

Signifyin', Bitching, and Blogging: Black Women AND Resistance Discourse Online

CATHERINE KNIGHT STEELE

INTRODUCTION

Much of the early research on the Internet, particularly the blogosphere, centered the experiences of Western White men. There is increasingly an interest in discovering how marginalized groups may use blogs to further their own participation in the democratic process. Previous literature has examined the use of online media by non-dominant groups; however, the lens used for this examination is that of the dominant culture. The use of new media technology by groups that have traditionally been kept out of the public sphere requires an epistemology that allows for diverse ways of understanding the production of knowledge and meaning-making. A Black feminist epistemology centralizes the conversations of Black women that occur in settings that are often excluded as valid by academic researchers. This study seeks to examine the online gossip of Black women for its potential to contribute to a discourse of resistance. Audre Lorde (1984) writes that Black female writers manage "the external manifestations of racism and sexism with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another" (p. 147). Using a typology crafted from Patricia Hill Collins's (2002) model of the "matrix of domination," this study examines Black celebrity gossip blogs and the ways in which they resist or tolerate oppression at three levels: the personal, the communal, and the institutional. The analysis suggests that Black

women use these blogs to “talk back” (hooks, 1988) to the systems and structures from which they are excluded or within which they are exploited.

As a group, African American women exist in a unique position between multiple systems of oppression. This has traditionally placed the group, and discourse within the group, outside of the confines of scientific knowledge production. Therefore, it is important to explore blogs as sites where Black women interrogate the intersectionality of race and gender from a Black feminist perspective. Exclusion from the public discourse has led many marginalized groups to find alternate way to sustain themselves as a community and engage in democratic society. As new media technology expands, it is increasingly important that research takes into account the perspectives of the media users/producers being studied and the interconnectedness between online and offline spaces (Baym, 2009).

Communication research frequently explores the uses of blogs in self-expression, activism, and political organization. However, the research fails to directly address how Black women use blogs in ways that differ from the dominant culture. A Black feminist epistemology allows for an interrogation of how bloggers and their communities resist dominant discourse and offers validation for personal ways of knowing and writing, narrative, and dialogue rather than debate, validation of emotion, and personal accountability. This analysis accounts for the ways in which participating in community conversations functions as an act of resistance, even when overt political motivations and advocacy are not the primary goal. Black gossip blogs are examined using a discourse analysis, which evaluates the blogs for the ways they combat multiple levels of oppression, including the personal, the communal, and the institutional (P. H. Collins, 2000). The previous literature in the fields of communication and sociology on blogging, gossip, and African American feminist thought inform this study.

BLOGGING THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL

African American users of online media commonly seek out community-specific content (Detlefsen, 2004; Harris, 2005; Wilson et al., 2006). African American political blogs mobilize these readers around particular political causes and issues (Byrne, 2007; Pole, 2010). Community building, especially as it relates to activism, is a tool used by bloggers to voice dissent against the political landscape, organizations, and societal institutions. Activism on the part of bloggers is revolutionary because it creates new oppositional spaces that transform everyday life and discourse (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). In these spaces, promotion of normative discourses of domination may still exist. While they exist as “contested terrain,” blogs still include voices outside of the mainstream (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010, p. 94).

While political blogs certainly act as organizing tools for communities, including marginalized groups, these groups often organize and create dialogue in spaces outside of what may be traditionally expected. Whether or not authors of blogs and their participants view their participation as political in nature, their actions may still involve resisting dominant ideology (Scott, 1990). In this sense, they function similarly to overtly political blogs, which, Farrell and Drezner (2008) explain, "frame political debates and create focal points for the media as a whole." This study uses gossip sites as sources of both intentional and unintentional subversive resistance to dominant discourse and ideology. In this context, a community can meet together and discuss and challenge oppression, both through their writing and through their existence outside of the control of popular media.

THE SOCIAL AND SUBVERSIVE USES OF GOSSIP

While gossip as a communicative practice has a history as long as human communication itself, new media technology provides a new space for exploration. Gossip is a form of cultural capital that affords those "in the loop" knowledge that contributes to power and status. Gossip manages the group identity and provides a social space for women to negotiate femininity. Celebrity gossip in particular serves to strengthen bonds and manage female relationships, but it also represents a subversive participatory act by women (Ayim, 1993; L. Collins, 1993). Because celebrity gossip is not specifically about anyone within the participant's social circle, the fear of disparagement is avoided and instead is replaced with discourse that is unifying. As Feasey (2008) explains, "The latest gossip [is] understood as, and deliberately coveted because, it act[s] as a point of conversation among young women. It [is] as if an understanding of celebrity 'trivia' served as a connection between women, with readers being united by an appreciation of a particular media text." (p. 691) While Feasey discusses readers' use of gossip magazines, the use of gossip blogs holds the same possibility for communal sharing of knowledge and for management of relationships online.

Recent research on celebrity gossip blogs discusses celebrity gossip as malicious discourse (Fairclough, 2009) or a resurgence of old practices of journalism (Meyers, 2009). This research excludes African American women's engagement in this activity and fails to note that their participation may differ from that of groups with greater inclusion in dominant American culture. This online space provides the opportunity for feedback from readers and important communal work. In the case of Black female gossip blogs, the online space may serve as a site of unification for a group of women who may otherwise be separated by geography or socio-economic status. Since gossip has been historically linked to women, it is often assumed to be a trivial communicative act. On the contrary, gossip can function

as a subversive practice by marginalized groups (Chidgey, Payne, & Zolb, 2009; Wickham, 1998). Gossip has often been crucial to the active resistance of domination and oppression.

BLACK FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Black feminism was developed to call attention to the multiple oppressions experienced by women of color, to reflect their real-life experiences, and to enable them to define themselves in their own terms. White feminism traditionally has focused on gender oppression while ignoring issues of race, class, and sexuality (hooks, 1981; Ortega, 2006). Out of resistance to this marginalization, Black feminism and “womanism” were forged. The experiences of Black women and their unique processes of knowledge distribution through personal and mediated communication often go unexplored by researchers. The exclusion of the tradition of Black female intellectualism is not coincidental, but rather part of a complex system of oppression (P. H. Collins, 2000). Black feminist epistemology then requires scholars to grapple with ways of knowing that often fall outside of dominant societal constraints (Anderson & Collins, 1992). As womanist anthropologist Linda Thomas (1998) explains:

Reconstructing knowledge means tearing down myths that have paralyzed communities, and recreating truths which have been buried in annals that contain vast sources of knowledge....Inclusive construction of knowledge denotes exploring sources that culturally may be vastly different from our own epistemological points of departure. It may be knowledge based on human experience as well as theory; and it decidedly involves inclusion of the ideas, theories, orientations, experiences, and worldviews of persons and groups who have previously been excluded. (p. 496)

Such research calls on scholars to reexamine ideas of intellectualism and conceive of Black women as doing the work of intellectuals who have historically been forced outside the world of academia. Black women’s writings and behaviors are philosophical statements that are both scholarly and activist in nature (P. H. Collins, 2000, p. 15). The actions of Black women that actively challenge dominant discourse serve as a means of resistance to oppression.

Previous research insists that for an action to be considered resistant it must include both action and opposition (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Weitz (2001) defines resistance as including “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination” (p. 670). As she explains, resistance should be done in public, by the collective and within sight of the powerful. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) clarifies: racism has created separate communal structure for African Americans, within which a culture of resistance may exist apart

from the dominant structure (p. 226). This asks us to see oppression and resistance operating at multiple levels in a "both/and," rather than "either/or," manner. Groups may simultaneously experience oppression and engage in resistance discourse. Often this culture of resistance does not appear to pose a direct threat to the dominant group, as the spaces in which marginalized groups congregate are often segregated from public view. We must consider the activity of blogging, as well as the decision to read and comment on another's blog, as action in this context. This analysis focuses on the hidden spaces outside of the purview of the dominant group in which Black women congregate. This study examines blogs as a new media technology, one with which Black women may engage discourse that challenges the common narratives about Black women, Black men, and the Black community.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

This discourse analysis examines the content of two popular celebrity gossip blogs that were established by and are written by Black female authors: *The Young, Black, and Fabulous* (theybf.com), started by Natasha Eubanks; and *Necole Bitchie* (NecoleBitchie.com), founded by Necole Kane. Both authors remain the primary contributors to the blogs. Each was selected for its popularity and the press it has received within Black media outlets. *NecoleBitchie.com* was rated in the Top 10 Urban Blogs on the Internet by Electronic Villager blog rankings and was nominated Best New Blog and Best Gossip Blog by the 2008 and 2010 Black Weblog Awards (Kane, n.d.). *TheYBF* boasts more than 13 million readers a month and describes itself as the "perfect mix of gossip, entertainment, and swagger" (Eubanks, n.d.). The blog's founder has also been selected as a "blogger you should know" by *TheRoot.com* (Whigham, 2011).

Discourse analysis offers an examination of texts or language in concordance with the thematic structure of the text and speech (Fairclough, 1995). The purpose of discourse analysis is to study texts "not only as form, meaning, and mental process, but also as complex structures and hierarchies of interaction and social practice and their functions in context, society and culture" (van Dijk, 1997). A careful analysis of the deployment of language and image is possible. This method of inquiry points toward an understanding of complex structure and hierarchies of interaction and social practice (van Dijk, 1997).

Using a typology crafted from what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls the "matrix of domination" of African American women, this study examines resistance and oppression at three levels. Within the everyday talk of Black women on celebrity gossip blogs, personal, communal and institutional oppression and resistance are explored. This research uses the model of the matrix of domination as a means of explaining the oppression experienced and resistance enacted by women of color.

Personal/Individual

Each individual possesses a personal biography that holds within it all of the narratives, experiences, and identities that construct the unified whole. For Black women, this may include race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. Because of the unique experiences and motivations of the individual, circumstances may be understood and internalized differently. Thus, each personal biography is unique and recognizes the agency of the individual, seeing the individual body as both an object of, and agent in, social practice. At the personal level, the individual practices self-definition as the first puzzle piece in forming a cohesive resistance discourse for the collective. However, the power of these individual acts of resistance should not be understood as being of lesser importance than the work done by the community. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) reminds us, "Black feminist thought speaks to the importance African American women thinkers place on consciousness as a sphere of freedom" (p. 227). If the individual has the power to restructure her own biography and, in essence, free herself from the dominant narrative, she has in fact resisted oppression at the personal level. Blogging may provide the space for Black women to participate in the retelling of personal narrative and restructuring of individual stories.

Communal/Cultural

Blogging also acts as a means of learning on the part of the cultural group and creates a shared sense of meaning through collective action. This level is particularly powerful, as community ideology can become infiltrated by dominant ideology that works to oppress Black women from within. The power to control and dominate a group from within has been explored by Fanon (1963) and Woodson (1933). While these authors explore the oppression of people of color at the communal level in brilliant ways, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) complicates this literature by expressing the unique capacity of African American women to be communally oppressed at both racial and gender levels. Communal resistance by African American women exists in the *relationships* formed where experiences are both validated and challenged in the larger system of oppression.

Institutional

While Jim Crow racism was rooted in biologically based notions of inferiority of certain races, and usually overtly expressed by the public, Bonilla-Silva (2006) explains that covert behaviors and words are now used to reinforce discrimination, segregation, and inequality at an institutional level. Oppression at the institutional levels marginalizes the lives of Black women in spaces that could and should be

used for empowerment, such as schools, churches, media, and other formal organizations (P. H. Collins, 2000, p. 228). Black women have historically produced, and continue to produce, work that challenges the hegemonic order and provides critique within these institutions. Resistance of such institutions is inherently political in nature, as it seeks to undermine the dominant legal or social structures that keep racism and sexism intact. Themes that emerge at each level are explored for their potential to resist oppression and/or reify systems of domination and control.

The data were collected over a six-month period in 2011. This period was selected as each of the blogs began shifting to an advertiser-driven model, which increased page views and comments in 2011. Original posted content was archived, which included pictures and text posted on the main blog page, as well as content links provided in the text. Links included archived content categorized by topic. On each site, reader comments were totaled at the bottom of each blog entry. Comments were considered and explored for common themes that emerged and were analyzed with the bounds of the typology presented above. The architectural structure of sites was considered along with frequency, type, and distribution of advertising content. Each site was updated with new blog posts with an average frequency of 5–6 times per day, for a total of 300–500 posts per site and more than 3,000 reader comments. Blog posts ranged in length from 100–600 words. Every post contained visual imagery or video, most often depicting a celebrity. Emergent themes at each level of oppression as outlined by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) are explored.

The Individual—Stepping in and out of the Feminist Box

Oppression at the individual level limits self-definition. Resistance discourse at this level contrasts dominant discourse about Black women with personal narratives and rejects negative labeling and oppressive representations. Bloggers writing for *Necole Bitchie* and *TheYBF* use the celebrity's words to clarify media rumors or negative press. Posts such as "Jennifer Hudson clears up rumors" or "Halle Berry says she's not the marrying kind" include the voice of Black women discussing their careers and relationships from their own perspectives, often shunning public opinion. *Necole Bitchie* begins an April 18, 2011, post about Halle Berry with a photo of the actress and her boyfriend Olivier Martinez (Kane, 2011a). Blogger *Necole* writes five lines to contextualize the photo and offers this lead: "Halle recently revealed that the traditional form of marriage is not for her, and she won't be getting married again." An extended quotation from the star herself follows. Berry explains her distrust of marriage based on past experience and her childhood relationship with her father. She states:

"I WISH I had known then that I was not the marrying kind. It would have saved me a lot of time, heartache and grief over the years. I made all the wrong choices when it came

to love. I have been an idiot. But, now, it is like a gift to myself—seeing more clearly and making better decisions. One thing was unavoidable. My father left us when I was young and that did affect my life. If I had a good father in my life, growing up, then I do not think I would have made the mistakes I made. I would not have been lost in love. I would have had a good role model and known what to look for. As it is, I had to find out about marriage from the men I've married. I have done it twice and I am not going to do it again. The traditional form of marriage is not for me.”

Blogger Necole follows this quotation with another from Oprah Winfrey, who also resists normative ideas of marriage. The post wraps with “Interesting. I guess marriage isn't for everybody.” This open ended and nonjudgmental conclusion allows for Berry and Winfrey's words to stand on their own as the discussion is opened up to the community. The use of personal narrative combats dominant discourse and provides the opportunity for Black women to use their own voices in resistance of marginalization.

Self-definition on the part of Black women is a political tool used as the first means of combating oppression. Self-definition on the blogs is not limited to celebrities only. The founder of NecoleBitchie.com is prominently featured in pictures on the site and is self-referential in her posts. Necole explains in her “contact” page:

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. I only report on artists/celebrities that I like or find interesting. Thanx—Necole (NecoleBitchie.com; emphasis in original text)

The acknowledgment of subjectivity provides the opportunity for both the blog's author and its readers to create and articulate meaning for themselves outside of the constraints of mainstream media. Each post is signed “by Necole Bitchie,” again demonstrating the voice of the author. Following each post, a link to reader comments is represented by the number of people posting replies and the word *bitching*, for example, “75 people bitching.” The tie-in of the word *bitching* links the author and readers, giving each a unique and equivalent voice on the site. In this way the readers participate in storytelling by crafting their own narratives. Guendouzi (2001) explains that even in the midst of cooperation and collaboration in gossiping behaviors, bitching is “underpinned by a need to discursively claim symbolic capital through competition for socially acceptable images of femininity” (p. 29). While “bitching” online is sometimes considered defamatory in nature (Rowland, 2006), it must also be considered as “talking and gazing back at popular culture...in this case a valued/valuable feminist act” (Bailey, 2003).

Acts of self-definition and individual resistance on the part of the bloggers, commenters, and celebrities emerge along two themes: beauty and mothering.

Beauty

While research demonstrates the cultural relativity of beauty, Western conceptions of beauty permeate American media content and are often internalized by sub-cultures in the United States. Posts and discussions of beauty on both sites focus on fashion, hair, and makeup. Singer/songwriter Solange receives praise from authors on both sites for deviating from traditional fashion attire and her decision to remove hair weaves and “go natural.” Celebrity decisions to show their natural, unprocessed hair occurred with some frequency. Posted April 23, 2011, blogger Natasha writing for TheYBF highlights actress Gabrielle Union’s Twitpic of her hair without hair extensions or chemical relaxers with the headline: “SHE IS NOT HER HAIR: Gabby Union Shows Off Her Natural Un-Relaxed, Un-Weaved Hair” (Eubanks, 2011). Union’s original tweet, which reads, “All done...I’ve been reunited with my scalp...and it feels soooo good (peaches and herb voice). No weave, no relaxer, no hot comb,” follows the picture. Commenters went on to both support Union by comparing their own hair journey with hers and to cast doubt upon the validity of her claim that this was her hair in its natural state. Commenter kaydub says, “she probably didn’t relax it during this beauty visit...but Gabby is relaxed, her hair texture is like the average blk person...coarse. When Jill Scott says she’s natural it’s believable because we’ve seen her with natural curly or kinky hair...since Gabby’s been in Hollyweird her hair has been str8...maybe styled real nice w/ a curling iron but she’s relaxed & there’s nothing wrong w/ that but she’s def not natural.” An anonymous commenter responds, “That look can be obtained without chemicals as I do it every week when I get my hair done! I havent used a relaxer in almost 2 years. However, to achieve the straight look, my beautician has some FLAT IRONS that are THE TRUTH!! They will straighten the GAYEST MAN!! LMAO, but seriously, her hair not chemically relaxed, if you a thing or two about HAIR, you could see that! She still a 10 with or without weave and SHE DATES DWADE, GO GABBY!! Lol.”

The comments quickly turn to the significance of hair in representing Black identity. Another anonymous commenter explains, “Now see this is sad (no[t] the post, great post) when a person showing their own hair is news...lol. I’m a natural sistah rocking it short and curly but now letting it grow out. It’s so liberating. Not knocking weaves or wigs or braids, they have their place, but take so much work and money to maintain. Natural hair needs maintenance too, but to me, is much preferable.” This community explores the broader implications of “going natural” and has a debate about the lingering desire for chemically relaxed hair by many in the community. The initial blog did not offer an opinion regarding the debate, which does not give insight into blogger Natasha’s perspective. However, the site often features Carol’s Daughter, a beauty line exclusively for

women of color that promotes natural hair, in posts. Advertisements for the product line can also be found on the site. These posts signal resistance in their use of personal narrative to define beauty by the individual.

Mothering

Personal narratives regarding Black mothering are another salient theme in the blog posts. In the dominant media landscape, professional women, including celebrities, are often judged and/or castigated for failing to adhere to social norms regarding mothering. Blogs written by and for African American women provide the space to discuss mothering within a communal context but with implications for the individual. Mothers are discussed in a variety of contexts; however, personal narrative is used primarily to explain how mothering affects a female celebrity's success or failure. Mothers of celebrities are discussed in relation to the success of their children. Women bearing children of celebrities are given a voice on the sites. In the dominant media landscape, often these women are relegated to stereotypic depictions of "baby mommas" with little attention or respect given to their own personal endeavors. Both *NecoleBitchie.com* and *TheYBF* make a point of telling the personal stories of these individuals. *NecoleBitchie* frequently features interviews with Toya Carter, the ex-wife of rapper Lil' Wayne. Under the section heading "On holding her own," one blog post features this quote: "People thought Tiny and I were going to do a baby momma show. They only knew that I was married to Lil Wayne. But once we did season 2, they knew more about me. My life has changed, and I'm more in the public's eye. I hear from people who are inspired by my story." This use of personal narrative reverses the dominant script, giving agency to the individual and promoting resistance to the oppressive nature of having one's identity fashioned by others.

The Communal—Re-centering Black Relationships

Communal/cultural oppression is most damaging for its ability to operate from within. Resistance to this form of oppression for Black women becomes possible through the nurturing of relationships and through challenges to popular myths and stereotypes about the relationships between African Americans. Each of the blogs has recurring themes of representing positive relationships of Black women with each other and with Black men. When reporting on issues of violence within the community the authors frequently take an overt stand against such actions. However, as is often the case, oppression is often internalized and rearticulated in Black women's writing as well.

The Black Male Hero

Hegemonic masculinity is a pattern of practice that allows men to dominate women. It is not a personality trait of certain men, but a way of normalizing gender stratification through institutions, culture, and interpersonal dialogue (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Even those not enacting hegemonic masculinity per se are often still complicit in its existence. Both blogs have frequent posts that celebrate the mythical Black male hero. The prototype celebrated on the sites is often one that holds fast to the patterns of hegemonic masculinity. This is particularly true in terms of the physical appearances of Black men in photos. Male athletes and entertainers are pictured with minimal clothing and their sexual exploits are described in entertaining and favorable ways. Men like former professional athlete Eric Williams are given a pass for violent and aggressive behavior. Williams's ex-wife, featured on the reality show *Basketball Wives*, often complained on the show about her husband's aggressive behaviors. Much of this critique was met with skepticism from blogger Necole and her followers. Following an on-air incident where Eric Williams throws a glass at his then wife, she appears to subtly change her view (Bitchie Staff, 2011b). She writes, "Basketball Wives fans really don't like Eric Williams, and I could see why but I always gave him the benefit of the doubt. On the show, it appeared as though he was hurt by his failed relationship with Jennifer Williams but just didn't know how to express it in the right way. Of course, that perspective changed on Monday night." In this post from August 3, 2011, she showcases a picture of the violent act and a link to the full video. Offering a tempered critique, she concludes by stating, "I'm more than convinced he was neglected as a child. Sad."

Clinging to a hegemonic representation of masculinity creates an archetype of a Black male hero. Black men are frequently disparaged in the mass media in ways that challenge traditional notions of masculinity (status, wealth, employment). Celebrated representations of hegemonic masculinity emerge as a way to validate Black men in the larger cultural context. This validation comes at the expense of the protection of Black women, as witnessed in the above example. Therefore, while acting to resist mainstream stereotypes of a lazy, irresponsible Black man that date back to the antebellum south, the creation of the Black male hero works against the safety and security of Black women. The patriarchal narrative of masculinity does not give the freedom to Black men to be fully formed and emotionally responsible beings.

Sister Friends

A frequent recurring post on Necole Bitchie is "Bitchie or Not," wherein a Black celebrity is featured. The celebrity's wardrobe is up for review by the community who determines at large whether the community approves. A similar recurring post is "Who owned the look." This post is similar in type to TheYBF's "Who ran

it?” in which two celebrities (almost always women) are shown wearing the same or similar attire and the readers determine the celebrity who wore it best. While this is similar to mainstream celebrity sites, the tone and tenor of reader responses are an interesting indicator of the use of the sites to provide communal sharing. On both sites, the authors provide an array of pictures with captions including the celebrity’s name, a description of the outfit in full, and the location where the picture was taken. Readers were always divided on who should “win the contest.” In the comments section following these “battles,” a secondary battle emerges among readers. These battles are ones of wit and humor and can be closely tied to signification, a common practice in Black oral culture.

The term *signifyin(g)* in popular English vernacular (usually pronounced and sometimes spelled *signifyin’*) refers to denotation of meaning through the use of a sign or word. Within the African American community the term generally refers to a contest in which the most imaginative user of indirection, irony, and insult wins (Lee, 1993). Bell (1987) defines it as an elaborate, indirect form of goading or insult that generally makes use of profanity, while Gates (1999) quotes Abrahams’s explanation of signifyin(g) as “implying, goading, or boasting by indirect verbal or gestural means.” Gates (1989) explains that signification happens in two forms: oppositional (or motivated) and cooperative (or unmotivated). Signifyin(g) “functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition.” In this context, authors reuse motifs from previous works but alter them and “signify” upon them so as to create their own meanings. Signifyin(g) is not only a possible form of expression for African Americans, but a necessary tool used to manage identity and community. Therefore, it must be acknowledged in this context, rather than as a lesser form of language use (Lee, 1993, p. 11).

Women tend to use more indirect means of signifyin(g), avoiding more direct means of confrontations (Abrahams, 1976; Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003). In an unsigned post from February 2011, YBF bloggers post pictures of singers Nicki Minaj and Keri Hilson both wearing extravagant leopard prints (_YBF, 2011a). After describing the garments, who designed each, and the occasions on which each were worn, the author opens the conversation with “Who ran it?” The community sometimes responds with a brief vote for one or the other, for example, “Keri Hilson Killed this look” and “I love you nicki but keri definitely got this.” Others use this as an occasion to offer more commentary on Minaj more broadly. Blog community member “Tropicana” says, “Somebody shoulda came in a egg!” An anonymous poster chimes in “Sigh. Is the cartoon character even IN the running?” referencing the view that Minaj is commonly over-the-top and not to be taken seriously. Two other commenters compare the dresses to Halloween costumes while one likens Minaj to a gender-ambiguous Chris Tucker character from the sci-fi film *The Fifth Element*. Few commenters are direct. Instead, subtle

jabs are more common and demonstrate the communal sharing component of signifyin(g). The ability to signify must be paired with a sense of familiarity between parties. Signifyin(g) is done among the familiar and only within the confines of the community. Outside of this context, the same discourse becomes malicious. The use of signifyin(g) in celebrity gossip must be situated contextually or the behavior may be misunderstood.

Black Love Relationships

A recurring theme on both blogs regards the romantic relationships between Black celebrities. In cases where Black men are involved in intra-racial relationships, blog posts tend to be more positive in tone and frequent in occurrence. Discussion of these relationships often begins with the use of the husband's surname. For examples, entertainers Jay-Z and Beyoncé are often discussed as "The Carters" on TheYBF. The deference to patrilineage is simultaneously resistant of and compliant with the hegemonic order. Celebrating Beyoncé as a "proper wife" combats the narrative of Black women's promiscuity and lack of suitability as mates for Black men. The use of "Mrs. Carter" (subsequently adopted by Beyoncé herself in promoting her brand) also shows the desire to replace the imagery of absentee Black men that permeates mainstream media. In attempting to craft the marriage of these two celebrities as a model, the bloggers and community also participate in reifying heteronormativity and patriarchy.

Both blogs follow the relationship of NBA player Carmelo Anthony and longtime girlfriend (now wife) LaLa. Their wedding and subsequent move to New York received multiple blog postings over the period of three weeks. Posts showing LaLa cheering on the sidelines of NBA games appear at least once a week. Coverage of the relationships of Kim and Khloe Kardashian, sisters who have both dated (or married) Black male athletes/entertainers, do not evoke the same celebratory tone. Stories on the sisters included mockery of their musical endeavors and ridicule of their fashions and appearances. Black women as a group have the most negative views of interracial pairings between Black men and White women (Childs, 2005). Often the resentment toward Black man/White woman pairings is dismissed as jealousy. Childs's research indicates it is in fact more readily explained as a reaction to White racism, Black internalization of racism, and what interracial relationships represent to Black women and signify about Black women's worth (Childs, 2005, p. 558). Therefore, celebration of Black love relationships within these contexts acts as a community act of resistance to popular discourse that discounts the worth of Black women as relational partners for successful Black men. In posts and comments concerning the Kardashians, commenters interrogate the women and the larger community issues regarding their fame and their crossover to the Black media market by means of interracial pairing.

The Institutional—Fighting the Power

Institutional oppression serves to provide justification for the separation of marginalized groups from organizations and institutions that serve the public good. When institutional oppression functions at its most oppressive, institutions in place to serve society act with specific detriment to certain groups within. Because laws often justify such oppression, resistance at this level challenges not only popular discourse or societal norms, but laws and regulations as well. The gaze of the law is not only Western, but as MacKinnon (1989) argues, male as well. MacKinnon asks us to interrogate how laws become normalized and unchallenged in society, acting to the benefit of some groups and the detriment of others. Values of dominant society are mandated as law and for those outside the dominant group, the problem with this correlation is obvious.

Defending Black Men

Legal issues faced by celebrities are a frequent theme in blog posts on both sites, with TheYBF devoting a category section to “Legal Woes.” Within this area, most of the posts discuss celebrities involved in civil disputes or being fined or given jail time because of tax issues. Often, disdain is reserved for celebrities rather than the government. The blogger and community commenters show sympathy for rapper Ja Rule as he faces charges of tax evasion. Instead of focusing on the charges, the post and subsequent comments instead shift attention to a Twitter war waged between Ja Rule and longtime rival 50 Cent. A March 2011 unsigned post concludes with “back in the day, rappers would be ready to shoot each other and knock each other’s heads off over a few choice words... now they just take the spectacle to twitter” (Bitchie Staff, 2011). This reads as a disappointment in the two for failing to live up to the hegemonic ideals of aggressiveness, violence, and competition attributed to masculinity. More significantly, no challenge is posed to the system of taxation; the bloggers and commenters critique Ja Rule as a tax evader.

Music artist Fantasia Barino was featured in an August 2011 post wherein YBF bloggers discussed the singer being sued by a collections agency for \$25,000 (YBF, 2011b). The post concludes with “Oh Fanny... I hope Antwuan helps her figure this out... *eyebrows raised*.” The blogger is referencing an ongoing controversy regarding Barino’s intimate relationship with a married man. Commenters are critical of Barino in this situation. Many blame a “lack of home training” or “lack of education.” One post summarizes the sentiments of the majority of the commenters:

I feel bad for Fantasia because she just had no home training. Fantasia, money and fame cannot buy class. The best example you can set for Zion and the newborn is to further your education, even to the Community College level. How are you even able to help with the

homework and understand the progress reports the teacher sends home? I guess that is why you hooked up with a college educated man. Unfortunately, you went about it the wrong way and will reap the fruits of those seeds. Please try to better yourself intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. My prayers are with Zion and the unborn. (jabe)

Poster "Mabel" responds by signifyin(g) Barino's perceived issues with literacy stating: "Wow! Well said! Unfortunately she can not read so...let us hope someone who cares about her harvest your words of wisdom and enlighten the 'poor child.'" This example shows how the author simultaneously signifies both Barino and the poster. The use of quotes around "poor child" indirectly calls out the posters for their belittling of Barino. In this and other cases, the systems under which the celebrities find themselves in trouble with the law largely go unchecked. The banking industry and systems of taxation are left intact as both the bloggers and commenters focus on the poor money management or inappropriate conduct of the celebrities.

The absences of Black protectionism when Black celebrities are accused of "white collar" crimes signals an acceptance of a level of governmental control. Katheryn Russell-Brown (2004) explains that Black protectionism is a form of group self-interest, wherein African Americans actively seek to protect other African Americans (usually men) from negative stereotypes or mistreatment by Whites. Black protectionism operates regardless of the group's perception of innocence or guilt. When a Black celebrity is accused of non-white-collar crimes, the discourse on the blog posts tends to include the elements of Black protectionism. Russell-Brown (2004) explains that Black protectionism usually incorporates the following challenges:

Did he commit the offense? Even if he did commit it, was he set up? Would he risk everything he has to commit this offense? Is he the only person that has committed this offense? Are White people accused of committing this offense given the same scrutiny and treatment? Is this accusation a part of a government conspiracy to destroy the Black race? (p. 60)

Protection by Black women is particularly significant in the ways it is used to challenge social and legal institutions on behalf of Black men. Blogs within the sample period discussed prosecution and incarceration of Black men for crimes including weapons charges, violent crimes, prostitution, and drug offenses. Rappers Rick Ross, Big Boi, and Soulja Boy were all arrested on various drug possession charges. An unsigned YBF blog post in March of 2011 details Rick Ross's arrest for marijuana possession in Shreveport, Louisiana (YBF, 2011c). Four separate yet related threads emerge in the comments section. The first condemns Ross, not for possession of narcotics but for conducting himself in a way that would draw the suspicion of officers. The second is a debate as to whether Ross was required under Louisiana law to show identification. The third questions the merits of drug laws and suggests marijuana

should be legalized. The final is an indictment of racism in the Shreveport Police Department. Commenters posit that Ross's arrest was an example of DWB (Driving While Black). Though possession of marijuana is against the law, the common protection theme of the comments suggest that the community sees Ross as being under scrutiny that a White counterpart would not be.

The new Jim Crow, according to Michelle Alexander (2010), is a system of criminal prosecution and incarceration that prevents African Americans from becoming full participants in dominant U.S. society. Through unfair and discriminatory law enforcements practices, sentencing laws, and access to adequate defense, African Americans are disproportionately imprisoned for minor drug offenses. The new Jim Crow affects housing, education, access to government resources, voting, and jury participation. Each of these means of participating in the economy and in the social fabric of this country has been historically taken away from African Americans as a population since the formation of the United States. The new Jim Crow emerges as a means to both redact laws and civil rights for a population and ensure the economic fortitude of the dominant group through the prison-industrial complex. Commenters who challenge unfair arrests and position those arrested for crimes as victims of the system do so within this context.

POSSIBILITIES AND PROMISE

The blogosphere provides a platform for marginalized groups to seek and sustain voice in a society where they are prevented from meaningful participation. Too often scholars have also participated in this exclusion by ignoring how these groups interact with media differently than the dominant culture. The blogs in this study demonstrate that as Black women negotiate the intersection of their gender and racial identities, gossip is used as a tool to resist oppression. At the same time, self-monitoring and adherence to hegemonic control is present as well. At the individual, communal, and institutional levels bloggers and the community of commenters engage in rhetorical strategies and narratives that resist the dominant culture's view of Black femininity, the Black family, and Black communal practices. At the institutional level the blogs challenge systemic issues while also reifying systems of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and an unjust legal system.

Two of the most common ways gossip has been discussed in anthropology, psychology, and communication are as a malicious act among acquaintances or as a means of social control. Previous ethnographic studies have explored the ways in which various cultural groups have used gossip as a means of social control. A resounding finding significant from such work is the idea that gossip is a tool used to keep the masses subservient socially, politically, and economically. As a means of social control, communities monitor themselves and their own behaviors

through means of shame (Kluckhohn, 1944; Pitt-Rivers, 1977). Those in control reside outside of the actual acts of gossip, instead allowing the masses to police themselves and relinquish power (Merry, 1997, p. 28). This view of gossip ignores the agency of the individual in the decision to participate. It is certainly important from a historical perspective to understand the role gossip has played in crafting social structure, but we must also be concerned with the ways in which groups have used gossip to serve alternate purposes for the individual and community.

Gossip is often considered within a malicious context (Fairclough, 2009). Even in extensive studies of cultural understandings of gossip, gossip is regarded as negative and even deviant behavior. As Merry (1997) expresses, "gossip not only attacks a person's honor and social prestige...but also leads to tangible political, economic and social consequences" (p. 56). This means of understanding gossip assumes a negative intent on the behalf of the gossipers. It leaves little to no room for the possibility of other motivations that do not seek to harm the subjects of gossip. One sure motivation may be the maintenance of relationships and community building. This is especially the case when the gossip occurs about strangers. When we stop dismissing gossip as purely malicious it is possible to see that gossip can expand the opportunity for cultural learning and foster community connection (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004).

Celebrity gossip in particular serves a specific function in strengthening bonds. Gossip blogs hold the possibility for communal sharing of knowledge and management of relationships online. Because this gossip is not specifically about anyone within the participant's social circle, the fear of disparagement is avoided and instead is replaced with discourse that can serve alternate purposes. Gossip is a form of cultural capital that affords those "in the loop" with knowledge that provides power and status.

Gossip may be used in online spaces to create a sense of digital community for offline communities separated by geographic or social distance. Because this online space provides the opportunity for feedback from readers, the communal work done in such a space becomes even more apparent. In the case of Black female gossip blogs, the online space may serve as a site of unification for a group of women who may otherwise be separated by geography or socioeconomic status. The writers and readers of celebrity gossip blogs exist within a different socioeconomic group than those they gossip about. In these online spaces, the gap between the producers, consumers, and subject nearly vanishes. Since most readers of celebrity gossip sites have never interacted offline with the celebrities they write about, their use of pejoratives and personal referents is largely symbolic. Research separates the community function from ideas of "bitching." Guendouzi (2001) explains that even within the midst of cooperation and collaboration in gossiping behaviors, bitching is "underpinned by a need to discursively claim symbolic capital through competition for socially acceptable images of femininity which reproduce a hegemonic ideology of gender" (p. 29).

While “bitching” online is highlighted as being defamatory in nature (Rowland, 2006) it must also be considered as “talking and gazing back at popular culture, is in this case a valued/valuable feminist act” (Bailey, 2003).

Black women’s writing often happens in spaces outside of Eurocentric positivist systems of knowledge. Writers such as Audre Lorde and Alice Walker 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. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains: “Subjugated knowledges, such as a Black women’s culture of resistance, develop in cultural contexts controlled by oppressed groups” (p. 230). Beyond showcasing community conversation and resistance discourse, this study posits that Black female bloggers must be considered as part of the historical legacy of marginalized Black women writers. They also act as agents of innovation in a new media context. The bloggers and blogging community use narrative construction, signifyin(g), and playing the dozens, features of Black oral culture, to “talk back” (hooks 1988) to systems and structures from which they are excluded or exploited. In this case, the authors’ and readers’ existence within the matrix of domination directs a methodological choice that gives space for the discussion of the complexity of experience and expression.

This study provides validation for a space outside the boundaries of what is traditionally considered appropriate for political discourse and intellectual discussion. While limited in scope, focusing on these two sites allows for a deeper reading of the context and construction of community that exists in these spaces. Beyond the boundaries of academic positivist research are the everyday conversations through which communities navigate identity and culture. Future research must continue to investigate the use of nontraditional spaces as sites of inquiry and interrogation by Black women and other marginalized groups. As scholars, a shift in epistemology creates the potential for incorporation of new ideas and possibilities of resistance to oppression through participation in political discourse.

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