of diversity in the professional and personal networks among Hollywood executives, cast, and crew significantly impacts workplace diversity and leads to structural exclusion of African Americans and other people of color from industry jobs. Essentially, in both Silicon Valley and Hollywood, people hire people they know or with whom

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "Bias and Meritocracy Don't Mix," *Kapor Center*, accessed August 19, 2017, <http://www.kaporcenter.org/bias-and-meritocracy-dont-mix/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Darnell Hunt et al., "2017 Hollywood Diversity Report: Setting the Record Straight" (UCLA, February 21, 2017), <http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2-21-17.pdf>.



they feel they can identify, just as Graham described. It is a phenomenon that manifests as a system based on meritocracy and potential, when it has much more in common with one's racial identity, gender identity and class position.

### **Artifacts of the Meritocracy: Reflections of the Technocratic Post-Racial Order**

These principles of post-racial mythology are inscribed not only in statements made by representatives at the highest corporate Silicon Valley echelons, but are also found in the underlying architecture it develops<sup>26</sup> and the labor practices it engenders.<sup>27</sup> These values are hardly hidden from view; in fact, they are so culturally resonant to the mainstream that they now serve as the basis of humor for the American premium cable channel HBO's comedy program "Silicon Valley." In the show, the environment of Silicon Valley's startup and establishment culture is presented as simultaneously post-racial and deeply race-aware, where post-racialism is represented by the casual use of racialized, bigoted, and typically factually incorrect comments predicated on race, gender and ethnicity. The beliefs and values espoused by White characters towards characters of color with a wink and a "we're all in on the joke" nod drives the show's plotlines. In keeping with a realistic portrayal of Silicon Valley employment demographics and culture, none of the characters in the fictional Pied Piper startup is either Black or female.

The comedy in "Silicon Valley" is frequently predicated on the casual, post-racial racism of the environment—at the expense of its characters of color. This is reflected, in particular, by South and East Asian characters, particularly software developer "Dinesh" (Kumail Nanjiani) and "Jian Yang" (Jimmy O. Yang), the much-abused unpaid intern in the startup incubator run by White sexist pothead Erlich Bachman.

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<sup>26</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, "A Future for Intersectional Black Feminist Technology Studies," *Scholar & Feminist Online*, no. 13.3-14.1 (2016), <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/safiya-umoja-noble-a-future-for-intersectional-black-feminist-technology-studies/>.

<sup>27</sup> Raj Jayadev, "South Asian Workers in Silicon Valley: An Account of Work in the IT Industry," in *Sarai Reader 01: The Public Domain*, ed. Raqs Media Collective and Lovink, vol. 1, 2001, 167–70; Sarah T. Roberts, "Commercial Content Moderation: Digital Laborers' Dirty Work," in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha Tynes, Digital Formations (Peter Lang Publishing, 2016).

# SILICON VALLEY



Fig. 1. On the American premium cable channel HBO's comedy program *Silicon Valley* (2014-), the environment of Silicon Valley's startup and establishment culture is presented as simultaneously post-racial and deeply race-aware; indeed, the culture it lampoons and the comedy derived from it are both frequently predicated on the racism of Silicon Valley culture. In this promotional shot, the members of the startup are depicted in the clothing and posture of the late Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple and Silicon Valley luminary.

These characters' ethnic, linguistic and racial differences are often made the punchline for much of the humor on the show. In the hipster, post-racial humor of the show, race still serves as a powerful marker of difference that normalizes the whiteness and maleness of Silicon Valley's culture and success. Both the real Silicon Valley, and its television parody, engage the paradox of post-racialism, where being South Asian or East Asian is seemingly at once acceptable and unremarkable while at the same time serves as marker of otherness upon which the White male characters can capitalize as it suits their needs. In this way, the show accurately portrays the predominating post-racial racist politics of Silicon Valley while also serving to reinscribe them as the natural order of things in the tech world and beyond.

## **Imperialism 2.0: Silicon Valley Post-Racialism Exported**

*"I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake." -- King Leopold II of Belgium, 1876 (as quoted in Thomas Pakenham's "Scramble for Africa," 1992)<sup>28</sup>*

Post-racialism does not end at hiring and representation in employment ranks. Rather, it undergirds problematic thinking on the part of a racially, educationally and class-wise homogenous Silicon Valley

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa* (London: Abacus, 1992).

technology elite whose design and manufacturing choices have implications for populations across the globe. Against proclamations of colorblindness, these same firms rely upon the legacies of colonialism, imperialism and continued Western economic, political and military domination for the extraction of minerals, production of goods and provision of cheap labor in the Global South, about which we have both written previously.<sup>29</sup> These old and well-worn capital extractive practices are combined with versions that are newly branded as “flexible” forms that shore up transnational corporations. It does not take much for the veneer of these kinder, gentler forms of capitalism to give way to the true ideologies at their root.

Consider the February 2016 episode in which venture capitalist and Facebook board member Marc Andreessen chastised the entire nation of India for that country’s Telecom Regulatory Authority rejecting the advances of Facebook’s Internet-lite service, Free Basics, on net neutrality grounds.<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 2. Tweet by Facebook board member and Silicon Valley venture capitalist, Marc Andreessen, on the rejection of “Free Basics” product entry into India.

<sup>29</sup> Noble, “A Future for Intersectional Black Feminist Technology Studies”; Sarah T. Roberts, “Digital Refuse: Canadian Garbage, Commercial Content Moderation and the Global Circulation of Social Media’s Waste,” *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–18.

<sup>30</sup> Pavithra Mohan, “Marc Andreessen Riles Up Twitter After Defending Colonialism In India,” *Fast Company*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3056581/marc-andreessen-riles-up-twitter-after-defending-colonialism-in-india>; Kurt Wagner, “Marc Andreessen Offends India Defending Facebook’s Free Basics. (Yes, the Country.) - Recode,” accessed August 19, 2017, <https://www.recode.net/2016/2/9/11587726/marc-andreessen-offends-india-defending-facebooks-free-basics-yes-the>.

“Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades,” Andreessen claimed with no evidence, and in the face of historical evidence to the contrary. “Why stop now?” With his tweet, Andreessen linked the Indian resistance to the Facebook product to anti-colonialist resistance, meaning that Net Basics was in the position of colonizing force, by Andreessen’s own logic.

Technolibertarian post-racialist attitudes have real-world consequences: they are invoked in order to establish, maintain, and exercise power and control. Sophisticated in his deployment of post-racialist beliefs, Andreessen activated a covert racism as he tied India’s supposed problem to a need for colonial control by those who know better and are in a better position to decide for that nation’s people. Andreessen called on a new imperialism, much the same as the old in terms of structural belief systems: a certainty of the superiority of his group, its natural acumen and ability, as well as quasi-magical, mythic success and its ability to preternaturally determine a best path for other people. In technology, and, by extension, in global policy, economics and politics, Silicon Valley knows best. A lack of grounding in the global view of itself led to Andreessen’s shock at the rejection of Facebook’s freebies, which India saw as an attack on its own informational and technological, and thus economic, sovereignty. His certainty of the right-ness of their products for all, and Facebook’s fundamental right to the Indian marketplace and customers, showed little regard for the culture and politics of anything outside a small, privileged and decidedly White and Western worldview.

But the new imperialism of Silicon Valley does not confine itself to targets solely in the Global South. Silicon Valley values and value are frequently undergirded by practices of localized gentrification that displace, in particular, vulnerable low-income and/or communities of color where it comes to roost. Much has been made of the economic impossibility created for longtime residents—many of them LGBTQ, communities of color, or both, which has meant the gentrification of San Francisco and freeloading off the city’s public infrastructure.<sup>31</sup> Now, as Silicon Valley expands its physical footprint south to Los Angeles, in an area rebranded as “Silicon Beach,” it is imposing its own system of values on that community, as well.

The Venice neighborhood in Los Angeles, California has long been an enclave that tolerated variation between rich and poor, and a site of great racial, cultural and ethnic mixing.<sup>32</sup> Since Google and Snap arrived with a new headquarters in the heart of Venice, however, homeless persons living in the area reported being harassed by Google security, often with batons and pit bulls.<sup>33</sup> To maintain attractiveness for the expansion of Silicon Beach, city council members are proposing radical housing initiatives to create space for people experiencing homelessness in Venice.<sup>34</sup> This, consistent with the neoliberal economic policies that have rapidly developed in the United States and Europe since the 1980s is more

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<sup>31</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble and Sarah T. Roberts, “Through Google-Colored Glass(Es): Design, Emotion, Class, and Wearables as Commodity and Control,” in *Emotions, Technology & Design*, ed. Sharon Tettegah and Safiya Umoja Noble (San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Isaac Simpson, “Vexit: Venice Beach Wants to Leave Los Angeles,” accessed August 19, 2017, <https://la.curbed.com/2016/8/18/12528616/venice-secession-los-angeles-vexit>.

<sup>33</sup> Yasha Levine, “‘We Got Geeks’: Inside Google’s Ugly War against the Homeless in LA,” *Pando*, June 22, 2015, <https://pando.com/2015/06/22/we-got-geeks/>.

<sup>34</sup> Gale Holland, “L.A. Considers Providing Homeless in Venice with Housing, Bathrooms and Storage,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-homeless-bathrooms-venice-20160415-story.html>.

evidence of the ways that corporations eschew responsibility for building communities and contributing to public services by paying taxes, and instead increase pressure on local communities to manage the burden of displacement through public funds--funds to which they contribute very little thanks to significant tax breaks.

Now economic and gentrifying expansion has spread into Los Angeles communities of color. These neighborhoods are being targeted by unscrupulous developers who see a gold rush on their hands with the coalescing of Northern California-based firms and LA-based technology companies into a major technology hub. Rents in areas near Google and other LA outposts have increased 7% between 2015 and 2016 alone<sup>35</sup>; this rise comes on the heels of similar increases in 2015 that saw areas like Santa Monica, adjacent to or within so-called Silicon Beach, already increase 17.5%.<sup>36</sup> Despite legislative mechanisms designed to protect renters, such as the Ellis Act, residents of predominantly Black neighborhoods such as Baldwin Hills and View Park are fighting gentrification by appealing to the City of Los Angeles to enter the areas in the historic registry as a way of staving off developers and real estate “flippers,” people with no vested interest in living in the community who often use predatory or submarket offers to lure residents out of their homes so they can make huge profits from quick renovations and sales.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Baldwin Hills, View Park and Windsor Hills--once known as the “Black Beverly Hills,” these encroachments from Silicon Beach are displacing middle class and affluent African Americans, and elderly African Americans who are targeted with cash offers to vacate the premises in many parts of South Los Angeles.<sup>38</sup>

These aspects of technology companies’ tone-deaf practices in communities is not just relegated to the physical, geographic quest toward unlimited expansion, and is not simply a benign sort of libertarianism in practice. Palmer Luckey, Oculus VR founder and outspoken Donald Trump supporter, offered a solution to those who cannot afford the lifestyle made available to the Silicon Valley elite: a VR headset to deliver the poor from their lacking material realities.<sup>39</sup> Oculus VR, acquired by Facebook, has been described by Luckey as having a “moral imperative,” as noted by journalist W. James Au. He reported on Luckey for *Wired* magazine<sup>40</sup> and expanded the abbreviated piece for his own blog:

“This is one of those crazy man topics,” Luckey answered, “but it comes down to this: Everyone wants to have a happy life, but it’s going to be impossible to give everyone everything they want.” Instead, he went on, developers can now create virtual versions of

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<sup>35</sup> <https://lusk.usc.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-Multifamily-Forecast-Report.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Thornberg, Robert Kleinhenz, and Rafael De Anda, “USC Lusk Center for Real Estate Casden Real Estate Economics Forecast 2016 Multifamily Report,” 2016, <https://lusk.usc.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-Multifamily-Forecast-Report.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Angel Jennings, “‘Black Beverly Hills’ Debates Historic Status vs. White Gentrification,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-adv-view-park-20150719-story.html>; Andrew Khouri, “Tenant Buyouts Lead to Protests and a Crackdown Plan by L.A. City Council,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-tenant-buyouts-20160919-snap-story.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Khouri, “Tenant Buyouts Lead to Protests and a Crackdown Plan by L.A. City Council.”

<sup>39</sup> Wagner James Au, “Palmer Luckey’s Support for Pro-Trump Group Reminds Me of His Support For Pacifying the Poor With VR -- UPDATE, 7:10pm: Luckey Posts Confusing Apology on Facebook,” *New World Notes*, accessed August 19, 2017, <http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2016/09/palmer-luckey-trump-supporter-poor-vr.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Wagner James Au, “VR Will Make Life Better—Or Just Be an Opiate for the Masses,” *Wired*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/02/vr-moral-imperative-or-opiate-of-masses/>.

real experiences that are only enjoyed by the planet's privileged few, which they can then bestow to the destitute of the world.

“It's easy for us to say, living in the great state of California, that VR is not as good as the real world,” Luckey went on, “but a lot of people in the world don't have as good an experience in real life as we do here” (Au quoting Luckey, 2006).<sup>41</sup>

What we learn from consistently studying the discourses of Silicon Valley is that its successes come at the expense of a growing number of communities. The costs to these communities are masked by investments in an imagined post-racial, post-gender, post-class reality that is seemingly sympathetic to inclusion, but resists it in material, quantifiable and cultural terms.

### **Resistance and Reality: Pushing Back While Being Black**

Post-racialist silence in Silicon Valley has not been ignored by its employees of color. Black workers, in particular, have responded to the ongoing lack of remedying of inequities through its own acts of resistance. On July 7, 2016, CNN's Sara Ashley O'Brien reported that African American tech employees were “calling in ‘Black’” after police murders of Philando Castille and Alton Sterling.<sup>42</sup> This practice of calling in and taking a day off for mental and emotional health after the shooting deaths of unarmed African Americans allegedly began in 2015, as African Americans on social media began talking more publicly about how difficult it is to go to work and act as if nothing was affecting them about the social injustices, and systemic racism, including the shooting of unarmed African Americans. In response, some tech firms released statements addressing the employee absences, which, despite being ostensibly supportive, were not well received in context:

“But while some people expressed appreciation for the support from tech, others pointed out the deep irony of the statements coming from companies with black employees making up just 1-2% of their workforces.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Au, “Palmer Luckey's Support for Pro-Trump Group Reminds Me of His Support For Pacifying the Poor With VR -- UPDATE, 7.”

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Ashley O'Brien, “Some Silicon Valley Tech Workers Are Calling in ‘Black’ to Work,” *CNN Tech*, July 7, 2016, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/07/07/technology/philando-castile-tech-workers-calling-in-black/>.

<sup>43</sup> Julia Carrie Wong, “How the Tech Industry Is Exploiting Black Lives Matter,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/12/black-lives-matter-marc-benioff-facebook-twitter-uber>.



Fig. 3: Response to Silicon Valley commentaries on “Black Lives Matter.” Source: <https://twitter.com/elogann/status/752536956286824449>



Fig. 4: Response to Silicon Valley commentaries on “Black Lives Matter.” Source: <https://twitter.com/elogann/status/752536956286824449>

Products and platforms from Silicon Valley now find themselves in the spotlight in racially-motivated deaths of people like Eric Garner, Philando Castille and Korryn Gaines through the use of their technologies like Facebook Live, Periscope, and YouTube, all of which are used to capture and circulate images and even live video. This only underscores the material consequences of the platforms, particularly as these platforms serve to benefit materially from the circulation and virality of Black death and dying.

### **Conclusion: The Post-Racial as Racism, Rebooted**

Post-racial ideologies permeate venture capitalist funding, hiring practices, and the culture and representations of the valley. These technolibertarian post-racial projects often manifest as gentrification, and in the architectures of its manufacturing and production processes. In our estimation, the post-racial is racial, and in many cases, patently racist.

What is clear in the wake of the efforts by Silicon Valley companies to respond to the structural crises of racism, economic marginalization, and gender disparity is the consistent bolstering of neoliberal notions of individual achievement that are prized in SV. Notions of genius, invention, innovation, and skewed concepts of achievement (sometimes simply through proximity and networks) as a matter of solo labor fly in the face of historical examples of collective struggle, on the one hand, and on the actual trajectory of scientific and technological collaboration. The latter is a history of collaboration among industry, academia, research and development centers, and funding from public coffers of government, all of which are conveniently erased in mainstream narratives of Silicon Valley innovation and development, and which place struggles around racial and economic justice in the realm of commodity and exploitation.

Thorough our analysis of the rise of discourses and culture of Silicon Valley, a discussion of how technology elites work to mask everything from algorithmic to genetic inscriptions of race embedded in their products, suggests that digital elites often elide responsibility for their post-racial re-inscriptions of racial visibilities (and invisibilities). Silicon Valley believes it's "post-" but then constantly appeals to the "pre-" racial models of control and exclusion when it behooves them—such as the case of calling on colonialism as an example of the "good old days," and as an ideal system for getting things done. It is also apparent in the way in which it eschews labor gains made by unions and labor organizations in the 20th century in favor of "flexible" labor policies that only benefit the employer. Indeed, benefits from racialized systems of power are still in place and have never been dismantled; while the Valley profits from them and actually obfuscates them.

Meanwhile, Silicon Valley's corporate entities control an unprecedented amount of the world's information flow to the general public, through its solicitation of user-generated content (which it then owns), its co-opting of knowledge (through projects like Google Books' use of library books purchased and held by state research universities), its development of information-provision algorithms that prioritize information in ways that support the status quo, and its vast projects of data collection, aggregation, archiving and storage, to the ends of advertising, surveillance and unknown other outcomes. As the evidence shows, Silicon Valley's claim that it is "post-racial" actually gives way to a reality is not even "post-racist."

American exceptionalism is not new, and didn't start in Silicon Valley. Longstanding struggles for social, political, and economic inclusion for African Americans, women, and other legally protected classes have been predicated upon the recognition of systemic exclusion, forced labor, and structural disenfranchisement. Commitments to U.S. public policies like affirmative action have, likewise, have been fundamental to political reforms geared to economic opportunity and participation, because American corporations were not able to "self-regulate" and "innovate" an end to racial discrimination—even under Federal law. Among modern digital technology elites, myths of meritocracy and intellectual



superiority are used as racial and gender signifiers that disproportionately consolidate resources away from people of color, particularly African Americans, Latino/as and Native Americans. Investments in meritocratic myths suppress interrogations of racism and discrimination even as the products of digital elites are infused with racial, class, and gender markers. Thus, Silicon Valley consistently embeds its values—as White and upwardly mobile, into the architecture of its products, many of which have come under fire as racist, and extend into its business and hiring practices. By ignoring issues of race (and, likewise, issues of class, gender and sexual identity) by gesturing to them as being old economy problems, they actually circumvent any meaningful interventions that work toward dismantling of barriers based on them, and reinscribe longstanding discriminatory practices.

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