

Digital Barbershops:
The politics of African American oral culture in online blogs

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BGLH	Black Girl Long Hair (blog)
CTDA	Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis
SNS	Social Networking Sites
VSB	Very Smart Brothas (blog)

SUMMARY

While blogging has become an increasingly popular means of self-expression, news sharing, and community building online, the potential of blogs as a site of alternate publics for marginalized communities requires more inquiry. For marginalized populations, online communication must be studied within the particular socio-historical legacy of the group. This provides an understanding that populations may have different goals and motivations for blogging and may use blogs differently than the dominant group.

For African Americans, the legacy of oral communication within the community is being transferred to online spaces. Blogging provides a platform with features that mirror many of the components of the black barber shop. The barber and beauty shop symbolize a space of retreat, wherein African Americans have formed alternate publics used to critique the dominant culture, foster resistance, and strengthen African American institutions.

A critical technocultural discourse analysis of black blogs yields three levels of analysis: the features of the technology, the means by which community is formed, and the themes of discourse that emerge from participants. Analysis of nine African American blogs revealed differences in site construction in the areas of advertising, blogger involvement, and availability of resources for participation. Each blog used traditional black rhetorical strategies while making modifications for contemporary goals. The strategies involve modifications made to traditional black humor and folktales. The writing style is highly performative yet relies upon participant interaction.

As the theme of discourse changed on the blogs, bloggers and readers alternated among types of publics given the resources available to them and their motivations for participating in

the dialogue. Bloggers use discussions of black culture to form satellite publics where black institutions can be protected. A new black feminist politics is visible in the discourse of the blogging communities that is separate from both white feminism and traditional black feminism and womanism. This study yields valuable insight into the political communication of a sub-segment of the African American community. By analyzing the use of African American rhetoric and discourse, one finds a tension between bloggers' connections to 'blackness' and a perceived distance from the economic and social realities of a large part of the black community.

For communities largely ignored in considerations of online political communication, researchers must begin their study by expanding sites of inquiry to include spaces not typically considered politically oriented. Approaching the online communication of counterpublics, cultural enclaves, and satellite communities with the proper historical understanding of their offline patterns of communication allows for more culturally responsible and inclusive internet research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Do blacks engage in political discourse online? Are they absent or silenced in the public sphere? Is the digital divide responsible for such absence? Much of the early literature on political communication online suggests that African Americans are largely absent in online political communication. Recent research has begun to discuss African American internet use in a more nuanced way, yet communication research has continued to privilege certain conceptions of the public sphere and political communication to the detriment of understanding of how marginalized communities engage in political discourse. The legacy of black oral culture suggests that African Americans may seek out and utilize spaces to engage in political discourse differently than the dominant group. To study the use of online technology for democratic participation, one must first understand the legacy of political talk within community. Within the African American community, political communication is commonly intertwined with everyday talk, such as the conversations historically found in barbershops and beauty shops. The need to create spaces wherein political discourse is not policed by the state or those outside of the community is not a new feature that has emerged with internet technologies. The everyday political talk of African Americans is mirrored in online blogging communities. The online conversations of African Americans and others alienated from mainstream political discourse sheds light on the democratic possibilities of online spaces for marginalized populations.

Interest in the idea of political talk in non-political spaces emerged from my experience with the black blogosphere as an enclave from the uncomfortably depoliticized contemporary work environment. Politics are usually left at the door of the workplace. Although it is possible to make inferences about your employer's political leanings, direct conversations about voting

and candidates can often be awkward at best and at worst can leave all parties with harsh feelings. Indeed, Americans tend to avoid conflict over political views in social settings, preferring social cohesion (Mutz, 2001). During the contentious 2008 U.S. presidential election, keeping political discussions out of the workplace seemed more challenging than ever before. Everyone had an opinion about then-candidate Barack Obama. At a large marketing firm in Chicago, my outspoken and boisterous supervisor held nothing back as he bashed both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton as the Democratic primary hit its climax. He was direct in his objections to a 'lady president,' but decidedly more discreet about his objections to Obama. They began as subtle jabs at his experience. Then, gradually, as Obama's viability as a candidate became more obvious, this usually jovial boss made each work meeting and social gathering an occasion to question Obama's citizenship, education, patriotism, character, and work ethic. The racial undertones were unmistakable and soon became paired with racial jokes and stereotypes worked into conversations in the board room and over lunch.

African Americans living and working in white middle class environment have a long history of feeling ostracized and marginalized in the workplace. My supervisor demonstrated that white privilege stretches into the far corners of the lives of those of color in this country in the present day. Subtle racist discourse uttered freely with no fear of recourse proves that notions of post-raciality are purely myth. Sitting in a meeting, as the only person of color, while racist jokes or offensive African American stereotypes are raised by those in power is reminiscent of generations past when those employed in the households of whites were forced to stand by as employers disparaged their race. The strength of African Americans in those moments was fortified by an ability to create and sustain political talk in their own communal spaces outside of the confines of white society.

As a black driver or domestic in 1940s Chicago, your day job in the North Shore of the city was a world apart from your Bronzeville community on the South Side of the city. In Bronzeville, an African American enclave in the middle of the city, African Americans owned barbershops, nightclubs, markets, and newspapers in the mid-century. While white businesses also thrived in Bronzeville following the Great Migration, black civic organizations and churches encouraged residents to have their money do ‘Double Duty’ by patronizing black-owned establishments. In addition to being an economic bolster for the community, African American establishments like barbershops served a social and political purpose as well. The barbershop is a physical space in African American neighborhoods that represents abstract notions of self-reliance within the community.

With increased educational opportunities and economic mobility, many African Americans find themselves not only working in a predominantly white world, but residing in one as well. Middle-class black¹ neighborhoods filled with black-owned establishments and thriving black social organizations have not disappeared altogether, but are rarer in cities and suburbs. The kind of camaraderie and community once forged in the physical barbershop, church, or civic

¹ For the purpose of this project, I make a distinction between the terms ‘black’ and ‘African American’. ‘African American’ refers specifically to a population within the U.S. with African ancestry who trace their ancestry through the American slave trade. While descendants may have little direct connection with the continent of Africa, African American culture combines elements of dominant U.S. culture with many cultural traditions from African ancestors to create a cultural identity shared by other African Americans. The classification ‘black’ is a racial marker given, based on an assumed linkage, to those who are a part of the African Diaspora regardless of their citizenship, cultural connection to the U.S. or to the transatlantic slave trade. Being ‘black’ is, therefore, a classification given to someone based on phenotypic criteria. Some who lack phenotypic markers of “blackness” may identify as such to demonstrate their connectedness to the Diaspora. The terms are not used interchangeably. ‘African American’, when used in this study refers to a cultural group that is a part of a racial group. ‘Black’, when used in this study refers to the race of an individual or group based on classification with the system of racial hierarchy. ‘Black’ may be used by bloggers and commenters to refer to themselves or to their community. When this is the case, the term may appear differently in context than the above distinction indicates.

organization is finding new footing in online forums. During the 2008 presidential election, blogging communities became a place of retreat during lunch breaks where I could ‘meet’ with other African Americans to find reprieve. While some of these blogs were politically oriented, most were not. The community met to discuss topics like pop culture, healthy eating, or life in the city. The conversations, much like those in the barbershop, served the purpose of forming connections. In discussing popular culture, issues of political significance for the community naturally emerged. The personal worlds of work, home, and family became intertwined with democratic engagement and political communication because of the connection to individual agency and community solidarity. In these communal spaces, political ideologies are cultivated outside of the influence of the mainstream media and the dominant group.

For a number of weeks in 2010, the popular celebrity gossip blog TheYBF (The Young, Black and Fabulous) posted pictures of African American celebrities who posed with their ‘natural’ hair, un-processed and without artificial extensions, under the title “I am not my hair.” This phrase, which is taken from a song by neo-soul recording artist India Arie, became a common mantra for exposing the problematic nature of white standards of beauty in the African American community. None of the pictures carried this explanation, nor did the original post explicitly detail the importance of crafting a unique understanding of African American identity or ‘Blackness’. The blogging community responded in the comments section with personal stories of resistance and accolades for the women in the photos. Outside of this discursive space the significance of the women shunning chemical processes for their hair would be lost, or at least not afforded the same significance. Within this community, the women were celebrated, and their decisions were raised as an issue of importance for the entire community: the experience of black womanhood was re-centered. This instance of racial discourse is powerful in

its ability to be transformative in the lives of a minority community. Due to its occurrence on the comments board of a black gossip blog, it is overlooked in communication literature that explores the democratic potential of the blog as a medium. This space of minority interaction is further marginalized because it is constructed by and signifies black womanhood.

African Americans, as a community in the United States, have historically been excluded from political influence by means of denial of access to communication technology. Past restrictions on education and literacy mirror some more recent issues involving new media technology. Research in the field of communication often focuses on the outcomes of such exclusion rather than on strategies used to create alternate spaces of discourse. Marginalized communities have always found alternate uses for communication forms and technologies that provide opportunities for in-group solidarity and resistance to the dominant group. The acts of relatively powerless people in resisting oppression tend to include little overt coordination, relying instead upon mutual understandings that develop over time via alternate modes of communication (Scott, 1985). Everyday acts of resistance are more than individual behaviors; rather, they are shared thoughts generated in constant communication and dialogue within the group. The creation of a safe community space enables acts of resistance, as exemplified in the heritage of alternative media produced by marginalized groups.

Shaped by early optimism about a digital utopia, the internet has been characterized as a tool for acculturation and means for racial minorities to access the 'American Dream', particularly as it relates to health information (Hsu, et.al. (2005), education (Cassidy, 1998), and political influence (Pole, 2010). The internet has been championed as the means by which African Americans can achieve equity in American society. Lack of access to the internet is commonly discussed as a civil rights issue. It is from this perspective that public and academic

discussions of ‘the digital divide’ emerge. While certain minority populations did not have early access to the internet, the divide has narrowed significantly in the last 10 years (Brock 2011, Compaine, 2001).

Since African American use was not recorded in much of the early and influential research on the internet, the myth of their absence online often continues to be propagated. Study design often allows for a perpetuation of the digital divide as an explanation for a lack of African American participants. For example, the idea that Caucasians are more likely to participate in politics online is found in current literature (Papacharissi and Meraz, in press). However, the Johnson, Zhang, Richard & Selzer (2004) study that is cited as demonstrating this fact has several important limitations. First, the lack of participation on the part of African Americans in the survey is equated with a lack of overall participation by non-whites in online political discourse. This fails to account for survey dissemination without special attention to networks that include racial minorities. Second, the definition of political participation is limited to engagement with blogs that are defined as “purely political” in orientation. This does not account for political discourse in traditionally non-political spaces. Finally, the researchers equate political participation online with voting behavior offline, which does not account for motivations beyond voting, including resistance, identity formation, and alternate forms of challenge to/protest of systemic issues.

Instead of careful analysis of African American users of new technology and ‘producers’ of online communication, literature regarding African Americans and other minority groups continues to reference “the divide.” This manner of framing African American usage of new technology raises a number of concerns for communication scholarship. First, as Andre Brock explains,

Technology becomes the hallmark of civilization, the arbiter of logic and reason, and the civilized are considered to have a ‘natural affinity’ for technology. Those on the margins are demeaned for their lack of technology engagement on material, cognitive, and ideological, or even moral grounds. Thus, instrumental rationality becomes inextricably intertwined with technical capital and cultural capital, and the underserved are considered ‘irrational’ and therefore prevented a careful interrogation of group practices online for racial minorities. (Brock, 2010, p. 1041)

The second problem with the focus on issues of digital divide is that many issues regarding access are increasingly unfounded. As recent research indicates, mobile access to the internet has significantly narrowed the divide in recent years. Approximately 54% of Internet users now access the internet through a mobile device (Zickuhr & Smith, 2009) and 64% of African-Americans are wireless Internet users (Smith, 2010). While 80% of Whites own a cell phone, that number is 87% for Blacks and of Hispanics. As access grows, further study reveals that African American users do not lack competency in the use of social media (Brock, 2010).

Early discussion of internet technologies focused on the potential for a new and reinvigorated public sphere creating possibilities for personal expression (Jones, 1997) and for citizens to make challenges in areas of public affairs (Rash, 1997). A utopian view of new technology masks persistent issues of access, fragmentation, segregation, and replication of social inequality online (Jones, 1997; Papacharissi, 2002; Williams, 1994). New media does not constitute any new potential for a Habermasian conception of the public sphere. The existence of multiple publics online mirrors the ways marginalized communities have always existed apart from the conventional public sphere. An afro-centrist and feminist critique of the Habermasian public sphere leads to a conceptualization of counterpublics as a way for African Americans to

form community and engage in important political discourse apart from the dominant group. For example, African American oral culture is commonly manifested in physical spaces like barber and beauty shops, as well as in mediated environments. Discourse that does not begin as political in nature can have politically significant consequences for marginalized populations. For marginalized communities, particularly African Americans, the features of blogs as a platform of communication online provide the possibility to expand community conversations and craft counter-frames by challenging the ideology of the dominant group. The current literature is lacking an exploration of the modern manifestation of this shop talk within the black blogosphere.

Utilizing critical techno-cultural discourse analysis as an approach, I rely upon a conceptual framework for analysis that includes Levine's (1977) facets of black oral culture and Squires' (2002) model of alternate publics. Blogs provide the best online manifestation of the barber/beauty shop. In examining a purposive sample of non-politically oriented black blogs, I examine: how blogs as a communication platform inform the re-creation of the barbershop in new media technology; how black blogs² utilize features of African American oral culture to sustain community online; and the themes that emerge as significant for black bloggers and their community of contributors that are important for political organization and cultural/ community uplift.

² This study makes no attempt to code for the racial group or ethnic identity of bloggers or commenters. Instead, black blogs refer to those blogs where bloggers self-identify as African American or black and where the content of the site is directed toward members of the African American community. The author acknowledges that people of many races may be a part of these communities; however, their connection to 'black blogs' makes their discourse relevant in considering 'black shop talk'.

While platforms like Twitter have been highlighted for their replication of features of orality, the digital barbershop provides agency and control for the blogger, insularity and high context for the communication. Within the new digital barbershop, the features of black oral culture are transformed by the users of technology. Each of the features of black oral culture described by Levine takes on new characteristics for bloggers and their communities. They are largely used to achieve the same ends. Three themes emerge within the discourse on the blogs: culture, feminism, and class. Blogs take on different kinds of alternate publics based on the affordances of the platform and the theme of the discourse. Bloggers and their readers shift between goals and motivations in their discourse leading them toward the creation of various kinds of publics used to achieved various ends. Whether accessed within a barber shop in Chicago's Bronzeville during the middle of the 20th century or by blogging each morning from a cubicle, the discourse cultivated by marginalized communities has political consequences. The everyday talk of African Americans in spaces that are intentionally kept separate from the dominant group is used to preserve culture, sustain black institutions, and provide a place to cultivate resistance discourse. While 'shop talk' may be uniquely an African American experience, the formation of counterpublics is not, nor is the utility of new communication technology by marginalized publics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: BARBERSHOPS AND COUNTERPUBLICS

The traditional notion of the public sphere emphasizes equality and voice in a democratic system. This conceptualization ignores marginalized communities who have long struggled for access and who have long built for themselves alternative publics. For the African American community, the black barbershop has been used to form and sustain counterpublics in a way that broadens the concept of political discourse. The legacy of black oral culture demonstrates that political discourse of African Americans occurs in spaces that have been deemed apolitical by the dominant group. In the formation of enclaves, counterpublics, and satellites, African Americans with different goals create spaces to negotiate identity, sustain community, and resist oppression. Oral cultural forms in the everyday and mediated communication of the African American community have shaped and modified racial identity for African Americans. While blogs provide features that replicate the offline shop experience, a critical examination of the use of blogs by African Americans to create an online space for political discourse is largely missing from the current literature.

2.1 Critiquing the Traditional Public Sphere

In order for democracy to be successful, citizens must be able to freely and openly participate in the process (Dahl, 1989). The insistence on open participation acknowledges that people must be free from overt coercion. As Dahl explains, “the best possible state would be one that minimizes coercion and maximizes consent, within limits set by historical conditions and the pursuit of other values, including happiness, freedom, and justice” (p. 57). While this principle

may be widely shared, implementation of a free and equitable system of participation is a constant struggle.

The traditional conception of the public sphere suggests that it can only exist in a society that values individual freedoms, democracy, free speech, and a free press (Habermas, 1989). The public sphere comprises “a set of institutions representing a sort of ‘buffer zone’ between the state/king and private sphere, to protect the people from arbitrary decisions that interfered with what they considered private activities in an irrational way” (Gripsund, 1992, p. 89). According to Ernst (1988), the public sphere is a “distinctive discursive space” within which “individuals are combined so as to be able to assume the role of a politically powerful force” (p. 47). In his influential text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argues that access to information and the possibility to spread positions without fear of government retaliation is necessary for the maintenance of a democratic system. He traces the enactment of public debate to demonstrate the need for public expression. Within the public sphere citizens navigate between the worlds of family and government. In physical spaces, such as squares and clubs, and through use of media, such as journals and newspapers, literate citizens can express their desires and concerns in a public way. Positions that oppose the dominant group acquire a voice in the debate. Positions that differ from those of the state can acquire value. When the political views of citizens are at odds with the government, there is recourse apart from open revolt.

The most glaring issue with this conception of the public sphere is its assumption about equal participation. This idealistic notion does not acknowledge the sociopolitical realities of the early public forums that Habermas praises. Little to no attention is paid to groups that are left out of public debate, such as ethnic minorities, women, and the illiterate. Because these early public

forums were lauded for their emphasis on rationality, stereotypes of women as “irrational” beings could be used to justify their exclusion (Fraser, 1990). Those in control were able to marginalize women and keep them physically and ideologically excluded from the public sphere. A public sphere that is based on rational-critical discourse devalues and excludes certain modes of expression more common to women and marginalized groups (Rabinovitch, 2001). Emotion and aesthetic-affective modes of discourse are, therefore, deemed less significant in a Habermasian conception of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2005).

White, literate, land-owning men constructed themselves as the embodiment of the ‘common man’, and the discourse and interests of white men became the stand-in for public opinion, generally. Prioritizing the bourgeois public sphere ignored other spheres where non-white or non-male groups gathered and engaged in political debate. As Fraser (1990) explains, “Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (p. 61). Whether groups are legally excluded from participation in politics, “impediments to participatory parity can persist long after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate” (p. 63). bell hooks uses the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to remind us of the interlocking systems of oppression that define our sociopolitical reality (hooks, 1992). Given the constructions of the traditional public sphere, we can assess the bourgeoisie public sphere, conceptualized by Habermas, as acting in support of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Another issue with the conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere is the prescription that debate in the public sphere should be restricted to notions of ‘public good’.

Only those authorized as participants in the debate can constitute what counts a ‘public concern’ or the ‘common good’. If marginalized groups are excluded, so are their concerns and their definitions of what defines the ‘public good’. In order to challenge these singular ideas of ‘public good’, one must deconstruct the strict separation between the public and the private spheres (Fraser, 1999). The dichotomy is not helpful in a current conception of civic engagement. Instead, the overlap and intersections between the two can create a new space(s) for civic engagement (Papacharissi, 2010).

Though Habermas argues that social equality is an element of the public sphere, it certainly is not a feature of society at large. The bourgeois public sphere is either not concerned with this feature or assumes that all inequality is meaningless once public debate is enacted. The utilitarian assumption of a singular public sphere assumes that the ‘public good’ is actually good for all. Within an economically and racially stratified society, this cannot be true. As Fraser (1990) explains, “Members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics” (p. 123). She calls these publics “subaltern counterpublics” that serve the dual purpose of constituting places of retreat for marginalized communities and spaces for resistance to be nurtured.

2.2 Counterpublics for Marginalized Communities

Feminist scholars have long argued for the incorporation of the personal as a form of political discourse (Jones, 1949; Mills, 1959). The ‘personal as political’ became a rallying cry for second wave feminists in the 1960s and 1970s as they argued that consciousness raising was

a political tool. Discussion of the personal raises the political awareness of women, leading to collective action and resistance (Hanisch, 1970). When marginalized groups are excluded from public debate and political power, their individual and collective struggles for power on a personal level serve as resistance to a larger superstructure. Resistance includes “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination” (Weitz 2001, p. 670). Resistance should be enacted in public, by the collective, and within sight of the powerful (Weitz, 2001). Black feminist sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins clarifies: racism has created a separate communal structure for African Americans where a culture of resistance may exist apart from the dominant structure (Collins, 2000, p. 226). At times, the gathering of such groups is itself a political act. Conversations that may appear apolitical involving relationships, popular culture, and work raise collective awareness and form community, creating the potential for direct political action and acts of personal and community resistance.

Scholars critical of Habermas agree that marginalized populations have created spaces separate from the singular public sphere but have failed to agree upon what constitutes a counterpublic and whether multiple counterpublics exist within each marginalized community. Rather than considering a singular counterpublic, or assuming homogeneity within marginalized communities, communication scholar Catherine Squires (2002) asserts the need for a reconceptualization of the counterpublic. She offers a model that asserts that the particular historical, social, economic, and political conditions of marginalized group may lead them to form enclaves, counterpublics, and satellites. Enclaves hide counterhegemonic ideas from the dominant group for the purpose of protection and survival. Within an enclave, lively debate exists for the community but does not move beyond that space. Alternately, counterpublics seek

to engage with other publics and may foster community actions like protests and boycotts. Finally, satellites seek spaces separate from the dominant group but engage with other publics. They do so not for purposes of physical protection but in order to keep their cultural identities intact. Satellites intentionally do not cross paths with the dominant public. Squires asserts that the development of satellites, counterpublics or enclaves are responses to “dominant social pressures, legal restrictions, and other challenges from dominant publics and the state” (Squires, 2002, p.457). This vocabulary of enclaves, counterpublics, and satellites emerges to examine the varying goals, resources, and performances of these groups at different times and given different resources and goals. This is not a rigid model. Squires asserts that each type represents a “range of discursive possibilities” that are largely tied to the resources, internal concerns, and cultural norms of the group (p. 457). Varying publics do not reflect moments in history. While one type may be more common in a particular social and political context, Squires identifies these as coexisting black public spheres. The transformative character of the black public spheres forces us to contend with contexts which may initially appear inconsequential but upon closer examination have the potential to generate and support important political discourse.

2.3 Political Discourse in Non-political Spaces

Each of these alternative public spheres harbors important political communication, even when the conversations and debates do not appear to be explicitly or conventionally political. Political communication research tends to focus on the analysis of the political content of the media, the actors, and the agencies involved in the production of content, the political effect of communication, the impact of the political system on the media system, and the impact of the

media system on the political system (Franklin, 1995, p. 255). This conceptualization of political communication centralizes media and political institutions, leaving citizens as merely reactants to a system within which they have little control. Other scholars incorporate new media and its potential to spread messages outside of the dominant mainstream media. Too often, though, the focus remains on burgeoning political parties, NGOs, and other stable organizations (Boncheck, 1995; Bimber, 1998).

Beyond what is explicitly and intentionally political, discourse in spaces deemed apolitical can have important political consequences. Political communication is too often conceived as intentional and purposely political (Denton and Woodward, 1990). Political discourse includes both rhetoric and paralinguistic signs, such as body language, and embodied political acts, such as boycotts and protest (Graber, 1981). While focusing on intentionality, this definition of political language broadens our understanding to include interpersonal political discourse. Such communication is frequently ignored because it is more challenging to uncover and is often hidden from public view (McNair, 1995). Interpersonal political communication, especially by marginalized groups that are often excluded from public political communication, is no less significant than more overt and public political discourse (Herbst, 1994). The intersections between the public and the private creates a space for civic engagement that is very closely tied to the personal.

Consciousness raising challenges the dominant frameworks used to represent and control marginalized communities. As Dahlberg (2005) explains, “It is the *process* that counts. Agreement may ultimately motivate discourse, but the process is more important than the ends. The process is one of *Bildung* [education and formation] from which rational understandings,

citizens, and public opinions develop” (p. 128). Whether or not participants view their participation as political in character, their actions may still act to resist dominant ideology (Scott 1990). This participation helps to “frame political debates and create focal points for the media as a whole” (Farrell & Drezner, 2008, p. 28). For African Americans, who have long been, and continue to be, kept from direct participation in the American political process, consciousness raising in places like the physical and virtual barbershop and beauty shop is an important part of building and sustaining community. Squire’s (2002) model of counterpublics acknowledges the important role that media play in crafting the ideology of Black Americans and concedes that negative imagery of African Americans pushes them to create enclaves, counterpublics and satellites. Everyday talk within barbershops and other mediated enclaves, counterpublics and satellites relies on oral traditions to interrogate the complexities of racialized political discourse.

2.4 Black Oral Culture as a Rhetorical Strategy

Rethinking the public sphere from a feminist and afro-centrist perspective begins with an interrogation of role that orality plays in the unique experience of those of African descent in the U.S. The U.S. was built and expanded with an emphasis on paper and literacy. Literacy has heavily influenced the structure of the government, our relationship to religion, and our creation of hierarchical systems of power distribution and social organization. Time-based media, such as speech, are limited by their extension into time and favor stability, community, and tradition. Space-based media extend influence and facilitate rapid change, development, and ‘progress’ (Innis, 1950). In the U.S., the dominant group’s emphasis on space-based media links our mode of communication to our quest for dominance, order, and power. The interplay between the

written and spoken word can be overlooked when technological determinism shapes Western emphasis on writing (Finnegan, 1988). Literacy has been privileged in Western society for its ability to separate ideas from the thinkers and create an ‘objectivity’ that orality does not (Innis, 1950). While literacy contributes greatly to a contemporary society, orality adds symbolic complexity, individual creativity, and complex audience relations (Finnegan, p.1988). Speaking provides the opportunity for reaction whereas writing offers delayed response (Sidran, 1971). In prioritizing the rational, literacy has moved the dominant U.S. culture away from an appreciation of emotionality and community. While writing has seemingly made us more ‘civilized’ through the creation of the individual, the provision of continuity between time and space, and the uniformity of codes, and our ability to be more expressive and communal is diminishing greatly (McLuhan, 1962; 1964).

Dominant U.S. culture has been maintained through a reliance on literacy, print, and now electronic communication. African American culture, however, has been maintained in the preservation of oral culture. Black culture was created and transformed in a process that included slavery and the merging of practices, traditions, and modes of communication of various Western African ethnic groups and colonial American (European) traditions. The hybrid culture that formed here in the U.S. is strongly connected to African traditions of orality. While only 106 languages have written forms, every society has oral language, and it is the primary means of communication (Ong, [1988] 2002). Primary oral cultures are those untouched by literacy and writing. Orality has implications for knowledge and recall and possesses several salient features. In a primary oral culture, a person can know only as much as she can recall, making mnemonics important cognitive and social tools and proverbs emerge as a means to evaluate decisions. Oral

cultures tend to be additive in discourse rather than subordinative. Aggregate expressions are taken in total (sturdy oak, glorious revolution). Literacy separates into nouns and adjectives what oral cultures understand as whole ideas. Oral cultures also rely on tradition more heavily to preserve knowledge over time. This leads to respect and near worship of those ‘wise’ ‘experts’ who serve as guardians of the culture’s truth. Those who are a part of oral cultures are more concerned with the ‘real world’ than with abstractions. Oral cultures are not objective, but empathic in their speech. Since there is no written record, they can disregard those things that cause conflict or discrepancy. The interiority of sound places man at the center of his universe within a society of primary orality. These features separate oral cultures from print-based cultures (Ong, [1988] 2002). The traditional conception of the bourgeois public sphere centers knowledge within a literate society. Black counterpublics instead center knowledge and debate within the realm of orality. Four primary elements of African American oral culture in America exemplify the features of orality as described by Ong. They are the sacred song, slave tales, the secular song and humor, and African American folklore and folk heroes (Levine, 1977).

2.4.1 Sacred songs hide dissent

The sacred song, or spiritual, is indicative of aspects of life (religion, humor, politics, etc.) being intertwined in the oral traditions of African Americans. The spiritual provided for the slave a way of expressing a sense of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation and an articulation of the desire for freedom. During the period of chattel slavery, systematic attempts to suppress the native religions of slaves led to an adoption and re-appropriation of the Christian religion. While slaves were restricted in their ability to congregate, expression of Christian faith allowed for

Slaves utilized the motifs of the Old Testament to create the double meanings of sacred songs used to guide collective revolt, signal rebellion, and voice dissent (Levine, 1977, p. 75).

Spirituals differed from hymns and popularized gospel songs that told of salvation and the 'Good News' of the Bible. Instead, spirituals often focused on the harsh conditions of slavery and the desire for freedom. Biblical places like Canaan symbolized safe havens for escaping slaves. The river Jordan stood for bodies of water like the Mississippi, which slaves had to cross on their journey to freedom. The song "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," captures this dual meaning with the lyrics "I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home, a band of angels comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home." While seemingly referencing the Jordan River of Israel and a group of celestial beings, many argue that the coded language of the song actually refers to the Underground Railroad, with the river Jordan actually standing in for the Mississippi and heaven referencing the North and freedom.

Sacred songs provided a means to express, out loud, the anguish and peril of slavery and the hope of freedom that remained (Thurman, 1975; Fisher, 1990). Beyond the lyrics, the music of the spiritual was refashioned as a cultural form of expression that was unique to the African American experience (Southern, 1997). The spiritual, or sacred song, also reflects the ability of a marginalized people to re-appropriate Christianity, which was used as a tool of oppression, in the pursuance of freedom. Since the dominant group was not aware of the dual meanings of the song, dissent could be voiced openly and without consequence.

2.6.2 Folktales and cunning

The folktales of slaves, which still exist today in many forms, enabled African Americans to craft a world where people of their own race were centered. Re-centering the experience via storytelling is a common facet of African Americans' oral communication. This world-building and centering function of storytelling allows oral cultures to foreground their own importance even as they are often de-centered in the discourse of more dominant literate cultures. Folklore is a communicative process, performative in nature (Ben-Amos, 1989), and "is constantly reflecting and refashioning the experience of the community" (Akoma, 2007). Common themes in the folktales of oral cultures are important indicators of cultural assumptions and values. The use of trickery in folktales to gain power is one such recurring theme in African American folklore with roots in West African tales (Roberts, 1989). Br'er Rabbit, for example, a trickster character, uses brains rather than brawn to overpower his enemies. While characters often serve as examples of behavior to be modeled, tales can be cautionary as well.

The emphasis on the use of words and cunning to manipulate and gain power, and the performative nature of these tales, demonstrates the importance of mastering oral communication within the community. The trickster tale and the folktale showcase linguistic prowess and verbal cunning in stories that are about both content and performance. This dual purpose signals the importance of face-to-face community interaction within an oral culture. The introduction of writing, on the other hand, signals an alienation of the spoken word (Havelock, 1963; Ong, 1977). When the need for recall and performance dissipates, so too can the aesthetic pleasure of storytelling and the cultural and philosophical thoughts embedded and enacted in the forms of interaction of a given community (Akoma, 2007).

2.4.3 Secular song critique and parody

Secular song and humor are embedded with themes of grievance and sexual relations that cannot be addressed in sacred music. Humor allowed for a release of the aggression that typically had to remain guarded in conditions of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. An example of the combination of humor and culturally condoned release of aggression, as well as the importance placed upon verbal prowess, is the practice of ‘signifyin’. In popular English vernacular, the term ‘signification’ refers to denotation of meaning through the use of a sign or word. Within the African American community, the term ‘signifying’ generally refers to a verbal contest where the most imaginative user of indirection, irony, and insult wins (Lee, 1993). It is an elaborate, indirect form of goading or insult, at times making use of profanity (Bell, 1987). Signifying is also defined as, implying, goading, or boasting by indirect verbal or gestural means (Abrahams, 1999). The origin of ‘signifyin’ is commonly ascribed to the poem, “The Signifying Monkey,” a story that has been recounted in music and comedy routines since the beginning of the 20th century. The Signifying Monkey is a character of African-American folklore that derives from Esu Elegbara, the trickster figure of Yoruba mythology (Gates, 1989). In this poem, set in the jungle, a monkey repeatedly hurls insults at the lion claiming that he is merely repeating the words of the elephant. As the lion becomes more enraged, he decides to confront the elephant. The elephant beats the lion mercilessly. The lion realizes that the monkey has tricked him and has only been “signifyin(g).”

According to Gates (1989), signifyin(g) “functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition” (p. xxii). In this context, authors reuse motifs from previous works, altering them and “signifying” upon them so as to create their

own meanings. Signifying is a necessary tool used to manage identity and community, and previous literature discussing signifyin(g) as it relates to African American literature (Bell, 1987; Gates, 1989) has identified ‘oppositional’ and ‘cooperative’ forms. Signifying must be acknowledged in this context as a vital cultural practice rather than as a lesser form of language use (Lee, 1993, p.11). Signifying is a trope that includes several other rhetorical tropes and demonstrates the verbal prowess and linguistic intelligence of the African American community.

Another subset of secular humor and cultural expression in African American communities is an activity called ‘playing the dozens’, or more simply ‘the dozens’. The key distinction between ‘the dozens’ and signifyin(g) is the directness of the insult. Within signification, the objective is to achieve the insult in the most elaborate and indirect manner possible. Thus, verbal maneuvers often include some form of trickery. ‘The dozens’ is best described as a contest of personal power—of wit, self-control, verbal ability, mental agility, and mental toughness. In most cases two parties exchange barbs with increasing intensity (Leland, 2004). While there may be a ‘winner’ based on the reaction of the crowd, the activity is more often done without the formality of a contest as a means to pass the time. Another distinction is that ‘the dozens’ have traditionally been considered a pastime for men rather than women. The tenacity of the insults used in playing dozens is not couched in indirectness or satire, and thus it is often believed to be a more masculine form of address. However some of the best dozens players were women, a fact that has been commonly ignored in both media representations and academic research.

Signifyin(g) and the dozens are also used to critique negative characteristics of the community as a form of community self-disciplining. As Levine (1997) explains, “the need to

laugh at our enemies, our situation, ourselves is a common one, but exists more urgently in those who exert the least power over their immediate environment” (p. 300). Anti-bellum work songs were used by African Americans to “criticize, parody, and sharply comment on society and their situation” (p. 194).

2.4.4 Work songs, heroes and the maintenance of dignity

The work songs of African Americans were an instrument used to co-opt forced labor, removing the mental power from those in physical control. The songs acknowledge the power the whites held in a racialized system of separation and the diminished status of African Americans in the 19th century (Bay, 2000). The songs, sung during the labor process that furthers this system of oppression, function as an act of community re-appropriation. A rhyme sung by black field workers exemplifies this process. William Wells Brown (1853) first transcribed the song as follows:

The bee flies high.
The little bee makes money;
The black folks makes the cotton
And the white folks get the money.

Bartlett explains that this music reveals what Dubois (1903) refers to as “‘second sight’, the process by which the minority knows the majority not only better than the obverse, but often better than the majority knows itself” (Bartlett, 1994). While used as a tool to recognize oppression, the songs often reified systems of patriarchy, colorism, and racial hegemony, cementing the ideology of the oppressor in the minds of the oppressed.

African American heroes, who tended to be meek and quietly manipulative in folklore, became more powerful and confrontational of authority as African Americans sought additional

rights. Exaggerated tales of African Americans fighting for their rights were important in crafting dignity and strength for the community. African American heroes emerge in the literature of Black Renaissance writers like Lorraine Hansberry and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as in Black films of the 1960s like *The Great White Hope*.

All of these aspects of African American oral tradition and orality more generally continue to help to build a community that developed in opposition to the dominant U.S. culture in values, systems of power, and communicative traditions. Though dominant U.S. culture and African American culture evolved over the same period of time and often in the same geographic spaces, the communicative features of the two are often in direct opposition. The high context needed to participate in African American oral culture is in opposition to the highly structured, public, and codified communication of the dominant group. The preservation of oral communication is evident even as African Americans embraced literacy. African American oral rhetorical strategies are a part of a cultural legacy rather than a cultural deficiency. Further, they serve as a strategy used to pass on history, empower, subvert oppression, assert agency, and create representations of self and community (Fulton, 2006). This reliance on orality is a necessary force in the maintenance of cultural traditions that have long worked to assist in group definition and acts of resistance in political power struggles. By utilizing song, narrative, and fables to articulate resistance and craft African American identity, African American oral culture suggests politically significant everyday discourse is at the center of the black counterpublics and political discourse in the African American community. These features of orality can be found in black barbershop both as a physical space and in the mediated barbershop talk within the African American community.

2.5 The Black Barbershop as a Hush Harbor

During slavery and in the antebellum South, black men who worked as barbers did not serve black customers. Following emancipation, those who were trained as barbers exclusively served a white clientele, and in some cases refused to allow other African Americans in the shop (Bristol, 2009). This was a matter of necessity to keep their white customers content in a segregated Jim Crow south. In this practice, black barbers negotiated public and private selves, making sacrifices to attain financial independence by maintaining separate identities at home and in the workplace. In the mid-1800s, a shift began to occur. Peter Howard, a black barber in Baltimore, used his shop as a stop on the Underground Railroad. John Smith, another black barber in Baltimore, began hosting political forums (Bristol, 2009, p. 75). Because of their professional training, black barbers had access to leadership roles in churches, fraternities, and other black organizations involved in abolition movements (Mills, 2013). Some black barbers continued to cater to an exclusively white middle- and upper-middle-class clientele as a matter of economic necessity. White patrons still flocked to black barbershops feeling that they should be served by blacks (Berlin, 1974; Mills, 2013). Deteriorating race relations in the late 19th century were less to blame for the decline of white-only, black-operated barber shops than the Journeymen Barber International Union of America's campaign for sanitation and hygiene. The union engaged in this campaign in order to dissuade white patronage of black barbers who were largely not unionized, and it was effective in driving a wedge between the barbers, who could not afford the latest sterilization equipment, and their white customers (Bristol, 2009, p. 163).

In the early and mid-20th century, the black barbershop, which was once a space reserved for white men, became an enclave within the African American community. Black barbers took

their professional skills and moved their shops to black neighborhoods, carrying with them financial independence. Black barbers began to focus on the unique needs of black hair care. In 1920, over 200 black barbershops were in operation in the city of Chicago along with 108 beauty salons catering to a black clientele (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). In these shops, black working and middle-class male patrons received services for their hair while engaging in the rituals of black hair care and everyday talk. In black beauty salons the same ritualistic communication occurred.

Celebrated for their potential to foster economic stability for small business owners, pride for customers, and as a site of cultural reproduction, the barber and beauty shops are also spaces where gender separation is apparent. Though a space hidden from the dominant gaze, the black barbershop has become recognized by scholars as a site of significance within the community. The barbershop signifies the cultural tradition of crafting community identities and asserting challenges to the dominant narratives about African American men that permeate American culture. While the history of the barbershop informs this study, so too does the further marginalization of black female spaces, even within the African American community. Black women are uniquely positioned between multiple systems of oppression, including race and gender (Collins, 2000). The barbershop, where culture and politics were debated, was a male-dominated space where hegemonic masculinity prevailed and women were often excluded as meaningful participants.

Beauty shop talk also builds upon features of primary orality in its reliance upon empathic communication over objective knowledge. Rather than the debates of the barbershop, the beauty shop creates a safe space of communal sharing. Black feminist writers explain this differentiation as a privileging of personal ways of knowing and writing, narrative, and dialogue

over debate, validation of emotion, and personal accountability. In the beauty shop, these facets of African American oral culture are more pronounced. Black feminist writers insist that theory and systems of knowledge that exist outside of what is normalized as scientific, such as narrative, poems, and songs, should be considered valuable as well (Lorde, 1983; Thomas, 1998). This preference for beauty shop talk is demonstrated in both the physical space of the beauty shop and the mediated reconstructions of these spaces.

As was the case for male proprietors of the barbershop, the hair care industry has also traditionally provided a means of economic mobility for black women. The first black female millionaire made her fortune by creating a line of hair care products for black women. She went on to train other black women to open salons and train what she referred to as “hair culturists” (Colman, 1994). The complicated and time-consuming task of hair grooming included washing, combing, oiling, braiding, twisting, and/or decorating the hair with any number of adornments including cloth, beads, and shells. This process could last several hours, sometimes several days” (Byrd &Tharps, 2001, 5-6). No less skilled than their male counterparts, their businesses served a cultural need in the community but has not received the same attention as the barber shop as an enclave of importance in the community.

2.6 Mediated Shop Talk and the Creation of a Counterpublic

The technology of black hair care within the barber and beauty shops previews the technological prowess of black journalists, radio hosts, and bloggers in navigating new technologies of communication. The unique nature of black hair care and the discourse that

surrounds the practice make hairstyling an “in-group activity” (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). Early black barbers catered to a white clientele by keeping personal identity hidden. In sharp contrast, the more recent black barbershop is a place of retreat for African American clientele and barbers. Outside the gaze of the dominant group, African Americans can openly discuss things personal to the community with no need to hide their opinions and ideas for fear of reprisal. The shop provides a place where no one is confused by African American hair, and no explanation is needed for one’s hair care needs: the need to explain or justify black hair or identity is absent. This frees the space to be used for other discursive purposes, including political communication.

As an integral part of its explicit historical function of speaking for and to the black community, the Black Press creates counter-frames in opposition to those found in the mainstream press. The Black Press includes publications that are black-owned, intended for a black audience, and ‘serve, speak, and fight for the black minority’. While the press is obviously connected to the written word more directly than to legacies of primary orality, the utility and form of the Black Press mirror components of black oral culture, such as spirituals, work songs, and folktales. Early publications like *Freedom’s Journal* were created with the expressed purpose of pushing an abolitionist agenda. Magazines like *Our World*, *Bronze World*, and Marcus Garvey’s newspaper *The Negro World* worked to re-center the experiences of African Americans. The titles of these publications give insight into their creators’ attempts to help the community focus on issues of the greatest consequence to the black community. Black newspapers, such as the daily *The Chicago Defender*, had circulations in the hundreds of thousands at their peak in the first half of the 20th century (*Editor and Publisher International Year Book*, 1970). *Ebony* and *Jet*, which are monthlies, had estimated circulations in the millions

in the mid-20th century. The success of counter-framing can perhaps best be illustrated in the examples of *The Chicago Defender* and *Jet* magazine.

When John Abbott founded *The Chicago Defender* in 1905, three other African American-owned publications already existed in the city of Chicago: *The Broad Ax*, *Illinois Idea*, and *The Conservator*. There were also two large out-of-state publications: *Indiana Freeman* and *New York Age*. *The Defender* carved out a place and eventually overtook the others in popularity because Abbott chose to champion black causes, embrace a muckraking style, and use sensationalism to captivate readers (Wolseley, 1971). *The Defender* covered local elections, provided information on candidates, and encouraged participation from the community to support black leaders and business owners (Herbst, 1994). The Bronzeville community in Chicago, where the paper was published, held shadow elections for African Americans as black politicians were prevented from truly participating in mainstream politics. *The Defender* promoted these elections, which served as a ritual of dissent on the part of Bronzeville residents. *The Defender* was a place for the development of opinion, interest, and expression (Herbst, 1994). It was also the first unionized black newspaper. By 1935, the paper began to add more cartoons and personal columns, and space was devoted to society, culture, and fashion. Abbott and *The Defender* created a community discourse and the potential to challenge the dominant narrative about African Americans that existed in the popular press.

Stories about African Americans in the mainstream media were limited to negative stereotypes, crime stories, or outright exclusion; in *The Defender*, blacks were the center of their own universe and in charge of their own story. Such counter-frames are essential to a new conception of a multicultural public sphere. In focusing on their exclusion from the mainstream,

communication research often misses the complexity of counterpublics (Herbst, 1994). Too often scholars conceptualize what the public sphere should look like, rather than what it actually does look like. There are multiple publics and multiple public spheres, each having their own infrastructure and public opinion (Herbst, 1994 p.19).

Social movements are predicated upon the possibility of building and sustaining counter-frames (Gamson, 1992), and the conversations that exist in such counterpublics are the basis for crafting public opinion. After the gruesome murder of Emmitt Till, a Chicago teen visiting family in Mississippi, *Jet* magazine published a photo of Till's open casket on the cover. Mamie Till-Mobley chose to have an open casket for her disfigured son. As she said, "I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby" (ref). Thousands waited in line at the funeral, but when *Jet* published the photo, the world saw the implications of a segregated Jim Crow South. Till's murder and the national conversation that emerged from the publication of his funeral photo became part of the foundation for the Civil Rights movement. Beyond reshaping the frame for the dominant group, the publication of this photo created community solidarity and pushed a social movement forward. Social movements are reflexive, forcing participants to deal with issues of identity and ideology. The goal of the social movement is political action, which begins with consensus-building. In publishing the photo of Till, *Jet* created a space where the black community came together to grieve the loss of a child and to grieve for a nation wherein this kind of racial violence could occur. Civil rights leaders made use of the graphic and vile images of racism to compel a community to action and to change the hearts and minds of a nation.

Study of the counterpublic forces attention to the complexities of the communicative cultures of non-dominant groups, as well as the character of political expression (Fraser, 1990).

While citizens engage in both regulatory and voluntary communication, it is only in voluntary communication that sociability necessitates equal conversational partners (Clark, 1969). The Black Press created a space for this kind of conversation amongst equals that did not exist for African Americans in the mainstream press. While the conversation did not always appear political in nature, there are significant political implications for African Americans' ability to write and report on their communities and promote those frames that challenge the dominant discourse. Though a print medium, the lingering attention to communal sharing, the emphasis on the black hero, and the re-centering of the black experience are drawn from African American oral culture. Even in formalized writing in black publications, we see that possibilities for revolution and activism begin with the racial/political discourse of the everyday.

Black radio is a medium that relies upon oral communication rather than print. Newspapers like *The Defender* replicate the workings of the barbershop through their re-centering of the African American experience and in their reliance upon black heroes in the story arcs journalists used to discuss black figures of importance to the community. Black radio builds upon this reliance of black rhetorical strategy and black oral culture. Radio provides reciprocal communication and additive discourse. Unlike print media where mainstream ideas of journalism pushed writing toward the objective, radio hosts were more empathic in their speech. The ability to intermingle humor into the discourse on the radio also set it apart from black newspapers. Finally, the intermingling of the spoken word with music makes the radio DJ an arbiter of information and culture for the community.

The physical barbershop, the black press, and the black presence in popular radio all demonstrate the power of a lively yet hidden counterpublic. While African American culture has

been represented on television, the medium's structure and corporate control have excluded African American's as content creators. Stereotypic depictions of African Americans have been a common feature on the small screen since its inception and widespread proliferation (C.C. Clark, 1969; Berry, 1980). In recent years, some African American writers, producers and directors have found their shows on niche and major television networks. Even as diverse images become more common, television has not routinely served the same function as 'hush harbor': the space is not conducive to content that resists the dominant ideology. Networks that seek to carve out separate spaces for the African American community have wrestled with challenges based on corporate ownership and the push for additional advertising revenue (Smith-Shomade, 2007). Within these constraints, African Americans still have incorporated various mediums and physical spaces in the process of black racial identity formation.

2.7 Black Oral Culture and Racial Formation

Race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interest by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). According to Omi and Winant, racial groups go through a process of racial formation in which "racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). Racial formation is a process carried out by historically situated 'racial projects', whereby "human bodies and social structure are represented and organized" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55-56).

While large scale racial projects still actively work to keep racial hierarchy intact, enclaves, counterpublics, and satellite publics are examples of micro-projects formed by African Americans as a means to challenge to systems of oppression. Individuals come to understand

themselves in both private and public ways that are both personal and political. As Omi & Winant (1994) insist, “everybody learns some combination, some version of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation” (p. 60). Discourse within racial groups, particularly for African Americans, is simultaneously introspective and political. The traditional or virtual barbershop requires the assembly of a marginalized group outside of the restrictions of the dominant society. Within these spaces, articulations of resistance to dominant frames and discussions of racial politics do the work of re-articulating personal identity, group categorization, and racial ideology. While Squires (2002) conceptualizes of enclaves, counterpublics, and satellites as physical spaces wherein African American congregate, we see the creation of these spaces in the utilization of various communication technologies as well. As previously discussed, the Black Press and black radio often acted to sustain the creation of enclaves, satellites, and counterpublics. Yet to be addressed in communication literature is how blogs as a medium may incorporate African American rhetorical strategies in the creation of the multiple publics African Americans use to negotiate their racial identity.

2.8 Blogs as Present Day Barbershop

The age of electronic media, widely signaled a shift to a secondary orality for the dominant U.S. culture (McLuhan, 1994; Ong, 1982). Patterns of interaction online further a shift back to the oral (December, 1993; Ferris & Wilder, 2006; Fowler, 1994; Harnad, 1991; Rheingold, 1993). Features like their additive, redundant, and polychronic nature, signal that

blogs and social network sites (SNSs) demonstrate the adoption of secondary orality in the dominant culture in the U.S. Given the continuing significance of orality among those of African descent, it is not surprising that African Americans readily participate in social networking and blogging (Brock, 2009; 2011; Esco, 2011; Madden et al, 2013). Blog sites offer an interface wherein users can connect with one another. Blog posts and comments house political discourse, and blogging communities form insular spaces separate from the dominant culture to interrogate issues of concern to marginalized communities.

2.8.1 Blogs as an interface

Many scholars have heralded blogs for their democratizing potential, voicing of political concerns (Scott, 2007; Tremayne, 2007), mobilizing movements, and changing the discourse in the mainstream media (Walker Rettberg, 2008). Blogs are defined as web pages that consist of regular or daily posts, arranged in reverse chronological order, and archived (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004). Beginning as online diaries and hand-coded lists of weblinks in the mid-1990s, blogs have evolved into a number of different forms. In the early 2000s, blogging systems enabled the average internet user to successfully create their own blogs, opening up the possibility of publishing to a wider array of users. Blogs can broadly be divided into three categories based on size: A-list blogs, blogs that are somewhat interconnected, and sparsely socially connected, mainly self-confessional blogs (Herring et al., 2005; Papacharissi, 2007). A-List blogs usually have a particular audience that closely mirrors the individual's personal social sphere (Papacharissi & Meraz, in press). Content on such blogs often blurs lines between the informative and the socially connective (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead,

2010). Another means of differentiating blogs is by content. Blogs can be considered personal, information filtering, or topic-driven (Walker Rettberg, 2008). Personal blogs deal with an individual author's life. Filter blogs mainly provide links to other web content. Topic-driven blogs may vary in size and can be published by an individual, a collective, or a corporation. Blogs are a medium rather than a genre and as such take on many forms and types with various audience sizes, relationships with advertisers, and content. While holding unique qualities, blogs generally consist of frequent, brief postings, are personal in form, and are social, encouraging readers to leave comments (Walker Rettberg, 2008).

The production of many blogs complicates traditional notions of consumer and producer. Coined by new media scholar Axel Bruns (2008), the term "produsage" goes beyond allowing the consumer to provide feedback to the producer. The key principles of produsage in such a community are: open participation/communal evaluation, fluid hierarchy/ad hoc meritocracy, unfinished artifacts/continued process, common property/individual rewards. Producers believe that more contributors and contributions will lead to better outcomes. Extending participation to more people draws upon the knowledge of the masses rather than the (elite) few. Because of the reliance upon community evaluation, negative contributions can be quickly identified and dealt with accordingly. Rather than the blogger being wholly accountable for the maintenance of the blog, participants are invested and act as co-producers. This mimics the kind of communal culture of the black barber and beauty shops.

While participants on 'black blogs' may not know each other offline, their group membership and shared racial experience may yield some of the relational qualities typically found in the physical spaces of the barber and beauty shop. Blogging has evolved in recent years

to take on more of the features of other online platforms, like social network sites (SNSs), that have in turn created new features that are additive to those of traditional blogs. SNSs are web-based services that allow individuals to “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others in the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). They include features of sociability, meaningful connection, conviviality, and, perhaps, empathy and support (Parks, 2010). SNSs are organized around connections to people rather than affinities with interests. SNSs are commonly understood to make public the connections users already have offline, but this is increasingly not the case. Many blogs now allow for frequent readers to create profiles, ‘fan’ other users, and send private messages. Unlike Twitter or Instagram, where users are connected via hashtag or by following certain accounts, blogs replicate the environment of the barbershop in several ways. The spaces, while open to public view, create an illusion of privacy for the participants. As barbershops served as ‘enclaves’ so too do blogs that exist apart from the public sphere yet foster exchange and debate for participants. Blogs also have a central facilitator for dialogue. Much like the barber or beautician who, as proprietor of their establishment, monitors discourse, the blogger begins dialogue and benefits from continued community engagement. It is within this context that the democratizing potential of blogs can be explored for the black community. The act of introspection on blogs can be a tool of self-actualization. In the context of a marginalized or maligned group, this can embolden the community and serve the political functions of consciousness raising and community building.

2.8.2 Blogs as sites of discourse

African Americans have historically used non-political spaces for conversations of political importance, and discussions regarding race are both deeply personal and issues of public significance. Being both public and private in character counterpublics are useful for such issues because they provide access to both information and to others, can cross geographic boundaries, and allow for reciprocity in communication (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 118). The concept of the doubling of space (Meyrowitz, 1985) articulates how an event can occur in both a physical space and mediated one. Members of the black blogging community may experience racialized events while physically apart from one another but experience them again together online. The convergence of online spaces blurs lines and boundaries between what is social and what is political. Blogs have the potential to illustrate the already common act of locating the political *within* the context of the personal and social: the boundaries are not simply blurred but non-existent. Because of the shift to a secondary orality within dominant Western society, groups like African Americans who have retained an oral culture are in a unique position to capitalize on this new technology. Blog posts that appear on non-political blog websites may serve as political forums when the identities and positions espoused by participants are in conflict with dominant society. Even conversations with little obvious political significance to the dominant group, like ‘natural’ versus ‘processed’ hair have consequences for racial group identity definition and resistance to assimilation. While humans rarely convene outside of pre-ordained rituals to discuss matters that are purely political (Papacharissi, 2010), this is especially true for minority populations whose gatherings are more heavily monitored by the state.

Having ‘voice’, as a minority group, is paramount to the achievement of true democratic participation (Coleman & Ross, 2010). Denying an individual or group the ability to tell their own story is to “deny a basic dimension of human life” (Couldry, 2010, p. 7). Voice is socially grounded, performed through exchange, reflexive, embodied, and dependent on material force (Couldry, 2010, p. 91). True research must include practices of recognition and inquiry into the obstructions and resistance to obstruction on the part of minority groups in the process of attaining ‘voice’. Recognizing the metaphorical voice of the African American community is accomplished in conjunction with recognizing the significance of orality for African Americans. Everyday talk as a part of storytelling, rhetorical wordplay, and sacred and secular song within black oral culture creates challenges to the dominant discourse, builds consensus, allows space for dissent, and creates the possibility of social change. These features are not immediate and are difficult to measure empirically. For this reason, they are often overlooked. This is especially the case if our lens does not allow for alternate definitions of political participation and does not recognize racial formation in intra-group dialogue.

African Americans have an increasing presence online (Fox, Zickuhr, & Smith, 2009; Purcell et. al, 2010., Smith, 2014) and more examples of online blogging communities that are both race- and interest-based are emerging (Brock 2010; Igwe, 2008; Kvasny, Payton & Hales, 2010; Poole, 2005). The literature suggests that the everyday conversations of African Americans in online spaces mimics black oral cultures of the past in both content and form (Brock, 2010; Florini, 2014). Online spaces provide users the potential to engage in short retorts, are additive rather than subordinative, redundant, can be agonistic, and center the experiences of the user. They let us know the extent to which minority populations can resist ideological control

and awareness of the dominant group's attempts at coercion (Scott, 1985). While "media are not the holders of power, they constitute by and large the space where power is decided" (Castells, 2007, p. 242). Much of the resistance to the dominant discourse is commonly overlooked because researchers often assume it must happen in inter-group dialogue rather than intra-group dialogue.

2.8.3 Blogs as online community

Online communities can be as significant in shaping individual and group notions of racial identity as offline communities. In the literature in the 1990s, as the internet expanded and more everyday people became responsible for the creation of content online, and as scholars and the public searched for metaphors to describe interaction through this new media platform, the term 'virtual community' replaced the metaphor of the 'information superhighway' (Rheingold, 1993). Virtual communities are "social groups that display the psychological and cultural qualities of strong community without physical proximity" (Wilson, 2006, p.22). The relationships formed or maintained online are often just as real for the participants as those they often experience offline, and the term 'virtual' can imply a secondary status that is not actually indicative of the experience of belonging to a virtual community nor the significance of interactions and relationships. As internet researcher Caroline Haythornthwaite (2006) explains, "it is possible to liberate community from its physical setting and see it as based on relations that can be maintained anywhere and via any technology that makes interaction possible" (p. 2).

Online communities have a few central features that replicate offline communities (Parks, 2010). The first is that the groups maintain a shared social meaning. In order to be unified when

geographic proximity is lacking, members must participate in the community by sharing values, practices, or beliefs. They also engage in collective action, shared ritual, social regulations, patterns of behavior, similar means of identification, and self-awareness; features all central to the rhetorical strategies embedded in African American oral tradition. Violations of the norms created by the community result in repercussions for the individual (Baym, 2003).

The congregation of African Americans online doesn't merely replicate *de facto* segregation offline. Rather it illustrates a lingering desire for racial community in a time when post-raciality is the mantra of neo-liberalism. As online communities develop and grow, so too does the ability to negotiate identity within, fostering processes of identity negotiation based on race and other signifiers. For some, the audiences they encounter online may be much different than those individuals and groups they interact with and among in their daily physical encounters. The inherent segregation and socio-economic stratification in the U.S. necessitates that many African Americans work and live in very 'white spaces' (Feagan, Vera & Imani, 1996; Reskin, McBrier, & Kmec, 1999). For those who must routinely interact with people outside of their race and/or culture for purposes of work or school, their online selves may actually be interacting in a way that feels more natural than their offline selves. Studying race online often leads to a surplus of studies on racial aggression and in interracial online discourse. While there is no doubt that this is important work, the communal nature of blogs should point us toward the intra-racial. Online spaces have the potential to foster community (Blanchard, 2004; Johnson, 2001; Jones, 1995, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1999). In considering blogs as potential sites of community, one must do so "to uncover a variable of social relations and understand

what community, as a model of social organization, is and does in specific socio-historical contexts” (Yuan, 2013).

2.9 The Digital Barbershop

According to Ong (1988), writing separates ideas from the thinker and acts to create a sort of ‘objectivity’ that orality cannot/did not. The form of writing is significant in ordering and privileging our understanding of the text (Ong, 1988). The dynamic structure of blogs, where newer posts appear at the top of the screen, challenges the traditional horizontal-vertical system for organized formal writing, instead reflecting the dynamic character of spoken communication. Many new online platforms allow users to replicate features of oral culture, creating a more natural process of explanation and storytelling. On social network sites, blogs, and other online media, there is a shift away from elite notions of knowledge, definitive ‘correctness’ in writing, and notions of traditionally conceived privacy that reflect the community-building priorities of orality more than the hierarchical priorities of literacy.

Given the legacy of black oral culture in the physical space of the barbershop and mediated spaces where African Americans gather to form counterpublics, this study examines online blogging communities for their potential to do the same. Past scholarship has referenced the idea of the barbershop to explain the ‘third space’ that the internet provides for African Americans (Brock, 2009). Absent though, is a critical technocultural discourse analysis to understand the production of African American oral culture as utilized within blog sites and within the discourse present on those sites. Although the oral culture of African Americans has been explored across disciplines, blogs as a medium have not yet been studied as replicating

physical and mediated counterpublics that foster political debate and dialogue. While these sites are not overtly political in nature, the legacy of oral culture and black counterpublics suggest that themes of political consequence emerge wherever counterpublics form. Through the process of critical technocultural discourse analysis, we can examine how the structure of blogs mirrors features of the barbershop, what rhetorical strategies are employed on these sites, and why blogs fulfil a need within the African American community to create alternate publics by examining the political themes of discourse.

2.10 Conclusion

Rather than a singular public sphere, marginalized communities engage in the formation of multiple publics. African Americans, instead of forming a homogenous counterpublic, create enclaves, counterpublics, and satellite communities that have different goals and motivations for their creation. Black oral culture has historically been used as a strategy by a community excluded from the dominant group and the mainstream public sphere. African American rhetorical strategies can be found in the everyday interactions of the community. Shop talk, as found in the physical barber/beauty shop or in mediated discourse is critical in the process of racial formation in the U.S. Missing from the currently literature is an exploration of current black publics in their utilization of blogs as a medium that most closely mirrors the shop talk of the past.

In discussing new media technology scholars often focus on the new provisions users have at their disposal and the ways that human interaction is changed by interacting with technology. Exploring the legacy of orality in the black community, one instead sees how the

technology of the human voice and the creativity of marginalized communities have provided communities a means of cultivating and preserving communication in the midst of oppression. As technology changes, African Americans have adapted new forms of media to fit the needs of the group. Rather than being restricted or bound by issues of access, African Americans fostered important political discourse in physical spaces, print, and radio. Building upon the features of the medium, marginalized communities can draw connections between their traditional forms of communication and new technology. In the case of blogs, black oral culture and shop talk may provide African Americans with a unique ability to navigate and manipulate the technology in the creation of alternate publics. African American oral culture is studied as art and a form of cultural expression. For those who used the rhetorical strategies of black oral culture in voicing dissent, re-centering the African experience, critiquing oppressive systems on the American continent, and maintaining dignity, everyday discourse was a political strategy. Therefore, in the history of black oral culture, the lines between art, politics, and technology become blurred. While African American art, politics, and technology can be studied separately, understanding their interrelated nature in the African American experience provides a more in-depth analysis of how everyday discourse online can foster the creation of alternate public spheres. The literature has thus far lacked an in-depth analysis of black blogs outside of the realm of what is typically considered political. Analysis of African American participation online requires a socio-historical basis to better understand the rhetorical strategies of the group and the goals and motivations of online participants in blogging communities.

3. METHOD: ANALYZING THE SHOP

3.1 Critical Techno-cultural Discourse Analysis as an Approach

Since the African American community has historically relied upon non-political spaces for political discourse, the themes that emerge in the discourse of black blogs may cultivate various black publics online. The legacy of black oral culture as found in the black barbershop, Black Press, and black radio requires examination of online blogging communities as sites of discourse, political spaces, and spaces of cultural preservation. I approached this project to reveal the possibilities and challenges in creating online publics for marginalized communities. To do so, I required a method of analysis that allowed for a deep reading of text. The guiding questions required a method that analyzed text within social context in order to understand the relation between social identities and power relations. Finally, the method of analysis must account for differing cultural uses of technology and the interaction between user and technology.

Discourse analysis is a means of studying the artifacts of recorded human communication. Discourse analysis attempts to capture the complexity of an issue by interpreting the text with the larger context of meaning. Discourse analysis examines the relationship between language and power and views language as a social practice. Within such an analysis there is an examination of texts to understand them “not only as form, meaning and mental process, but also as complex structures and hierarchies for interaction and social practice and their functions in context, society and culture” (van Dijk, 1997). The purpose of discourse analysis is to uncover patterns, repetition, themes, depictions of identity, relationships, and systems of knowledge (Fairclough, 1995). Discourse analysis considers the practices of a given community to analyze and compare discursive patterns, themes, and boundaries that may exist. Within such an inquiry there may be reinforcement or negotiation of norms, as well as the

reproduction or subversion of identity, relationships, and systems of knowledge (Fairclough, 2010). Discourse analysis is limited to fewer units of analysis and does not allow for aggregation of data. While discourse analysis as a method provides depth of analysis, critical discourse analysis adds to discourse analysis by inserting the element of critique and the examination of power differentials for the purpose of enacting positive change for marginalized communities. The premises of critical discourse analysis as determined by Jørgensen and Phillips (2006) are that: discursive practices contribute to the construction of social identities and power relations, discourse creates the social world and is maintained by social practices, language should be analyzed within its social context, and discursive practices create and reproduce unequal power relations. In online spaces, the interaction between user and technology must also factor into the analysis process.

Andre Brock (2009) has developed a method of examining online discourse that he calls “critical techno-cultural discourse analysis.” Brock approaches research from a critical perspective and is informed by both Critical Race Theory and Nakamura’s cyber-cultural research to examine systemic instantiations of privilege and power in online spaces. He insists that an analysis of online discourse should be grounded in an understanding of the environment, culture, internet, and audience. Critical techno-cultural discourse analysis builds upon the foundation of critical discourse analysis, adding a layer of social and political history of online media as manifested in the lives of marginalized communities. Critical techno-cultural discourse analysis works from the premise that populations other than the dominant group do not fundamentally lack technological capabilities, even though they have frequently been excluded from the literature. While similar to critical discourse analysis, critical techno-cultural discourse

analysis adds the examination of “structural analysis of an artifact with a discourse analysis of the cultural means through which users interpolate themselves within relations to the artifact” (Brock, 2011). In this case, CTDA allows for analysis of the structure of blogs created by African American users and their experiences and interactions on the site given the unique oral history of this community. Application of CTDA to this study requires attention to three areas: “situating online discourse about cultural artifacts within a sociocultural matrix, analyzing interfaces to understand how the Internet’s form and function visually, symbolically, and interactively mediate discourse, and the considering communication technologies as a representation of shared beliefs that produce, maintain, and transform reality” (Brock, 2009). As a method, CTDA favors the subjective analysis of the researcher guided by a conceptual framework in order to yield a more holistic analysis of the interaction between users, technology, culture, and practice.

3.2 Guiding Questions

Using an approach of critical technocultural discourse analysis in this study allowed for a better understanding of how users of technology form and reform images of themselves within the constructs and boundaries of the interface. In this case blogging is the tool used by African Americans in the reconstruction of identity. At the first stage of analysis, blogs were examined for technological features that enable the reconstruction of the digital barbershop. This segment of the analysis focused on the parallels between the barbershop as a physical structure and the blog as a mediated space. At the second level of analysis, the rhetorical strategies employed by bloggers and their communities guided the inquiry. At this level of analysis I sought to better

understand how blogging accommodates or transforms facets of black oral culture/rhetorical strategies. Finally, at the third level of analysis, the themes that emerged within discourse allowed for a better explanation of the possible alternate public spheres created by bloggers and their readers online. Not only does the political communication of African Americans become more apparent, but this method of analysis uncovered the potential for other marginalized communities to create alternate publics online.

3.3 Crafting a Purposive Sample of Blogs

Crafting a sample of black gossip blogs presented a series of challenges. The number of sites with black authors generated around themes of cultural significance for the black community is extensive and not readily quantifiable. The name and genre of a blog does not always include a reference to the black community. While content analyses of blogs traditionally relies upon online search engines and directories for sampling frames, because of the interpretive nature of designating a blog as a ‘black blog’, these tools are less useful in this context. This process often neglects large volumes of source material as blogs emerge and fizzle too rapidly to be accurately traced.

One source that identifies and catalogues influential and up-and-coming black blogs is a yearly list of “30 black bloggers you should know” compiled by *The Root*, a black online magazine owned by *The Washington Post*. *The Root* has 1.7 million average monthly unique visitors and 13.5 million page views per month (comScore Media Matrix Aug. 2011). Another source from which this sample is drawn are nominees and winners of the Black Weblog Awards. The Black Weblog Awards is owned by GEMPIRE Interactive and recognizes bloggers

of African-American descent for their contributions in blogging, video blogging, and podcasting in 36 categories. Using *The Root* and The Black Weblog Awards yielded a sample of blogs that have received praise for their contributions to the community. This necessarily excludes some of the more controversial blogs, wherein the black community is featured but is not necessarily the only target audience. This sample is purposely comprised of blogs that target African Americans with the leisure time needed to participate in community discourse and for whom the included genres may be most appealing. The sample of blogs in this study is topic driven and would be considered A-list in that A-List blogs usually have a particular audience that closely mirrors the individual's personal social sphere (Papacharissi & Meraz, in press), and content on such blogs often blurs lines between the informative and social connection (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010).

This study does not seek a representative sample of all black blogs. Instead, given that the research questions seek to better understand blogs with established community discourse and debate, the purposive sample included blogs of varying genres, sizes, authors of different genders, and readership that is varied. Past literature has focused on black political blogs (Poole, 2005) and the formation of black political ideology (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). What is lacking is an examination of where African Americans gather without an overt political agenda, yet still engage in political discourse. This scenario most closely mirrors that of the barbershop. Shop talk is profoundly important because it is done without being labeled 'political'. It is in the enclave of the barber and beauty shop that discussions that formed community and gave way to resistance discourse.

The first criterion for selection of individual blogs was that they be black- or African American-authored. Brock explains the process for identifying online authors as black in the following way: explicit identification through a profile, determination of racial identity through an extended reading of the site's content, and an explicit articulation of designing their online presence to reflect their allegiance to and interest in the black community (Brock, 2007, p.44). Therefore, in the analysis that follows it is not necessary to repeatedly identify the blogger's race. During the analysis, the same method was applied for the classification of commenters, some of whom are identified as black, while others are not. The second criterion was that the blog be oriented toward the African American and black community. This was assessed by the title, description, visual imagery, and presence of monikers for describing blackness in the text of the page. The third criteria was that blogs must have an active comments section available to readers and the ability to comment using either one's own name or a created avatar. This allows readers to form connections with each other and engage in discussions over multiple posts on multiple days. The fourth criteria for selection was that blogs not espouse an overt political agenda. Therefore, while I included blogs where politics were discussed, I excluded those that had the word 'politics' in the title or in the description penned by the founder on the blog website.

Blogs selected for study also represent differences in the following areas: blogger as facilitator or expert, involvement of readers (through commenting on posts), theme, and scope and scale of advertising. The purposive sample includes blogs of each of varying genres/types: News & Opinion, Fashion, Relationships, Lifestyle, and Entertainment/Media. The sample is

comprised of nine blogs¹, including: *Very Smart Brothas* authored by Damon Young and Panama Jackson (lifestyle/humor), *A Belle in Brooklyn* authored by Demetria Lucas (lifestyle/relationships), *Until I Get Married* authored by Jozen Cummings (relationships), *Black Girl With Long Hair* authored by Leila Noelliste (lifestyle), *Necole Bitchie* authored by Necole Bitchie (entertainment/media), *Young Black and Fabulous* authored by Natasha Eubanks (entertainment), *Afrobella* by Patrice Yursik (fashion), *PostBourgie* by Gene Demby (news/opinion), and *The Field Negro Blog* by Wayne Bennett (news/opinion/politics). The following chart details the important differences among the blogs that will be further explored in the analysis.

¹ The sample originally included ten blogs. However, *The Gentleman's Standard* suspended the ability to comment during the collection period. Therefore the blog no longer met the criteria for incorporation in the study.

TABLE I

BLOGS

	Founder/Editor	Topical Orientation	# of Posts	# of Comments	Average Comments per Post	Method of Commenting	Advertising Content
A Belle in Brooklyn	Demetria Lucas	Lifestyle/relationship	48	495	10	Log in with site specific username/password	1 third-party ad (with Lucas as spokesperson)
Afrobella	Patrice Grell Yursik	Hair, fashion, and beauty advice	35	371	11	Create name for each post/option to tag personal website with photo	Multiple third-party advertisements
Black Girl with Long Hair	Leila Noelliste	Natural hair and beauty	187	5591	64	Log into profile with site specific username/password	Multiple third-party advertisements
Field Negro	Wayne Bennett (field)	World news, politics, and law	121	7467	62	Choose identity (Google account, name, open id or anonymous)	No third-party advertisements
Necole Bitchie	Necole "Bitchie" Kane	Celebrity gossip/entertainment	738	72288	97	Create name for each post/encouraged to select photo using Gravatar	Many third-party advertisements
Post Bougie	Gene "G.D." Demby	Lifestyle, media, and relationships	19	65	3	Log in with social media account or create name for each post	No third-party advertisements
The Young Black and Fabulous	Natasha Eubanks	Celebrity gossip/entertainment	1109	16658	15	Log in and post using Facebook social plugin	Many third-party advertisements
Until I Get Married	Jozen Cummings	Relationship advice	10	33	3	Log in with social media account or create name for each post	3-4 third-party advertisements
Very Smart Brothas	D. Marcellus Wright (Panama Jackson) and Damon Young (The Champ)	Media, pop culture, and lifestyle	141	5591	300	Log in with social media account or create name for each post	No third-party advertisements (ads for proprietary branded merchandise appears as blog post)

3.5 Process of Analysis

Because communication research treats blogs as a medium much like television or radio, quantitative content analysis using category or genre types is common. Research shows that blogs typically fall into certain categories, including: personal interests, family, personal views, creative expression, support, and fan pages (Papacharissi, 2007). Categorization is useful for

organization and recall but does not reflect the interconnected character of the content on actual blogs. For example, Brock's (2010) study of two pop culture and one relationship blog targeting black women found "structural analyses of racism and sexism, media criticism, and aesthetic arguments about black women's worth, beauty, and value to articulate their vision of black womanhood" (p. 1056).

While convenience may lead researchers to place blogs into strict categories and imagine the motivations of users based on these categories, participants may make use of the blog differently at different times given the current dialogue on the site and relationships among the users. The analysis of blogs in this study focused on emergent themes as a conceptual framework. The process involved documenting the frequency of posts and the frequency of comments for each post, identifying the use of black rhetorical strategies and remnants of oral culture on blog sites, and analyzing themes that emerged from the discourse within blog posts and comments in relation to the idea of the public sphere. While considering the authors' own categorization of each blog (e.g., relationships, lifestyle), I developed a conceptual framework to guide my analysis of posts and community discourse and describe the multiple thematic orientations present on each site. The categories assigned to a blog by its creators do not tell the full story of the blog's utility for the community. While blog creators establish the architecture of the site, the participants help enact its possibilities. In reporting the findings of this research, I attempt to leave the voice of blog authors and commenters intact as frequently as possible.

The blog sites and their content (posts, comments, and advertisements) were archived between December 1, 2013 and April 4, 2014. This time period includes events of cultural and historical significance for the African American community, including Kwanzaa, Martin Luther

King Day, President Obama's inaugural address, and black history month. In addition to these expected events, several unanticipated events of significance to the black community occurred within this window, including the online release of Beyoncé's self-titled album, the verdict in the case against Michael Dunn, and the anniversary of the death of Jordan Davis². Beyond this four month window, when blogs featured links and tags to archived content, this content was also included within the parameters of study. The goal was to archive and analyze a typical user experience during this time. Therefore, the features of the blog (tags, links, search functions, topics) were examined. If a post linked to older content, this content was included within the parameters of the study as well.

Original posted content was archived, including pictures, posts, and content links provided in the text. On each site, a complete record of blog posts and reader comments were collected. A total of 1670 posts were archived and analyzed. Comments in addition to the original posted content were archived and analyzed for the emergence of common themes. A total of 36,271 comments were archived on April 4 for all content posted from December 4, 2014 and April 4, 2014. The architectural structure of the sites was considered along with frequency, type, and distribution of advertising content. Many posts contain visual imagery or video in addition to written text. I documented themes that emerge in the analysis of text, interaction, site architecture, advertising, and other visual imagery. CTDA offers a means of forming boundaries for qualitative internet research. Subjective analysis of emergent themes is liable to provide an unwieldy and endless list. To guide my analysis I developed a conceptual framework that

² A black teenager murdered in Florida whose killer was not convicted based on a controversial Stand Your Ground defense

merged Levine's (1977) facets of black oral culture with Squires' (2002) types of alternate public spheres. While these approaches emerge from two distinct scholarly traditions, the examination of discourse as a cultural artifact combined with the function of discourse in the creation of a public sphere acknowledges the interrelated character of politics and art, especially for marginalized communities.

3.6 Conceptual Framework

There are three necessary components in a CTDA: a conceptual framework, an analysis of the user interface, and a critical discourse analysis (Brock 2013). The conceptual framework that guides this analysis is twofold. The first component comprises rhetorical strategies that materialize from the traditional elements of black oral culture in the sacred song, slave tales, the secular song/humor, and black folklore and folk heroes as shown below (Levine, 1977). Levine's analysis of the black rhetorical tradition views these elements as cultural artifacts and art forms within the African American community. As the literature suggests, though, these rhetorical traditions have been kept alive, not just as art, but as tools for political dissent in the barbershop and in various communication mediums. In the chart below, elements of black culture are shown in connection to their potential uses for political strategy.

TABLE II
ELEMENTS OF BLACK CULTURE/BLACK RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Element of Black Oral Culture	Feature/Rhetorical Strategy
Sacred Song	double meanings used to guide collective revolt, signal rebellion, and voice dissent; biblical metaphors
Slave Tales	re-centering black experience; emphasizing cunning; demonstrating grievance (against dominant group/employer)
Secular Song/Humor	presentation of conflict between genders in sexual humor; signifying (implying, goading, or boasting by indirect verbal or gestural means); playing the dozens (verbal maneuvers include some form of trickery, contest of personal power—of wit, self-control, verbal ability, mental agility, and mental toughness)
Black Folklore	cautionary tales and critiques of characteristics of the community (self-policing); co-option of labor, reified systems of patriarchy, colorism, and racial hegemony; and depiction of powerful and confrontational heroes

Analysis of the themes that emerge in the discourse of blog posts and comments for their contribution to a black public sphere is guided by Catherine Squires' model (2002) of African American multiple public spheres which she classifies as counterpublics, enclaves, and satellites. This framework allows for analysis of the goals, resources, and motivations enacted within the users' discourse. I extracted patterns and themes that emerged in the discourse of the blog posts and comments, then analyzed the discourse by examining the goals, resources, and motivations of the users. Using Squires' model condenses the possible themes of discourse into manageable segments that can be analyzed for their potential to foster alternate publics.

TABLE III
GOALS AND RESOURCES OF ALTERNATE PUBLICS

	Space/Discourse	Goals	Resources
Enclaves	Hidden, produced solely by group members	Preserve culture, foster resistance; create strategies of the future	Few material, media or political resources
Counterpublics	Increased inter-public communication, protest rhetoric, reclamation of dominant public sphere, strategic use of enclave spaces	Foster resistance, test arguments, create alliances, perform public resistance to social codes	More distribution of material/media resources, high level of organization
Satellites	Separate, independent spaces open only to group members	Maintenance of group identity; strengthening of institutions	Consolidation of resources (material and media) to be used by group

This framework provides the vocabulary to discuss the blog posts and discourse present within each blog site and the emergent themes within the discourse of the communities.

3.7 Constraints of the Approach

The qualitative approach to critical technocultural discourse analysis is systematic and grounded in a conceptual framework that guides the researcher's careful analysis of the media artifact as interface and site of discourse. To provide the deep reading over time needed for this type of analysis, the number of blogs included is few. This does not offer a comparative lens for assessing broad tendencies in the black blogosphere. Critical technocultural discourse analysis allows for a deep reading, attention to themes and patterns, and a critical lens through which one can draw connections between patterns of discourse, participants, and the interface.

Because the approach is interpretive and the meaning created by bloggers and their communities is situated within cultural context, it is important that as the researcher I acknowledge potential biases and subjectivities that are a part of my work. In this study I encountered symbols, artifacts, and cultural meanings that are situated within the African American experience. I evaluated and analyzed discourse with the following in mind:

1.) I identify as an African American woman and a woman of color and am intimately connected to the African American community. 2.) I approach this project with the belief that the research should be beneficial for the community 3.) I am a regular reader of some of the blogs in this study, and my lens for interpreting the discourse cannot be separated entirely from my personal connection to the sites and their content. 4.) I possess privilege as a doctoral student and scholar in that my work is acknowledged as academic while that of the bloggers I study is not 5.) I want to understand the relationship between black oral culture and blogging and the possibilities that are available to a marginalized community by their mastery and utility of each. Systematic critical analysis is not hindered by the above acknowledgments. Rather, through these acknowledgements, I contextualize my work, own my position, and focus on the text as a site of inquiry. While not a traditional ethnographic study, my position as a part of the African American blogging community is embedded in my analysis. CTDA is complex and interpretive, requiring researchers to study both text and context. Connection to the communities within the study can therefore be an asset in discerning context provided the analysis remains guided by the conceptual framework.

3.8 Conclusion

An approach of inquiry utilizing a critical technocultural discourse approach allows for a deep reading and careful analysis of the features, structure, and discourse of a purposive sample of nine African American-authored blogs. The utility of black rhetorical strategies in varied settings can only be accomplished by selecting blogs of different sizes and with different themes and orientations. The focus on nine blogs using a conceptual framework derived from Levine (1977) and Squires (2002) yields an in-depth descriptive analysis. This analysis begins with examining how blogs are ‘built’ paralleling the process of building a successful barber/beauty shop.

4. BUILDING THE SHOP

Blogging provides a unique space for the creation and maintenance of alternate public spheres for African Americans. Previous researchers have identified online social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as presenting features of oral communication. Research on Black Twitter¹ has highlighted the platform for short retorts and hashtags as a means of utilizing rhetorical devices like signifying and playing the dozens (Brock 2012, Florini, 2014). However, blogs mirror the structure of the barber/beauty shop more directly than other online social media platforms. Prior to an examination of the oral culture of blogs or an analysis of the political discourse on blogs, we must first better understand how the architectural structure, visual elements, and creators of blogs mimic or re-present the barbershop. The following chapter provides a detailed description of each of the blogs in the study, situating their features as examples of the parallels between the blog and the shop. This demonstrates how blogging as a platform is conducive to the kind of everyday political talk found in barbershops, and how bloggers and their communities together create variations on the features of blogs in order to better meet their own needs of community engagement through everyday dialogue.

4.1 Bloggers as Barbers

African American bloggers who own and operate their own sites act as the facilitators of discourse. They may guide the tone and theme of the blog, control content, and benefit both

¹ 'Black Twitter' is a term used to refer to the overrepresentation of African Americans on the social media platform and the tendency to use hashtags and elicit trending topics that are directly connected to the black community (Sharma, 2013). Research suggests that "Black Twitter" is a phenomenon cultivated by a group of Twitter users who use the platform differently than many others. Based on the history of African Americans' connection to oral communication and performative wordplay, "Twitter's architecture creates participant structures that accommodate the crucial function of the audience during signifyin" (Florini, 2014).

socially and economically from it becoming a community site. Like shop owners, they are the proprietors of their establishments and regulate discourse while benefitting from its success. The skill set and personality of the barber, the aesthetics of the shop, the dynamics of communication within the shop, and the services available to patrons differentiates one shop from another. As with the blog itself, the founder and/or editor of the blog is responsible for establishing the thematic content, the tone/tenor of discourse, and the architecture of the site that provide particular opportunities for participation to the reader. For three of the blogs the persona at the center of the blog is the defining feature of the site. None of these blogs rely upon advertising revenue and therefore all three authors remain in control of the content and tone of their sites. As their site's only bloggers, Demetria Lucas (*A Belle in Brooklyn*), Wayne Bennett (*Field Negro*) and Jozen Cummings (*Until I Get Married*) create thematic content that is simultaneously personal to the bloggers and appealing to their readers. They also determine the types of participation allowed to readers and have the ability to moderate comments on their sites. With increased traffic to the site, the blogger may directly gain from advertising revenue, or may indirectly benefit as their popularity within offline channels of communication grows. While older platforms like message boards created spaces where multiple persons could comment on threads, message boards lack the agency provided to bloggers since they are operated by a company or third party that hosts the conversation. Blogs position the blogger as directly responsible for facilitating discourse and managing content. The ease with which a person can start a blog provides opportunities for entry into the blogosphere. The challenge of attracting and maintaining a devoted and active following speaks to the skills necessary to master this technology.

In the career of Demetria Lucas, who founded and is the sole blogger on the site *A Belle in Brooklyn*, we see the parallels between blogger and barber/beauty shop proprietor. Beginning as a relationship coach, the success of *A Belle in Brooklyn* propelled Lucas into the public eye. She has launched new websites, benefits from product endorsements, and is the star of a reality show produced by the Bravo Network. Thus far, Lucas has only allowed one third-party advertiser on the site, OraQuick. In a video ad pop-up when first opening the blog, and in all subsequent hyperlinks to access other content, Lucas says the following “I know that relationships are built on trust and communication, and one important conversation you should have is on your HIV status.” Lucas speaks directly to the audience in the advertisement, building on her brand of open and honest relationship advice, while advocating for HIV awareness. However, this is not a public service announcement. OraQuick is a product, and Lucas a paid spokeswoman. Lucas’ participation in this vertical cooperative advertisement allows her to remain in control of the messaging on her space while benefiting financially from the arrangement. *A Belle in Brooklyn*, *Field Negro*, and *Until I Get Married* reflect the importance of the single blogger in the creation of a blogging community.

4.1.1 A Belle in Brooklyn

Readers of *A Belle in Brooklyn* are greeted by the pop-up, 15-second advertisement for OraQuick, an HIV home testing kit for which Lucas is a paid-celebrity endorser. . A banner ad for OraQuick is featured at the top of the blog, and OraQuick is the only product featured in ads on this blog aside from Lucas’s book “Don’t Waste Your Pretty.” The blog’s tagline is “The Perspective of a Southern Woman Living Above the Mason Dixon.” In addition to the tagline and banner ad, links to share on social media, an invitation to subscribe to the newsletter,

navigable menu items (Blog, About, Ask Belle, Books and Contact), and a scrolling display of the latest posts are featured above the fold. The background of the site is dark pink/purple in color, and next to the blog's title is an icon created by combining three hearts on their side that graduate in color from pink to black. Below the fold, each post in its static form is displayed with right-side advertisements (again only for OraQuick and the author's books). During the entire sample window, Lucas only featured advertisements for her own book and the product she endorsed.

Demetria Lucas is the only blogger contributing to A Belle in Brooklyn. In the About section of the site, she describes herself as a former and current journalist with running columns in numerous online news magazines. She is a life/relationships coach and author. Her blog content reveals that she is also the star of a Bravo reality show. Lucas lists her educational background in this section as well. It is clear from the emphasis on the persona of Lucas, how central she will be in forming the content and shaping the conversation on the site. The other navigable items besides About include a link to an Ask Belle page wherein readers can write directly to Lucas with their relationship questions. Lucas then features her answers to select questions in the blog. Lucas frequently links her own blog posts to *The Root*, where she writes a column. Though her biography, the Ask Belle page, and links to her other work, Lucas' expertise is established, and she becomes the centrally important figure on the blog.

The layout, colors, and content of the blog signify the primary target audience as female. Lucas describes herself and her career in the About section, but does not go beyond the tagline to describe the function and purpose of the blog. Lucas's site is self-promoting but not self-

aggrandizing. She frequently recounts her experiences as a relationship coach, a reality star² and a new celebrity. Because of the limited advertising and total creative control, the tone of the posts as well as the community conversation was stable and consistent during the sample window. Posts discussed relationships (romantic and platonic) between African Americans, African American celebrities, and African American popular culture. Because the blog is an arm of Lucas's burgeoning relationship-advice business, posts did not discuss celebrity fashion or beauty, but when celebrities were mentioned, the posts tended to focus on the business relationships, friendships, and intimate relationships of the individuals as a catalyst to discuss larger relationships issues. In addition to celebrity and reality TV recaps and discussion, Lucas's posts fell into two other main categories: advice-response posts to readers' questions, and personal diary-like entries that use Lucas's own life to provide guidance. Belle's guidance is a mixture of progressive feminist appeals and traditional Southern sensibilities. These two positions at times combine within a post and at times indicate to readers a conflict that is discussed in the comments thread. More about Belle's brand of feminism will be discussed in chapter six.

To comment on a post one must create an account and log in. To create an account a reader must create a username. Commenters tend to remain on subject in each comment thread. Commenters frequently talk directly to 'Belle' (Lucas) who often responds in comment threads to reader's questions or disagreements. During the sample window, threads never devolved to flaming or hate speech. Rather, light disagreement, usually about how to handle relationship

² Posts receive varying numbers of comments; however, posts about Lucas's reality show and other black reality show stars garner the highest number of comments. For example, Lucas's recap of her show *Blood, Sweat and Heals* on February 26, 2014 received 57 comments as of the 31st of March. However, another post from the same week, "Ask Demetria: How to ask your man to get an HIV test," received only 3 comments by this date. Posts not relating to pop culture or television consistently received 3-10 comments, while the others average between 25 and 50.

problems or the behavior of reality TV stars filled the comments sections. This directly contrasts with the type of community dialogue created on A Field Negro.

4.1.2 Field Negro

The Field Negro blog describes the author as “raised in the house, but field certified. Jamaica is the land of my birth, but I consider myself a citizen of the world.” The author does not identify himself by name, but only as ‘Field’ or ‘Mr. Field’ on posts. However, Wayne Bennett the founder of Field Negro, is a lawyer who has been featured on *The Root* and in *Black Enterprise*, as well as a variety of other news outlets. He is described by *The Root* as a blogger interested in making politics more accessible to the ‘average Joe’. Bennett (Field) does not offer an About page or a way to navigate to other content beyond the continuous scroll. This is a BlogSpot³ blog and therefore the navigation functions and layout is decidedly limited. The top of the page features the title written in old teletype next to a body scan image of a black man’s back hearkening to images of tattered, scarred, and beaten backs of Africans living as slaves during the period of chattel slavery in the U.S. Written over the image are the words “Silence is Never Golden!” The page is divided with reverse-chronologically ordered posts on the right two-thirds of the page. On the left third is a social media toolbar, a link to a charity organization that features the image of slain teenager Trayvon Martin⁴, a link to tweet the author, and a disclaimer that says “the views expressed on this site are The Field’s and The Field’s alone. They do not reflect the views of his employer or any professional of legal organization which he is affiliated.” Below this is the following: “This is a commercial free blog. Money is nice, but being able to

³ Blogspot is a free weblog publishing tool from Google, for sharing text, photos and video.

⁴ Unarmed African American teen, Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman in Sanford, FL, February 26, 2012. Zimmerman was subsequently acquitted of murder claiming self-defense. The teen’s death and Zimmerman’s acquittal became an issue of controversy bringing issues of systemic racism and racial profiling into the public spotlight.

speak my mind is better.” There is consequently no ad content on this blog. In the rest of the right third of the space are quoted blurbs about the blog and the writer. This is used rather than a more overt About section to describe the content, tenor, and tone of the blog to new readers. Demetria Lucas makes her own life and personal experiences central to *A Belle in Brooklyn*. Though Bennett does not provide his pictures or intimate details of his life, his perspective is central and therefore his persona becomes the defining feature.

Below the descriptive blurbs are two recurring pieces from *Field: House Negro of the Day* and *Field Negro of the Day*. This is a place where the author designates various black celebrities, politicians, and other public figures as in alignment with the political and racial ideology presented in the blog, or in opposition. The terms ‘house’ and ‘field’ Negroes reference the physical and psychological position of the slave in connection to the white slave-owner. I will discuss this designation in more detail in chapter six. Post topics include black culture, politics, legal issues, and world news⁵. This site has the highest number of reader comments of any in the selected blogs for analysis. Commenters are not required to create an account to post, nor must they attribute their comments with any name. They may reply directly to one another and often do so with more profanity, hate speech, and racially offensive language than in any of the other blogs analyzed. Unlike the other blogs investigated in this study, commenters on *Field Negro* directly address issues of racial difference with other commenters and frequently monopolize threads with personal battles and insults directed often between only two or three parties. *Field* does not directly engage with commenters on the blog by responding directly to comments. He instead appears to provoke conversation and allow the comment thread to unfold as it will. Because this is a Blogspot blog, though, the author has the ability to set controls to

⁵ During the research period, 121 posts were filed on *Field Negro*.

approve comments and delete those he deems unacceptable. It is unclear to what degree Bennett chooses to engage in censorship. Commenters have no means to report abusive posts.

While using a pseudonym, Bennett remains the central figure of import on the blog. The decision to keep advertising content away from the blog is a part of his desire for content to reflect his position and ideas without the influence of others. The ascription of ‘house’ or ‘field’ Negro status is apparently done solely by Bennett. While other bloggers sought the input of readers at the end of posts, Bennett does not. This did not result in a lack of participation, though it did seem to affect the type of participation from the reading community. Rather than deference to Bennett, commenters often engaged in raucous debate and critique.

4.1.3 Until I Get Married

Until I Get Married is a relationship advice blog written by journalist Jozen Cummings. Cummings also writes a blind date column for the *NY Post*. He is a former writer at *Vibe Magazine*, *XXL*, and a contributor to *The Huffington Post*. Cummings provides this description of himself on Until I Get Married’s About page. Until I Get Married, which is indicated as a trademark at the top of the blog site, is tagged as “Inside the mind of the modern day bachelor.” Beneath the tagline are links to Meet Market, NYC Dating Guide, About Jozen and Until I Get Married, Contact, and Advertise. To the right of this navigation bar is a search feature. The left two thirds of the page is devoted to blog content in a continuous reverse-chronological scroll. On the right one third is an ad for the Meet Market, an outside company advertisement, a plug-in featuring Cumming’s tweets, a link to a dating website, links to 5 other blogs titles, “what the people are saying,” and an archive organized by month and year of post.

The posts on the site frequently follow a diary like model with Cummings sharing thoughts and experiences of his personal life that relate to relationships. Cummings writes about his own romantic relationship as a means to provide advice for how couples involved in monogamous relationships should behave and how those outside of monogamous relationships might find partners. The advice, while ostensibly written to men, appears to actually target a largely female audience⁶. Commenters may sign in with their Facebook, Twitter, Google+ or Disqus accounts. They also may create a temporary name used to post comments. Most commenters identify themselves as female either through profile picture, name, or content of comment. Rather than responding to reader comments, *Until I Get Married* has a feature where readers may write questions directly to Cummings in hopes of getting a direct reply with his advice. Very similar to Demetria Lucas, Cummings is the attraction for readers to this site. His offline persona as relationship expert and journalist provide him the credentials necessary to provide advice to blog readers. Their participation is predicated upon some agreement with Cummings and his style to relationships guidance.

4.2 Advertising and the Shop

If imagined as a barber/beauty shop, a blog must also be seen as capitalist enterprise that must generate revenue for its survival. Four blogs in this study rely heavily upon advertising as a means of generating revenue, but also as a means of attracting readers to the site. *Afro Bella* and *Black Girl with Long hair*, not surprisingly, devote a significant portion of their site's space of advertising content. Since both blogs rely upon products to advise their readers in the areas of beauty and fashion, most of the products featured are in this category. In both cases the sites

⁶ The sample window yielded a total of 9 posts and a total of 34 comments.

provide guidance and assurance to black women regarding Afrocentric ideals of beauty. This is done, in large part, by directing readers to products and services that monetarily benefit the bloggers through advertising revenue. Like the beauty shop owner, the relationship with the client is built on trust. Trusting one's appearance to another, particularly given the politics of black hair in America, is a venture not entered into lightly. The recommendations from the beautician to the client are filtered through that lens of trust. AfroBella, Black Girl with Long Hair, The YBF and Necole Bitchie develop trust with their readers, which enables advertising on their sites to carry the credibility of the bloggers themselves. As an enterprise, these blogs build profit directly through the three-way relationship among blogger, reader, and third-party advertiser. Because the thematic content of the blog is so directly connected to consumerism, the relationship typically goes unquestioned by readers.

4.2.1 Afrobella

Afrobella is a self-described fashion, beauty, and lifestyle blog for African American women. The blog's founder and sole author is Patrice Yursik, a Trinidadian born writer (according to her biography on the site). Readers of AfroBella are greeted by an icon of a black woman with an afro at the top of page left. On the right, readers may connect with various social media platforms. There is a navigable menu that includes: Hair, Beauty, Reviews, Famous Faces, Style, About, Contact and Privacy Policy. On the right side of the page are multiple advertisements. Each is for a different beauty brand (L'Oreal, Tressemmè, etc.) or another product. The layout of the first page of the site changed during the research period. Initially, blogs posts were featured alongside advertising content, with both items taking the same space and displayed in the same font and colors, making them virtually indistinguishable. By the end of

the study, the layout of the page made the distinction clearer between the two. The other products featured were mainly feminine hygiene products and software ads. Under the blog title and icon is scrolling content that shows the most recent posts. Below this are static links to blog posts that prominently display the number of comments for each post.

Posts on Afrobella are categorized by the author as “Hair,” “Beauty,” “Reviews,” “Famous Faces,” or “Style.”⁷ Unlike many blogs, there is not continuous scroll to older items, instead readers must navigate through categories or use the search feature to find archived content. Content is almost exclusively tied to products. When celebrities are featured, their clothes and makeup are the focus. When Yursik discusses her own life it is connected only to her work as a beauty reviewer/reporter. One exception during this period was Yursik’s discussion of her favorite childhood beauty brands. Comments were, therefore, largely only connected to these topics as well. Commenters need not create an account to post and can create a new name to post with at each visit. Therefore, it is more challenging to identify and document repeat commenters or the formation of a high-context community within the confines of the site. Commenters frequently posted to congratulate Yursik for her accolades and encounters on the red carpet. They were largely agreeable with Yurik’s fashion and beauty pics and thank her for her recommendations. Commenters rarely stray from the theme of the post being commented on, and do not tend to respond directly to each other in the post but instead carry on individual para-social relationships with Yursik. Though Yursik directly responds to commenters, her persona does not drive the site. Rather, her promotion of products is the focus. Because the posts are often thematically oriented around product recommendations, comments are predominantly about products as well.

⁷ During the collection period, Afrobella had 34 posts distributed among these categories.

4.2.2 Black Girl with Long Hair

Black Girl with Long Hair is a self-described site for natural hair enthusiasts. There are multiple writers on the site, who in their biographies detail their own journey with natural hair as well as their credentials demonstrating authority to write and offer guidance on the subject. Some are professional writers, one is a chemist, and all have an extensive background in techniques for wearing their own hair naturally. While the founder of the site still edits BGLH, her presence on the site is no more apparent than the other writers. This is not a blog where individuals come because of a singular persona, rather the writers are trusted as a unit to provide guidance and make product recommendations. BGLH, like Afrobella, functions as a beauty shop. It is a gendered space where women come for guidance and support. The home page for the site is busy, filled with content and advertisements. A banner at the top of the page contains an advertisement for a popular beauty brand for women. Below this is a navigation bar with the date and the following items: Style Icons, Products, Hair Care, Hair Styles, Salons, and BGLH Style. A scrolling block with featured posts follows, with the title of the blog to the left. Below the title is a field that says “Getting Started” and points readers to four posts that give advice in transitioning to natural hair. Above the ad content at the right is a social media toolbar. Below the fold are static posts on the left and advertisements on the right. Each are the same size and have the same orientation. Below the ads are a series of pictures of products until the title “Get the Basics.” Each picture linked directly to Amazon.com where readers can purchase hair care products.

Every post ends with a short biography of the author. Many posts solicited reader feedback with the line “Weigh in” or “What are your thoughts?” When the topics of children or

a debate between processed hair and straight hair is raised, a warning is given that readers must remain respectful in their posts. The About section can only be accessed from a navigation bar at the bottom of the first page. Here the reader learns about Leila Noelliste, the creator and editor of the blog. She describes herself as Jamaican born and raised by a Haitian and African American mother who is “passionate about black beauty and self-image in a post-colonial world.” This manner of identification is aligned with the values exhibited in the posts. While most of the content offers guidance in managing natural hair, every post is written within the bounds of being celebratory of the natural hair of black women living in diaspora. Other writers on the site are designated as “Hair Care Writers,” “Science Writers,” and “Style Icon Coordinators.” The posts in each category offer product guidance and advice about styling for personal experiences and showcase everyday women as Style Icons in a celebration of black culture and hair.

This blog’s layout, rather than being arranged for a reader to continuously scroll through content, encourages readers to find the pages most useful for them⁸. This blog functions as a tool and therefore features many more navigable items including hair texture guides, style guides, and tools to find salons and products nearby. Even as a tool where readers self-direct to pertinent information, comments on this site average between 20-30 per post. Readers create a name and profile (including a picture) allowing them to post each time they visit the site. They may reply directly to other readers and have the option to ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ the posts of other readers with an ongoing tally showing each comment’s popularity. The ability to like and dislike posts provides social capital for the commenters.

4.2.3 Necole Bitchie

⁸ During the research period, there were a total of 187 posts on Black Girl with Long Hair.

Necole Bitchie is a celebrity gossip and entertainment blog founded by Necole “Bitchie” Kane. Kane provides the following to all readers: “Disclaimer: This is a blog site, not a news site. All posts are based on my opinions and thoughts on what may already be reported in the media. I am not a journalist nor do I aspire to be. I am a blogger who created this site as a hobby. And yes, I am bias. [sic] I only report on artists/celebrities that I like or find interesting. Thanx – Necole.” While she describes the blog as a hobby, the multiple third-party advertisements and links to Kane’s other websites demonstrate that the hobby has developed into a career for the blogger. The site’s home page features a picture of Kane taken by noted photographer Derek Blanks.



Figure 1. Necole Bitchie’s homepage image

Blanks, in his typical style, shoots Kane in costume as both blogger and celebrity with the two women ensnarled in a fight through the computer screen. Below the banner is the menu bar that includes: Interviews, Fashion, Relationships, Privacy Policy, Bitchie TV, Advertise, Contact, I Am Necole, and Subscribe. The first three categories segment regular posts. The

Privacy Policy discusses Kane's use of third party advertisements and cookies⁹. In the Advertise section, Kane provides a means to contact her regarding advertising on the page. Contact is a link to directly email the blogger. I Am Necole is a link to Kane's other blog. On the home page, a continuous scroll of reverse-chronological posts takes up the left two-thirds of the space. The right one-third features multiple third-party advertisements and links to connect with other readers on social media. Featured posts repeat between ad contents. Posts are attributed to "Bitchie Staff," indicating that Kane may no longer write each post; however, other individuals are not featured in the post byline¹⁰. The number of commenters is shown at the bottom of each post in a hyperlinked box that says "# of People Bitching." To comment, readers must provide a name and email address. They may respond directly to other posts and have the option to give each preceding post a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" as well. Readers are encouraged to use Gravatars¹¹ in the comment section and provided a link to create their "own personalized 'bitchie chick'" and upload it in the members' section.

4.2.4 The Young Black and Fabulous

In the years since its founding, The Young, Black and Fabulous¹² has increased in popularity with a growth in advertisements to match. The YBF logo is featured at the top left of the home page with the tagline "Celebrity Gossip Never Looked So Good." Across the top of the

⁹ Small piece of data sent from a website and stored in a user's web browser while the user is browsing that website. Every time the user loads the website, the browser sends the cookie back to the server to notify the website of the user's previous activity

¹⁰ The staff posts approximately 5-6 times per day. There were a total of 738 posts during the study with an average of 97 comments per post.

¹¹ Gravatars let weblogs and similar sites display user-provided pictures from a central database.

¹² The YBF was founded by Natasha Eubanks, who still owns and edits the celebrity gossip site.

page are hyperlinks that direct readers to social media sites. Directly below is 1 of 11 advertisements on the home screen. The navigation bar below the top banner advertisement links readers to Photos, Interviews, Videos, and Tips. The left two-thirds of the page is a continuous scroll in reverse-chronological order. The first post covers the entire width of the page. Each post features a headline, a photo, and the first four lines of the post. The number of comments and a link to comment appears below along with links to see more pictures and read the entire post. A series of advertisements fills the left third of the page. Advertisements are also situated between posts on the scroll. During the period of study, the third-party ads featured variety of products that included airlines, restaurants, websites, and media outlets. Beneath the scroll is a series of links to “Popular Categories” including: YBF Exclusives, Foolywang, Gossip Bits, Candids, Coupledom and Legal Woes, Red Carpet, Parties, Political Fab, Sports, Photo Shoots, and Music. At the bottom of the main screen are links to: About The YBF, Contact, Tips, Photos, Interviews, Contests, Advertising, Disclaimer, and Privacy Policy.

The About page describes the blog as “fashion, fabulousness, gossip, and foolywang”. A profile is provided of the editor Natasha that lists her age (27), location (Washington DC area via New Orleans, LA) and profession (CEO, Writer & Editor of TheYBF.com and Young, Black, and Fabulous, LLC.). Unlike the founders of many of the other blogs in the study, for Eubanks, The YBF is a full-time enterprise. She does not list another profession and describes her education status as “on a break” from law school. Eubanks signs each post “Natasha.” She posts with more regularity than any other blog in the sample, with some days seeing as many as 5 posts. Readers may log in with their Facebook account to comment and must uncheck a box to keep their comments from posting to Facebook as well as to The YBF. As the name and links

suggest, posted content involves the dealings of black celebrities and celebrities otherwise connected to the black community.

4.3 Creating a Loyal Clientele

Generating active readers is akin to crafting a loyal clientele for a barber/beautician. Black patrons of barber and beauty shops are notoriously loyal to their barbers/beauticians. This loyalty to the blogs is developed through the interaction with the readers. Interaction may be direct, with bloggers responding directly to readers in the comments section (VSBs, Afro Bella, Post Bourgie), or via an alternate means to contact and seek the advice and guidance of the blogger (Until I Get Married, A Belle in Brooklyn). Interaction may also be enabled through the use of common rhetorical devices and facets of black culture (VSBs, Post Bourgie). Finally, the interaction may be generated through the establishment of a high context needed for participation, wherein readers are positioned as insiders and more likely to remain loyal to the blog where they possess the context needed to continue to participate. This is why the features of the platform are of the utmost importance. Whether readers must log-in, provide a user name, or create a profile to comment changes the dynamics of participation. It changes the propensity to post but also the tone and tenor of the messages posted. While posts and comments vary greatly in frequency between Very Smart Brothas and Post Bourgie, both engage in similar high-context communication with readers within a sub-segment of the African American community joined together by socio-economic status, education, and political ideology. They achieve this end without making either blog overtly political in theme. Instead, relying upon popular culture for context and providing readers the tools to join an active community discussion, VSBs and Post Bourgie create loyal followers.

4.3.1 PostBourgie

PostBourgie is described by the authors as “a running, semi-orderly conversation about race and gender and class and politics and media and whatever else we can think of. It represents the views of its authors and not those of their respective employers or organizations with which they are affiliated.” PostBougie was founded by professional writer Gene “G.D.” Demby, who editors the site. He blogs about race for National Public Radio, and is a native of South Philadelphia. Each of the other 15 writers is identified on the site in this format:

Angela | L.A. | DC | writer

The two cities reflect the blogger’s city of birth and current home. This parallel identification with past and present is reiterated in the summary provided for all of the authors: “as young adults — news junkies, hip-hop heads, smart-asses and autodidacts — we were suddenly smack dab in the middle class, wielding much of the same privilege we’d always been distant from and criticized. We were skeptical toward the politics of respectability. And yet! We were now surrounded by and socializing with self-congratulating Negroes who patted each other on the back because they were about something and self-congratulating white folks who patted themselves on the back because they had black friends. (But damn it if we ain’t love the sushi!).” Content reflects this parallel identification with the marginalized community and the privilege of one’s new economic class.

The top of the blog’s main page features picture of the Brooklyn Bridge with title “postbougie” in lowercase typewriter font. Directly below the title is a navigation menu that

includes: About, Commenting Policy, and Holler at Us. Right side shows “recent posts,” “the grape drink mafia,” “blogroll,” and archives by month.



Figure 2. PostBougie logo

The typeface is black with a white background. Full posts are on the homepage rather than the brief intros to posts that are seen on many continuous-scroll blogs. The “grape drink mafia” is the Twitter feed that showcases the writers of the site and what we can assume are other bloggers and cultural critics that the site owner follows. Topics of Post Bourgie posts include media and black popular culture, race, and relationships. Comments varied in frequency over the study period with most receiving none or less than five. To comment on this site, readers must provide an email address and name (that can be changed with each visit). Bloggers almost always respond directly to reader comments.

The Commenting Policy displays the author's tone in a way that encourages readers to

Commenting Policy for Post Bourgie

Awhile back, we had tinkered with the idea of instituting a commenting policy for readers, but we decided that we'd fall back on the commonsensical rules in place over at Bitch PhD's spot: don't be obnoxious. But being obnoxious is kinda like being a racist: most never really think they are. ("Why, some of my best friends exhibit common courtesy!") As our readership has grown, we've been getting more commenters (good!) which necessarily means more jackassery (bad!). In order to maintain an environment conducive to conversation — and not get your comment deleted, which we'd rather not do — we decided to codify some basic do's and don'ts for specifically commenting here at PB.

There shall be no litmus tests for 'proper blackness.' Blackness is a fuzzy, complicated thing, and we'd really like to discourage essentializing it, policing it, legislating it, or lambasting folks for showing insufficient fealty to some goofy, arbitrary Negro ideal. Calling Michael Steele a coon? Claiming ___ is setting us back? Don't do that, fam. This is the only thing you can do here that will get your comment deleted automatically.

No ad hominem attacks. Disagreement is good, but refrain from calling the mama of the poster/commenter you're disagreeing with a dusty-ass mud duck.

Link game crazy. If you're leaving a comment, we encourage you to use blockquotes and links to other sources.

The HTML for blockquoting is `<blockquote>And then she was all like...</blockquote>`.

The HTML for linking text is `Thing being linked to`.

Also, if you're tossing in a lot of links, your comment will get held for a second because of the spam filters. Hit us on e-mail and we'll dig that jawn out. (We should also note here that all new commenters get held for moderation initially; once your first comment is approved your comments should show up immediately. Also, also: we don't approve "anonymous" commenters. That is, if your comment has a clearly fake e-mail address — "no@no.com," por ejemplo — then it won't get approved.)

Arguing by way of assertion. This is more of a personal peeve, but if you're going to make a bold claim, be ready to back it up.

School us! There's a lot of stuff that's way above our pay grade, so if we're misstepping somewhere or misinterpreting something, chide us and point out where we went wrong. We can take it!

Because we are. "Why are we talking about this?" or any permutation thereof is grounds for deletion. We're so terribly sorry to have waterboarded you into reading something on the Internet that you're not interested in.

Be verbose, within moderation. Yo, I appreciate what you saying right now, playboy, but there's really no need for your comment to read like The Illiad. As a long-winded cat myself, I know it's hard. Exercise restraint.

Get tangential, but don't derail. The best discussions always branch off into other, quasi-related realms. Try not to use the commenting section as an opportunity to thread-jack or to speak to one of us directly. (Again, that's what e-mail's for...) Also, we know Michelle Obama is beautiful, brilliant and seems like an awesome person. It's unnecessary to leave comments on posts that mention her that read something like "Michelle is doing the damn thing!" or "Now every little black girl can dream of being first lady!"

Black Thought is the best MC doing it. You can disagree, and we probably won't dead your comment, but we will be side-eyeing you. — G.D

join in: comical, respectful, awareness, without being judgmental.

Figure 3. PostBourgie Commenting Policy

The level of detail used in the commenting policy is out of the ordinary compared with the other bloggers in the study. Each rule is simultaneously meant to provide instruction on how

to appropriately leave a comment and provide new readers with an insight into the style and tone of the site. Overt regulation is out of the ordinary for many blogs that rely upon high-context to create community standards for participation. Someone left the metaphorical door open and now the shop owners (bloggers) must directly instruct new clients about the rules of the shop (blog).

4.3.2 Very Smart Brothas

Very Smart Brothas (VSBs) is authored primarily by the founders of the blog who go by The Champ and Panama Jackson, respectively. Readers learn more about the authors through posts that focus on lifestyle, pop culture, and relationships. The top of the homepage features a banner advertisement. Below the ad is the title of the blog and a navigation window with links to About VSBs and About the Brothas. In the About the Brothas page, the differing writing styles of the two become apparent. Panama Jackson writes in the rhythm of a dozens game. He is the editor in chief of an online magazine. He explains his contribution to the page in the following way: “As one half of the creative genius behind Very Smart Brothas, my job is to bring the ruckus and the noise. My job is not to bring Flavor Flav, as he is banned from all conversations regarding relationships from here on out. That is, of course, unless it involves nude pictures of Buckey, in which case, he’ll be a guest panelist every Tuesday.” Damon writes a more typical biography, which is short and in paragraph form, where he describes himself as the author of three books and a contributing editor at Ebony.com. The About VSBs page is a satirical tale about the actual origins of the site.

The left third of the page contains a link to the site’s Facebook page as well as a list of the most recent comments and recent posts. Toward the bottom is a Member’s Only section.

Here, one can create an account to comment regularly on the site. There are no third-party advertisements on this site. The left two-thirds is a standard blog roll in reverse chronological order¹³. Blogs have tags, but the archives are not organized by category. Each post is signed by Damon or Panama Jackson. During the research period several new authors joined VSBs, all of whom were female identified. Very Smart Brothas is a WordPress blog and the founders retain primary control of the layout and content of the site.¹⁴ Commenters frequently post multiple times on each post and on multiple posts over time. Their comments demonstrate prolonged interaction and personal knowledge of other reader's off and online identities. Bloggers frequently respond directly to reader comments in the comment section as well.

4.10 Conclusion

The purposive sample of nine blogs was derived in order to provide a spectrum of black blogs that differed in type, level, and degree of reader participation via commenting, advertising, and structure. While all of the blogs have the familiar features of blogs, they approach advertising, commenting, and authorship differently. These differing approaches are responsible for creating different communities of readers. Even though readers may participate in multiple blogging forums, the context of the blog changes the way a reader will participate. Each site differs in the frequency of reader engagement, tone/tenor of discourse and ability of the blogger to profit from the blog. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, wherein the possibilities for posting, archiving, and creating profiles are the same for all users, each blogger, in combination with a community of followers, creates a unique site of discourse. Black barbershops comprise barbers,

¹³ During the research period there were a total of 141 posts with an average of 300 comments per post not including posts that promoted an event or a product (the site sold a line of t-shirts during the sample period).

¹⁴ WordPress is an open source blogging tool that is free. Bloggers utilize a plugin architecture and a template system.

hair cutting and styling technologies, patrons, and products. Despite these similarities barbers create enough differentiation that clientele remain loyal to their shops. Likewise, the nine blogging communities in this study are all a part of the larger black blogosphere, yet are differentiated by the personalities and discourse housed within the shop. This parallel between the features of the shop and the blog indicate that the blog, as a medium of communication for African Americans, harbors potential in crafting alternate public spheres. The similarities also point toward the features that may prevent open dialogue and community interaction. The following chapters will explore the creation of a high context for participation among readers through the employment of black rhetorical strategies that demonstrates how the digital barbershop is created and maintained. Following this, an exploration of the politics of the shop answers the question of why a digital barbershop is a necessary part of a productive alternate public for marginalized communities.

5. SHOP TALK AND BLACK ORAL CULTURE

While Twitter certainly provides the means for African Americans and other populations to utilize some features of oral culture to engage in critique of the dominant culture, the design of the platform falls short of allowing for the creation of a separate sphere of discourse that provides ownership (control and profit [social or economic] for the proprietor); builds upon the high-content culture of participants; and whose features best make use of the rhetorical strategies of black oral cultures. Blogs sites, unlike Twitter provide a platform where the primary blogger and a community of involved commenters can utilize narratives, storytelling, extended metaphors, and other features of oral culture to preserve black culture and challenge the dominant culture. The blog serves as a new barbershop, a means of cultivating active participation and re-mixing the features of oral culture present in shop talk.

5.1 The High Context of Black Blogs

Black blogs employ a high context for participation. High-context cultures are those in which less verbally explicit communication is common. Such cultures also tend to use less written/formal communication and instead rely upon internalized understandings, long-term relationships, and strong boundaries to guide effective communication. The long-term relationships guarantee that those involved in communication share meaning. The internalized understandings can often make it difficult for outsiders, especially those from low-context cultures to participate. Low-context cultures are rule-oriented and task-centered. Such cultures, which would include the dominant U.S. culture, codify knowledge, making it public and external. High-context cultures generally focus on personal face-to-face interaction. Interactions

on many black blogs are of this type . The tone, vocabulary employed, and context required for participation in the community demonstrate the parallels between blogging and personal face-to-face dialogue (Hall, 1976). Unlike some other social media platforms used by African Americans, blogs provide the space necessary for discourse that doesn't rely solely upon established communities but re-builds new communities over time.

One can see examples of the high context needed to participate in conversations on blogs like Very Smart Brothas, Post-Bourgie, and Black Girl with Long Hair. On each of these sites, synecdoche specific to the blogging community are employed regularly. This includes simple acronyms on Very Smart Brothas, and a more complex categorization system for hair textures on Black Girl Long Hair. While this means of categorizing natural hair textures did not originate on the site, the bloggers never define the terms for the reader. Style Icons on the blog BGLH are identified by various categories referencing their respective hair textures. The categories 3B, 3C, 4A, etc., are used by the blogger to describe women featured in their recurring series. In these posts the natural hair journey of a successful black woman is detailed through the use of interview, followed by pictures of the women, which feature their hair styled in different ways and the women in multiple contexts. The title of the post always includes the woman's name as well as her hair texture. For example, Aiesha was featured in a late February post. The post was tagged 3C hair. A 3C refers to the curl pattern and texture of the hair. According to Naturallycurly.com, 3C hair is Curly Coily Hair which is usually very voluminous, with tight ringlets that look like corkscrews (<http://www.naturallycurly.com/pages/hairtypes/type3>). This definition was not provided to readers on BGLH. Without explanation, the post provoked a higher than usual volume of comments wherein readers debated whether 3C was an appropriate label given the pictures provided. They compared the Style Icon to other icons of weeks past

while providing praise for the woman's hair and her hair journey. Several weeks later, the blogger renamed the original post, retracting the designation of 3C, and instead tagged the post as both 3C and 3B. The high context required to participate in this discussion demonstrates how bloggers take advantage of the features of the platform to create communities who share insider knowledge. The back and forth between blogger and community demonstrates the power of dialogue on the blog and the blogger as facilitator rather than expert. The blogger draws upon the collective knowledge of the community.

Beyond acronyms, the high-context culture of the black blogosphere is displayed on sites like Very Smart Brothas and Post Bourgie as the writers connect with readers with whom they share cultural touchstones. Black pop culture references from the 1980s and 1990s linked readers to the present by reflecting upon a similar coming of age movie or album that is shared by the community. For example VSBs and Post-Bourgie frequently incorporated lines from movies like *Coming to America* or *Boys in the Hood* as metaphors for the topics of the current blogs. In a February 2014 post, Panama Jackson, blogging for VSBs describes the "People he hates the most." People who read while walking are first on the list. He explains

If you're a woman you already can't walk in a straight line when you're paying attention (yeah, I said it. Shots fired.) But now you're engrossed in some sh*t that has taken your full attention, meanwhile I'm just trying to get to my final destination without bumping into random motherf*ckers I see in the street, but nooooooooooooooooooooo...here you go, zig zagging like you learned something about how not to get shot from watching Ricky get shot in Boyz N The Hood.

Here Jackson references the shootout scene in the film wherein a beloved character, Ricky, is shot and killed. This interjection does not cause the audience to focus in any long-lasting way on the plot of the film. Rather, as a cultural touchstone, the film reference does the job of signifying upon women reading the post while tying the community together with the reference to a film that is widely known among readers. Such cultural touchstones are predominantly used as

metaphors to describe the lived experience of the writers and readers in the present. The meaning is doubled; only those who are a part of this community, both on and offline, are able to fully appreciate the metaphor, narrative, or joke in question. They function much like the sacred song or spiritual within the black tradition in the Americas, but rather than singing about Canaan or crossing the river Jordan, within VSBs we laugh about ‘Ricky’ in *Boyz in the Hood*, or ‘Your Queen to Be’ and *Coming to America*.

The high context required for participation sets a bar for understanding the content of the original post, but also affords readers the credibility needed to engage in discussions. For this reason, blogs that rely upon more of this high context tend to have a high volume of posts, but from a smaller number of active participants. Participants in high-context culture blogging also tended to identify themselves by names closer to their presumed offline identifiers. Very Smart Brothas and a Belle in Brooklyn both allow readers to create online identities to respond both to posts and directly to one another in the comments section. Each of these sites featured the number of reader responses prominently with the title of the blog, thusly encouraging active engagement.

Blogs that normalize participation through the creation of profiles (with names and pictures) tend to have more active comments sections wherein people engage in dialogue with one another and with the blogger. They tend to stay on topic, and flaming is rare. When the topic shifts, it is almost always to the personal, with commenters asking about children, jobs, or hairstyles seen in the profile pictures. These blogs function as a site where people are familiar not only with the opinions of others but with their personal life stories as well. Sites like Field Negro operate differently. While Field Negro has a high volume of comments attached to most every post, commenters can remain anonymous and often use monikers that, rather than serving

the purpose of naming and identifying the self, are used to goad other readers with opposing political stances. Until I Get Married, Jozen Cummings' relationship advice site, has infrequent posts and much less participation from the readers than does A Belle in Brooklyn, which also focuses on relationship advice. Cummings, unlike Lucas, writes *for* his audience, not to them or with them. His posts, which often share personal information about his own relationships, do not solicit feedback from the reader. The feedback Cummings receives is from readers who recognize him as an authority or the site as providing a service. Cummings, through his blog, features links to The Meet Market, where he sets up strangers in NY on blind dates. Blogs like Until I Get Married require less context for participation and instead direct readers toward engagement with others outside of the blog. Cummings writes for an audience outside of the African Americans community for his day job. The blog is an extension of his career as a writer so the blogger does not seek to create the same insularity from the dominant group as other blogs in this study.

Engagement in long-lasting conversations, search functions, and tags that redirect readers back to previous posts are features indicative of the high context of the blogging culture as well. On every site where the other features of the high context required for participation exists, the format of the blog is such that readers can retrieve a long archive of previous posts and conversations with the ability to easily search for and find topics using themes and tags. High-context cultures are known for their long-term personal relationships (Hall, 1976). Encouraging readers to participate in these long-term dialogues adds to the high context of the sites. The high-context character of blogging communities is not particular to the black blogosphere. This finding merely supports the assertion that blogs provide an online platform that mirrors communal oral culture.

5.2 Remixing Black Oral Culture

Facets of black oral culture are present in black blogs and the features of blogs as an interface lend themselves most readily to the rhetorical strategies employed by black bloggers and their communities. The four facets of oral culture created by Africans living in America during chattel slavery and the antebellum South were slave songs, folktales, secular song/humor, and slave tales as detailed by Levine (1977). While rooted in the legacy of enslavement, these components of black oral culture have had a long and important history in the preservation of black culture and black cultural identity in America.

5.2.1 Substituting the sacred

The spiritual is the creation of a people who were restrained physically but not mentally. In the creation of the spiritual, Africans who were enslaved in the Americas took the religion that was used to oppress them and created a tool of freedom. This was done figuratively through the embrace of spiritual practices that adopted the ideas of social justice and liberty from biblical texts. It was done literally through the use of spirituals to guide collective revolt, signal rebellion, and voice dissent through biblical metaphors. Spiritual metaphors kept inside meanings hidden from outsiders. Spirituals have remained an important cultural tie for many in the African American religious tradition. The tie that binds for many African Americans in the online blogging community is not the traditional spiritual. Instead, black bloggers who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s share the connection to the popular culture of that time. Early hip hop, black sitcoms, and black films hold the cultural weight of spirituals for this group of black bloggers and the blogging communities. Substitution of the sacred occurs by re-appropriating that which was often used as a tool of oppression, including media stereotypes of African Americans and other artifacts.

During this period of analysis, the hashtag #byefelicia became popular on Twitter as well as other social media platforms. “ByeFelicia” is utilized at the end of a description of a person who the speaker feels is no longer worthy of consideration, usually because their opinion or behavior is contradictory to that of the community of which they are a part. At the end of a February post on VSBs titled “Under the Radar Significant Contributors to Black History,” Panama Jackson quips about pop culture figures Cam’ron and Ray J as being important parts of black history. The post is comedic in nature explaining that Ray J,

is all of the most ratchet parts of black twitter combined. He’s like Captain Planet if the five elements were Subtweets, Absurd Stories, B!tchmade Behavior, Delusions of Grandeur, and Wayyyyy too much free time on his hands. Brandy’s brother is tired of being humble, and we should all thank him for that.

Using elements of the dozens in his description of multiple pop culture figures, Jackson is mocking the way that certain members of the black community take black history month too seriously. He uses pop culture figures with little respect in the community to prove this point. This is further exemplified by the picture that accompanies the post wherein actor Samuel Jackson’s character from *Pulp Fiction* is captioned in a meme saying: “Say something about black history. I dare you.” The meme points us closer to the message of the post, which is never directly stated.

The final way the author alludes to the double meaning is in the conclusion of the post which reads, “Happy Black History Month (Also, if you are offended and feel that we’re trivializing Black history month...bye Felicia.)” The expression is taken from the classic film *Friday* which features actors Ice Cube and Chris Tucker spending a Friday at home in south central LA. *Friday* was released in 1995. In the film, Craig (Ice-Cube) and his friend Smokey

(Chris Tucker) smoke marijuana, attempt to meet and hook up with various women, and are eventually involved in an altercation with a neighborhood thug. Felicia is a local drug-addicted woman who regularly interacts with the pair and displays many of the signatures of the stereotypical ‘crackhead’ in many African American urban comedies. Craig and Smokey regularly dismiss Felicia’s requests for cash, drugs, or other favors with a simple phrase, “bye Felicia.”

These scenes are not an integral part of the plot of the film, rather they are a part of the mundane and normative experiences communicated by the film signifying life in an underserved African American inner-city community. This reference by bloggers and the blogging community is an example of substituting the sacred common in modern black oral culture online. “Bye Felicia” does several things for its speakers. First, it helps create an in-group space where cultural context is required for participation. This cultural context is created both by viewing the film and by understanding the relative normality of a character like Felicia, one who is a part of the community but not a productive member of the community. Felicia, as the neighborhood crackhead, is welcome until she becomes an annoyance or a disturbance to the overall maintenance of comfort and stability for the rest of the members of the community. A person who holds positions in contrast with the blogger or who is not worthy of attention is ‘Felicia’. The phrase serves as a means to diminish contrarian positions without the direct attack that one might find within the low-context dominant culture. Because relationships must still be protected in this space, “Bye Felicia” dismisses someone from the current dialogue but does not exclude from the community. In this case, those who, in the opinion of the blogger, hold black history month to be sacrosanct are not helpful and are doing relative harm to the complexity and heterogeneity of black culture. After the satirical post, telling those who are offended “Bye

Felicia” allows readers to take the assertions in the post as biting humor and lets naysayers remain in the community but without the credibility to critique this position effectively.

In a post on February 6, 2014, about gendered communication patterns, Panama Jackson discusses his frustration with indirect communication from women in romantic relationships. He says “But, I know women have this whole ‘I want you to want to do xyz’. I even alluded to it in my last post about a perfect man. You want to feel wanted. And that’s cool, and I’m gon’ let you finish, but real spit...bye Felicia.” Again, he silences the opposition to the argument of his post, but in a way that allows them to continue reading and feel like they are an intended part of the audience and welcome to continue to share in the future.

When religious similes and metaphors are referenced, they are not done with reverence for the spiritual or holy nature of the items. Rather these also become simply a part of the cultural experience of growing up in an African American church. The black church in America has historically been far more than a house of religious practice. It is the place where Gospel music was born, where black ministers rose to prominence within the community, where rhetorical devices were created and employed within the community, and where facets of black culture were passed on to a new generation. The bloggers in this study typically make religious references without the connection to the sacred, using them instead as cultural touchstones from black church culture. Very Smart Brotha’s April 4, 2014, “Shit Bougie Black People Love: #14. Lupita Nyong’o,” declares the love that upper-middle class (“bougie”) black people have for the actress. They explain:

Just say the words “Lupita Nyong’o” and nothing else, and watch their countenance improve, their posture straighten, and their teeth magically whiten. They may even begin to cry. Don’t be alarmed, though. It will be tears of joy, and the crying will likely stop when they start praise dancing a few seconds later. While they’re praise dancing, locate and grab the nearest chair. If no chairs are available, sit on the ground. When they’re

done praise dancing, they will want to talk about Lupita Nyong'o, and you may not have time to grab a chair then.

Praise dancing, which is a part of the modern black religious cultural tradition is used to poke fun at the ways African Americans treat certain public figures as above reproach, or even holy. So the religious reference mocks the practice of this type of uplift and hero worship. On April 4, 2014, Afrobella celebrates Lupita's sponsorship deal with Lancome, posting "Lupita For LANCOME! The News We've All Been Waiting For!" The exuberance surrounding her Oscar win, red carpet looks, natural hair, and product endorsement are indeed 'worshiped' on multiple blogs.

5.2.2 Blogger tales

Slave tales centralized the importance of the African living in an America that marginalized him. Through the creation of tales, the cunning, intelligence, and expertise of the slave was lauded, not as exceptional but as a norm. Slave tales worked to preserve dignity for a community that faced unending degradation. In the blogs VSBs and Post-Bourgie, one sees the modern manifestation of these tales. Used for the same purpose, bloggers routinely tell stories filled with humor, moral lessons, and examples of the wit and cunning of the central figure. While some are personal, others reference "a friend" who may be real or a fictional creation used to weave together a more compelling tale.

Panama Jackson and Damon of VSBs routinely tell stories filled with humor that demonstrates their own verbal prowess and the strength and dignity of African Americans faced with the most undignified circumstances. Damon posts about his experiences in his

neighborhood and fashions the post as a modern (slave) tale. In this blog tale, we follow him from sun-up in his Brownstone with his fiancé, through breakfast as he reflects upon the noisy neighbors and dilapidated buildings that surround his home. We follow him as he drops his fiancé off at work and heads back home to write. He blogs:

My route back home takes me through the hood part of the neighborhood. Sometimes there will be cops circling around. I do not consider the police to be an antagonistic entity. But I do not feel safe around them. I don't necessarily feel unsafe either. I guess the best word to describe how I feel is *aware*.... But there are also times when I notice them paying me more attention than I'm comfortable with. I might even get followed for a block. And then, at that point, I realize nothing matters. I'm a popular published author and professional writer with a fiancée. A fiancée with multiple degrees. We're renting a brownstone with hardwood floors throughout and 12 foot ceilings. We're getting married in July. We go to gallery crawls and board meetings. I own t-shirts proclaiming my love for Bougie Black People. We have four corkscrews, collected over time from the parties we throw and attend. I have a morning routine. And a dog.

But, in that moment, I'm a Black man in a sketchy neighborhood wearing a parka, sweats, and sneakers, and driving a Charger. To them, I am a potential suspect. Or, even worse, a potential threat. One awkward move or one overzealous officer could end everything for me.

I'll eventually make it home and I'll finish working. Maybe I'll moderate comments on VSB. Or, maybe I'll make some edits to something I'm writing for Complex. I'll forget about the morning. And I'll forget that, between the people across the alley and the cops on my way home, I've had to be on guard every moment I was out the house. Because I'm Black in America. And when you're Black in America, there really are no safe spaces, no recluse from potential danger, no time when you can be certain that what you do and who you are will not cease to matter because someone considers you to be a threat. Nowhere I can relax without reservation. Nowhere where I can be me and not worry.

The bloggers of PostBourgie and Very Smart Brothas speak from the position of the black middle class, those who are painfully aware of the legacy of oppression and discrimination African Americans have faced in America yet, given their current social and economic conditions, find themselves in a privileged position within the community. Much of this privilege comes from access to education. Bloggers reference college and the college experience as an unquestioned norm within their community of readers. During the period of study, a news story

about a black high school student from New York's acceptance to eight Ivy League schools began making the rounds of various social media sites, news sites, and in the TV news. The young man's accomplishments were heralded by many individuals and publications. None of the websites in this study linked to or mentioned the story. This example of black male accomplishment was ignored, not because the achievement is scorned by the bloggers, rather holding this young man up as exceptional in the mainstream press works to discourage the public from thinking of black males as typically excellent. By not pointing to individual accomplishments and instead weaving conversations about education into the everyday stories, bloggers re-center their experiences as normative. There is no plea for black males to go to college or reference to questionable statistics about graduation or incarceration rates. Discussions of college assumes a familiarity with this experience for the readers. The bloggers are confident about knowing and reaching a particular audience within the community.

The bloggers and their communities do not need to use their education to prove themselves in a white world, nor do they hold themselves up as exceptional. Instead black excellence and success (through education) is the norm in this world. Instead of proving a point to the dominant group, their tales centralize the black experience and establish the central figures in the story as normal. They are not coons or sambos, yet they are also not exceptional credits to their race. In this way, the modern blog tale, like the slave tale, reifies the African American experience as part of the American experience. Their struggles, like their accomplishments are an ordinary part of being black in America. The tales situate the bloggers and other characters in the tales as ordinary but worthy of attention.

5.2.3 Humor and wordplay

All of the blogs in the study rely upon humor and verbal wordplay in different forms and to varying degrees. For VSBs, verbal wordplay utilizing indirection and signifying are a part of the brand. The bloggers of Very Smart Brothers tend to use humor to examine their own situation and indirectly poke fun at themselves. Many black bloggers recognize and utilize class distinctions to interrogate the complications of their present economic situation juxtaposed with their social realities. Being born within the African American community but navigating an integrated world as a middle class adult provides challenges often brought to light through humor. One example of the use of indirection in signifying is the running themed post “Shit bougie black people do.” In this post, the bloggers subtly reference internet memes such as “Shit girls say” and the many others that followed to signify upon a group that they belong to. Another example of indirection that is directed within the community is the running joke on VSBs in which the Black Greek Organization, Delta Sigma Theta is signified upon.

Blogger Maya Francis describes, in her January 7, 2014 post, “On D. Wade, Gabby Union, And Making Sense Of Non-Break ‘Breaks’ And Condomlessness,” addresses the problems with irresponsible sex. She says, “One of my personal rules in life is ‘never make a mistake you can’t fix’. This is why I’m not a Delta.” She does not expand on this in any way. The single line that uses the Deltas as the butt of a one-line joke signifies upon the women of the organization. The joke works because the organization is well respected within the community; therefore, there isn’t any obvious harm done. Likewise, Damon (The Champ) Young’s post published February 14, 2014, “When Your Worst Behavior And Best Behavior Is The Same Damn Thing,” begins, “We’ve all heard the story before: Boy spots Girl at 6th annual Delta ‘Chicken Wing Eating Contest For The Mouth Gout Cure’” This is the opening line of a

longer tale woven by the blogger makes a joke at the expense of the organization again. The joke works in this instance because it diminishes the high esteem of the organization by pairing them with an African American stereotypes and a stereotype about uneducated African Americans. Again, because neither of these stereotypes would typically be assigned members of this group, the humor is not biting or defaming. Rather the humor does the work of strengthening group bonds. They can joke about the organization because they actually respect it.

The January 13, 2014 post, “Ode to Deltas,” explains the running joke signifying the sorority. The author explains that they joke about the Deltas because “they don’t take themselves too seriously,” “make a major impact,” and “follow the blog more closely than others.” This explanation, while complementing the Deltas, also subtly jabs at other African American sororities who they imply do take themselves too seriously, do not make a major impact, or would not follow their blog. Signifyin, while present on other social media platforms, can be used differently by bloggers. Blogs allow for the creation of a high-context community rather than relying upon members to already have the cultural context and knowledge necessary to participate. Joking about the Deltas simultaneously makes use of a part of black culture and requires readers to regularly engage on the site to follow the humor. Signifyin on the Deltas, is a demonstration of group solidarity through the use of black rhetorical strategy.

To challenge systemic issues and mock institutions, bloggers on VSBs use a form of wordplay that relies upon shared cultural knowledge. The blogger or commenter will make a point regarding how things should be, then follow it by explaining that idealized state of affairs cannot exist because of some institution that actively works in opposition but is not recognized as such. For example, a re-make of *Coming to America* is technically feasible, “but the internet.” You *could* go for a long walk at night, “but the police.” The internet, being filled with discourses

of racial intolerance can act as an oppressive force in black creative expression. The police, due to the legacy of white supremacy and the power of that institution serve to enforce white supremacy rather than protect the interests of black citizens. This form of signifyin', as Florini (2014) explains, "often speaks to the shared experiences of Black Americans as raced subjects and can be a resource for encoding and expressing experiential knowledge about Black identities" (p.224) .

The humor and wordplay common on this site is decidedly different in posts linked to online magazines and more mainstream blogs. Damon, a writer, is a contributor to *Complex* magazine and several other news sites. When he links to articles that he has written elsewhere, his tone is more biting and he directly addresses issues of concern. For example, a March 3, 2014, article written by Damon addresses hip hop "rebuttal" songs written by male artists to refute female-empowering songs and calls the men hypocritical. He says:

Basically, it's an exercise in a particular brand of butthurtiness that's even worse than the typical butthurtiness: A hypocritical butthurtiness. It operates from the premise that these bitches and hoes are "winning." And, since these bitches and hoes are winning, we need someone to stand up for men to put those bitches and hoes in their places. This premise conveniently ignores the fact that the last two decades of rap music has been filled with song after song after song after song after song of lyrics and concepts insulting and disrespecting women. These are not veiled or implied disses, either. The consistency of these types of lyrics is only rivaled by how bold and unambiguous they tend to be. Songs like "No Scrubs" and "Lookin Ass Niggas" are singular raindrops in an ocean full of "Big Pimpin"s and "Tip Drill"s and "Pop That"s and "Bitches Ain't Shit"s.

This kind of directness in humor is saved for those who are detrimental to the black community. Whether outsiders or members of the community, when the actions of an individual or group serves to further oppress, the bloggers engage in name-calling and direct critique. We see this on The YBF in the section titled Foolywang. Foolywang refers to individuals or institutions that engage in senseless acts of depravity, sexism, or racism. On February 26, 2014, the satirical

newspaper *The Onion* was called out in the Foolywang section for calling nine-year-old Quvenzhane Wallis a c--t. NBA star J.R. Smith's actions were labeled as foolery as his actions of asking an underage girl for sex were blasted in the Foolywang section of the site. The term 'foolywang' signals displeasure, but does so while maintaining a humorous tone. The blog Field Negro similarly castigates African Americans whose behavior causes harm to the community or whose public image and discourse 'embarrasses' African Americans. Secular Song traditionally served the purpose of this kind of self-policing that Foolywang or "House Negro" does on the blogs The YBF and Field Negro. The secular song is now articulated in labels of 'foolywang' and 'house negro' which are recurring features and do not require a continuous explanation of their meaning. Here again we see the utility of blogs in crafting spaces where self-policing can occur within a high-context environment and where cultural knowledge is necessary to understand and participate.

5.2.4 Performance, narrative and humanizing heroes

The performative aspect of telling folktales and recounting the history of a community is not lost the black blogosphere. Many blogs follow a traditional diary model in their publication. These blogs recount the authors' experiences and perspectives, but are written not to a larger audience, but in many ways as a means of catharsis for the author. On the contrary, other blogs, especially those considered A-list blogs with a high advertising revenue stream tend to follow traditional journalistic models for writing. These blogs are highly conforming to principles of journalistic writing including an adherence to the perception of objective truth, a distance from those one writes about and for, a duty of verification of facts and sources, and a desire to be comprehensive in coverage without favoring the interests of particular communities. A few of

the bloggers in this study mention their background in journalism, including Jozen Cummings. While Cummings frequently discusses his personal experiences with dating, his site is created as an advice column in blog form. Therefore, Cummings is the ‘expert’ to whom his followers look for guidance in matters relating to dating and romantic relationships

Demetria Lucas an author, life and relationship coach, and co-star of a cable reality show is the proprietor of A Belle in Brooklyn. A Belle in Brooklyn is also a lifestyle and relationship blog wherein Lucas interweaves personal anecdotes about her romantic relationships with relationship advice and guidance. In both cases we see the emergence of the blogger as griot rather than as diary writer or journalist. The blog is personal but not written for the self. The blogger understands the parameters of journalism, yet the blog posts exist as performance rather than prose. The lens through which communication scholars view bloggers is often colored by our knowledge of journalism (Deuze, 2009; Gillmor, 2009). Bloggers are often marginalized as writers because of their emphasis on the subjective experience. As Papacharissi and Meraz (in press) explain, “A hobby for most, blogging is motivated by goals and priorities that are subjective, aimed at connecting bloggers to their social sphere and a variety of publics, and involving them in the process of information production and consumption.” The insertion of self into ‘reporting’ disqualifies the blogger from the realm of the professional. The attempt to compare blogging to standard practices of journalism obscures the creation of a new category of writing that is personal and professional, simultaneously individual and communal. Within the African American oral tradition, the insertion of self and personal experience bring validity to the conversation rather than weakness to one’s argument. People are driven to blog, to chat, and to participate online because of the affect of enjoyment received through participation. Participation reminds us that we are wanted, needed, found important, and belong (Dean, 2010).

The ritual of blogging (or tweeting) is not always done to convey particular messages we find important. Rather we wish to be found important ourselves, and to achieve this status through our communication. Performance via blogging achieves this end. Re-centering one's experience, or the experience of a sub-culture within the dominant society, replicates the practices of folktales and songs common in the black oral tradition.

Within oral culture, the performance of narratives and tales is as important as the material content. Folktales, along with secular songs were performed by a person equipped to share messages of cautionary tales and critiques of the community along with powerful confrontational heroes. Lucas' blogging style commonly elucidates the folktale as well as the secular song/humor. Posts like "You never held it while he pees?" use a comical story of romantic encounters to bring levity to an awkward conversation about relational intimacy. Rather than an advice column about how to know or determine your level of intimacy, Lucas's February 18, 2014, blog post, functioning as a humorous song of traditional oral culture, eliminates the difficult path to navigating intimacy with a romantic partner. She goes on to write about Jordan Davis, a young African American teen shot and killed in Florida by a man claiming to 'Stand His Ground'. Following the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed Davis used a similar defense. The death of Jordan Davis along with Trayvon Martin served as cautionary tales for the community. The two young men symbolized the lack of respect afforded to black life and the fear instilled within the community that the laws of the land do not protect them from acts of violence nor afford them the same rights to peace and security that they do for the dominant group. Instead of writing in detail about the death of Davis or the trial of the man who killed him, she instead memorialized him on the anniversary of his death by writing about herself at the age he was when he died. She

remembers the loud music she too played while driving with friends at 19, an allusion to the reason given by Davis' killer for the prompting of the altercation. She does this while simply telling her story. Beyond Davis' name and picture, the story is reflexive about her own life rather than his. This is not a traditional political statement, but is a statement nonetheless. In the retelling of her story, and the encouragement of the community to share their own narratives, she subtly aligns herself, and asks her readers to align themselves, with Davis. She asks us, in our remembrance of self at Davis' age to empathize with him and in turn to "do better" on behalf of our youth.

Extended narratives differentiate the interface of blogs from sites like Twitter. Black Twitter talks about the television show *Scandal* regularly. Black Twitter lives for *Scandal*, Olivia Pope, and Shonda Rhimes, but it does so for one hour each week and 140 characters at a time. What this prevents is a facilitated dialogue about the complexity of character development and the ability to formulate impassioned arguments regarding the development of characters in relation to the larger significance of their representation on prime-time television. The blog, insulated from the dominant culture, does not need to protect Olivia Pope, or Shonda Rhimes, or the relationships of black women on television. Critique is paired with respect for an extended insightful dialogue among parties who know and relate to one another regularly. PostBougie's weekly recap of *Scandal* features open letters from two different bloggers giving their take on the week's drama. In a post from March 7, 2014, Stacia and G.D. sound off. Both spend much of the post lauding the white wife of the president as their favorite character rather than Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington), one of the few black female prime-time protagonists. G.D. blogs about Mellie's take-control attitude and explains: "This shit right here is why I'm Team Mellie." The space to make their case both for Mellie and for other controversial positions about the show

would not be possible using Twitter, Facebook, or other platforms with confining limitations on text and no assumption of the hush harbor. Because Olivia Pope is one of the only black female protagonists in prime-time, and Shonda Rhimes one of the few successful black female writers/producers, the tropes of black protectionism often induce unending defense of the character and the show from those who would seek to devalue them. People reading the post on Postbougie understand the significance of the show culturally and, therefore, can critique it using extended narratives. They can use Olivia Pope and her relationship failures as cautionary tales and treat characters like Rowan Pope, Olivia's father, as heroes who stand up to the President and to power. The blog post functions as the performance of two storytellers responding to each other with commenters and engaging in the call and response typical in black oral culture.

5.3 Conclusion

Black blogs provide a platform to replicate modes of discourse present in black oral culture and serve as a medium through which African Americans can modify facets of black oral culture to meet the community's current needs. As a marginalized population in the U.S., the shop talk and employment of recognizable rhetorical devices preserve culture and can potentially foster the discourse needed to create an effectual counterpublic. Substituting the sacred with popular culture reflects a shift within this generation's experience and its disconnect from the tradition black church. While the black church maintains its cultural role, bloggers in this study were drawn together more by their common experiences with music, television, and film than by the sacred songs of the church. Yet, the same re-appropriation occurs. As much of mainstream American pop culture has devalued African Americans in stereotypic representations; this

community of bloggers has re-appropriated mainstream disparaging images of African Americans to demonstrate solidarity and resistance and to urge uplift.

While the content of folktales changes, the bloggers still utilize tales to reassert the dignity of African Americans in an undignified system of racial stratification. Signifying and doxen's playing is not lost on this group of bloggers. We see jokes crafted based on the features of other social media platforms, and because this generation of bloggers spends much of their time communicating through short messages, the humor of "But the police" or "Bye Felicia" becomes typical. The platform of blogging, specifically, isn't fully responsible for shaping the rhetorical strategy; rather, the communicative culture as determined by all of the technologies readily available to the community impact the discourse. The desire to move beyond hero worship allows for nuanced exploration of prominent real and fictional African Americans through extended narratives. Rather than a simple transference of the historical features of black oral culture or the rhetorical strategies, modern day bloggers are making important changes to these features to better navigate the platform and the politics of the time.

Examining the rhetoric of the metaphorical barbershop demonstrates the ingenuity of African Americans as a marginalized population able to reimagine a medium that was previously considered exclusionary. This same ingenuity and reclamation of space is and was found in the black barbershop. Black barbers were forced to exclude black men from their shops, and black women were taught that they had to accommodate white standards of beauty. The present day barbershop has been reclaimed as a space of reprieve for black men and a means of economic advancement for black entrepreneurs. Likewise, black women's hair care is experiencing a renaissance with black women at the forefront of natural hair products and services. The reclamation of these spaces is made possible by the use of black oral culture to foster dissent, re-

centralize the importance of the African American experience, and preserve dignity in the face of oppression. Though the facets of black oral culture have been modified by bloggers in the communities within this study, many of the original rhetorical strategies remain intact. In the following chapter the analysis extends to the themes that emerge from these discourses and their connection to the public sphere.

6. POLITICS OF THE SHOP

Bloggers and commenters demonstrate that the motivations for discourse and the tools available to them are important in determining whether blogging communities take on the characteristics of enclaves, counterpublics, or satellites. Enclaves, counterpublics and satellites are not separate spaces. They overlap and transform spaces over time. Though varied thematic content is present on the blogs, the formation of enclaves, satellites, and counterpublics in the black blogosphere is most evident in the discourse of black culture, the black bourgeoisie, and black feminism. Themes of the discourse transcend the categorical designation of the site by the author or by third-parties. At different times, blogs may take on the characteristics of different forms of publics and may change their goals and motivations. As Squires (2002) explains, “Political strategies and ideas emerge from exchanges of ideas and inspiration, and the primary function of the public sphere is to support this discourse” (p. 450). By utilizing different rhetorical strategies, bloggers and their communities create spaces that serve different purposes for the African American community, including preservation of culture, public resistance, and strengthening group institutions.

6.1 The Politics of Black Culture

Black and African American art has historically served and continues to serve as a point of resistance to a legacy of enslavement, colonization, and oppression. Within the African American community, expressions of culture through music, dance, comedy, and visual arts are used as tools of dissent and to maintain group identity and resist assimilation. We see in African American oral culture, the utility of song, storytelling, and humor as a part of this process. Black

culture, as expressed in entertainment media and hair and beauty, suggest that satellite publics form in black blogs to solidify black institutions. Satellite publics desire separation from the larger public to maintain group identity. They only enter into discussion with the larger public when there is a convergence of interests (Squires, 2002).

6.1.1 Dispelling the burden of representation

In an April 3, 2014, post on Very Smart Brothas titled, “On being black and having it both ways,” blogger Shamira discusses a Saturday Night Live Sketch featuring two black cast members. She explains that many within the African American community found the sketch offensive. The critique is that the sketch would be funny for a black audience—in that the comedians utilized black rhetorical strategies, mocked elements of the community, and did so for the purpose of signifying and self-policing—but this humor was lost on the larger audience. The blogger responds to this critique by explaining:

I’ve never been explicitly concerned about how white people receive black content once it’s been given the space for a large audience. While I understand other peoples valid concerns, I don’t think putting content out removes the social responsibility of white people to see their privilege and know when they are able to jump in and when they should just step back and listen.

In this assertion, Shamira claims that black art is created for black people. Expression of one’s culture as a member of a marginalized community should not force an explanation or justification to the dominant group. The blogger goes on,

In my opinion, desiring a space to depict the varying versions of the black experience is disserved if we feel required to dilute the message to accommodate for the ignorant and the hopeless. The second we feel dictated [to] by people who are already uninterested in our narratives is when we cede our power before mobilizing it. To sum up...it’s not my

problem if the white audience didn't get the joke. I'm only interested in ensuring that we have a multitude of avenues to say what we want to say in the manner that we see fit. If nonblacks get it, great. If they don't...I'm trying to find a bother, but it seems that my pockets are all out of them at the moment.

The blogger asserts that black art and the representations of blackness, even in mainstream media exists for the artist and the black community. The art is not meant to foster dialogue between African Americans and whites, neither should African Americans expect that those outside the culture will understand. Privilege dictates that when those of the dominant group create art and entertainment, there is no burden of representation (Hall, 1981). Instead, those part of the dominant group have access to a plethora of representations of the dominant culture. Each time a white person is seen on screen, produces an album, or writes a joke, cultural and artistic expression is not scrutinized for the ways someone outside of the culture may interpret it. The burden is not on the artist to create art that shifts the discourse or does the work of creating equity in an industry based in inequality. The blogger admonishes the community not to hold black art to this standard. Commenter 'cushicmaid' agrees, saying:

Could not put it better myself. We simply don't get the luxury of being seen as individuals. So any mainstream representation reflects on all of us, whether we like it or not. But you can't live fixated on what non-blacks things of you, and we have to recognize our own individuality, even if the ignorant masses won't. We can't hold fellow blacks to a higher standard. If we can tolerate ignorant, irresponsible individuals of all other races, we can find it in ourselves to tolerate the same in blacks.

Whether or not the SNL sketch was funny, it was a representation of blackness on television that had not previously existed on the show. The sketch features black actors and black writers hired only after protest that the show lacked a diverse cast. Therefore, complaining that the representations of blackness they produced are inappropriate is inadequate. A comment from

‘Mental Masturbation’ shows the same frustration with those who complained about the sketch.

The commenter says,

I agree with all the points made in the post. Black people spend too much time worrying about how our actions are going to be perceived by white people? Seriously, what type of existence is that? I don’t want to spend my life being a slave to white people’s thoughts or perceived opinions. It’s 2014, can we stop giving a f*** about what they think about us? I’m sure they don’t give two dry f***s about what we think of them. And sure, there is a system of white supremacy that favors white individuals and we should probably learn how to go along to get along, and eventually get ahead... but I’d rather live a free life and not “make it” rather than submit to such a silent form of white supremacy. And anyway, Black creativity is stifled when we put too much thought into figuring out how NOT to push the envelope or offend others with our artistic content. Stop trying to become mainstream and catering to everyone’s taste. That is bland and boring. And it will not set you apart from the next man(or woman). Be you. Have a voice. Have a spark. That’ll get you mainstream appeal. Ask Eddie Murphy, Redd Foxx, Jamie Foxx, Chris Rock, Martin Lawrence, and countless other black comics who were boldly black in their material. And if white people are offended, so be it...

This comment, like the post, is written to other people who identify as African American and not meant for those outside of the community.

In this discussion, the blogging community takes on the features of a satellite, a separate and independent space open only to group members that exists for the maintenance of group identity and the strengthening of institutions. While a satellite community preserves and strengthens black institutions, a part of this preservation is the critique and self-policing of institutions that are not actually to the benefit of that community. Commenters on VSBs frequently bring up director, writer, and producer Tyler Perry to remind one another that all representations are not created equally. However, previous posts on VSBs have taken a more nuanced approach to their discussion of Perry, positioning him as a cultural anti-hero who brings about the need for more artistic representations of the black experience, as were received with the films *Fruitvale Stations*, *The Butler*, or *12 Years a Slave*.

Television shows such as ABC's *Scandal* and BET Network's *Being Mary Jane* received regular attention from bloggers on VSBs, PostBourgie, TheYBF, and A Belle in Brooklyn. The discourse is split between praise for the black women's presence on television and a barbed critique of each for their affairs with married men. Panama Jackson of VSBs writes, "Are Black women that starved for representation in the face of the 'reality' shows out there that these shows which all seem to include Black women chasing married and unavailable men (you can throw in Tyler Perry's *The Have and the Have Nots* in there too though I'm not sure anybody's actually watching that) and pretty much failing on all accounts welcome respites from the ratchetry?" In this January 9, 2014 post, Jackson offers a critique of the representation of black women while also subtly digging at Tyler Perry for his latests television show's lack of success. In both cases he is arguing that the representation of African American women on television is not a full and balanced one. In the rest of this post, he problematizes the idea that black women should celebrate any representation without careful attention to the ramifications.

The first comment on the article addresses the author directly and repositions the characters as more than participants in infidelity. 'CherieAnn' writes:

There's no uproar (yet) because we like to have a chance to be the center of attention for an hour on tv. We know she's more than just a side-piece- she's a daughter of a sick woman, the breadwinner of her entire family, a career woman, etc. So to just say she's a side-piece, isn't exactly fair... She's human. She's flawed. Also, we are more trusting of the shows because their creators are Black women- that's a biggie. We feel even more connected to the character because she sprang forth from the imagination of one of us.

In this comment CherieAnn argues that, with all of her faults, the character Mary Jane is a product of the black imagination. The people most equipped to tell the stories of marginalized communities are the people of those communities. Sometimes the stories are difficult for outsiders to hear and painful for insiders to acknowledge, but the narratives are important all the

same. They are crafted from the legacy of storytelling within African American oral culture and this commenter asks that the author reflect upon the significance of the community's ability to tell its own stories. Satellite publics are those that desire separation from the dominant group because of a lack of perceived interdependency of desire for regular discourse apart from the dominant group. Unlike an enclave, the separation is not based exclusion or fear of reprimand. In the discourse surrounding black representations in mainstream media, the blogs serve as a satellite public. While desiring representation in the mainstream media, the community requires a separate space to interrogate these representations and reflect upon their desirability, influence, and importance within black culture. Beyond entertainment, these satellite publics discuss the politics of black hair and beauty in spaces where they "do not feel compelled to hide or change cultural particularities" (Squires, 2002, 464).

6.1.2 Our black is beautiful

Black hair, fashion, and beauty are common themes on all of the blogs in the study. This is true for blogs that celebrate black beauty, like the natural hair blogs, and those with other goals. Conversations about hair were often coupled with issues of colorism and body image on the blogs. In natural hair blogs, the tone of both the blogger and the blogging communities was highly celebratory of women who decided not to use chemical processing techniques on their hair. Bloggers posted examples of celebrities and readers wearing their hair without chemical process. Black Girl with Long Hair categorizes posts by product, hair care, hair styles, and style icons in order to help readers navigate all of the advice and information the bloggers craft for their audience of natural hair enthusiasts. These blogs are a tool for the construction of identity

and the maintenance of self-image. The celebratory tone encouraged women to ‘go natural’ as well as those who had already made the decision to ‘go natural’.

Historical shaming of Afrocentric beauty popularized hair ‘relaxing’ and straightening in an attempt to make black beauty more palatable to whites (Owens-Patton, 2006). Straightened and relaxed hair has historically also showcased creative expression and technological prowess as black female entrepreneurs turned black hair care into an incredibly profitable business. Yet the business of black hair is still wrought with the politics of colorism and dominant ideals of beauty for many in the community. African American and Latino men and women are more likely than even whites to believe that hair should be long, hair should be straight or curly but not kinky, hair should be professionally maintained, and that hair should signal one’s gender (Weitz, 2001). However, a natural hair revolution has been fomented by the ability of black women to form satellite communities that challenge white standards of beauty and centralize the beauty of natural hair.

Natural hair, on the blog *Black Girl with Long Hair*, is recognized as a part of self-care and preservation. Self-care relates to the hair itself but also the emotional and spiritual self-care involved in the dissent from mainstream colorist notions of beauty in Western culture. The presentation of techniques for styling, conditioning, and protecting natural hair are practical tools for readers. Posts about Style Icons allow readers to situate themselves in relation to beauty ideals within a society that rarely agrees with these positions. During the study, *Black Girl with Long* featured 66 Style Icons on the site. Interviews revealed what led each woman to ‘go natural’ and the techniques she uses to maintain her hair. In addition to celebrating her hair, the site details her interests, profession, and other facets of her identity. Displays like these, and the conversations that follow, signify that hair remains intimately connected to identity for many of

the black women who are a part of these blogging communities. Hairstyle choices can reflect connection to community and the protection of Afrocentric ideals of beauty.

Discourse about hair and beauty is used to create communal spaces of support and self-care. BGLH's Style Icons feature readers from the site and the images associated with the women are often "selfies"¹. The use of the selfie allows the woman to create her own representation. Photos are paired with the text of an interview where woman's story is told in her own voice. Bloggers in this study regularly rely upon women to tell their own stories, articulate their own conceptions of beauty, and provide spaces of support and the possibility to care for self within the discourse of the site. The sites do not take on the features of enclaves in that the goal of discourse is not to prepare readers for interaction with the dominant group. There is no expectation or hope that the discourse on the site will make its way into the larger public sphere. Instead the dialogue re-positions black beauty as the norm. The techniques provided to care for one's hair parallel the spiritual and mental care the sites afford to readers through participation in dialogue.

Afrobella, like BGLH, celebrates natural hair and offers tips for the maintenance of African American natural hair. This site is much more product focused and relies upon a single blogger as authority figure. Where BGLH relies upon the community to create Style Icons, Afrobella highlights celebrities who have embraced natural hair styles. One example is Lupita Nyong'o. While Nyong'o is a celebrity with mainstream appeal, Afrobella situates the actress as a part of its community and one who shares their interests. Yursik, the founder of Afrobella announcing Nyong'o's new partnership with the cosmetic brand Lancôme on April 4, 2014, says, "Our Lupita is now the face of an internationally recognized, beloved French beauty brand. Her

¹ Photos taken by oneself, usually with a phone, and often circulated in social networks.

face will be in magazines and maybe even on billboards.” Lupita is “ours,” the author explains. Her success is ours, and her beauty is ours. In this way, the conversation remains celebratory of not only the actress but of the beauty of black women.

Yursik and the community of Afrobella, while celebratory of natural hair and Afrocentric beauty, do not show disdain for women who do not make the decision to ‘go natural’. Yursik discusses Queen Helene hair products, a white-owned company whose products were used by many African Americans in the 1960s-1990s. The post ask reader to reflect upon old hair secrets. Many refer to times when they used relaxers with nostalgia. The post and the comments that follow create a collective space wherein people can comfortably reminisce about ‘creamy crack’ without feeling that their blackness is under attack. The dialogue on Afrobella does not essentialize blackness and breaks with the idea that natural hair is always an overt political statement. Many women wear their hair naturally without the intention of challenging norms or rebelling against Eurocentric standards of beauty. Yet the action is political whether or not it is recognized as such. This is akin to the creation of the separate, independent space open to the communities of Afrobella and BGLH. The discourse found on these blogs maintains group identity and strengthen black institutions. Such discourse (and self-presentation) is a political act whether or not it is articulated as such by the blogger. The satellite community, while having little connection to a mainstream public sphere, is an important political tool of the black community.

When discussion of celebrity hair occurs on blogs, the goals shift to policing and monitoring of black institutions. Hair on The YBF is not a primary focus of the blogger but receives considerable attention from commenters. Natasha Eubanks at TheYBF is largely uncritical of pop star Beyonce’s daughter, Blue Ivy or Beyoncé’s decisions regarding her natural

hair. Instead, Eubanks post photos of the family vacationing, visiting the White House, and posts a short anecdote about Blue Ivy singing along to her mother's songs. However, on each of these occasions, some commenters debate the decision by Beyoncé and Jay-Z to keep their 2-year-old daughter's hair natural. Following a March 26, 2014, post showing the family sightseeing in Barcelona, Top Commenter 'Carla Posner' says "PLEASE comb that child's hair! What is the problem?" Another 'Top Commenter', 'Char Glamorden', frames her critique as concern saying, "Blue, girl, you are adorable. They wont comb that baby's hair. Heck, they wont even moisturize it. But, save up your nickels and dimes, and one day, you will be able to buy your on comb, barrettes and Pink Lotion. And, wont nobody be able to take it from you. Rock on ghyrl." Many more commenters defend the child and her parents.

The message from these exchanges is clear. When public figures act as representatives of the community they can no longer can make individual decisions. The decisions of Beyoncé regarding her daughter's hair are community decisions now. Young Blue Ivy Carter's hair is a statement regarding the politics of black hair. If her mother chooses hairstyles for herself that uphold Eurocentric forms of beauty, can she choose another path for her daughter? Must women wear their naturally in order to understand and respect the reasons why others do so? The discourse now shifts away from the goals of the satellite community to that of an enclave used to debate how the child, as a stand-in for the community, can and should be represented to the dominant group. Beyoncé as an artist, business woman, and mother is used within the blogs to create an enclave wherein the politics of a new black feminism can be debated.

6.2 Enclaves: Black Feminist Shades of Grey

On December 13, 2013, singer and entertainer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter released her fifth studio album. She did this without announcing the album release to the press or previewing the album for critics. She also released the album exclusively online and without the option to purchase singles. Beyond its non-traditional release, the album also featured new content for Beyoncé. She sang about her sexuality and her videos featured more sexual content than has been typical of the pop star. One song includes segments taken from Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk about feminism. In the song "Flawless," Beyoncé tells her competitors to "bow down," calling herself "flawless." This exercise in braggadocio is bookended by a video clip of the singer losing her first national singing competition. Intermingled within the song are Adichie's words that reflect upon patriarchy and the disservice done to young women by asking them to shrink themselves so as not to threaten masculinity. Embedded within this song are the many contradictions of a modern black feminism. Upon its release, the internet and the black blogosphere suddenly became consumed with discussion about Beyoncé and her new "feminist" LP. Many argued that Beyoncé subverted the traditional industry model of album release, taking ownership of the album, her career, and her sexuality. She simultaneously constructed her identity as wife, mother, sexual being, and black female celebrity. Discussions of Beyoncé and black feminism on the blogs in this study elucidate the conflict between a modern black feminism and the traditional black feminism that developed in response to exclusion from traditional white feminism.

An enclave, unlike a satellite, is forced into separation from the dominant group. Within an enclave, marginalized communities build strategies for the future. Denied a space in public discourse, these communities create enclaves to create "discursive strategies and gather oppositional resources." Discourse within these communities is hidden from the dominant group

and is dedicated to black interests and needs. Enclaves serve as safe spaces where those who are denied access to the dominant public sphere gather. The type of discourse produced by bloggers and commenters in this study regarding Beyoncé is largely inwardly focused and produced to preserve culture and foster resistance to the representation in the mainstream media of black women. Black feminism itself emerged because of the exclusion of women of color from mainstream feminist scholarship.

The idea of Beyoncé as a feminist sparked controversy among women, black women, and black feminists. Blogs and mainstream news sites featured stories that celebrated Beyoncé as a feminist. Various authors proclaimed that the agency she demonstrated in the way she released the album, the way she deals with complex intersections of her own identity as a black women, and her own claims of being a feminist situate her definitively as a black feminist. Others wrestled with making sense of this figure as a feminist within the parameters established by the pioneers in the field of black feminist research. Joan Morgan (1999) coined the term “Hip Hop Feminist” to describe a generation of black feminists who live within the seemingly contradictory space of abhorring patriarchy while embracing the culture of hip hop. Hip Hop has been criticized by many feminist scholars for sexist lyrics, misogynistic representations of women, and a celebration of consumer capitalist culture contradicting many feminist principles. In the discourse of the blogging communities regarding Beyoncé, we see traces of what Morgan describes as Hip Hop Feminism. As Morgan explains, “The manifestos of black feminism, while they helped me to understand the importance of articulating language to combat oppression, didn’t give me the language to explore things that were not black and white, but things that were in the gray,” Morgan says. “And that gray is very much represented in hip-hop” (Ofori-Atta,

2011). That gray is also reflected in a modern interpretation of black feminism in the black blogosphere.

On December 17, 2014, Demetria Lucas of A Belle in Brooklyn posted “6 Thing I Care About on ‘Beyoncé’ more Than Her Feminism,” both on her own blog and *The Root*. In this post she dismisses the idea that one can determine if Beyoncé is a feminist based solely on an album release. She asserts that the debate is not important, needed, or interesting. While she appreciates a new image of feminism, Lucas asks us to focus on six things that are more interesting and important about the album. The list includes the following:

- 1.) Release of the album with press or advertising;
- 2.) A lyric from the song “Drunk in Love” that appears to reference Ike and Tina Turner’s tumultuous relationship;
- 3.) A song called “Rocket” that exudes sexuality from a female perspective;
- 4.) A reference to her miscarriage in the song “Heaven”;
- 5.) Introducing the world to the term Surfbording (a sex position);
- 6.) And her new persona that raps and breaks with the good girl image she formed over a decade in the industry.

Lucas supports the agency of the artist while remaining unaffected by how this arrangement still supports a form of hypercapitalism². She defends the use of the Ike and Tina Turner reference, explaining that the quote “Eat the cake Anna Mae” from the film *What’s Love Got to Do With It*, is referencing cake as a sexual innuendo rather than condoning the act of violence on the part of Ike Turner. According to Lucas, the line re-appropriates the negative connotation and it becomes a part of the narrative of the song about sex with a consenting

² Hyper-capitalism refers to “a new form of capitalistic social organization marked by the speed and intensity of global flows that include exchange of both material and immaterial goods, people, and information. Hypercapitalism, sometimes referred to as corporate capitalism, is blamed by critical scholars for causing misbalance and fragmentation of social life by allowing commercial or business interests to penetrate every aspect of human experience” (Vujnovic, 2012).

partner. The line connects certain listeners to a cultural touchstone rather than an acceptance of domestic violence. She admits that the line is unneeded but castigates the knee-jerk reaction of many white feminist critics for taking the idea out of context. Lucas can abhor domestic violence while understanding that any reference to an abuser does not necessarily condone abuse. This nuanced approach to discussing patriarchy is typical among the bloggers in this research. They problematize individuals and groups that do not consider context, intent, and implications in an admonition of anything that carries the appearance of supporting gender norms, patriarchy, or racism. Lucas explains that Beyoncé not only speaks about her sexuality but locates her own sexual pleasure as the most important component of her sexual encounters. While Beyoncé's album is being discussed most for its sexual content, Lucas reminds us that Beyoncé, like all women, has a complex of identity negotiation processes. Beyoncé's song "Heaven" alludes to a miscarriage and reminds us of her identity as mother and wife. It pairs her strength with fragility, her braggadocio with emotionality and grief.

Lucas's list highlights the agency of the individual and an unwillingness to have others define and label what is seen as problematic or patriarchal and what should be considered feminist and progressive. While in the preface to the list Lucas asserts that she is not interested in a debate about Beyoncé as a feminist, the body of the post articulates a feminist ideology that is reflective of the form of feminism found in the blogs within this study. It is a complicated form of black feminism that is informed by a progressive ideology emerging from the bloggers' education and class status and roots within a conservative cultural tradition within the African American community. The blog posts as well as community discourse on the sites VSBs, PostBourgie, A Belle in Brooklyn, and Black Girl with Long Hair each reflect this form of black feminism. This digital black feminism prioritizes agency, reclaims the right to self-identify,

centralizes non-gendered spaces of discourse, has complicated allegiances, and is informed by a dialectic of self and community interests.

6.2.1 Working within the system

Neither TheYBF nor NecoleBitchie explicitly discuss the term or ideology of feminism. Both are largely congratulatory and supportive of Beyoncé for her agency, sexuality, and mastery of the entertainment business. That mastery of the business is praised constantly among these bloggers and their communities, who respect Beyoncé's ability to control her fate within the music business, make substantial money, and do it without appearing to rely upon her husband, father, or anyone else, including the Target Corporation. In a post from December 21, 2013, a staff writer on Necole Bitchie posts about Beyoncé's surprise trip to Walmart saying:

Target must not know 'bout Bey! She can get another you in a minute! Now, we all know that Beyoncé used to love herself some Target but after the retailer vowed not to carry the queen's latest album since she let iTunes sell it exclusively for a week, she decided to throw major shade yesterday by high-tailing it right on into Walmart! What makes all of this even funnier, is that despite Target's decision to not carry her album in their stores, she's selling the new LP in 7000 Starbucks across the country, and guess what?? Starbucks is located in most Targets! #BowDown

The post does not challenge the idea of big-boxes' or large retailers' impact on the economy, pricing, or wages. It also makes no comment on Beyoncé's embrace of capitalism and tacit support of Walmart, a retailer frequently critiqued by progressives for unequal pay for women and poor benefits for employees (Cascio, 2006). It is in the comments that we find a nuanced discussion of Beyoncé within a capitalist system. Some assert that Target and Walmart as major corporations use Beyoncé and her followers for the acquisition of more wealth while not caring for her or their customers. Others distinguish between the two, bringing up Walmart's corporate

greed. A commenter going by ‘Seriously...?’ says: “F**k Walmart! Just cause they carry Bey’s CD then they get a pass? ! They still don’t treat workers fair! Women still get discriminated. And the benefits suck. Also, Im sick of people saying ‘So what? They got a job!’ That’s ridiculous! Everyone DESERVES fair treatment.” Another member of the community responds to the post saying, “Beyoncé versus Target. Are you kidding? She can’t bring down a huge corporation. Yep. Scoot your cart around Walmart and look stupid. I will be sliding into Target and shop like a fool...despite the stolen information debacle. Target is the ish!” (December 22, 2013). This post alone provokes 183 responses.

The form of black feminism expressed by bloggers and the community in this study engages in discourse that challenges the fairness of a capitalist system, positioning it as an oppressive force. The bloggers and commenters appear willing to work within this system and tacitly accept it as inevitable. The blogs are a mode of entrepreneurial enterprise for many of the bloggers in the study. The spaces they create provide financial gain for themselves and their families whether directly or indirectly. Therefore, their attachment to consumer capitalism is not surprising. Posts like the one above situate success within a capitalist system as important while offering a critique of the system that disproportionately harms the marginalized communities to which they belong.

6.2.2 Men challenging patriarchy

On both Very Smart Brothas and PostBourgie, authors that identified as male and female talked a great deal about gender, gender norms, and heteronormativity. Those identifying as men and women were each as likely comment on these posts. For example, a December 4, 2013, post

on Very Smart Brothas, written by Panama Jackson is titled “7 reasons why men should watch Scandal according to an actual man.” This list reinforces many gender norms by assuming that men are drawn to heterosexual sex, sports, and aggression. Jackson also uses heteronormative language like “you and your girl.” He prefaces his list by explaining that he will give “man-centric” reasons why the prime time drama should not be dismissed. His reasons include a comparison between the suspense of the show and that of a football game, male characters that are “bad ass,” insights into women’s decision making that men rarely see, and the attractiveness of the main character. However, the list concludes with the following:

The only reason you probably refuse to watch it is because all the women love it. Which is a stupid reason. It’s a good show, if not entertaining. Choosing not to watch it because women swoon too much over it is perhaps the worst of the reasons not to check it out. You could attack the premise. You could attack the side-piece ness of nearly EVERYBODY on the show (seriously, I’ve counted at least 4 sidepieces on this show...even the sidepieces have sidepieces), the lack of realism at times, Quinn (who we all want to die), Liv’s wardrobe consisting of only white, or maybe it just ain’t your thing. But for all of those, you’d have to watch it to know. And you’re not doing it. Besides we like tons of sh*t that women hate and tolerate because they care about us.

This argument is rooted in the idea that strict adherence to gender norms is often done without thought and that adherence to hegemonic gender norms is harmful to men and women in the creation of equitable and healthy romantic relationships. He argues that refraining from an activity because it is seen as ‘feminine’ is ridiculous. The blogger pushes for reciprocity in relationships. This form of black feminist rhetoric recognizes patriarchy as oppressive to both men and women. Men are involved in this discourse, not merely as allies for women, but for themselves as well. While beneficial, their participation and the influence of heteronormativity make it more likely that some ideas of hegemonic masculinity remain in place.

6.2.4 Complicated allegiances

Most of the blogs in the study posted with some regularity about the television show *Scandal* or its lead actress Kerry Washington. PostBourgie has an ongoing series of recaps of the show following its weekly airing on ABC. The show features a black actress as the protagonist and a black woman as the lead writer and producer, which has made it important for the blogging communities in the study and given it a dedicated following in the black community, a rarity for mainstream television. Olivia Pope, the main character, is a strong, successful, career-minded, single woman who happens to be involved in an affair with the president of the United States (a white man). While Olivia is still revered by many in the posts and comments about the show, during the period of study, her character received less blind support as bloggers and commenters began to show support for the wife of the President. On March 13, 2014, PostBourgie posts letters between two bloggers who discuss the second episode of the third season of the show. The character Mellie (the President's wife) was the focus of this episode and of the post. Both bloggers are still deeply connected to the character Olivia, but she is now signified upon as the "side piece," an expression in African American vernacular English used to diminish the importance of a woman who engages in a relationship with a man who is in a committed relationship with another women. Mellie is a heroine, able to use her verbal wit and cunning to tear down both Olivia and her husband. The post and the comments that follow demonstrate that the bloggers and the blogging community on this blog are 'here for Mellie'. The decision to support this character is not because she is seen as innocent. Mellie regularly engages in immoral, unethical, and vicious behavior. She needs no one to come to her defense and does not reflect the common trope of the fragile white woman frequent in film and television. Instead, Mellie is described by various commenters as a "G" (gangster). The bloggers and commenters are 'here for Mellie' because Mellie is there for herself in a situation where it appears no one else

is. The form of feminism articulated on the blogs in this study does not see black women as the only people worth fighting for. Instead, even on a show with a black female protagonist, they relate to a white female character who better exemplifies strength, tenacity, and the complexity of an emotional being. The bloggers recognize intersecting forms of oppression. Rather than this leading to an interest in how only black women experience these forms of oppression, this black feminist ideology turns the focus back out to alliances with white women and those who find themselves in oppressive relationship status regardless of their race.

6.2.5 Agency of black women

The form that black feminism takes within these blogging communities is concerned with the agency of the individual. The politics of black feminism as observed within this population of black blogs lives online in spaces that are crafted for the community, rather than in an attempt to reach a larger populace. The bloggers and commenters in this study are less concerned with a debate regarding feminism, or the ability to label others as feminist or not. They do not feel pressured to speak on behalf of or defend other women/feminists. Instead this form of black feminism places the onus on the individual to determine and voice her (or his) own politics and her (or his) own labels. So, is Beyoncé a feminist? According to the discourse of a new digital black feminism, it is not anyone's concern or within anyone but Beyoncé's power to determine. Instead the focus is on self-definition and alliances that can be used to chip away at a system of patriarchy. The focus inward and on the self means that rather than the formation of a counterpublic, where we would see an attempt to reclaim the public sphere via protest rhetoric

and inter-public communication, the goals and motivations of the users designate discourse of this kind as an enclave.

As important as the conversation of whether Beyoncé is a feminist is, the more important fact is that this conversation lives primarily in online blogging communities wherein black women have the space and power to negotiate a new conception of black feminism for themselves. Black women as proprietors of blogs and facilitators of this conversation are able to refine and debate a modern conception of black feminism. Blogging as a form of discourse is suited to this conversation: it has a facilitator who constructs an argument for an audience that initially comments internally but then often links to the blog from external spaces in order to encourage the inclusion of other positions. All participants and community members share a vested interest in the representation of black women and in being a part of the discourse concerning black women. The internet release of the Beyoncé's album captivated mainstream news outlets while an online enclave emerged to discuss sexuality, motherhood, and black feminism. The emergent discourse demonstrates that the future of black feminism is currently being debated with the black community online.

Black feminism was developed to call attention to the multiple oppressions experienced by women of color, to reflect their real life experiences, and to define women of color in their own terms. White feminism traditionally has focused on oppression in terms of gender while ignoring issues of race, class, and sexuality (hooks, 1981; Ortega, 2009). In resistance to this marginalization, black feminism and 'womanism' were forged, and an enclave to discuss these intersecting forms of oppression emerged. hooks (1981) reminds us that patriarchy cannot be uncoupled from the systems of imperialism, capitalism, and racism, and that black feminists

must consider these systems together. Mastery of capitalist enterprise, for these bloggers, does not conflict with espousal of a feminist ideology and does not expel an individual from feminist discourse or causes. With the agency of the individual recognized as harboring implications for the collective, we see threads of second wave white feminist discourse intermingled with the digital black feminist discourse of these blogging communities. Exclusion from participation in traditional feminism led to black feminism and womanism. Perhaps exclusion from black feminism has led to a new generation of digital black feminists to the creation of an enclave online. As an enclave-public denied entry to both traditional feminism and traditional black feminism, the community has little access to the political resources of either group and therefore uses the blogosphere to foster resistance and create strategies for the future.

6.3 Counter-Publics: The Politics of the Black Middle Class

The bloggers in this study directly and indirectly discuss their identification with the middle class³, though the term carries different meanings and social obligations. Some articulate an anxiety about their place within a privileged social class, others fully embrace the idea of consumer capitalism. For TheYBF, NecoleBitchie, and AfroBella, middle-classedness for African Americans is a step up the meritocratic ladder of American consumer capitalism. In the case of Field Negro, we see a reactionary forum where bloggers engage with issues at the center of political oppression for African Americans in the hope of changing the mainstream political conversation. For VSBs and PostBourgie the careful negotiation of class identity for middle class

³ The discussion of the black middle class is heavily influenced by Mary Patillo's *Black Picket Fences* (1999;2013), which attributes both privilege and peril to the situation of the black middle class and the notion of "respectability politics" (Gross, 1997).

African Americans is used to remind the community of their continued double consciousness.

The portion of the black blogosphere reflected in this study is one that tends to be class conscious. Class consciousness manifests itself differently within the discourse and structure of the various blogging communities. In each of these blogs the discourse concerning class, in its goals and motivations, serves as a counterpublic.

6.3.1 **“Bou(r)gie” black folks**

The term ‘bou(r)gie’ has multiple interconnected meanings for African Americans. Rather than simply describing one’s economic condition, ‘bourgie’ is commonly used as a signifier that articulates the ways that certain African Americans distance themselves from others on the basis of taste, class access, and opportunity. The separation is best demonstrated through superficial connection to material acquisition and a place within a social structure not usually afforded to others of their race. More recently, the term has strayed from this connotation to one that recognizes those who were not born with this separation from the community but, having attained it through the acquisition of education and some wealth, now struggle to maintain balance between community centeredness and assimilation to middle class whiteness. Rather than modeling the values and traits of the dominant group, “bougie” black people occupy a space with its own rhetoric, values, cultural practices, and challenges. Damon, blogging for Very Smart Brothas explains his use of the term this way:

Interestingly enough, the Bougie moniker was an accident. I meant to use the most common spelling of that word (“Bourgie”) when creating the video, and mistakenly left the “r” out. This mistake proved to be advantageous. While the difference in spelling is minor, the R-inclusive “Bourgie” are a completely different type of Black people than the ones I’m talking about. “Bourgie” describes a certain upper-middle to lower-upper class lifestyle

more dependent on and defined by activities, ancestry, and legacy than actual income. These are the brothas and sistas whose great-grandparents were Alphas and Deltas, whose Jack and Jill cotillion was their prom, and who “summer” places where people who use “summer” as a verb “summer.” Basically, think of Whitley Gilbert.

While women were the initial focus of this designation, I soon realized that most of the “urban and highly educated” young Black men I knew—myself included—also shared many of the same characteristics, despite a reluctance to actually own up to it. We’d endlessly chide our girlfriends, wives, and homegirls about their irrational love for Thai food, their tendency to intentionally over tip, and even their deification of Olivia Pope. But we scour Groupon for the restaurant with the best Thai chicken satay with the same intensity they would—making certain to leave a 30% tip after dining—and, although most of us won’t admit it, we’re fans of Scandal too.

To an outsider, many of these shared traits may seem superficial. And, considering the fact that most Bougie Black People (BBP) don’t exactly come from legacies of wealth, socially irresponsible. But, closer inspection reveals that they’re largely rooted in a race-conscious pragmatism that allows them to be upwardly mobile while still staying connected to “regular” Black folks.

This explanation shows the tensions in how class is discussed by the bloggers and their communities. Class identification is a negotiated process for individuals that cannot be accomplished within interactions with those affected by that identity. In the above description, we see the distinction made between ‘bourgie’ and ‘bougie’. Implicitly though, in either identification, there is a contrast with the dominant group’s conception of class status in the U.S. Therefore, discourse about class status and identity happens when this group takes on the features of a counterpublic. Within a counterpublic, Squires (2002) argues, marginalized publics engage in protest rhetoric and persuasion for the purpose of reclaiming public spaces and performing public resistance. To negotiate this identity, bloggers and communities test arguments, demand self-determination, and appreciate the complexity of how being a ‘bourgie’ black person necessitates increased interaction with the state and increased inter-public communication (Squires, p.460). The writers of PostBourgie, in their explanation of the term exemplify this interaction saying,

“as young adults — news junkies, hip-hop heads, smart-asses and autodidacts — we were suddenly smack dab in the middle class, wielding much of the same privilege we’d always been distant from and criticized. We were skeptical toward the politics of respectability. And yet! We were now surrounded by and socializing with self-congratulating Negroes who patted each other on the back because they were about something and self-congratulating white folks who patted themselves on the back because they had black friends. (But damn it if we ain’t love the sushi!)”

There is a tension between the necessity of interaction with the dominant group and the desire to retain an identity separate from the dominant American culture. This interrogation of class identity, therefore, occurs within the black community but involves interaction with the larger economic system and the larger mainstream public sphere. For this reason, a counterpublic is needed to wrestle with the interactions between race and class.

6.3.2 Black (middle-class) essentialism

One of the first manifestations of this counterpublic is in black essentialist discourse found on Field Negro. The site is named Field Negro to reference the distinction between slaves working inside the house and those who worked the field during the period of chattel slavery in the U.S. Those working within the house worked in close contact with their white oppressor, often as domestics, butlers, mammies to the white children, and drivers. They were deemed more suited for these positions because of a perception of their docility and conformity to standards of whiteness in appearance or in demeanor. This history has led to a negative connotation for the term, overlooking the everyday acts of resistance by those of African descent in these positions and the tenacity and inner strength required to survive in these positions. The author plays on the negative connotation in order to suggest that he and his position are associated with ‘real’ blackness. House Negroes are those who he aligns with the values and attitudes of the dominant and oppressive group.

This site offers the type of rhetoric found in a traditional ‘hush harbor’ without the safety and privacy that this space usually extends. Field Negro does not possess the features necessary to create an enclave. The primary blogger posts on the issues of the day and has little interaction with the community beyond the initial post. Readers have discussions without creating an identifying pseudonym or linking to another social media page. Anonymity translates to a lack of accountability and the possibility for interlopers to take over the conversation. This blog is about the black community and involves the black community, but it is not created as an enclave for the black community.

The author and many commenters discuss politics and world events in a manner that essentializes notions of what constitutes an appropriate form of blackness and an appropriate politic for the black community. Their politics and their rhetoric are deeply embedded in their class identity and a particular notion of the black middle class. For Field, being a part of the middle class (economically and socially) requires a commitment to pursue a progressive politics that does not embrace abstract liberalism, color-blind ideology, or assimilation into the dominant group. Field articulates his goal as reaching other African Americans in order to get them more engaged in the issues that are central to their survival and ability to resist oppression. In the desire to advance an agenda most helpful to the black community, the author and the readers voice their position with the intention of sparking heated discussion with those outside of the community. The blog acts as an entry point to dialogue with a larger populace; however, it fails to produce healthy dialogue with the dominant group.

The comments section on Field Negro demonstrates the labor of creating a counterpublic. To advance the goals of a counterpublic is to fight for a place within the public sphere. This requires active engagement with the dominant group. Field Negro’s posts, which articulate a

disdain for those who do not engage with and fight on behalf of the black community, reach a large audience. Within the comments section readers engage in back-and-forth exchanges with a small number of dissenters who migrate to the site seemingly for the purpose of inciting flame wars. The dissenters often monopolize and derail the conversations. On a post dated March 26, 2014, Field writes about athlete Kobe Bryant's comments on the death of Florida teen, Trayvon Martin. The death of Martin and subsequent trial and acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman spurred outrage from African Americans, including 'Field'. He quotes Bryant who says,

I won't react to something just because I'm supposed to, because I'm an African-American. That argument doesn't make any sense to me. So we want to advance as a society and a culture, but, say, if something happens to an African-American we immediately come to his defense? Yet you want to talk about how far we've progressed as a society? Well, we've progressed as a society, then don't jump to somebody's defense just because they're African-American. You sit and you listen to the facts just like you would in any other situation, right? So I won't assert myself.

Field then responds, saying:

Something happens"? A little more than something just happened, Kobe. This unarmed young man was shot and killed in cold blood. Now if you are so desperate to be embraced by the majority population that you would diminish the memory of Trayvon Martin, well then good luck to you. You had a Hall of Fame career on the court; you are a first class jerk off of it.

The comments that follow do not demonstrate a healthy debate or dialogue between a black counterpublic and the dominant group. Instead vicious and racially charged language is used by anonymous commenters.

Anonymous said...

trayvon "ghetto thug loser,purple drank drinkin useless welfare beeeeiitch...

7:04 PM

Anonymous said...

Greed is a human condition

blacks are not human sooooooooooooooooo

7:05 PM

Anonymous said...

A little more than something just happened, Kobe. This unarmed young man was shot and killed in cold blood....nope sorry loser we all heard the facts and all your bs and whining will not change the facts you and eric"not my people" holder and Obama are loooooosers ...

7:07 PM

Anonymous said...

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/03/27/father-accused-of-killing-daughter/6948863/>

what I can't hear you....

7:12 PM

Anonymous said...

Well, brother Field, the way Kobe is acting...are you going to call him 'White' like you called me White?

Hell, I never thought "once" about TM the way Kobe Bryant thinks. His thinking is pure anti-Black and pure pro-White, wouldn't you say? But you still haven't taken his race card from him...why?

I wonder what Trayvon's mother thinks of Kobe?

I already know Kinky thinks Kobe is great.

9:05 PM

Anonymous said...

Field, "Now you all know how I feel about corrupt black politicians; they are the lowest of the low. They are put in a unique position to help others and they throw it all away because of greed."

Well, shut my mouth. Field has finally come clean how he feels about Obama.

Brother Field, thank you.

9:07 PM

Figure 4. Field Negro Comments

Squires warns about this kind of monopolization of discourse by the dominant group (p.461). There is work involved in engaging with the public as a member of a marginalized

community. The counterpublic, as conceptualized by Squires, faces threats of violence and disrespect and dismissal from the larger public. By resisting oppressive social codes and laws and doing so often within view of the dominant group, this community does important work but in spaces that are not protected from reproach and carry risks for the community.

6.3.3 Double consciousness

W.E.B. Dubois, a black intellectual of the 20th century and one of the fore-parents of modern public sociology, coined the term double-consciousness to refer to the state of the African living in America. It describes African Americans as living in a state of divided identity wherein one must constantly deal with being American and being a member of a group castigated from true and equitable participation in American life. He writes,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 1903, p. 3)

This quote is frequently cited to underscore the complexity of developing a racial identity as an African American. For African Americans who are deeply connected to their racial identity but whose education and economic status puts them in contact with the (white) middle class of America, the idea of the double consciousness is a salient part of everyday experience and discourse. In a post from March 20, 2014, Panama Jackson writes about the inner conflict he faces about sending his child to private school. The overwhelming desire to provide the 'best' for his child is juxtaposed with the desire to support a public education system where black and brown children are overrepresented and underserved. The financial ability to send your child to

private schools is met with the cultural responsibility of uplift within the black community. While the conversations on VSBs and PostBourgie are directed primarily within the African American community, the goals and motivations of bloggers and the community show the establishment of a counterpublic to deal with interactions with those of the dominant group.

Post-Bourgie's February 20, 2014, post titled, "From Our Play Cousin," is a narrative about a women's evening with her white romantic partner. She comments on the gentrification of Washington, DC by explaining that police are interested in protecting the neighborhood because of new white residents. While she feels disdain for the presence of the police, she is simultaneously grateful for the protection of the police as she fears her own safety. She admires the fact that her white romantic partner is not filled with "white guilt" and dreams that they would have been interracial freedom riders together in a different time. This story shows the complex world that class-conscious black Americans find themselves in as they simultaneously seek justice for their communities yet strive for professional and social 'success' within a system that normalizes whiteness. The interracial relationship serves as a metaphor for this problem. She doesn't want DC gentrified, but appreciates the protections in the in-between while also being resentful about it. Her personal narrative, written in folktale style, is used to critique "the man," systemic racial injustice, and her own complicity within the situation.

The post shows the complex intersection of race, sexuality, and class. She connects with this man is because he is comfortable in his whiteness, neither apologetic for it nor unaware of it. He knows what he knows and knows what he cannot know as a person born with both the privilege of whiteness and male identity. She loves her black community and is offended that it is only respected and treated as a commodity when whites become interested in it. Yet, outside of

a reaction to a larger systemic issue of racial injustice and privilege, she enjoys the benefits that come along with living in a gentrified space. The post is offered to challenge the reader, as well, and create a space where those who find themselves within the same double consciousness can articulate challenges and find potential solutions.

We see the intersection between race, class, and gender for blogging communities revealed in a March 24, 2014, post called, “I have no white friends and I think I know why,” written by Damon for VSBs. In the post, Damon plans for his wedding and ruminates on his life experiences. His career and education put him in contact with many whites, yet he realizes in planning the guest list for his wedding how few close friendships with whites he has. First, he posits he does not share a similar activity orientation with white colleagues because of their different upbringing. But he settles on the disconnect having more to do with romantic attraction and being friends with those who are interested in the same romantic/sexual partners. He explains,

Even thinking of the types of activities and events I’d usually attend when I was single, a single White guy looking for a sorority girl-type was not going to find her at any of those spots. And, when I had White co-workers, as much as I appreciated them inviting me out with them, the perpetual lack of sistas — and the lack of sistas interested in Black men — there limited my enjoyment.”

The distance the blogger feels between himself and his white co-workers reminds us that African Americans, whether in 1940 or 2014, often seek out spaces to assemble with other African Americans even when they have access to the dominant group. This may be motivated by exclusion from meaningful participation, as is the case in an enclave, or it may be voluntary as is the case with a satellite. They may also form counterpublics as the VSBs do in this conversation in order to resist oppressive social codes and practice resistance discourse. He has

become a part of the middle class and has been propelled into a world that is mainly white by means of schooling and employment. However, he is not connected to this world. He recognizes that his white friends can enjoy his company without the double consciousness he experiences. White friends can enjoy his company without knowing or accepting his reality. He is not afforded the same luxury. Damon certainly is not suggesting that whites must marry or partner with blacks in order to prove their acceptance of the community. Rather, he is explaining that the lack of romantic interest in black women, often read as a mere difference in preference, alludes to our country's relationship with miscegenation, white purity, and white supremacy.

Being wholly American and wholly a descendant of Africans sold into chattel slavery in the Americas creates a double consciousness. Double consciousness exists at an even greater level for those who because of their class identity find themselves surrounded by whites and living apart from the homogeneous black communities where they grew up. Class conscious African American bloggers and their readers create counterpublics that provide the space for complex identity negotiation. The posts and the comments foster resistance to unjust laws and social practices. They do so by allowing bloggers and their readers to practice arguments to be used in a wider discourse about issues, and race, and class. These spaces take on the features of counterpublics because they happen in spaces created by and for other African Americans. Those involved in the discourse take these conversations back to the larger public.

6.4 Conclusion

Studying blogs that are not overtly political in their orientation points us toward the everyday interaction of African Americans in the physical and metaphorical barbershop. Excluding blogs that are labeled as politically oriented does not exclude politically consequential dialogue. Employing a reconfiguration of the black rhetorical strategies uncovered in the preceding chapter, the bloggers and their communities do the work of creating alternative black public spheres. Rather than a homogenous counterpublic, the blogs utilize the features of the medium available to them along with black rhetorical strategies to create enclaves, satellites, and counterpublics used to interrogate black culture, feminism, and class politics. The goals and motivations of the communities change based on the theme of discussion. Whether they are attempting to foster dialogue, are reacting to exclusion from the mainstream, or are crafting strategies for inclusion in the public sphere, the blogs in this sample are making the everyday political. Even when it does not immediately translate to revolutionary action, thought revolution is important in reshaping black identity and potentially emancipating the mind.

The discourse in the sample blogs suggests that rather than a static alternate public determined by the features of the technology, or even the rhetorical strategies, the potential of these spaces to foster politically important discourse is mediated by themes of dialogue. Unlike the structure of the sites, the dialogues found on the sites change based on the participation of the community. One blog might take on the characteristics of varying kinds of alternate spheres in order to make sense of a particular political issue. That satellite publics emerge to discuss black culture, enclaves to discuss black feminism, and counterpublics to discuss class shows the complexity of blogging as a medium for African Americans. The gray area of designating each blog as a type of alternate public parallels the grey area of the political positions espoused on many of the sites. Political positions within the communities favor complex, nuanced

perspectives rather than extreme ideological stances. The bloggers and readers navigate feminism, class, and culture by moderating progressive ideals with the realities of their position within a system that privileges false meritocracy and the politics of respectability.

Blogging as a medium readily allows for the public display of discord, debate, and complex and fluid political positions within the African American community. Like the barbershop, the discourse evolves as new clients enter and leave the shop. The barbershop and beauty shop are gendered spaces wherein participants are required to conform to the norms of the space and very little interaction between men and women is possible or preferable. While some of the blogs in this sample are gendered in a similar fashion, the three themes analyzed in this chapter were avenues for cross-gender communication that highlights the possibilities of online publics sometimes not possible in physical spaces. Unlike the shop, which harbors dialogue in a space free from outside influence or surveillance, the dialogue on blogs is much more open as anyone may read posts and comments. Given this distinction, the possibilities for radical dissent within the alternate publics created in blogging communities are mitigated by the consequences of participation.

7. CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES OF THE SHOP

Meeting within the contemporary digital landscape, bloggers utilize rhetorical strategies and cultural traditions in new ways online. The blogs use the high context created through cultural and historical references and the jargon of the black bourgeois to create communities that share social and economic class and, potentially, values and behaviors as well. Black public spheres are not new, nor is the use of black oral culture for the purpose of creating and sustaining community. Because of exclusion from the participation in political communication, the black community has historically used spaces outside of the purview of the dominant group as means to foster debate, to pursue rebellion, and to build separate institutions (Squires, 2002). The literature exploring the development of physical spaces as ‘hush harbors’ and counterpublics shows how important political dialogue often exists apart from overtly political spaces within marginalized communities (Nunley, 2011).

Within the African American community, the persistence of orality fostered the ability to create separate spaces of discourse that did not appear to threaten the dominance of the majority. However, the rhetorical strategies of African American oral culture coded dissent and rebellion to foster resistance. While previous mediums like newspapers and radio have been modified by various African American sub-communities to fit the goals and motivations of an alternate public sphere, each lacks the flexibility of community involvement and freedom from corporate control. Without fully embracing a utopian view of internet technologies, online mediums hold the potential to foster the kind of communication that the African American community has had in spaces like the barbershop.

Rather than beginning with the technology as the site of inquiry, historical analysis of the offline modes of communication for the group yields information about their potential online behaviors. The internet does not create a unique experience in terms of community interaction. Instead, like all other communication technology, the internet has the potential to be utilized by marginalized communities to further the already existent resistant communication practices. This potential is mitigated by issues of access, competence, and outside control. In the case of African Americans, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and blogs are each utilized in ways that mirror offline dialogue within the community. Blogs, unlike Twitter and Facebook, afford each blogger a measure of autonomy in the creation and facilitation of a space for online community. Black Twitter, while a noteworthy online phenomenon, is but an outgrowth of Twitter. Therefore, discourse is limited by the same restraints as the larger platform. While Facebook allows for the creation of Groups pages, wherein membership can be limited, the visual dimensions of the page are again restricted by the architectural features of the platform. Bloggers, given different levels of technical skill and motivations for blogging, can create unique sites wherein they are responsible for managing the visual elements, moderating and facilitating dialogue, determining the revenue structure (if any), and enabling engagement and participation.

This analysis serves as a model of exploration of marginalized communities in online spaces. Analysis of the online activities and communication patterns of marginalized communities must begin with consideration of offline cultural practices in order to determine how and why technology may be used with different goals and may produce differing outcomes. Using an approach of critical technocultural discourse analysis allows for more complex examination of blogging as tool of a marginalized community. Focusing on a small sample of blogs allows for a deep reading of the structure and function of blogs, how discourse is mediated

by the structure, and how ideological and institutional systems of stratification and oppression mediate access, utility, and interactivity. Bloggers and their communities manipulate the features of blogs to replicate familiar spaces. This is achieved through modifying the visual layout of the page, centralizing the blogger's voice within the site, allowing advertising on the site, and creating loyal readers through various possibilities for feedback. The blogs in this study simultaneously constitute separate and varied communities while contributing to a larger whole.

The form of the blog is consumed as whole. In describing newspaper readers Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone (2001) write, "Readers don't read the news; they swim in it" (p. 7). The term 'readers' evokes the image of a passive consumer of content. However, those who frequent blogs are not passive and are participants in meaning-making within the blog. While none of the blogs are overtly political in theme, the choices made by bloggers regarding advertising have implications for the ability of the blogging community to form effectual counterpublics. Blogs that centralize the blogger as sole expert tend to have less feedback and less productive dialogue from participants. Rather than the examination of the layout and form of blogs signaling an agreement with technological determinism, examination of the form of blogs instead reminds us that every form is connected to the political culture and climate in which it emerges (Barnhurst & Nehrone, 2001).

The deep reading of the dialogue on blogs revealed the rhetorical strategies of African American oral culture. Bloggers and their readers maintain control over membership in these spaces by utilizing insider knowledge to affirm participation. Just as oral culture during chattel slavery served the purpose of protecting and insulating Africans in captivity from further denigration and oppression, so too do the modern manifestations of shop talk. The cultural referents have changed as young technologically savvy, middle class African Americans prefer

popular culture to the traditional religious songs and sermons of the past, but humor is still used for self-policing and critique of injustice. The form that this humor takes is modified by exposure to new media technology with bloggers copying the short retorts necessary for communication in text-messaging, and with hashtags on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. Rhetorical strategies are modified to meet the needs of this segment of the African American community discussing complex issues of political importance using personal narrative and pop culture figures as exemplars.

This approach to research allowed an analysis of the thematic content of the blogs rather than categorizing each blog as a type of alternate public. The conceptual framework derived from Squire's (2002) model of enclaves, counterpublics, and satellites takes on new usefulness in discussing the content of the black blogosphere. While Squires identifies organizations or movements as taking on different goals based on the needs of the community during different time periods, blogs shift between motivations based on theme. When discussing black culture, bloggers and their readers form satellites communities used to affirm African American culture. Rather than attempting to promote the adoption of African American cultural practices in the mainstream, bloggers and their readers use the blogs to build centripetally and reaffirm the right of people of African descent to decide their own standards of beauty and produce art that speaks to and for them.

Enclaves are formed in response to exclusion from the mainstream public sphere and to foster the resistance discourse of black feminism. Mainstream white feminism has historically left out women of color, privileging the concerns of middle class white women to the exclusion of others. Exclusion for digital black feminists in this study comes not only from white feminism, but from womanism and traditional black feminism as well. Formed in response to

such exclusion, early black feminists and womanists insisted upon the intersectional interrogation of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and imperialism. While the discussion of black feminism on the blogs often considers each of these components, this generation of digital black feminists use their platform to advocate for nuanced approaches that take into account the various shades of grey within which they presently find themselves. What is happening in black feminist discourse right now is important. This generation of black feminists came of age reading the work of bell hooks and Audre Lorde. Yet their relationship with capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and racism is different from these fore-mothers'. Still facing oppression at multiple levels, they see our place in the world differently. Digital black feminists live in shades of grey. They allow for shades of grey. They can love hip hop and loathe misogyny. They can celebrate Beyoncé and critique colorist beauty ideals. They can work against patriarchy and celebrate monogamy in their own lives. There is a recognition that ideals often butt up against realities; issues are complex and sometimes confusing. Even while acknowledging the continued relevance of the writings of black feminist and womanist foremothers, they are finding their voice in online forums where they make their own rules.

Many of the blogging communities are ready to interrogate their complex relationship with the American economic system. Educational opportunities and employment decisions put many within this community in close contact with whites and the trappings of a middle class lifestyle. Uncomfortable with affiliation with an economic system that works to the detriment of their communities, they create terms to describe the double consciousness of this experience. The designations made between the monikers of "bourgie," "bougie," and "post-bourgie" illustrate the tensions of being a class conscious African American. Yet we should not overstate the emancipatory potential of blogging. What is emancipatory is the ability of marginalized

populations to congregate without fear of retribution from the state or the dominant group. Blogs may provide this possibility. Yet acts of resistance are mitigated by the degree of control of the blog by those outside of the community through corporate control, advertising, issues of surveillance, censorship, and hegemonic ideologies present within the community. Considering blogs as a means of economic provision and security for their owners, the means by which the blogger makes money from the blog is important. Advertising decisions and the transference of independent blogs to corporate ownership can challenge the insularity of the spaces and the ability of the alternate public sphere to thrive. Black public spheres form around discourse rather than space and time, and these themes are the salient points of discussion where political communication lives in the black blogosphere. When discourse is interrupted or otherwise corrupted, the possibilities that come from robust alternate public spheres are lost.

The formation of counterpublics is mitigated by the ability of bloggers and their communities to engage in free and open communication that is not subject to surveillance or censorship. The barbershop and beauty shop, though both were ensnared in gender politics, gave participants the ability to congregate and dialogue without interference from the dominant group. This provided security and freedom from punishment or consequence. Because the dialogue was not recorded, participants could speak freely without any record existing for future review. The comments posted to blogs, even when done ‘anonymously’, are traceable. Those who are aware of what this may mean for their offline lives may choose to self-censor. This can thwart conversations that are more radical and perspectives that are most counter to that of the dominant group.

This study involved a deep reading of nine blogs that are a part of the African American blogosphere. These blogs are not a representative sample of all of those present or of the varying

sub-communities within the larger African American community. The sample does show the heterogeneity of this group in approaches to political discourse, as well as some of the unifying features present in their cultures and dialogues. Future research into the digital barbershop should focus on three areas that this project alludes to but which require more detailed analysis. The first is the role of advertising. This study points to the influence that advertising may have in changing content and preventing certain voices from free expression in online discourse. The second area for future is the closer critical examination of the form of digital black feminism uncovered in the analysis of political discourse in this study. Some scholars have been harshly critical of the new wave of black feminism for possessing features of neo-liberalism and an emphasis on the individual. Straying from the origins of black feminism rooted in collectivism and critique of imperialism and capitalism, this new black feminism must be more closely interrogated. The agency of the bloggers and their community of participants should not be overlooked in such a critique. The third area for future research is the notion of surveillance and the silencing radical black politics online. Those who have more to lose from the additional surveillance of the digital barbershop also tend to hold positions that are the most threatening to the status quo. Therefore, we may be less likely to see robust counterpublics emerge online if radical participants are absent.

Facets of black oral culture that have been studied in physical spaces like the black church or barbershop are now accessible to researchers online. The information and dialogue found in blogging communities is not formally restricted, giving researchers unfettered access to community dialogue. Ethically scholars must consider the degree to which participants may consider these spaces safe and free from the dominant gaze. Research in online communities raises issues of boundaries that must be addressed, especially when the subjects of inquiry are

communities that are historically disenfranchised in academic research. Increased accessibility to marginalized communities online must be met with research that centralizes the history and socio-political struggles of the community. A recognition of the privileged position of the scholar must be at the forefront of such analysis. As often as possible I kept the voice of the community intact in the presentation of this research, considering bloggers and their communities to be participants rather than subjects of inquiry. The goal of such a project should align with that of the community involved in the production of the research.

Physical spaces and mediated environments have always been re-appropriated by marginalized communities. The mastery of technology by marginalized communication, the ability to use existing communication platforms, and the reformation of platforms to fit within the bounds of their cultural mode of communication show this act of re-appropriation. For African Americans the ability to preserve oral culture, craft new cultural contexts, and shift between goals and motivations in political discourse is made evident in the blogging communities of this study. Other marginalized communities also may find platforms wherein their traditional/cultural forms of address can be best used in the production of alternate public spheres. For the academic community, the task is to broaden our sites of inquiry involving political communication and utilize approaches to research that fully realize the complexity of cultural exchange.

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