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Destabilizing Race in Political Communication: Social Movements as Sites of Political Imagination

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ABSTRACT

How do social movement actors use consciousness-raising communicative practices to reconfigure political understandings of race? And how can such practices shape the analysis of political communication? We explore these questions by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and archival materials to examine two case studies: an historical example of Grace Lee Boggs' structural guidelines for creating a revolutionary study group in the Asian Political Alliance and a contemporary example of Equality Labs' anti-caste political organizing by engaging across racial and caste social hierarchies. These cases illustrate the analytic value of engaging alternative theoretical frameworks of race and politics from critical ethnic studies, feminist of color scholarship, and social movements as rich sites of political theory through cultivating political consciousness in service of radical political imaginations.

This article offers two main contributions to the field of political communication. First, by looking at the creative work of racial theorizing within social movements, we destabilize the limits of race as a demographic category. Second, we demonstrate the analytic value of studying political education and consciousness-raising as communicative practices that emphasize relational reconfigurations of race. This article recasts racial political discourse from public opinion and campaign messaging measured quantitatively to political imaginations that must be interpreted within historical and material contexts. As our cases demonstrate, centering the shifting category of race within movement building opens up the field of political communication to the communicative processes of consciousness-building and also offers dynamic understandings of race and racialization.

KEYWORDS

Race; social movements; political theory; solidarity

Introduction

> Too often, our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they "succeeded" in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves (Kelley, 2002, p. ix).

During the summer of 2020, during an international reckoning about Black lives and police violence, Equality Labs – a Dalit-led,[1] feminist, and caste abolitionist digital organization – organized a series of online events that were hosted on Zoom and live-streamed on

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Facebook to mobilize South Asian diasporic communities in political relation to Black liberation movements. One event, "Black, Dalit, and Sheedi Internationalist Solidarities," featured a conversation between Dr. Cornel West and two activists and political leaders from India and Pakistan, Chandrashekhar Azad and Tanzeela Qambrani, who first spoke in Hindi-Urdu followed by English translation. Two years later, the event had accrued 3.3K likes, 2.7K comments, and 217K views on Facebook. The scale, however, is not the point. Unlike other forms of digital activism and political mobilization during moments of crisis that often emphasize a clear call to action, such as signing a petition, donating money, or attending a rally, this event instead aimed to communicate a relational and transnational reconfiguration of racial politics in service of a longer-term collective vision of liberation. In other words, Equality Labs used the communicative tools of Zoom and Facebook for broadcasting a political education event to raise political consciousness amid a broader social movement with a much longer time horizon. This example demonstrates how consciousness-raising activities in organizing advance theories and praxis of racial politics as well as shift our attention to communication practices outside of political elites and electoral campaigns.

Moments of racial reckoning and crisis, including the 2016 US elections and 2020 uprisings, have made clear the urgency as well as current theoretical inadequacy of political communication in responding to, addressing, and analyzing the politics of race. Taking seriously Robin D.G. Kelley's (2002) provocation that intellectual engagements with social movements can generate knowledge, theories, and questions that enable new political imaginations of society, this article examines the communicative practices of consciousness-raising by grassroots organizers to make a theoretical intervention on race in political communication. We ask: how do movement actors use consciousness-raising communicative acts to reshape political understandings of race? In doing so, we demonstrate how the intertwining of racial theorization and political imagination in social movements is a crucial site to understand political communication. In the vein of Kelley, we define political imagination as a collective vision of expansive liberation for the future world we want to live in, or the "effort to see the future in the present" (p. 9). The work of consciousness-raising is to bring others into this shared imagination.

This article begins by describing how race has been operationalized as a site of inquiry within political communication scholarship to demonstrate several limitations, which we call race and/as politics[2] in communication. We then offer alternative theoretical frameworks to race and politics from other traditions of scholarship that emphasize race and racialization as sites of struggle. These frameworks bring us to our empirical sites of study: consciousness-raising activities as political communication. We bring together original research from ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and archival materials to focus on two case studies: first, an historical example from 1971 of Grace Lee Boggs's creation of a revolutionary study group in the Asian Political Alliance and, second, a contemporary example of Equality Labs' anti-caste political organizing by engaging across racial and caste social hierarchies. We follow these examples with a discussion of implications.

This article offers two main contributions to the field of political communication. First, by looking at the creative work of racial theorizing within social movements, we destabilize the conceptual value of race as a demographic category. Second, we demonstrate the analytic value of studying political education and consciousness-

raising as communicative practices that emphasize relational reconfigurations of race. Our analysis recasts racial political discourse from public opinion and campaign messaging measured quantitatively to political imaginations that must be interpreted within historical and material contexts. As our cases demonstrate, centering the shifting category of race within movement building opens up the field of political communication to the communicative processes of consciousness-building and also offers dynamic understandings of race and racialization. This approach expands the analytic capacity of political communication scholarship to better make sense of political phenomena.

Race and/as Politics in Communication

We begin by reviewing the boundaries, definitions, and history of political communication to discern what is counted as politics and how race has typically been operationalized in the field's canon in ways that have been depoliticizing. This approach builds on previous scholarship that has identified absences of racial theorizing in the field of in communication (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020; Chakravartty et al., 2018). Following this, we draw on an alternative canon from traditions of critical race and ethnic studies and feminist of color scholarship to outline a theoretical framework that understands race not as a source of deficiency or statistical noise, but rather as a site of political and revolutionary struggle. This literature shifts our analytic focus from formal sites of politics, such as elections, and toward communicative work within grassroots organizing, where political imaginations are contested and constructed.

The Stability of Race as Operationalized in Political Communication

The politics of race as a key analytic has been a lacuna within political communication scholarship. Race as a site of study and the "disavowal of race" in communication theory are best understood in the context of the field's disciplinary history and epistemological orientation, including the field's roots in the U.S. Cold War social sciences (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). Further, the theoretical and conceptual understanding of what constitutes the political in the social sciences inherits white, Eurocentric paradigms, particularly the secular traditions of liberal philosophy that locates political agency vis-a-vis citizenship in the state as well as the erasures of how slavery and colonialism created the very conditions of possibility for what is now understood as the rights of man in political democracy (Lowe, 2015; James, 1938).[3] Ryfe (2001) also traces the roots of political communication, in particular, to social psychology, political science, and mass communication. Thus, the field's analytic attention to individual and group attitudes and beliefs and the psychological and behavioral effects and outcomes of communicative acts have tended to focus on political elites, such as candidates, elected officials, and mainstream media (e.g., Entman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011). These modes of inquiry have also focused on testing and refining existing social scientific theories that presume a narrow universality (Scheufele, 2000) and reaffirm the field's methodological conventions rather than open up "context-driven problem-focused, and interdisciplinary knowledge production" (Nielsen, 2018, p. 147). This history is also a key contributor to the

"methodological consensus" of quantitative methods that dominates political communication research today (Karpf et al., 2015).

These methods and empirical analyses tend to treat race as a stable source of difference, a controllable statistic for comparison, and an independent demographic variable (Lane et al., 2022; Sen & Wasow, 2016; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Here, race becomes primarily about populations – objects of study for comparison and measurement. Studies that foreground race tend to view racial categories as a static source of difference without evaluating the origins of those differences, ways they shift over time, and other related political implications. In such cases, social identity theories are applied to explain differences between racial groups in terms of political attitudes or behaviors – and are often interpreted as deficits and disadvantages (Helms et al., 2005) to explain lower levels of political participation from minoritized groups (Lane et al., 2022; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

We also trace the field's theoretical limitations to a rigid and narrow conceptualization of who and what constitutes politics and the political. The field as defined in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* focuses on "making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise of power" and "the presentation and interpretation of information, messages or signals with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power" (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017, p. 5). This definition is highly conducive – yet rarely applied – to how race has always been strategically constructed and deconstructed and operationalized in symbolic mediation in the pursuit of power through racial domination and supremacy (see Robinson, 1983; Wynter, 2003). Within political communication, the epistemological focus on particular forms of shared power and symbolic expression tends to universalize theories focused on political elites in Western liberal democracies. Left outside this understanding are a wide variety of social and political actors (e.g., grassroots organizers and activists, minoritized communities), communicative practices (e.g., political education and creative media), and methodologies (e.g., historical, ethnographic, and community-engaged).

While this scholarship exists in fields such as ethnic studies, media studies, social movement studies, and area studies, they are largely excluded from the tent of what counts as "political communication" for adopting a more "particular" interpretation or analysis of power. For example, originally published in 1948 (and republished as recently as January 2021), Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1968) *The People's Choice*, a landmark study of media effects on voting behavior, demonstrates the intentional omission of race to control for population sampling. Concerned over the "diversity of American life" and the impossibility of a "typical American county," the authors selected Ohio's Erie County for its size and stability, noting that it was "relatively free from sectional peculiarities" and "deviated very little from the national voting trends" (p. 3). In other words, they picked the whitest possible county as their ideal laboratory because of the explicit absence of racialized political subjectivities. Race, seen here as statistical noise, was effectively "controlled," minimizing the risk of racial difference in order to develop a universal theory based on a monolithic sample. These are often dummy variables that distinguish only between white/nonwhite to establish a causal or mediating relationship to political attitudes or behaviors in service of supporting or qualifying a more supposedly universal theory about political communication. This mirrors longstanding practices in health research that name race as a risk factor or explanatory construct, treating it as a natural composite for the manifold consequences

of racism. Assigning such explanatory power to race absolves a researcher from reckoning with why race appears to have a causal effect or how that effect operates. This approach represents a stark contrast against fields such as ethnic studies and critical race scholarship that foreground racial difference as a theoretical and methodological starting point.

The Creative and Political Work of Racial Theory

This section reviews theoretical frameworks from critical ethnic studies and feminist of color scholarship to offer an alternative approach to race and politics that will guide our empirical analysis of political communication subjects. Scholars across a range of disciplines and fields have produced a rich set of literature on race and politics to engage with existing traditions of political thought and produce new sets of ideas on questions of race, power, and governance. We begin our conceptualization of race as tied to political and revolutionary struggle (e.g., Combahee River Collective, 1977; West, 1991; Kelley, 2002; Singh, 2004; Smith, 1977; Taylor, 2016)—including struggles over who is human (Wynter, 2003) and who is "political" (Hartman, 1997). These struggles also direct us to the long lineages of the racial and racist character of colonialism and capitalism, where hierarchical ideologies and relations are made material (e.g., Césaire, 1972). For example, in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois (1935) points out the limits of white political democracy in the US through histories of racialized segregation, exclusion, and control as well as theorizes the organization of alternative publics and political relations. Or, Robinson's (1983) *Black Marxism* brings together a theory of racial capitalism and historiography of Black struggle, resistance, and revolt to imagine radical futures otherwise (see Johnson & Lubin, 2017). Saidiya Hartman's (1997) *Scenes of Subjection* argues that political theory takes for granted the white liberal subject only made possible through the historical ground of slavery and points toward enactments of political resistance in the context of difference, disruption, and domination. At the crux of these projects are theorizations of power and change and about the kind of world to struggle toward.

Collectively taken, such texts articulate a *political imagination* of democratic and political subjectivities and processes while attending to the fragile and contested notions of freedom in relation to different communities. They also highlight the material stakes of inquiry by positing an explicit vision of and commitment to liberation versus taking up race as merely an object of study. These bodies of literature at the intersection of political imagination and race also direct us to how marginality is not just a site of deprivation, but also one of the generative possibility (see also hooks, 1989). Race is not a static or fixed singularity, but rather a "locus in which economic, gender, sex, and race contradictions converge . . . that organizes current struggles" (Lowe, 1996, p. 26). Further, the most radical possibilities of racial theorization take us beyond rights-based citizenship confined to the boundaries of the nation state. Instead, they pursue larger visions of political possibility beyond the conventional structures of democratic engagement and representation. These theorizations direct our attention to practices that engage with and contest political subjectivities in terms of how identities are constructed in relation to each other.

We operationalize this approach by bringing critical ethnic studies and feminists of color scholarship into the field of political communication. As Chandan Reddy (2011) defines, critical ethnic studies "seeks to understand race in the context of the national within the international, of the nation from within conditions of empire" (p. 19). Such

an approach highlights global critiques of imperialism and racism to illuminate contradictions between US claims of democracy and equality with historical and empirical evidence of ongoing material experiences of racialized exclusion. Ethnic Studies (e.g., Africana Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicanx/Latinx Studies, and Native Studies) is the institutional formation of radical movements in the 1960s and 1970s – the echo of a more "revolutionary spirit" attempting to survive within academic institutions, where epistemologies of minoritized difference continue to be organized through the institutionalization of positivist multiculturalism that effectively "deracialize" or neutralize the politics of race. Additionally, the convergence of Black liberation and Third World anti-colonial movements during this time period has often been obscured by a predominant focus on a progressive narrative of civil rights. Kelley (2002) describes this as a "general conspiracy of silence" (p. 62)—which seems to capture the field's methodological trends evaluated above – around the most radical aspects of Black liberation movements, particularly connections with Third World models of revolution. Beyond civil rights in the US, radical Black organizers, thinkers, and leaders (e.g., Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois and Shirley Du Bois, Vicki Garvin, Claudia Jones, and Huey Newton, among others) produced Black internationalist imaginaries by developing transnational political analysis that sought to articulate race and class struggle in global terms (Blain & Gill, 2019; Kelley, 2002; M. O. West et al., 2009).

These theories and histories are not only often overlooked in political communication scholarship, but at times also in studies of social movements in communication that lack depth in theoretical engagement with race (e.g., Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). This deracination in social movement studies can take for granted what Hartman (1997) describes as the "bourgeois individual . . . that gives meaning to the term political in its conventional usage, with all the attendant assumptions of the relations of the subject and the state" (p. 62).

The implications of critical ethnic studies' alternative approach to race and politics constitute a theoretical model for our empirical analysis of political communication subjects. To study race in political communication means looking to these long-standing traditions of scholarship at the intersection of racial theorization and social movements that direct us instead toward different political subjectivities; additional sites of inquiry; new understandings of how and why publics coalesce; and also trouble deeply embedded assumptions about freedom, democracy, and equality. As examples of how engaging race and social movements can shape understandings of political communication, Robeson Taj Frazier (2014) draws our attention to the communicative practices of Black internationalist revolutionaries and the role of newspapers, pamphlets, radio shows, and newsletters in producing collective imaginations of shared political struggle across geographical, historical, and racial differences. Or, Kelley (2002) describes the efforts of Robert Williams's publication of the magazine *The Crusader* from Cuba and China, circulating it by mail and eventually creating the Revolutionary Action Movement in Cleveland, Ohio. Or, Jackson et al.'s (2020) discussion of hashtag activism as a site of racial justice can be seen as a study of political communication that explores online modes of racial theorizing and political imagining. In other words, an empirical engagement with race and social movements together illuminates both the application of political theory and fruitful sites from which new theoretical frameworks emerge.

An Alternative Approach: Looking to Social Movements' Communicative Practices of Consciousness-Raising

To demonstrate how this framework applies to political communication, we use the theoretical perspectives above to analyze communicative practices of political consciousness-raising in racial justice movements. In doing so, we destabilize race by accounting for its abundant conceptualizations. With this approach, rather than employing race as an independent variable to explain differences between groups or mediate effects, race moves to the conceptual center of analysis as a contingent site of political struggle. Thus, we apply this framework not only as an alternative method but also as an alternative epistemology to more common understandings of what constitutes politics in political communication scholarship. Under this framework, social movements illuminate relational political formations of race within and across social hierarchies, and the empirical focus is not only outcomes in terms of agenda setting, message framing, or campaigning tactics, but rather new political relations discerned through close analysis of archival and ethnographic material.

Indeed, as demonstrated by political theorist and labor organizer Grace Lee Boggs, the practice of political struggle is a means of producing new political alignments and imaginations beyond identifying with stable categories of racialization.[4] We adopt this approach to illustrate how communicative practices within social movements aimed at raising consciousness produce collective political imaginations about race. Such practices address relations of power between and across groups and also between groups and larger institutional systems, and they include a range of media and discursive formats, such as political education events like reading groups and teach-ins or flyers, zines, and newsletters. We center these practices in our analysis because they open up the field to offer new, dynamic understandings of race and political theory; build on previous calls to expand the empirical domain of political communication to account for social movements as sites of political power; and focus on the communicative practices of non-elite actors such as activists and community organizers.

In the sections below, we discuss two examples of consciousness-raising communicative acts by Asian American political actors that re-shape political understandings of race: 1) the 1971 Asian Political Alliance's study group on Black liberation and anti-colonial revolutions and 2) Equality Labs' (EL) anti-caste political organizing between 2016 and 2020 that engages across racial and caste social hierarchies. These cases emerge from a synthesis of different qualitative methods tied to two projects on race, social movements, and digital media platforms, including semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork by both authors and archival research by Rachel Kuo. The semi-structured interviews draw from jointly conducted interviews as well as a larger set of 35 interviews conducted with Asian and Asian American organizers by Kuo between May 2018 and April 2022 (under IRB study #20–3270). Some names have been pseudonymized while others remain the same. Grounding our scholarship in political praxis, both authors simultaneously enter into movement spaces as researchers and also enter into academic research from movement spaces; this means we hold different political organizing relationships with our interlocutors. Conducting interviews with informed consent is a specific way to mark a consensual point in a relationship to be directly used for research purposes.

We focus on different kinds of Asian American movement building to expand understandings of race beyond categorical identity and demonstrate ways organizers theorize racialization processes as mutually constitutive, in that they occur in relation to and interaction with different racial positions and dynamics – in other words, how organizers position and frame race as a set of political alignments in order to disrupt regimes of power. These examples also demonstrate the significance of grassroots organizing in theorizations of race. Furthermore, we juxtapose two cases across historical and contemporary temporalities to demonstrate the durability of social movements' political communication practices and thus the value of diverse qualitative methodologies to learn from them as rich empirical sites of political theory. Therefore, while each case study represents just a kernel of a larger empirical analysis, we nevertheless present two accounts to emphasize the analytic capaciousness of our alternative framework for political communication scholarship - one that opens up new questions, methods, and modes of inquiry across identities, temporalities, and racializations.

The Practice of Study for Building Revolutionary Organizations

Our first case uses primary source materials from archival research by Kuo at the James and Grace Lee Boggs papers during the summer of 2018, located at the Walter P. Reuther Library Archives of Labor at Wayne State University. We focus specifically on G.L. Boggs' archival documents on creating a revolutionary cadre organization through the creation of a study group in the Asian Political Alliance in 1971. G. L. Boggs (1915–2015) was a Detroit-based writer, activist, and political philosopher known for her labor organizing against racism and capitalism. In contributing to theoretical debates on race and political communication, we turn to G.L. Boggs for two primary reasons. First, her organizing work destabilizes the limits of race as a demographic category. Within Asian American political movements, she is often elevated as an Asian American-identified movement leader as well as a marquee example of solidarity between Black and Asian communities. However, the majority of her organizing work, grounded locally in Detroit, has not been Asian American – nor about making intentional, coalitional links between Black and Asian communities. Second, her primary archival documents about creating a revolutionary study group demonstrate how engaging with social movements theoretically contributes to how we understand politics.[5]

While G.L. Boggs has been taken seriously for her practice as an organizer, her theoretical contributions to the domains of philosophy and politics have rarely been taken up in scholarship. Her theoretical writing happens through communicative practices within movement spaces: in pamphlets, leaflets, letters, press releases, and speeches. Her writing emphasizes change in both political theory and practice, attending to the multiple antagonisms and contradictions that emerge within movement building, particularly during moments of crisis. To her, politics is a process created through collective struggle over ideas and practices. In the early part of her organizing, while she was in Chicago, she met C. L.R. James in 1941 and they developed a close working relationship for over 20 years. Together, they co-organized the Third Layer School in 1952, a political education workshop led by rank-and-file workers, Black community members, women, and youth. They focused on building at the grassroots level to "unleash creative energies of those at the bottom." It

was also through this work that she met her lifelong partner James (Jimmy) Boggs, an auto worker, labor organizer, and Black radical theorist.

By 1962, Grace and Jimmy Boggs parted ways with C.L.R. James, splitting over diverging visions of revolutionary process and also over their applications of Marxist ideology. However, their relationship would be informative to her ideas in forming and structuring a revolutionary study group with the Asian Political Alliance in 1971, which highlights the significance of Black radical thought in early formations of Asian American politics. Namely, C.L.R. James's emphasis on building grassroots power over access to state power undergirds Boggs's attention to "theoretical strengthening" in base-building strategies (Boggs, 1982)—in other words, the communicative work of consciousness-raising and building shared political imagination for mass mobilization.

In archival documents about the mission of this study group, Boggs (1971) writes, "a study group should be organized not for the sake of study but in order to lay the basis for a cadre organization." She also observes that building a "cadre organization"[6] is one that "takes a lot of time and patience; a lot of hard work and struggle; a continuing relationship from and to the revolutionary and progressive social forces within our society, and the continuing expansion and enrichment of your own revolutionary vision." The emphasis on work, struggle, and building continuing relationships also demonstrates a longitudinal approach to political communication rather than an emphasis on short-term outcomes. Additionally, she expresses the conviction that "correct ideas matter" and that once these ideas are grasped by the masses, they can become a "material force." The practice of distributing "correct ideas" as political imagination requires the communicative tasks of "analysis and synthesis" in order to produce frameworks for transforming members into becoming "more conscious, more responsible, more creative, and more critical."

Boggs emphasizes how the work of political organizing first requires building a shared theoretical direction to shape and evolve a political practice. By analyzing and studying Afro-Asian and Third World liberation movements and revolt (e.g., revolutions in Algeria, China, Cuba, Ghana, Kenya, Guinea-Bissau, and Vietnam as well as Black revolution in the US), the group would develop racial and class consciousness from which to reimagine global politics and collective visions of liberation.

In outlining the process of transforming "separate subjectivities into a collectivity," Boggs observed how the fragmentation of movements into highly individualized categories serves as a challenge to collective formation:

> The US movement is spiritually and ideologically impoverished as the country itself. It consists chiefly of various racial (or ethnic), generational, and sexual groups, each pursuing its own special, separate interests, and each becoming increasingly incestuous or concerned with its own internal relationships (Boggs, 1971).

We emphasize this particular quote as an early critique of how separating groups based on demographic identity (e.g., race and ethnicity) also fragments the political possibility of collective struggle across difference. By creating a study group under the Asian Political Alliance, Boggs emphasized how an Asian American positioning of the group could make a unique intervention on this challenge because of both the "exceptionally heterogeneous background of its members" and also the increasing reaches of globalization and capital. Additionally, the emergence of Asian American as a political category during the early 1970s alongside Black liberation movements and anti-imperial and anti-war organizing

offered a kind of flexibility in re-imaginations of racial political relations. This particular example demonstrates the emergence of what is now presumed to be a demographic identity category in political communication (Asian American) as historically rooted in a struggle over the political meaning behind racial identification. In the next case, we demonstrate the expansiveness of Asian American politics and the uses of political consciousness-raising to trouble racial categories in a contemporary context.

Forging Internationalist Solidarities Across Race and Caste Hierarchies

Throughout 2020 and into 2023, Asian American political formations have produced and circulated digital events and artifacts for political education with the purpose of consciousness-raising and communicating a political imagination of cross-racial solidarity between Black and Asian communities. Examples of such projects and formations include the Letters for Black Lives project; the Xīn Shēng | 心声 Project (formerly WeChat Project); Asian American Feminist Collective's collaboration with Black Women Radicals; and 18 Million Rising, to name a few. These communicative practices about racial politics led by US-based formations often have a distinctly transnational focus in both content and format. In particular, they emphasize historical and contemporary frameworks of Black-Asian internationalism, such as evoking legacies of Third World solidarities during the Civil Rights era and Black Power movements or highlighting intertwined systems of global racial violence including casteism, white supremacy, capitalism, and militarism. These projects also engage political theory as well as generate new theories about race and politics, especially by emphasizing the mediation of new relational configurations of race. Therefore, such movements qualify as ideal empirical sites to explore our intervention in what sorts of politics can be considered under the umbrella of political communication.

Thus, the second case looks at examples of political communication between 2016 and 2020 from Equality Labs (EL), a Dalit-led, feminist, and caste abolitionist digital organization. We turn to examine South Asian diasporic movement building in the United States to illustrate the possibilities of engaging with race by drawing on expansive political imaginations. We draw on ethnographic fieldwork by Rohan Grover as well as original interviews with South Asian American movement leaders by both authors to demonstrate the analytic opportunities made possible by engaging with the consciousness-raising communicative work of social movements that destabilizes both national borders and social hierarchies.

To most external audiences, including mainstream press coverage, wider publics, and policymakers, EL's most visible work includes both organizing in and through political institutions such as legal casework, regulatory advocacy, and electoral organizing and analysis. Much of this work has been focused on making racial and caste violences legible to institutions; for example, recent campaign victories in advocating for caste to be classified as a protected category demonstrate how EL strategically draws on established pathways for enacting political change. However, much of the political change pursued by EL is less widely visible and takes place internally in South Asian community formations.

Examples of such movement work include educational initiatives and cultural organizing to intervene in and challenge the ignorance and intentional erasure of caste hegemony among South Asians in the US. Therefore, during an interview to discuss EL's political organizing and goals in shifting understandings of racial categories and alignments, co-founder and executive director Thenmozhi Soundarajan describes this work as:

> Re-imagining and reforming what it means to be South Asian. While our communities were racialized under white supremacy to be South Asian, there's internal reckonings around historical traumas that we carry that have to do with divides of geography, genocide, apartheid, and communal violence that are rarely addressed in pathways of migration.

For example, one of EL's earlier projects was a research project in 2016 that surveyed Dalits in the US to document their experiences of caste oppression and violence. While this study has been impactful in terms of its citations in academic scholarship and legal arguments, it first reverberated among South Asian Americans who were forced to reckon with quantitative and qualitative data that offered empirical validation of caste oppression in the US – disputing assumptions that the diaspora was immune from social hierarchies associated with South Asia. Thus, the survey intervened in the politics of knowledge production and destabilized the presumed homogeneity of the South Asian demographic category.

Methodologically, the survey demonstrated the epistemic potential of research with the appropriate design, community knowledge, and analytic lens to not only measure differences among groups but also destabilize well-established racial categories. Rather than recruiting probability samples of South Asian Americans across castes, EL operationalized caste as the primary object of study, centering Dalit experiences to raise consciousness about the continuity of caste discrimination and *savarna* (upper caste) supremacy. Soundarajan thus characterizes the survey as an effort to remedy "epistemic injustice" as it challenged how knowledge production has been weaponized to make caste hierarchies seem irrelevant. The significance of these findings can be seen in how caste supremacists and denialists waged harassment campaigns to suppress and contest the survey results and in how progressive organizations scrambled to respond to concerns that the findings were divisive. These tensions reveal the fragility and instability of South Asian as a categorical identity by unsettling internal hierarchies and presumed political homogeneity. For example, the survey's findings destabilize superficial notions of community cohesion and popular characterizations of South Asian Americans as a high-income, highly educated, Democratic-leaning electorate (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2013; Wong et al., 2011), which collectively invisibilize caste and religious violence. Furthermore, the findings open up new lines of inquiry that would otherwise be overlooked by political communication research methods that presuppose a US-based racial framework that renders in-group politics invisible. These dynamics illustrate the hazards of presuming the stability of racialization, especially within the US, which imposes a specific classification that masks casteism and other social hierarchies.

In 2019, EL launched its first Unlearning Caste Supremacy workshop, a training series for individuals and community organizations, to build on the momentum of the survey and raise political consciousness among South Asians in the US. The workshops offer political education and cultivate community among small cohorts of participants who could continue educational and organizing work within and outside of EL through, for example, coordinating reading groups, organizing local political collectives, and sharing resources within existing community infrastructures. The workshops are grounded in historical examples of building political imagination by crossing transnational and transracial borders, such as the legacy of correspondence between W. E. B. Du Bois and B. R. Ambedkar. The workshops transgress the traditional boundaries of what is considered political – especially related to diaspora communities – by starting not with legislation or political institutions but rather with histories of religion, migration, and colonialism. This approach

situates participants in an alternative timespace, inviting them to reimagine their personal genealogies in an alternative sociopolitical context in order to disrupt assumptions about the universality of a US-based racial hierarchy as well as trace contemporary circumstances to historical systems of knowledge production.

In other words, the workshops are designed to ignite a new political imagination by recontextualizing political consciousness beyond participants' immediate temporal and geographic contexts. Thus, the workshops are also markedly different in that they are specifically designed to reconfigure relational hierarchies among participants both through and against racialized formations – in other words, the workshops shift participants' relationships with each other and with power structures. The workshops are open to all but generally attract South Asian Americans with diverse caste identities and experiences with casteism, and thus they create spaces in which participants reckon with their commonality, the particularity of their own experiences of racialization in US contexts, as well as the diverse range of personal and ancestral relationships to casteism. The dialogs fostered by these unique circumstances are necessarily private – thus we do not describe them in detail here – which further strengthens the case for recognizing semi-public or nonpublic communicative acts in movement building as crucial moments of deconstructing and reconfiguring relational racialization. These modes of political communication are not immediately visible within contemporary digital activism. One organizer for the workshop series described how social media platforms are often hostile to such discourse, given that a majority of them are based in Silicon Valley, which is itself rife with casteism (Paul, 2022). She references "the rise of the Hindu fundamentalist trolls" on Twitter to reinforce the need for internally focused spaces in order to build radical imaginative politics.[7] While their creative and diverse range of communicative tools and tactics have also included Twitter Storms, Wikipedia Hackathons, and digital safety training, organizers also emphasize attention to non-digital forms of activism. As the workshop series organizer describes:

> We need to bring cross-movement partners into a practice of being in dialogue together . . . the structural forces of violence are bigger than the internet. With the rise of authoritarianism, the internet is not enough. [Online] petitions won't stop land evictions—we need structural analysis of what stops fascism.

Consciousness-raising through political education and cultural organizing illustrates how political theory is bound up in articulating and communicating novel visions of political imagination. Although EL focuses on the caste system and its durability beyond South Asia, it regularly invokes scholarship and activism from aligned movements, such as Black internationalism. In their events, newsletters, and reading lists, as well as in our interviews, EL organizers regularly cite Black internationalist and feminist thinkers, many of whom were also contemporaries of G. L. Boggs. This was true not only in 2020, when many organizations engaged in black scholarship and activism as part of their contributions to the Black Lives Matter movement, but also for years prior to and since then. These citational practices are most often found in EL's internal movement work, where the organization builds political theory by engaging with scholarship and other movements to work through difficult questions about exercising solidarity and building political imaginations.

These examples of communicative strategies to raise political consciousness illustrate the analytic value of a destabilizing racial analysis for political communication scholarship. EL's communicative practices would be missed by studies designed to assess a community's

politics according to public-facing factors such as hashtags or formal engagement with elites and political systems. Further, the conventional understanding of race and politics in political communication – as individual, static categories of identity – does not capture EL's communicative practices that work to undo the violence of caste hierarchies in South Asian communities. It would also miss how these modes of communication destabilize and expand the broader political formation of Asian America that also places Black and Asian communities in relation. While the case of EL illustrates this gap, it also demonstrates the clear stakes for political communication scholarship as EL's activism increasingly intersects with emerging topics in the field. For example, the organization's ongoing work on disinformation in South Asian communities focuses not on "veracity and intent" but instead "historical fault lines of trauma" (Asian American Disinformation Table, 2022, p. 7). They therefore emphasize the necessity of contextual understandings of race, caste, and power in order to build and reclaim political consensus. Thus, this example demonstrates the urgent need for theoretical rigor of racial analysis in how we understand political communication today.

Expanding the Field by Destabilizing Race in Political Analysis

Political consciousness-raising uses different modes of communication to build what Boggs (1971) describes as "revolutionary cadres"—or frameworks for political organization. In many ways, political education as consciousness-raising communicative acts can be difficult to study and measure: there is no clearly testable relationship between messages and effects nor an easy way to track influence or impact. Changes to political opinion and behavior may not be readily apparent or immediate. However, attending to the communicative practices within social movements is critical to understanding the relationship between race and politics. The goal of consciousness-raising is both aimed toward longitudinal change and toward building broad-based mass organizations – building people power through political analysis. Within social movements, people negotiate and use points of connection across difference at particular junctures given social and material conditions to stage new political positions—"a movement of people" (Hall & Grossberg, 1986). The practice of consciousness-raising seeks to organize and shape political formations through articulating shared affinities and understandings of historical and contemporary inequalities at both local and systemic scales.

This more expansive conceptualization of politics brings important empirical sites into view for political communication. For example, members of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) collectively read Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire together and also circulated newsletters and pamphlets titled Triple Jeopardy, to build anti-imperial and anti-capitalist political analysis at the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism (see also Hong, 2015; Romney, 2021). Their consciousness-raising techniques aimed to build connections between Asian, Black, Chicana, Puerto Rican, and Native American women and articulate a shared Third World politics across differences. Extending earlier formats such as the teach-in, study group, newsletter mailer, and radio show to contemporary, digital forms of political consciousness-raising can and should inform methodologies for analyzing Zoom, live-streamed events and webinars, and semi-closed spaces on social media on political and social issues; Instagram carousels about historical events; community-produced research reports; and also text and e-mail threads organizing programs and

events. These communicative practices across media build intentional cross-racial and transnational links and demonstrate different modalities of consciousness-raising as political communication.

The two cases of consciousness-raising we described extend how, where, and when politics happen and by whom. Further, they demonstrate how racial theory does political work as well as how race is an unstable category made politically meaningful. There is a mutually dialectic relationship between movement building and theorization at the intersection of race and politics. From uprisings and resistances against colonial rule to historical and contemporary solidarities and struggles in pursuit of liberation, the establishment of radical schools of thought engages deeply and materially with political struggles over labor, migration, land, and war and against the violences of statecraft. Colonial and racial divisions of society and humanity have tended to be buried and forgotten in narratives of politics and progress. The social scientific impulse to render race within movement politics from ever-shifting articulations and concepts into something stable and legible, often as the study of identity, is also reflected in how social difference – for example, race, gender, sexuality – become normative categories for state and corporate governance, control, and management. The inherent instability of race differs from conceptualizations of race as a composite variable that can be disaggregated into discrete elements, such as color, class, and ancestry (see Sen & Wasow, 2016, on race as a "bundle of sticks").

Addressing race as in a state of flux also redirects our analytic attention toward alternative research sites and questions in the study of political communication. As discussed above and illustrated by our cases, current lines of inquiry that approach race as a stable independent variable outside the bounds of generalizability limit the analytic potential of political communication in two significant ways. First, treating race as an independent variable limits generative theoretical and empirical possibilities by understanding theory only as assortments of objective, universal, and causal psychological or social relationships (i.e., "effects"). These theories generally have not considered different contextual and relational aspects of racism and racialization.

Second, this operationalization of race presupposes a theoretically unfounded degree of inherent stability in which race is an innate characteristic that naturally confers people with attitudes, dispositions, behaviors, and experiences. While systems of racism and white supremacy are certainly durable over time and take new shapes and forms, race itself is not stable across time or space. This is also particularly true for US-based conceptualizations of race that define non-mutually exclusive classifications that bear limited significance in other geopolitical contexts. Recognizing the instability of race is particularly important to the study of political communication because race is constructed relationally within and through political systems. This approach to studying politics echoes Ryfe's (2001) articulation of politics as culture, not outside of it. In other words, attributing differences in political attitudes or behaviors to race without attending to the very constitution of race enables the false notion that deracialized politics not only exists but in fact serves as a precondition for objective analysis of political behavior. Rather than compartmentalizing social difference into individualized categories of identity to strengthen the analytic utility of race in causal inference, our approach takes up how a collective politics of difference (e.g., Hong, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; West, 1990) changes how we approach, understand, and conceptualize politics and communication by drawing on racial theory.

Rather than pursuing research questions motivated by rapidly expanding nonwhite voting populations and anxieties about a majority-nonwhite populace in the United States, we draw on a more expansive scope, crediting community-based and social movement leaders as political actors and attending to different modes of communication beyond stump speeches, news coverage, and political advertisements. These are not simple methodological modifications, but rather disciplinary interventions in pushing the boundaries of political communication. In quantitative terms, they shift social movements from the dependent variable to the direct focus of research (Sobieraj, 2019) and examine activism as sites of deep, relational communicative practices rather than reducing them to one-way messages (Rohlinger, 2019).

Importantly, these interventions originate from outside the canon of political communication and engage directly with rich literature and methodologies from other fields, such as critical ethnic studies and feminist studies. These fields, we argue, have always centered theories and practices of what can be considered political communication – especially given the definitions cited earlier in this article, which referred to a "shared exercise of power" (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017, p. 5). This interdisciplinary engagement expands political communication as a field to discern how power is contested not only within but also beyond traditional political structures and the stable categories of race. These systems are powerful because of their perceived durability, but they are also perpetually contested by actors in pursuit of building political imaginations, or collective visions of a liberatory future. These contestations challenge race as a static independent variable and open up new questions and empirical sites where politics and/as race (and/as communication) happens.

Conclusion

A cursory search of *Political Communication*'s archives reveals zero mention of "Black thought" (or "Black political thought" or "Black radical tradition") and "Black feminism" (or "Black feminist theory") among existing articles (see Freelon et al. in this issue for a discussion on "race-avoidance" in this journal). Additionally, at the time of writing, a search for "Asian American" yielded no articles that explicitly engaged with Asian American politics as a key site and framework of study (until Nguyễn et al. in this issue); instead, "Asian American" is primarily included as a demographic category. These are critical gaps in understanding the relationship between race, politics, and communication. These omissions demonstrate the aforementioned "silence" about race in political communication scholarship – and point to the opportunity to reengage with theory building, particularly through the mutually generative relationship between social movements and political theory (Kelley, 2002).

Thus, this article echoes earlier critiques of the field's ability to evolve and generate theoretical perspectives to keep pace with sociopolitical and technological changes (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), as well as calls for experimentation with qualitative methods (Karpf et al., 2015) and for deeper engagement with social movement studies (Karpf, 2019; Sobieraj, 2019). We build on these arguments by providing empirical and analytical evidence about how communicative practices destabilize race using archival and ethnographic material with historical and contemporary social movement actors. Our hope is that the literatures and approaches herein will be further engaged by future research in political communication.

The stakes for this intervention are clear. Social movements are contesting racial structures that seek to contain Global Majority peoples in demographic containers. Political visionaries are building on historical legacies by reimagining relational formations beyond national borders and across social hierarchies. These movements challenge power across local and transnational scales. Our cases have also demonstrated that radical politics developed in movement spaces are often inaccessible and less visible to traditional academic research methods. Thus, these dynamics demand rethinking extant approaches, such as shifting focus from publics and instead paying attention to alternative formations such as enclaves and satellites as key sites of political consciousness discourse – where enclaves offer spaces for lively debate within a particular community and satellites provide separate space for building and maintaining group identity (Squires, 2002; Steele, 2021). These sites allude to the analytic possibilities for political communication scholarship to explore in its pursuit to understand how power is contested within and across communities, spaces, and structures.

Notes

1. *Dalit* refers to people assigned to the lowest caste stratum under the Indian caste hierarchy.
2. Race and/as politics is a play on Wendy Chun's (2009) article, "Race and/as technology."
3. James (1938) argues in *The Black Jacobins* that slavery in the Americas created the conditions that gave rise to the French bourgeoisie and the "rights of man" demanded during the 1798 French Revolution, an empirical site of study that has been a foundational part of political theory and philosophy. As Michel-Rolph Truillot (1995) points out in *Silencing the Past*, such theorization corresponds to the erasures of the Haitian revolution in historical record, given the unthinkability of slave revolt during that time period.
4. Jennifer Jung Hee Choi (1999) describes how, despite state-based designations of Boggs as "Chinese American," she did not primarily organize under the banner of what might be labeled as Asian American activism. Boggs herself also says, "My political activity over the years has not been primarily based on my ethnicity. I was attracted to the Black movement because Jim Crow in 1940 was so barbaric and because I viewed Black struggle as the catalyst for revolutionizing this country" (Duncan & Lindberg, 2001). In other words, she was primarily engaged within Black organizing rather than what may be interpreted as coalitional organizing across racial boundaries. According to Boggs (1985), after marrying Jimmy Boggs, her "identification with the Black community became so total that most FBI records describe me as Afro-Chinese" (Boggs, 1985). By eschewing racial categories in service of a radical political imagination, Boggs shifts and exceeds state-based forms of racial categorization through her organizing and movement work.
5. Given our theoretical focus on internationalisms in Asian American politics undergirding the building blocks of Black and Asian solidarities, Yuri Kochiyama's activism is also of note here, as she has brought an explicitly transnational anti-imperialist analysis to political organizing and because of her involvement with the Republic of New Africa and Young Lords party in New York City.
6. In this document, she notes that "cadre" originally means framework.
7. In early June 2022, Google also uninvited Thenmozhi Soundarajan and Equality Labs from giving a talk on caste bias in technology industries because of claims from some employees that discussing caste would lead to "division and rancor" and foment "Hinduphobia," a term that weaponizes institutional diversity and equity policies with little analysis of power relations within communities. See Tiku (2022).

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