

# 1

## AN INTELLECTUAL PUZZLE

THE FIRST TIME I played video games on the internet was also the first time I was called the n-word.

During my freshman year of college, I spent an inordinate amount of time playing video games. For hours each day, my friends and I took turns fighting aliens (or one another) in a digital world, with occasional breaks for studying. While today any smartphone can play video games over the internet, back then it was more complex. Our campus network wouldn't allow video-game consoles to connect to the internet, but we figured out how to play on the local network or with other students on campus. Great rivalries were formed between dorms as we challenged one another in *Halo*, a popular combat-based game, the winners gaining bragging rights across campus and the losers sometimes resorting to physical pranks as payback.

Over winter break, I went to visit two cousins around my age, CJ and David, who lived a few hours away by train. Not

only did they play video games even more than I did, but they also had access to playing online, something I was eager to try. The ability to play and communicate with people who could be anywhere around the world was alluring.

Apart from the competition being a bit stronger, playing *Halo* online didn't feel much different than playing on campus. We weren't using the headset to chat with the people we were playing against, so it was just us, goofing around while playing, as usual. But I thought that chatting was the main draw of playing online, and I wanted to get the full online gaming experience. Wasn't making friends from around the globe the point?

When I asked my cousins if we could plug the headset in, they looked at each other uneasily and said, "No, we don't use the headset." When I asked why, they replied, "Because every time we do, we get called the n-word."

This was hard for me to believe. As a Black man growing up in Chicago and now living on a predominantly White campus, I knew that racism was real. I was accustomed to being stopped by the police for no reason and had experienced countless racial microaggressions—subtle slights that question the intelligence, appearance, or lawfulness of people of Color.<sup>1</sup> Beyond my personal experiences, I had taken sociology classes that taught me to think critically about racial inequality in education, mass incarceration, and other forms of racial oppression. But I had *never* been called the n-word maliciously. It's just not something that happened in my neighborhood growing up, which was majority Black and Latinx, or at school.

So I didn't believe them. "You mean it's happened before," I said, "not that it happens every time."

"No," they said. "We mean every single time."

Still incredulous, I had to try it for myself. So, I put on the headset and simply said, "Hey, what's up guys," into the microphone.

The response was something I'll never forget. I was playing with an online username, GalacticHair. And the first words in response to my greeting were, "Your username should be GalacticNigger."

I couldn't believe it. For the rest of the game, the guys we were playing continued throwing hate speech at me. I didn't back down and spent the game focusing more on the war of words than the virtual combat. When our team lost badly, one of my cousins pointed out that this was the reason they didn't like to chat while playing. "You get so mad that you forget how to play; then you end up losing to racists."

It was like losing twice.

Even though my cousins "told me so," I still could not believe that this was a regular occurrence. I insisted that we must have run into some bad apples by chance—maybe those guys were in the KKK—but there's no way that everyone online talks that way. So I kept the headset on for the next four or five games. Each time we matched against different users but experienced the same result.

At some point I just decided to take the headset off. My cousins were right: to have fun playing this game without being harassed, we couldn't engage in the chat function.

When winter break ended and I went back to college, I wondered how many of my White friends might have been also playing *Halo* online over winter break. And I thought, if *everyone* we encountered online used racist language, is that the type of behavior my friends are engaging in when I'm not around? Might some of them have been behind the usernames and microphones that were hurling racial slurs at my cousins and me?

This question was the beginning of an intellectual puzzle: what does the style or expression of racist language in a virtual world, or on the internet, tell us about the nature of racism in the real world?

A few months later, I was hanging in a friend's room on campus where of course the Xbox was on, and we were taking turns playing

*Halo.* There were four or five guys in the room, all of them White except for me. Music was playing, much of it acoustic songs that I didn't recognize. But then, to my surprise, Tupac Shakur's *Changes* came on. Everyone in the room, including myself, rapped along with Pac, singing:

I see no changes  
Wake up in the morning and I ask myself  
Is life worth living should I blast myself  
I'm tired of being poor, and even worse, I'm Black  
My stomach hurts, so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch

Growing up, my mother didn't allow my sister and me to play many explicit rap songs at home. But Momma had a few favorites that played on repeat: Lauryn Hill's *Miseducation* album, and two songs from Tupac's *Greatest Hits*, "Changes," which has a few curse words but was a deep exploration of racism and poverty, and "Dear Mama," another meaningful song that had none of Pac's violent or misogynistic lyrics. Knowing how different our tastes in music were, I thought it was cool that these guys knew a song that was so near and dear to my heart. But then I remembered what the next lines were, and stopped rapping. I looked around the room at my friends, and wondered, would they sing the n-word along with Pac?

Cops give a damn about a negro  
Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero

No one said it. Everyone stopped rapping that at that lyric and picked back up after the slur. A few of the guys glanced over at me as they did. I laughed out loud and asked for the music to be shut off.

"Yo, I'm not mad," I said, trying to make sure they wouldn't be defensive. "But be honest. If I wasn't here, . . . would you all have rapped *nigga*?"

"No, of course not!"

“No way bro, we would never!”

“C’mon man, how could you think that?”

But one guy in the room, a soccer player with a penchant for being a rebel, had a smirk on his face.

“Oh please,” he said, looking around the room. “Yea, you do.”

A few of my friends looked sheepish as he continued, saying, “I say it, but not to be racist, just because I like the song.”

A few of the guys nodded, admitting that they rapped the n-word from time to time, but assured me they didn’t mean anything by it. At least one of them vigorously denied ever doing so, and I believed him. We put the music back on and kept playing video games. I told my good friend Trey, a Black man from Texas who lived one floor up, about the incident later. We had no shortage of race-related stories to tell each other that first year in the dorms.

This experience answered some of the questions I had about how prevalent racial slurs were when playing video games online. Some of my White friends believed that singing the n-word was innocuous, not malicious. But I didn’t see a big difference between singing the n-word and shouting it while playing video games. The kids who hurled racial slurs online probably saw that as being pretty innocuous, too. They might not have seen themselves as real racists; they were just using the word as an insult, or to be cool, imitating their favorite rappers.

Following this logic, I reasoned that if my friends were okay saying the n-word as long as no one Black is around to make them feel uncomfortable, they might also be okay saying it while gaming, when they don’t have to look a Black person in the eye. Of course, it’s possible that none of them ever did! I’m not making an accusation. I’m making a point about how the combination of my online and in-person experiences influenced the way I understood the world around me. I learned that the way White people treated me when we were face to face (overwhelmingly with kindness) did not mean that they didn’t do, think, or say racist things in private or when I was not around.

## PIECING THE PUZZLE

As a first-year graduate student, I was assigned Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's seminal text, *Racism without Racists*.<sup>2</sup> In the book, Bonilla-Silva discusses what he calls colorblind racism, a racist ideology that sustains unequal racial systems without reverting to hostile language around racial differences. Bonilla-Silva suggests that racist ideologies and racist language are used to legitimate racist social systems. During the Jim Crow era,<sup>3</sup> racist language needed to be explicit in order to justify a harsh and formal racial-stratification system. But contemporary racial systems, which rely less on the explicit and legal separation of races, can be sustained with subtler, milder expressions of racism.

It struck me that while this framework explained the subtle presentations of racist ideologies in many contexts, including most college campuses, it did not explain why overt racism persisted, and even seemed to be the norm, in some online spaces. How could I reconcile my experiences with overt racist language on the internet with Bonilla-Silva's theory? What is it about online spaces that seem to invite a reversion to Jim Crow-era racist language?

Research on the difference between "computer-mediated communication" and face-to-face communication makes it clear that the internet represents a distinct social environment, and that communication in many online contexts may not be bound by the same norms as in face-to-face interaction.<sup>4</sup> For example, Kishonna Gray explores how anonymity and online norms such as "disinhibition" (saying or doing things one might not offline) shape the ways Black and Latinx women experience racism, sexism, and homophobia while playing online video games.<sup>5</sup> Jessie Daniels has written about online White supremacy for decades, from the ways White supremacist organizations use technology to spread their ideologies to (with Matthew Hughey) the proliferation of racist comments on mainstream news sites.<sup>6</sup> The

research on online racism adds complexity to our understanding of the ways expressions of racism change in different contexts.

As young people spend more time socializing and learning in online spaces, it follows that their online interactions will have an increasingly large impact on their lives and well-being. Research on racial socialization finds that preparing Black children for experiences with racial bias can lessen the negative impact that stereotypes have on their social and emotional health.<sup>7</sup> But what happens if we socialize children to prepare them to deal with colorblind-style racism, and fail to recognize that they are actually being exposed to overt expressions of racism in online spaces, where adult moderation is less prevalent?

It's difficult to keep kids safe online. I study online abuse for a living, but my kids still surprise me with their online communication experiences (often game-based) on mediums that weren't on my radar. For example, I know how to change settings on video-game consoles so that my kids are able to chat only with their friends (and not with random people online). But I did not know that public chat was a function on the Oculus VR headset that my oldest child, Malachi, had saved his money to buy until his younger sister, Karis, and brother, JD, alerted me to the toxic language people were using on the platform. Malachi assured me he had quickly figured out how to mute the public chat, but this worried me. I had no idea it was going on, nor how to stop it.

I ask some big questions in this book: How does the internet shape the way people talk about race? How are online experiences and responses to racism different from in-person experiences? What impact do these changes have specifically on people of Color, and on society?

My experience with a strange, new, and more explicit style of racism online was like a puzzle piece that didn't fit: how could such explicit racist language be ubiquitous in online spaces, when it was so rare in face-to-face settings? Then, my experience on campus, seeing my friends censor themselves because of my presence, gave me a clue, and I was able to imagine how muted behaviors in person might be

connected to the normalcy of more explicit behaviors online. This is what it takes, I think, to fully understand the impact technology has had on the race conundrum: an investigation that pays equal attention to the virtual and physical realities of race and racism, how they differ, and how each influences the other.

This is difficult to do! Often our online realities and behaviors are so different from our day-to-day, face-to-face interactions. In many online spaces, users may not even know the real-world identities of the people they interact with. Online actions are therefore often divorced from perceived consequences in the real world.

The idea that there are separate worlds, one physical and real, and one digital and fake, is known as the “digital dualism fallacy.” Social theorist Nathan Jurgenson argues that we actually live in a world that is a mix of the digital and the physical: an augmented reality.<sup>8</sup> There is no better place to study the augmented reality of race and racism than the college campus, a setting where online and in-person communities are less detached, since it is common for students to share classrooms or dining halls with the same peers they engage with on social media. The perceived consequences of online behaviors, therefore, can be more real, or at least more immediate, for these students. If you post something online over the weekend, chances are people in your class on Monday have seen it.

To bridge the gap between the digital and the physical, this book begins on the college campus. I started this eight-year study in 2014 in Chicago at a private, selective university. I conducted interviews with Black, Latinx, and Asian students, as folks of Color are too often denied a voice and are most likely to experience and witness racism and its effects. Centering the perspectives of people of Color is an important part of the critical race theory tradition, as the experiences and perspectives of marginalized peoples are often able to highlight the ways oppressive systems work and identify biases and blind spots that exist in dominant ways of thinking.<sup>9</sup>