"Who do you think you are?": Race, Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces

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"Black folk and others are talking like they've always been, but it's like, suddenly, for the first time, White folks are listening"

- rikyrah

I spend a fair amount of time (too much, actually) on the Internet, looking for my people. I do this as a palliative for my cultural isolation here in the rolling hills of the Mississippi River Valley, but I also do so because I love finding other people discussing what it means to be Black. As I travel around the Web, I note the many ways that Blackness is articulated online. This behavior stems from my ever-present awareness of how I differ yet resemble cultural expectations of Black masculinity. As a youth, I was mocked for "acting White" because I loved to read, loved school, and "talked proper". As an Black graduate student, I was intensely uncomfortable with the limitations of being an "exceptional" Black placed upon me by my liberal professors, because I was aware that by labeling me as such they sought to separate me from my working class origins, speech patterns, and cultural perspectives in order to make me palatable for their consumption and indoctrination.

My younger brother, in one of the innumerable sessions of the dozens that we play to show affection to one another, once quipped, "When you were in high school, you used to try so hard to be White...but now that you in grad school you've turned into Super Nigga!" I laughed when he said this, but I couldn't argue with his analysis. In his pithy fashion, he had identified my personal and academic response to multiple crises of representation:

- Stereotype: How does one display the complexity of their Black identity to a world intent on fixity?
- Interiority: How much of our professed Black Identity is shaped by what we think the world expects of us?
- Exteriority: How much of our Black identity is shaped by the contexts in which we find ourselves?

The Internet offers yet another context in which Black identity is shaped by the in- and out-group. Compared to older forms of media, the Internet adds an interactive, discursive dimension to

exterior renditions of Black identity and thus enabling interior perspectives on Black identity to become part of the conversation. Goffman (1959) argues that identity is a performance, conducted for audiences in settings using signs 'given' and signs 'given off'. Before the Internet penetrated deeply into everyday life, conversations like the ones analyzed above were limited to venues and discussants in Black neighborhoods. The experiences of Blacks in American civic life – *de facto* segregation and *de jure* equality – ensure that conversations about how to be 'proper' Americans and 'real' Black people happen in private or commercial spaces where Blacks have time to congregate and talk. The only public outlets for these discourses of propriety and membership were Black newspapers and later, Black talk radio.

From my own subject position as a Black Internet user, I can participate in cultural contexts online that test, expand, or affirm aspects of my racial identity. Online responses such as the ones below to crises of public representation highlight the heterogeneity of Black identity formation while also demonstrating the discursive and rhetorical commonplaces of Black identity.

Race, Representation, and Public Culture

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that racial formation projects operate on the tension between social structure and racial representation In this essay, I examine two online discourses on the intersection of Black and American identity .For both examples, the Internet serves as the social structure within which each incident is articulated and responded to. The Internet becomes a discursive structure – one spanning space and time but constrained by bandwidth and text – through which racial identity is represented. In the Kanye West example, West's impassioned speech on behalf of Hurricane Katrina survivors encouraged respondents on a number of Black blogs to argue how Blackness should be articulated through hip-hop culture, in times of crisis, and through rhetorical craft. In the Rev. Lowery example, I selected a weblog that is marked as a Black discursive space – Ta-Nehisi Coates' Atlantic magazine blog - to highlight the racialized discourse employed to discipline Rev. Lowery's use of Black culture on a profoundly "American" occasion.

While the blogs discussing these incidents do not merit the title of "public sphere", they should be considered as third places (Oldenburg 1991) where matters of import are discussed among a select group of initiates. Third places, as defined by Oldenburg, have the following features:

- They operate as a neutral space where conversation is the main activity

- They are free of external social hierarchies
- They are inclusive and accessible
- They expand possibilities for association by like-minded souls
- They offer psychological comfort and spiritual support.

The Internet has become a sort of "third place" (Oldenburg 1991) for public discussions among Black folk that were once limited to Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons. Conversations on the Internet are often framed through references to Habermas' public sphere, where groups come together to generate deliberative discourse in pursuit of political goals. Third places, however, are a much more fertile framework from which to understand what it is that people do online. Third places serve a regenerative function for the people who frequent their environs; where they can reconstitute themselves as 'people' apart from their kinship and work networks. In the online spaces I study, Black web users are often interested in the political process and its effect on their daily lives. What happens more often, however, is that the "personal is political" (with a hat tip to second wave feminists). By this I mean that if we understand political activity as the negotiation for ideological resources among individuals and between groups, then Black online communities spend a fair amount of time working through the internal and external ideological constraints of being a low-status American subculture. In the following section, the online authors apply their understanding of *kairos* to Kanye West's hurricane benefit speech, examining how it reflects upon their own Black identity and the identity of the Black community

## Kairos, Kanye, and Katrina: Blackness On Air and Online

Alliteration aside, *kairos* is the ideal term to describe Kanye's moment of infamy during the hurricane's aftermath. The classical definition of *kairos* - the appropriate time (and manner) to speak – has its analogue in the Black community. My brother's quip about my reconfigured academic identity highlights an important element of Black identity: a love of wordplay in the form of 'signifying' (Gates 1988). Although signifying is usually publicly understood as a game of insults (the 'dozens'), it is better understood as a celebration of invention, timeliness, and delivery in a discourse style intended to speak truth to power.

Thus, West's criticisms of the government's efforts and allegations of Presidential racism sparked a firestorm of commentary. The authors evaluated his ethos, his reasoning, his emotional appeals, and his delivery from personal perspectives.

They also considered how West's speech affected the representation of the Black community to the world.   The common factor in these responses was a measured, critical online articulation of what it means to be Black within the structure of American public culture.

Kanye Speaks His Mind

As a show of support, NBC broadcast a "Hurricane Relief Benefit" concert and telethon on Friday, September 3rd 2005. Kanye West, an award-winning hip-hop artist and producer, appeared both as an artist and as one of many presenters tapped to read prepared solicitations for donations from the viewing audience. Instead of following the script, Kanye delivered a heartfelt, impromptu plea that shocked the audience and polarized the nation:
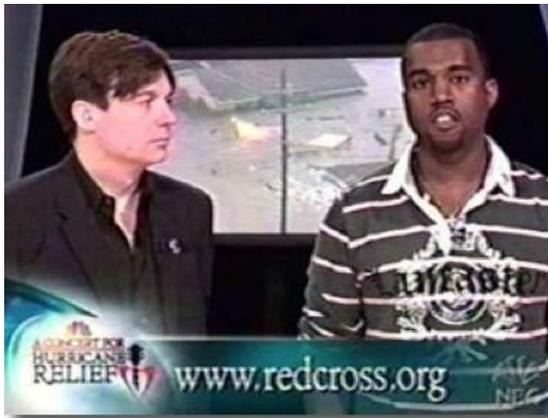
I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, 'They're looting.' You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food.' And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the TV because it's too hard to watch. I've even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I'm calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help — with the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way — and they've given them permission to go down and shoot us!

West turned to Michael Myers, his co-presenter, who according to reports looked flabbergasted. Myers said,

> And subtle, but in many ways even more profoundly devastating, is the lasting damage to the survivors' will to rebuild and remain in the area. The destruction of the spirit of the people of southern Louisiana and Mississippi may end up being the most tragic loss of all.

West then finished by saying, "George Bush doesn't care about Black people!"

<center>***</center>

The blogs examined in this paper, all written in the days immediately following Kanye's speech, highlight a number of reactions to the *kairos* (my term, not theirs) of West's critique. One set of responses centered on whether Kanye West, the rapper, was the best representative of the Black community to the world at a moment of crisis. Some authors ruminated upon the ethos of rap and its performers as avatars of Black culture. Others considered the rhetorical significance of the setting, West's delivery, and the political significance of Black criticisms of American racial attitudes. These conversations, and others like them, regularly take place in Black cultural third places. Through their publication online, these discourses became a part of the public cultural spectacle produced by Kanye West's actions. They also signaled the emergence of how the Black cultural Web 2.0 was evolving towards an online "third place", where for the first time, outsiders could observe the heterogeneity of Black identity (online and offline).

Ethos and Race: Black Bloggers Following Katrina

During Katrina's aftermath, the authors discussing Kanye's behavior made an explicit ideological link between the portrayals of Blacks in the media and the effects of those portrayals. They interrogated West's professional character (ethos), his reasoning and criticism (logos), his emotional appeal based on his race, gender, and nationality (ethos), his delivery, and the timing of his speech. These analyses are conducted through a lens of Black identity, and presented online to present the author's frame of mind and invite discussion. The right to represent an authentic Black viewpoint to the world was debated using Kanye and hip-hop as exemplars; the result was an online evocation between Blacks about who can speak for Blacks in the public sphere.

Kanye and Kairos

Banks[1] deftly describes African American kairos as "The tension between the "good man speaking well" and the "bad nigga willing to say what the rest of you are scared to say". The negotiation of these tensions can be found in the Black online authors' conjoined considerations of Kanye and of whether he chose the proper moment to speak. One such example of this tension can be found in the writings of minister and theologian Bishop Eddie Huff, who

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[1] Banks, Adam. J. (no date). "What is African American Rhetoric*?" Dr. Adam J. Banks – Syracuse University Writing Program*. Retrieved from
http://writing.syr.edu:16080/~ajbanks/afamrhetoric.html. Accessed July 7, 2009.

blogged on *New Black Thought* about Kanye's Katrina speech. He disparaged Kanye's criticism of Bush by arguing that Kanye did was called "showing your behind". He explained by adding, "For Kanye or any other entertainer to do this [criticize Bush] is to be expected". "Showing your behind" is a commonplace for the Black community; it usually means that the person in question has done something embarrassing to him or herself and by extension, to their family and the entire Black community. The idea that "one stands for many" represents the cultural belief held by Blacks that the mainstream believes that the negative actions of one Black person can be solely attributed to their Blackness, rather than as an individual characteristic. Thus, Kanye's actions as a rapper and as a spokesman, for Bishop Huff, reflect negatively on the entire Black community.

Michael Bowen, a former New Orleans resident and conservative Republican blogger at *Cobb*, had problems with West's poor delivery, emotional demeanor, and felt that faulty logic irreparably damaged his argument. He wrote,

> What an embarrassment. Now I understand why were saying they felt sorry for Mike Meyers. Sorry, I have to laugh again. This was clearly an impromptu rambling rant. I get the distinct impression, counter to my earlier guess, that he had absolutely no idea what he was going to say from one second to the next. But that gives his critics more biting indictment. He was speaking from his heart and that's what he really believes…My initial take was that he was coming off [faux]-militant and posturing, which led me to believe that he figured he was talking to his crew, his demographic, his fans. But that's not entirely true. He's another political Hollywood wack-job.

Bowen is not a huge consumer of hip-hop, and is often critical of its practitioners and topics. Bowen argues here that entertainers are 1) crazy and 2) not capable of sophisticated political analysis ("another political Hollywood wack-job"). West's delivery did not go over well either. Unpreparedness, a lack of organization, and an absence of verifiable information to back up the assertions West made were enough, for Bowen, to discredit the speech. Moreover, the statement "He was speaking from his heart and that's what he really believes" relegates West's speech to belief and an emotional appeal, rather than a factual criticism of the Bush administration's actions during the hurricane's aftermath.

As excerpted above, Bowen linked West's style ("[faux]-militant and posturing") to "his crew, his demographic, his fans". These references speak to Bowen's beliefs that hip-hop, as a culture, which attracts large numbers of young people, is touted as revolutionary (with the associated military connotations) - but is not. Bowen also intimated that the revolution itself is only a pose;

that is, that those who follow hip-hop are not actually interested in changing the world but feel that it is important to act as if they do. Thus, Bowen deflates West's persona as a 'conscious' rapper and in the process delegitimizes hip-hop itself.

Bowen later examined Kanye's final words "George Bush doesn't care about Black people", in response to outcries of West's racism against Whites.   In a post titled "If Kanye West is Racist", Bowen clarified the relationship between West's statement, his political affiliation, and George Bush:

> Hell I'm black and Republican and conservative and GWBush, as the head of the Republican party doesn't care about me. So really, how much of a stretch is West making? None. And there's nothing racist about it.

Although Bowen is clarifying here that disinterest is not the same as outright racism, the link between Bowen's Black identity and his political allegiance is clear: the reader is left to draw the conclusion that Republicans, as a party, are not interested in the aims of their Black party members. Bowen earlier noted that the interests of the poor are least important to those in power; and Blacks are overwhelmingly represented at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum. Thus, the argument here is that although disinterest does not equal outright racism, the neglect that a politics of disinterest engenders will always hurt those most vulnerable – which, in the end, is not much different from outright racism for poor Black people.

Returning to West, Bowen asserted, "he was stating the truth, he just didn't qualify it the way a politician would" and closed his post with,

> Race isn't simply culture, it's class and politics too and until people start putting those three things together into identifyable [sic] quantities, blackfolks are going to get blamed for everything whitefolks want to blame them for, without specificity. There will always be one person to prove the point, which demonstrates how small a point it actually is.

Bowen's conclusion is that a focus on race, and the color blind ideology that focuses on the personal behaviors of racism, allowed those who cried "racist" to ignore the structural arguments West alluded to in his brief statement.

Finally, Ambra Nykol, a conservative female blogger over at *nykol.com*, criticized West's timing and venue as well (have they all criticized timing and venue?). She wrote, "The part that really kills me is that I know Kanye's intentions were genuine, but unfortunately, very ignorant. That's what made it such train wreck of emotion and pretension". Her reasoning is explicit,

> Any validity in Kanye's comments was completely squashed when he decided to make blanket statement and publicly bash the president. You DO NOT DO that. You express disappointment; you point out faults; but you do not disrespect authority on national television. What an embarrassment.

Nykol interpreted West's comments as disrespectful, reasoning that whites would take offense at West's words and construe them as charges of racism.

The ignorance Nykol refers to could not have been West's views, for despite her disapproving words, she actually agreed with several of his points. She agreed that racism was a problem, one exacerbated by "the lop-sided media portrayal" and magnified by the catastrophe. For Nykol, the fact that West utilized a charity event as a venue for critical discourse was a problem. The much larger problem for Nykol was her apprehension that West, speaking at an extremely public venue, would be perceived as speaking for all Blacks. Nykol admits as much, as she wrote,

> In many circles, Kanye will be heralded as a hero for saying what everyone else is supposedly thinking. For me this will be counted as one of those moments when you hang your head in shame and mourn for the conversation that have been were it not for unorderly accusations…Nevertheless, Kanye doesn't speak for me (quick, somebody make a t-shirt). I am not of the belief that President Bush doesn't care about black people. I don't care if much of what said was true, he was out of order and his credibility will suffer.

Thus, Nykol unseats Kanye as a voice for the Black community even as she acknowledged the truth of his claims. For Nykol, West's speech was the "ultimate bad form" as she argued that his words removed any credibility from the valid charges of racism.

Hip Hop as Black Ethos

The nature of American race relations means that when racial representations are embedded within public culture, Black culture is usually the example of "what not to be". According to W.E.B. DuBois, Black culture serves as the boundary of White American culture, functioning as the nadir of behavior and belief. This is as true for Black Americans as it is for others; Blacks are Americans after all, and are just as subject to believe mainstream cultural depictions of Blacks as anyone else - with the added empirical data from actually living within the community. DuBois predicted this behavior, writing:

> The American Negro, therefore, is surrounded and conditioned by the concept which he has of white people… if in education and ambition and income he is above the average culture of his group, he is often resentful of [the Black community's] environing

power; partly because he does not recognize its power and partly
because he is determined to consider himself part of the white
group from which, in fact, he is excluded. (1940, p. 173)

DuBois' explanation of Black cultural character can rightly be
defined as *ethos*. Hip Hop, as a Black cultural product, is often cited
as an example of the deficient character of Black culture.

Although never explicitly named as a consideration of *ethos* by
the online community excerpted in this essay, the authors outlined
here were concerned by West's participation and production of hip
hop culture. The authors, however, offered critical approaches of
the ethical character of hip hop and, by extension, the public
perception of hip hop as a ethical benchmark of the Black
community. Some cited rap's potential for cultural and political
criticism while at the same time acknowledging the perils facing
musicians who critique society.

Clay Cane, an LGBT male blogger, is one such example. He
wrote,

I LOVE KANYE! I have to say this is a true risk with his career -
I'm sure his record company is reeling in fear he's completely
cutting off his "diverse" audience -- and we all know what that
means. I have NEVER seen a mainstream hip-hop artist truly take
a risk with his career like this - THIS is what music is all about -
THIS is a revolutionary statement. Kanye said what probably 90%
of Black folks feel about President Bush (and a lot of white folks)
to America's face. Congrats - finally!

In this short excerpt, Cane makes the argument that by speaking
truth to power and criticizing George Bush, West has spoken for
"90% of Black folks" who were already unhappy with Bush-the-
Younger's policies before Katrina ever made landfall. Cane
explicitly named hip-hop as a foundation for the structural criticism
of West's comments ("THIS is what music is all about"), while
positioning West as a spokesperson for Black beliefs about
government and American culture. Cane argues that Blacks and
whites think differently about similar topics. Thus, we have Cane's
reversal of the connotation of "diverse"; by setting it off in quotes,
Cane reorients the meaning to refer to the white rap fans that
purchase West's music. The other warrant in this excerpt is a pitch
for hip hop as a positive Black art form--one that enables the
criticism of institutional discrimination and other problems
affecting the Black community. While doing so, however, Cane
pointed out that rappers rarely do such criticism. Cane uses his
online platform to issue a veiled criticism of the control that white-
owned mainstream media corporations (and white fans) have over
Black artistry.

Robert George, a blogger and columnist for the New York Post, differs from Kane in his estimation of West's professional and cultural ethos. Prior to the hurricane, George had praised West for employing complexity, originality, and for being "the guy who refused to use the gangsta ethos to sell his art". In his blog post, "No Kanye Do", George revises his estimation. He wrote,

> In my touting earlier this week [of] Kanye West's virtues over those of gangsta wannabe 50 Cent, I forgot an important aspect of the rap world. The so-called "conscious" rappers are the ones most likely to go off on some stupid-fool political rant that can make an-already tense situation worse…That said, NBC had no business editing out West's rant. What he said wasn't obscene. It may have been wrong and inappropriate, but that type of corporate censorship is also worse.

'Conscious', here, refers to West's choice of subject matter that reflects a wider range of Black life than the "gangsta ethos" mentioned previously. However, rap takes a beating at George's hand: despite his acknowledgement of the critical nature of West's work, George does not want rappers to represent the Black community at a time of crisis. For George, West's words were "wrong and inappropriate", coming at a time when the Black community needed help from mainstream culture. This assimilationist perspective is reflective of Black concerns that White Americans must be appeased in order for the Black community to receive needed resources. It also contains the understanding that Whites do not like to be reminded of America's troubled past with respect to relations between the two communities. In either case, the impression that George offers to his readers was that neither the 'conscious' nor 'gangsta' rapper is qualified to make the critique that Kanye made, albeit for different reasons than Cane provided.

The common thread throughout this section was the authors' awareness that West's appearance would be considered emblematic of the opinions of Black Americans. This has long been a concern in the Black community, as the community has been painfully reminded that negative representation to the mainstream often lead to sanctions, cultural or otherwise. West's profession, his presentation, and his logic were all considered and evaluated based upon how they fit into the authors' understanding of the Black experience. Hip hop was acknowledged as a Black cultural product, but confirmed as a low status endeavor despite the near-unanimous acclamation West was granted for his articulations of Black middle class life. West's emotional state and nervous delivery served as an indicator of the strain he must have felt for some authors, while others took it as a mark of incompetence and immaturity. His logic, however poorly expressed in the opinions of some authors, was still universally understood.

The above blog posts are topically linked but do not represent direct interactions or a unified discursive community. Taken in the aggregate however, they comprise a conversation about Black identity that was not available for public inspection only a decade ago. Publishing them on the Internet following Katrina's arrival served as a conscious intervention into mainstream discourses about Black identity. That these interventions interrogated Black identity from a variety of Black identity perspectives serves to demonstrate the value of the Internet for demonstrating the heterogeneity of Black identity, as well as establishing a nascent Black public sphere that later grew to prominence following the Jena Six in 2007 and continues to grow following the successful Presidential campaign of Barack Obama.

A Reverend's Benediction

I have argued here that the Internet brought privately conducted discourses of Blacks held in historically segregated "third places" to the world. The above analyses did not examine the comments attached to the blog posts; rather I chose to focus on the internal constructions of Black identity offered by the blog authors. In this section, however, I turn to the comments section of a popular Black authored blog to demonstrate how out-group members contribute to the discussion of Black propriety and membership in the public sphere. As such, these public comments made by out-group members demonstrate the external identity construction of Black identity online.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, free-lance journalist and author, began blogging at www.tanehisi.typepad.com in January 2008 as a promotional vehicle for his then-unreleased memoir, "Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and An Unlikely Road to Manhood". He quickly garnered a well-deserved reputation for blogging on current events from a nuanced and thoughtful Black perspective, and was hired by the Atlantic Monthly to continue blogging on issues he found of interest at www.ta-nehisicoates.theatlantic.com. At the Atlantic, he joined noted blogger/journalist Andrew Sullivan, as well as other bloggers such as James Fallows and Megan McArdle. Coates also wrote a few well-received articles on Obama for Time magazine, which, along with the Atlantic's imprimatur, served to draw a multi-racial audience to subscribe and participate in the comments section of his blog.

Coates often deploys his life history as a way of explaining how he both fits in and differs from what would be considered a 'normal' Black identity. For example, one set of posts on family values began with the statements that he and his partner are unmarried, living together, and raising their child. He used this information as a

starting point for discussing the salience of marriage in the Black community and in America. Part of Coates' appeal is that he acknowledges his limitations as a public intellectual; he works hard to have an open mind about the issues he writes about, while articulating them through a framework of the Black cultural values that he was inculcated with from a variety of influences.

Coates' blog is of interest for this essay because his perspective and audience lead to the construction of Black identity in a public space between in-group (Blacks) and out-group (Whites and others) members.

These conversations are framed by advertisements and promotion for the Atlantic magazine and website, which adds the additional ideological frame of billing the website/magazine as a leading place for influential, highly educated readers to find critical, reasoned news. This contributes to an ethos of civility in this online space, supported by Coates' active interventions in commenting brouhahas, and quells much of the angry, empty posturing that often characterizes online discussions of race. The site's formatting features black text on a white background, with colored headings and a branded banner, again encouraging an atmosphere of restraint and authority

As I have discussed in previous work, blog commenters discussing racial issues often identify their racial background as a way of establishing authority on the topic (Brock 2009). I have found this phenomenon primarily in spaces which attract multiple ethnicities, such as Coates' blog or the *Freakonomics* blog on the New York Times website, but also on the blog *Stuff White People Like* where the commenters work to distinguish their particular brand of Whiteness from that of the blog's author. Because Coates explicitly works to unpack Blackness for himself and his audience, he attracts a multiethnic audience that often opens up about their racial origins to explain their take on the events Coates discusses.

One such multiethnic discussion about racial identity took place on Coates' blog following his blog post reacting to the closing event of the 2009 Presidential Inauguration. As you may remember, on January 20, 2009, Reverend Lowery delivered the benediction to close President Barack Obama's inaugural ceremony. He began with a spoken recitation of the Negro National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing", continued with a few minutes of prayer, and ended with a paraphrasing of Bill Broonzy's song, "Black, Brown, and White". It was these last few words in particular that incited cries of racism from public and private commentators:

> Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day *when black will not be asked to get in back, when brown*

can stick around ... when yellow will be mellow ... when the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace what is right. That all those who do justice and love mercy say Amen. [emphasis mine]

Using references gleaned from spirituals, homilies, and music familiar to Black culture, Rev. Lowery utilized his history as a civil rights activist and religious leader as a discursive framework for blessing the elevation of a Black man to the Presidency of the United States. In this section, I examine the impact of Rev. Lowery's words, as analyzed by Ta-Nehisi Coates and his blog commenters, to bring to light the reactions of outsiders to Black public figures within a Black online environment.

The Reverend and "The Race"

In "Joe Lowery and white people" (January 21, 2009), Coates began by admitting to the temptation to say 'Tough. Get over it" to those who had a problem with the implications of Lowery's closing words. He continued asking that his readers consider Lowery's benediction in the vein of a signifying moment, one that neatly encapsulates the joy and critical outlook of Black Americans at a moment that Lowery had quite possibly never dared dream to happen. Coates closed his post by displaying empathy for his White readers, writing:

> Certainly, there is a sector of white folks who just want the niggers to get over it. But there is also a section of white folks who, themselves, *want to be over it* [emphasis Coates]. We never talk about how it must have felt to, say, have been a progressive in the Deep South, who loved the South, but hated the racism. It must have been embarrassing--sort of like hearing the conversation around black life being dominated by the murder rate.

The comments to the post contained some very heated conversations between participants; so much so that Coates had to briefly close the comments and urge his readers to return to civility.

Lowery's words incurred the hostility of many of Coates' commenters, who felt that Obama's election did indeed symbolize their embrace of "what is right". Some felt that Lowery's words dismissed their actions, continuing to hold Whites responsible for the legacy of White supremacy.   Conversations in the comments following this post were offered from a variety of national, ethnic, and geographic perspectives and reveal a range of strategies involved in the articulation of White identity online. I excerpted the following comments to show how these strategies are employed within a space that is clearly and specifically marked as a discursive space for Blackness. In several cases, Blackness was used as a boundary to establish other identities. As was noted earlier in

responses to West's speech, *kairos* arose as a rationale for dismissing Lowery's words.

In response to comments by Blacks and others echoing Coates' desire to say "get over it", several White commenters complained that they felt betrayed by a critical take on American history at that particular moment. Some responded by making wildly equivalent statements. anon [sic] wrote, "I have 4 friends who've been mugged in San Francisco in the past 2 years--all by black people. Next time someone talks about police brutality on blacks, I will just say, 'Stop whining. Get over it'". Peg, in a more lengthy equivocation, wrote,

> on a day that occurred BECAUSE hundreds and thousands of whites not only chose the right, but fought hard for it -- from colonial times to the present, and surely in this election -- we were the ones called out on the failure of OTHER whites…it feels like the effort made by Whites Of Goodwill goes unappreciated even on the day when it is proven to have had SOME positive effect.

These comments are indicative of a wider set that focuses on the indignation that White commenters felt at being lumped in with the Whites who fought so hard to preserve White supremacy. As a marker of Whiteness, this discourses focuses on the privilege to be individuals, rather than considered as a mass of low-cultured people; a right which is not attributed to non-Whites.

Ben CO marks himself as "a bi-racial American Indian European" and notes that he "found the oratory despicable, mean spirited, offensive, and lacking of manners". He continues by noting that there is a time and place for such a dialogue. Ben's comment does not contradict the logic of Rev. Lowery's closing words, but instead focuses on the time and place of delivery. Ben CO ended his comment in a punitive frame of mind, saying, "Any individual, including the President, who thought this as cute, appropriate, or acceptable should be taken behind the woodshed and have their rear tanned". Ben CO's words are representative of a range of opinions that first established that they are able to comment through some genetic combination of Whiteness and "Other". They then mark their allegiance to White privilege clearly by attempting to silence discourse that is critical of the role Whites have played in shaping the socioeconomic order in the United States

There were White commenters who claimed close relationships with Blacks as their warrant for responding to Lowery's remarks. wb44 [sic] called this strategy "the "race testimony card", asking those who used this strategy to "tell us you have black friends too and like to listen to Jay-Z when you work out." The irony of wb44's

response is that he identified himself using the same strategy, describing himself as a White man married to a Black woman, and then noting that he found Rev. Lowery's comment to be wildly inappropriate. He then goes on to deny that race has any ideological import on worldview, arguing, "Everyone's response is individual to them". This strategy only differs from the previous one of genetically/socially identifying with the Other by degree, continuing the pattern of upholding White privilege by denying cultural patterns of behavior or cultural history.

In addition to denying the timeliness of Rev. Lowery's words, there were other rhetorical strategies employed to reinforce White privilege. "Rudy Friml" argued, "the perception from many of us is that Lowery, and some who defend his remarks, are only after power, not parity" adding that Rev. Lowery should have employed dispassionate argumentation, not jabs, to make his point. This commenter is emblematic of a range of commenters that argued that Blacks, as represented by men such as Rev. Lowery, were more interested in getting power over Whites than in achieving equality. "kd" adds,

> something white people figured out long back, was to be as just and equitable as possible within their OWN kind. is this why they have been better off for the last few hundred years? if brown and black hadn't been as quick in exploiting our own people, our much older societies would have been better off today?

Here, Whiteness is deployed as representing "fairness", while claims for minority equality are relegated to grabs for power or exploitation.

For all of the above comments and more that recoiled at the thought of being condemned as less than ethical, there were many others who understood Lowery's message as a gentle reminder that for all the hard work that had been done, there was still more work to do. Peter Mosca's comments begin from the recognition of white privilege and ends with a nuanced explanation:

> People don't want to be held responsible for what others of similar skin color have done (now or in the past). For a lot of whites, being white isn't seen as a privilege. Hell, they haven't benefitted from the system. The Man ain't given them shit! They can barely pay the bills.
> I do understand the idea that people simple want a level playing field. There are people who want real racial equality. No affirmative action. No things that black coworkers can say that whites can't. No nothing. No excuses.
> Personally, I believe that such an attitude lack a historical perspective and too generously presumes we're in some post-racial Utopian world (though I do think we're a bit closer to that world than we were a week ago)

Agorabum, after identifying his race by saying "note: white guy here", continued: "Anyone trying to make a big deal of it [Rev. Lowery's comments] is clearly acting in bad faith...for the white part, he prayed that white will do what is right. Isn't that something we should all hope for?" Finally, "Angus Johnston", who also identified himself as White, noted that

> if you do agree that black people are still on occasion asked to get back (and so on), then doesn't it pretty much follow that white people have not fully embraced what is right?

These commenters, among others, exemplify a large group of regular commenters to Coates' blog that appreciate the unpacking of Black identity that takes place on the blog. They approach Coates' ruminations on Blackness with an open mind and a willingness to be critical of their own racial identities in the process of understanding how Whiteness has shaped Black identity in American culture.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Atlantic Monthly* blog is perhaps not what I expected when I ventured online looking for outlets of Black culture. The mostly White-staffed *Atlantic Monthly* website is an anomaly with respect to mainstream media and racial representation, as Coates articulates a complex presentation of Black identity through his work and the participation of his commenters. This complexity was apparent in the discussions of the overtly nationalist ideological moment of the Presidential inauguration. In many cases, the commenters accepted the nation (e.g., America) as a perfectly acceptable mediator of identity, but used their racial identity to question the fitness of discussing race at such a nationalist moment. It was as if, for many of those who felt discussing race was inappropriate, that their racial identity justified ignoring the racial history of the United States. For Coates, as well as for other commenters defending Rev. Lowery's comments, it was clear that their Black identity owes a clear debt to American racial practices and ideologies. These commenters argued that the inauguration of an African American president was a good time to remember just how impossible it was to even conceive of the possibilities of doing so.

Discussion

I employed two different approaches in this essay to demonstrate the heterogeneity and complexity of Black identity online. The approaches are linked by the possibilities of Black representation in the public sphere and how that reflects on the Black community. In the first section, I gathered a cross-section of bloggers who were discussing the same topic – Kanye West's Katrina relief monologue – to demonstrate how Black people (stereotypically considered to

be a homogeneous community) could approach a topic from diverse perspectives centered around a common cultural viewpoint. My identification of their Blackness came from a number of data points – profile descriptions, website design, network linkages (e.g., blogrolls), and discursive markers within their texts. The cross section yielded conservative, Christian, female, young, gay, Republican, straight, male, and liberal viewpoints on the rhetorical significance of hip-hop as a public avatar of Black culture. All of these writers, driven by rhetorical situations featuring Black men at moments of extreme import in American history, drew from their professed racial identities to analyze the importance of *kairos* for Blacks when being critical of mainstream America in public spaces. Discussions like this normally take place in offline third places such as barbershops or beauty salons, so their publication on the Internet marks the changes the Internet has made in citizen-generated public discourse as well as in the way that Black identity is presented online.

In the second section, I took a Black website author – the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates – who writes a culturally-themed blog for a mainstream publication, and examined his response to Rev. Joseph Lowery's benediction at the inauguration of an African-American President. Coates consistently identifies as Black across his blog posts (as opposed to his journalistic endeavors for mainstream media), and his take on Black identity is additionally mediated by the framework of his website, theatlantic.com (home of The Atlantic Monthly) and by his audience of active commenters. This discussion differs from the first section in that Coates' commenters identify themselves as biracial, White, or foreign ethnic as they discuss Rev. Lowery's language and conduct at a crucial moment in American history. In discussing Rev. Lowery's signifying closing statements, Coates and his commenters also discuss the importance of *kairos* for Blacks in public discourse. The conversation degenerated at times to name-calling and venting about perceived racial injustices; as with many Internet discussions, there was never a clear conclusion or consensus reached by the commenters. However, Coates' desire to keep the discussion civil (aided by moderation techniques such as closing the comments temporarily), as well as the ethos of the Atlantic and of the blog itself, contributed to a occasionally nuanced dialogue between Coates and his audience about how to be Black in the time of Barack Obama.

The Internet provides a window into discussions about Black identity between group members. The visibility of such discourse is faintly reminiscent of television's exposure of the brutality of the Jim Crow South against Blacks to the world in the Fifties and Sixties. That era offered the world a media-driven definition of

Blacks as political beings, leveraged by the broadcast capabilities of television. I mention this period not to equate the Black blogs I examine here with the deliberative and transformative power of the civil rights movement, but to point out that these Black blogs are beginning to leverage the artifacts of a new communication medium to articulate a counter-hegemonic vision of Black identity and purpose similar to how civil rights groups used television to open mainstream conversations about being Black in America.

The Internet, as an avatar of public culture, has changed discourses on Black identity on Black-oriented websites in part because of the writers' awareness of the Web as a public space open to all. This visibility affects the presentation of racial identity in differing ways: some authors chose to employ arguments, metaphors, and attitudes toward mainstream society that are common to Black cultural experiences. Others moderated their discourse in recognition that outsiders would inevitably visit and interject their own perspectives on Black identity. The net affect of these discursive choices, however, works to increase understandings of racial identity as a constellation of knowledge, behavior, and beliefs for those site visitors interested in learning more about Blackness.

The paradox of constructing an embodied identity in a virtual space helps to open up an ontological consideration of racial identity - that it is a socially constructed artifact with more to do with social and cultural resources than with skin color. . The power of the Internet as a communicative artifact rests upon its possibilities for constructing discursive articulations of ideological signifiers. For the authors examined here, West's representation of the Black community on NBC never hinged upon his facial features, his skin tone, or his hair texture. Instead, his identity was examined in relation to the social structures of hip hop, cultural logics and styles particular to the Black community, and American racial history. The removal of physical signifiers of race from credible online articulations of racial identity highlights that race has always been more about the relation of the sign (locating differences in others) to the signifier (rationales for maintaining social structures) than it is to any particular physiognomic aspect.

The Internet's penetration into everyday life has encouraged a wider public participation in the process of constructing online identities; wresting discussions of identity construction away from unreflexive academics and pundits. The conversations in Black online spaces recounted above discussed what it meant to be Black in public; where American cultural values dictate that Black communities feel that only those who conform best to White values should represent Blacks to the world. On the Atlantic Monthly website, I analyzed comments by self-identified White people

discussing how they felt when a Black man - with was without question considered to be near iconic and worthy of respect - appeared to be critical of White culture on a very public stage. For many of those Whites, Rev. Lowery's comments felt like the commission of ideological violence to their conceptions of themselves as upright, moral beings. For others, both White and self-identified minorities, Rev. Lowery's closing statements symbolized the difficult nature of wresting equality from a culture which devotes considerable effort to preserving White privilege. These arguments and comments would be invisible to outsiders without the assistance of the Internet and its function as a transmitter of beliefs and knowledge.

I have compared the spaces analyzed above to a "third place" re: Oldenburg; and would like to again return to that concept. Third places, as described by Oldenburg, are geographic locations that promote rejuvenative discourse communities. I would argue, as perhaps Oldenburg could not, that due to environmental segregation in the United States, that Black people have always had to make do with whatever geographic location they were allowed to occupy. Thus the stoop, the porch, the corner, the store, and the aforementioned barber and beauty salons all became places where Black men and women could philosophize, sympathize, and enjoy each other's company. This is not to say that Blacks did not conduct "third place" activities in churches, bars, Masonic temples, fraternity/sorority houses, or country clubs! I have mentioned more transient locations such as "the corner" to point out that even in a cultural milieu that fears congregations of Black people, Black people have always found time and space to discuss (with humor and with wisdom) what it means to be Black. As such, I believe that the arguments about the developing Black online public sphere miss the point; Black people are not only concerned with being better citizens through deliberative discourse. Many Black online authors simply use the Internet as an additional medium to express being themselves...and that's much more interesting to see.

The moves necessary to articulate a Black identity on the websites covered in this essay make apparent the technological and discursive mediation of identity that also take place in offline contexts. The Internet's elision of embodied signifiers of race shifts the production of racial identity to discursive, visual, multimedia, or yet-unexamined symbolic means. By encouraging principled discussion about the heterogeneity of Black identity, Coates and his cohort demonstrate that it is indeed possible to discuss race and racial differences in a way that is educational and intelligible. The number of viewpoints expressed by Black online authors about a singular topic demonstrates that there is considerable variation within the Black community, but that there is indeed a Black

perspective from which the authors above interpret the world. Contrary to speculations about a technologically-enabled post-racial future, the Internet as examined here points toward the salience of unpacking racial identity to increase understanding of differences between people and disarming the symbolic violence demonstrated by those holding to a color-blind ideology. For that, I am thankful.

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