

**THEORIZING BLACK COMMUNITY ONLINE: OF BLACK MIND, BLACK
SELF, AND BLACK SOCIETY**

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2017

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Since initial research on online chatrooms, communities, and fandoms were conducted, the study of online community has burgeoned. Still, the literature that explores racial identity as a distinguishing factor in how individuals use social media to establish, maintain, or join communities is relatively limited. The concept of community, like all of our lives, is socially constructed. Our online communities reflect this socialization process and the boundaries of that community are defined by those who identify as part of it as well as those that exist outside of the space; though the versions of those definitions may differ remarkably. Accordingly, newer communities occupy many spaces to create meaning on multiple platforms. Concerning racial inequality discourse, online community has become particularly salient to activism and organization both on- and offline. In this context, the already loosely structured on- offline binary becomes even less distinct. Thus the aim of my dissertation is to contextualize a nebulous subculture of black users, known as Black Twitter, and other racialized groups of online resistance as a community that engenders purposeful social action.

By providing a qualitative evaluation of over 7,000 tweets associated with various social movements, two years of ethnographic observation, and 48 follow-up in person interviews, I offer a new theorization of social media as a multifaceted space for resistance. Findings reveal that everyday experiences in the digital realm such as communal viewing of black-produced television contribute to the negotiation of black collective identity and community in a relatively innocuous setting. The comfort afforded by the everyday

negotiation of identity on social media is integral to strengthening pre-existing connections. These connections become paramount when collective action is needed. I argue that collective action (online and offline) via Black Twitter is facilitated by everyday experiences of community building and discourse on black identity that subverts the online / offline experiential divide.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Jennifer Johnson, my father Charles Williams Sr., my sister, Aaliyah Bledsoe, and my brother Aaron Williams, who believed that I would finish this journey, long before it began.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Stjepan Mestrovic for being the best advisor a graduate student could dream of. His gentle wisdom and guidance has always pushed me to think beyond boundaries and to create my own path. Likewise, my committee members, Dr. Poirot, Dr. McIntosh, and Dr. Gatson have continually supported me and shown me the type mentorship in which I hope to engage.

I am forever indebted to my friends Adriana, Janay, Shantal, Jari, Bridget, Aaron, Neil, Audry, Tara, Jenny, and James who have become family and have supported me throughout various stages of my life. Even more so to my family that I met while in graduate school here at Texas A&M – Betty, Stéphanie, Guadalupe, Vanessa, Gabe, Nicole, Amy, Abby, Andrea, Ruth, Jess, Graham, and Emily – because they have strengthened and encouraged me during the highs and the lows of pursuing a doctorate as a black woman in America. Thanks also go to my mentors, now trusted friends and colleagues, Wendy Moore, Laura Robinson, Verna Keith, Jane Sell, Joseph Jewell, John Eason, Jenni Mueller, and Cara Wallis, who have helped me begin to find my way in academia.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Dr. Mestrovic and Drs. McIntosh and Gatson of the Department of Sociology and Dr. Poirot of the Communications Department.

All work for the thesis (or) dissertation was completed independently by the student.

Graduate study was supported by a research fellowship from Texas A&M University, summer funding from the Center on Conflict and Development, and a summer research fellowship from the Department of Sociology.

NOMENCLATURE

B/CS	Bryan/College Station
FPOC	Fat People of Color
PWI	Primarily White Institution
SM	Social Media

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CHAPTER I
THEORIZING THE MEDIATED SELF IN LIGHT OF MEDIATED COMMUNITIES:
AN INTRODUCTION

The following is a theoretical discussion of empirical data that will attempt to connect the sociological underpinnings of Symbolic Interactionist literature with studies of racialized Internet communities and selfhood. Sociologists, communication scholars, and technologists have debated the nature of mediated identities online – both individual and communal. Scholars have questioned the authenticity of individual and communal experiences online ad nauseam (see Agre 1997; Bateman and Lyon 2000; Baym 1995; Hampton & Wellman, 2003) Nonneck, Andrews & Preece 2006). Yet there are still some who challenge the idea that community, as defined by classical social theorists, can exist in the context of digitally mediated communication. If not questioning the integral properties of human relationships, some scholars contend that technology facilitates the departure from true face-to-face interactions, suggesting that the face-to-screen-to-face interaction presents negative unforeseen consequences (Turkle 2011). Arguments on either side of the technological determinism debate have their merit. However, I aim to focus on the role of self and community online. In line with various interpretations of Symbolic Interactionism, my theorization of online communities is grounded in the idea that the self cannot exist without community and certainly not vice versa. Our selves are, in part, products of the communities in which we take part. Our communities are a result of multiple iterations of symbolic meaning making processes over time.

Still, the presentation of self and identity management online is far from being fully explored. Within and across disciplines there is debate about the presentation of the self online. Moving away from technologically deterministic arguments and from utopian views of self-presentation online, I argue for a more realistic theorization of online sociability. Presentation of the self as individuals and in communities is fluid online just as it is offline. A return to earlier sociological theories can clarify some of the discontent surrounding the socialization of the self with digital technologies. To build my argument, I begin with a review of classical sociological understandings, grounded mainly in Symbolic Interactionist thought of self and community, move chronologically through relevant literature on digital self and community, and finally explore the contemporary implications of all facets of life online – self, identity, and community – through two case studies.

Cooley and Mead theorize about the construction of the self or self-identity as a process that can be influenced by others. Although neither of the aforementioned scholars can be fitted squarely into Symbolic Interactionist frameworks, both are cited as key foundational theorists (Blumer, 1969). I submit that a close reading of both theorist's work suggests a slight departure from contemporary understandings of Symbolic Interaction. Thus, my interpretivist approach follows directly from the writings of Mead and Cooley and is informed by the school of American Pragmatist thought. American Pragmatism, developed by John Dewey, William James, and others is a philosophical school of thought which fundamentally asserts that "the meaning and truth of any idea is a function of its practical outcome" (Philosophytalk.org). Or in James' (1992) own words an idea or

experience is “useful because it is true or that it is true because it is useful” (p. 90). The pragmatists relied on experience to provide evidence for truths rather than on abstract ideas about absolutes.

The idea of that experience verifies truths for individuals couples nicely with most interpretations of Symbolic Interaction because individuals interact with community through meaning-making experiences. Cooley (1998) offers that meaning for individuals is constantly changing and that a person’s very nature – that is, their “self”, is different every day. However, as James (1890/1918) further informs, these selves are synthesized so that there are not multiple selves. Instead, the self is multifaceted. Mead, a contemporary of Cooley shared similar ideologies about the development of the self. Self and community develop together – they are two sides of the same coin. The processes of self and community cannot be disjointed.

Though Cooley’s (1902) theorization of the Looking Glass Self predates digital technology, the Internet, especially social media, provide an additional space for negotiating layers of self, identity, and communal affiliation. For the most part, studies on the Internet and online communities have largely undertheorized the role of race in the negotiation of self and community. Thus, I use the explanatory power of Mead’s theorization of self and community as well as Cooley’s ideas on the Looking Glass Self to unpack the layers of meaning-making processes that occur in racialized online spaces.

Users of color engage in specific practices that code self-presentation with insider status. For example, black Twitter users engage in the practice of signifyin’ in order to mark the social boundaries of race on Twitter (Brock 2012; Pappacharissi 2012; Florini

2013). Signifyin' "deploys figurative language, indirectness, doubleness, and wordplay as a means of conveying multiple layers of meaning" (Florini 2013:2). Signifyin' as a social tool facilitates the performance of "Black Cultural Identity" (Florini 2013:2). These coded interactions can be used to highlight the symbolic boundary between white and black users. Those whose performance of blackness is not deemed authentic by members of the group are excluded from further conversation. This is particularly relevant in light of emergent social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Presenting an authentic racial performance may be key in online group identity. Non-white users signify as a sort of digital code switching; using culturally specific language to fluidly navigate conversations on blackness in a predominantly white space (Brock 2012; Williams 2016). Code switching as cultural performance online allows black and latinx users to participate in both conversations at the same time while maintaining their authenticity and insider status. I will delve more fully into racial identity negotiation after a brief introduction to symbolic interaction.

According to Mead, "the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that processes" (1934 p. 135). Before the era of the Internet, when Mead was writing, the socialization of the self occurred entirely offline. Yet his words still hold true the Internet and social media serve as an additional platform by which the self may connect with other individuals through experience.

Mead's theory was heavily imbued with the idea of socialization via experience.

He wrote:

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own *experience* as a self or individuals, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his *experience*; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of *experience* and behavior in which both he and they are involved (1934 p. 138) [emphasis added].

We can see that for Mead, the self is experienced through others, a process which he later describes as taking the role of the other or the generalized other (1934, p. 144). But the presence of the screen amplifies our capacity to connect with others by extending our networks with whom we share experiences. Social media packages bits of information and forces users to come face-to-face with the experience economy. Studies on social media usage tend to invoke the theoretical and conceptual framework behind the idea of identity without focusing on the experiences that inform those identities. For example, the Internet, particularly social media and social networking sites, are depicted as spaces for identity manipulation or selective self-representation (Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino 2006; Gonzales and Hancock 2010; Walther 1996). The literature on online identity management is somewhat fragmented in the views that it presents. Identity work, self-presentation, and narcissism can coexist on social media. Scholars have theorized that users engage with social media to validate their perceptions of self and social order (Papacharissi 2012; Gonzales and Hancock 2010; Mehdizadeh 2010; Buffardi and Campbell 2008). Chen

(2010) as well as Wang, Tchernev, and Solloway (2012) find that social media satisfies a basic need to feel connected.

To some extent, the presence of the screen does mitigate the interaction between the self and community in that it shapes *how* we say things. With character limits imposed by social media, it constrains our sentence structure as well as the meaning behind our words. The ever-present feed of others' lives can paint a distorted picture of what we might be missing out on. But with all things considered, technology – the Internet in particular, still broadens our potential for building community and exploring the self, allowing us to access multiple networks at a time (though not everyone has equal opportunities to tap into this potential). Moreover, we can build stronger communities because we have multiple platforms from which to interact and offer support.

Foundational scholars' works (i.e. Mead and Cooley) support the idea of a need for connection. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall further illuminates the need for connection. For him, the very roots of human connection exist in language. Language represents a system of symbols that are culturally constructed and interpreted with shared understanding by any particular group. We then attach additional layers of meaning to those symbols. Mead also highlighted the importance of language in communication because communication facilitates shared experiences that are integral to the formation of the self and community.

“The importance of what we term communication lies in the fact it provides a form of behavior in which the organism or the individual may become an object to himself. It is that sort of communication which we have been discussing ... but communication in the sense of significant symbols, communication which is directed not only to others but also to the individual himself. So far as that type of

communication is a part of behavior it at least introduces the self” (Mead,1934 p. 139).

Thus, the self is a direct result of communication with others. “The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience” (1934, p. 140). Social media platforms allow users to project multiple facets of identity as well as various experiences to an audience. The audience consists of users’ actual followers and the things that they experience in their daily lives or the digital mundane. Scholars have positioned “routine digital mediations” as the digital mundane (Maltby and Thornham 2016, p. 2). The digital mundane includes experiences that we engage in on a regular basis such as taking and posting images, sharing inspirational quotes online, and liking pictures of a friend’s child. Also included in the digital mundane is the consumption of racial performance in everyday experiences. Racial performance and identity negotiation via posting and sharing images and discourse is an active meaning making process for both the originator or the content and those that subsequently consume it. Every post says something about a user. We “do race” (Pitcher 2014) in all aspects of our lives but social media heighten the visibility of racial identity negotiation. Until recently, scholars have not explored the performance of race on social media.

Further enriching the relationship between the experience of the digital mundane and online community, Marwick and Boyd (2010) theorize that users also reference an imagined audience in addition to their “followers” on Instagram or Twitter and their friends on Facebook. Marwick and Boyd contend that because users are aware of the potentially limitless audience of social media, they use cultural norms and signifiers to conceptualize an audience in their mind. This allows users to construct their posts

appropriately, allowing them to choose the correct language and conversation style of their posts. In the absence of these cultural cues, users gather their information from the general social media environment to imagine an idealized community. The imagined community may differ from the audience who is actually consuming the posts.

Social media amplifies the effect of the imagined audience, or in Mead's words, the generalized other or the looking glass according to Cooley. When people tweet or post their experiences, they get "likes", "favorites", reposts, or "retweets" that express approval from their audiences. Everyone is allowed some measure of celebrity in their own minds. They feel that they must share their experiences with their followers because everyone in their imagined community is watching them. According to Mead, "one inevitably seeks an audience, has to pour himself out to somebody... thinking becomes participatory to social action" (1934, p. 141).

Marwick and Boyd contend that users "learn how practices of micro-celebrity can be used to maintain audience interest" (Marwick and Boyd 2010:130). However, the driving force behind micro-celebrity is the need to connect with others. Users feel the presence of their followers which drives them to produce content online more efficiently, in order to get more "likes" (Williams & Aldana Marquez 2015). They want their followers to see the images and indicate that they saw them. They need an indication that their packaged experience was consumed and is now being replicated in another form by someone else. When users produce content in a particular moment, or in the middle of an experience, they are sending a message to their followers: this experience is worthy of being emulated and discussed. Simultaneously, they consume a feedback message from

their followers if they do not receive the amount of likes they desired: this experience is not worthy of our “likes” – for a multitude of reasons. When users cite certain images as receiving higher numbers of likes, the followers are demonstrating that those are the experiences that should be highlighted and thus repeated again.

Social psychologists maintain that feelings of belonging to a particular social group (racial or otherwise) is paramount to developing a healthy sense of self (Pickard et al). In a society in which race relations have become more visibly strained, racial identity becomes particularly important. Positive identification with a social group has been linked to feelings of self-worth and psychological stability. Twitter and Tumblr can act as positive spaces of support for people of color. Two platforms that serve as case studies present two different types of spaces for activism and / or online community. On Tumblr, moderators control access to the community. On Twitter, there are no moderators. In either case, users can perform blackness to gain entry into the space. The remaining chapters will explore the meaning of racialized or ethnic based community online through the lens of theoretical approaches as well as empirical evidence. Through the lens of communal identity, I examine the role of performative blackness online.

CHAPTER II

THEORIZING SELF AND COMMUNITY ONLINE

Cooley's conception of the self as a reflection of one's social setting (in part) has greatly informed many cultural studies conceptualizations of race. Collectively, many of the ideas of Cooley, Mead, James, Dewey and the general Symbolic Interactionist perspective heavily influenced cultural studies approaches (Denzin, 1992). Concerning race, cultural studies constructionist perspectives argue that all aspects of the social self, including race, are social constructs and that individuals living within different societies may interpret messages and signals differently depending on their specific cultural context (Denzin, 1992). A cultural studies conception of race relates to the Symbolic Interactionist approach to sociality in that race is a social construct, dependent on those that exist in one's shared space, though as sociologists, we've done a poor job of articulating this connection.

Beginning with Stuart Hall's conception of the constructionist approach to language, I find that media and social media representations of race are results of social understandings of language and social relationships. Hall argues that meaning is constructed in and through language:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, ... and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical,

naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). *Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference* [Emphasis added]. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed (1997, p. 5-6).

Identities are constructed and contested through difference. Race as an identity falls under this interpretivist framing. In the sense that Hall uses identity and discourse, we can surmise that racial identity is a social construct – evidentiary of a symbolic meaning making process. As Denzin argues (1992), Hall's and other cultural studies scholars' conception of identity is closely linked the Symbolic Interactionist approach to understanding the construction of identity – one that is heavily influenced by the identities of others. Going a step further, Hall argues that our racial identities in particular, filter our lenses of interaction with others. As a master identifier (the outside characteristic by which others chiefly identify us) race cannot be ignored in our interactions with others, even if the notation of that race is merely subconscious. Our conceptions of another's race are socially and historically constructed, as race or blackness can have many different meanings in diverse cultural contexts. For example in Congo I am viewed as "white face" while in the U.S. I am black. Thus, Hall's point that identities are constructed through difference heavily impacts his theorization of race. Social actors engage with each other's

differences, not sameness. Hall's theorization of identity directly influences his theorization of representations of race in media. Representations of race rely heavily on the idea that identity is performed and / or lived through otherness. The representations of that othering are what we perceive when we watch television and movies or listen to music. As social beings, we provide meaning to those representations as we consume them. Representations (of race) then, are depictions of meaning.

Representations can be displayed through language but also through visual images (Hall, 1997). Constructivist cultural studies perspectives further inform that the interpretation of represented images is also socially constructed. Meaning and intent are not always received by the person emitting social signals. Thus, many approaches concerning race, media, and social media stem from Hall's ideas about representation even if his and the symbolic interactionist's theoretical underpinnings are subtle.

I will filter the remainder of this portion of the chapter through a cultural studies and / or my interpretation of a symbolic interactionist approach. As I see it, race is itself a social construct that is dependent on context and one's conception of identity. All the more so, then are representations of racial and ethnic identities through mass media and social media.

But before I can fully expound upon the relationship between representations of race and social media, I begin with a discussion of ethnic and /or racial identity because these identities are central to identity conceptualization for most which in turn affects their behavior on social media and the consumption of other media (i.e. television).

Understanding the development of ethnic and racial identity over time and at certain points in individuals' lives is vital. Jean Phinney (1992) asserts that ethnic identity is part of a person's social identity and self-concept that comes from their knowledge of membership in a social group. Persons then attach value, meaning, or emotional significance to group inclusion. In a study on ethnic identity development among students of color at a highly selective Primarily White Institution (PWI), Maramba and Velasquez (2012) found that individuals perceived that ethnic identity development was central to identity development. Students believed that their understanding of their ethnic identity related positively to their "sense of belonging, interpersonal relationships and commitments" (Maramba and Velasquez 2012:310). Their study confirmed previous research (Hurtado, Gonzalez & Vega, 1994; Tatum, 1999; Oyserman et al., 2002) and affirms the importance of ethnic-identity development in relation to a sense of belonging in students of color.

People must resolve issues about self in order to have a stable self-concept that Erikson (1964) describes as achieved identity. Phinney (1992) describes the main components of ethnic identity as self-identified ethnic identity, ethnic behaviors and practices, affirmation and belonging, and ethnic identity achievement. She stresses that self-identification as a part of an ethnic group is separate from simply belonging to a group. Membership in the group is determined by parents' ethnic heritage. She cautions that although individuals may identify as part of a single group, ethnic identity development varies over time and is shaped by historical and social events. When one does not develop a clear understanding of self, the result is identity diffusion and confusion

about one's place in society. Phinney and Alipuria (1990) note that race identity is not the central aspect of identity for all people. Perceptions of other groups are not a part of an individual's self-concept of identity however ideas about others groups may shape how one feels about her or his *own* identity. Symbolic interactionists' writings on development of self corroborate the above findings:

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him to merely take the attitude... He must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or of social undertakings in which as members of an organized society or social group itself, they are all engaged; and he must then by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group itself, as a whole, act toward different social projects which at any given time is it carrying out, or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes its life and of which these projects are specific manifestations... Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed" (Mead, 1934 p.155).

As Mead contends, the individual self is realized through action within a group and is experienced through social activity. For the self to fully develop, it must act toward the social project of the group. In the case of black online spaces, action is essential. At the very least, a member making her presence known to others in the group indicates some type of participation in the group. Taking it a step further, most individuals announce their presence and participate within the community on a frequent basis. On digital media, both announcement and continued participation can be represented by use of a hashtag, or

specifically a “blacktag”. Users claim membership into the community with hashtags such as #blacktwitter. And in so doing, reify their own notions of self.

“True identity depends on the support which the young receive from the collective sense of identity which social groups assign to [them]: [their] class, [their] nationality, [their] culture” Erikson, 1964, p. 93). Erikson theorized that individuals make these decisions early in life but need a period of moratorium in which they choose what their identity will encompass and will use that foundation to navigate the rest of their life choices. Phinney and Tarver (1988) found that ethnic identity development follows patterns of Erikson’s identity development. Adolescents search and commit to a racial or ethnic identity in middle school and high school. Since Erikson and Phinney’s work on identity we have gained a better understanding and now know that individuals’ ethnic identity is always in flux just as their general sense of identity is.

Much of the early literature on black Americans and racial identity theorized that they have low self-esteem. Kardinger & Ovessey (1951) as well as Clark and Clark (1947) found that black individuals internalize outsider perspectives about their race thus making them feel inferior to others (Rowley et al.1998). Presently social scientists have found that black Americans have a healthy sense of self-esteem. A widely supported explanation for the occurrence of high self-esteem, despite negative outsider opinions about race is the *insulation hypothesis*. It argues that African Americans compare themselves with members of their own group instead of to individuals outside of their race *because* of segregation in the United States. A healthy racial identity helps positively influence a healthy self-identity (Rowley et al 1998 and Broman et al., 1989). Rowley et al. (1998)

found that there was no significant difference between genders in self-esteem patterns. I favor the insulation hypothesis as a potential explanation behind heavy social media use by black Americans, especially those who identify as part of Black Twitter. Black social media users who actively or sometimes exclusively engage with other black users may do so because of the need to compare one's self to or relate to people of a similar background instead of the ideas presented by the dominant group.

Although extensive research has been done on ethnic identity development, we are only just beginning to understand how multifaceted it is. Nagel's (1994) "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture and Affiliative Ethnic Identity", illuminates some of the power struggles behind ethnic group interactions. It also inspires the question, how does becoming part of one ethnic group afford some power while taking it away from others? Wimmer (2008) attempts to answer this question to a degree but many of the examples used do not seem concrete enough nor do they yield an in-depth understanding of ethnic relations. He fails to acknowledge some of the barriers that are presented when attempting to study ethnicity and ethnic identity.

One of the barriers to an interdisciplinary study of black community is the conflation of race and ethnicity. Authors in various disciplines use different terms and frameworks to identify both racial and ethnic identity. In general, researchers studying identity development in African Americans tend to use the term racial identity instead of ethnic identity however Phinney (1996) argues that ethnic identity can include both race and ethnicity for this type of analysis because of the similarities in the patterns of race and ethnic identity development. There is not enough difference in the way the two ideas are

developed within the self to be of notable difference. Black Americans often conflate the two terms, unless they are identifying a multiracial or multiethnic background. Thus concerning the terms ethnic and racial identity, I will treat the terms as one in the same. My choice is particularly compelled by the participants in my previous study in which several participants use both terms interchangeably when asked about their race (Williams & Aldana Marquez 2015). Phinney (1996) also observes that white students follow the pattern of self-identifying both race and ethnicity as simply white, in the same manner that black students might identify as simply black or African American. Further, to be able to consider white racial identity development in conjunction with or in opposition to minority ethnic identity development as it is performed, represented, and interpreted, on social media, it is important not to overstate the difference in the two.

Race & Social Media

Social media provide an additional social context in which racial identity can be lived and performed. But social media have added a component in that they provide an ever-present record of identity negotiation. Twitter provides a space in which black users can enact agency when interacting with white individuals while also enacting insider status with other African Americans. Unlike in cases of traditional code switching, social media platforms keep a written record of coded interactions. Though black users operate in both spheres simultaneously, these interactions are distinct and have separate implications.

Even while the literature indicates that African Americans seem to have a healthy sense of self-esteem, they must still interact with those outside of their communities in online spaces. Rollock et al. found that African Americans intentionally construct and

enact a separate identity that they use in navigating interactions with white Americans offline. “Middle class blacks assert public identity in order to convince others that they are legitimate members of the middle class” (Rollock et al: 1081). This understanding of constructed identities allows us to understand how black middle class individuals express agency and resistance against discrimination while maintaining ties to black identity. Elijah Anderson (1999) also observed code switching among blacks as they navigated different social situations. Twitter provides a space in which African Americans can enact agency when interacting with white individuals while also enacting insider status with other African Americans. But unlike in cases of traditional code switching, social media platforms keep a written record of coded interactions. They operate in both spheres simultaneously however the interpretation of these actions by members of separate groups is dependent on the socialization of the group membership.

Further considering the performance, construction, and interpretation of race on social media, Florini (2013) theorizes that identity, especially when that identity has been marked as the other, must be performed as *difference* in order to be perceived.

“For racial identity to function in social media spaces, racialized users must make those identities visible online. The construction of race in U.S. culture is closely tied to corporeal signifiers. However in social media, those signifiers can be obscured or even imitated (e.g., by a deceptive avatar). When reliable corporeal signifiers of racial difference are not readily apparent, Black users often perform their identities through displays of ‘cultural competence’ and the use of other noncorporeal signifiers that rely on ‘social and cultural resources’.” (p. 2).

For generations, black communities have used signifyin' to express cultural knowledge, provide social critique and to create solidarity (p.2). Social media users of color engage in the practice of "signifyin'" in order to make sense of social events that have broken the social contract or that somehow disengage implicit social norms. "Signifyin'", which "deploys figurative language, indirectness, doubleness, and wordplay as a means of conveying multiple layers of meaning, serves as a powerful resource for the performance of Black Cultural Identity on Twitter" (Florini 2013, p. 2). Signifyin' is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple layers of meaning simultaneously, frequently involving wordplay and misdirection (Papacharissi 2012). Papacharissi hypothesizes that exercises in sociality, or performances of the self on Twitter generate a level of intimacy that may sustain and further cultivate social ties. When communicating with networked audiences, Twitter users frequently craft "polysemic messages", encoded with meanings that are decoded differently by each potential audience member (2012, p.1994).

Signifying is just one way African Americans interact on social media and social networking sites that demonstrate differences in the way that white users engage digital media. But it also acts as a type of visual code switching. Black users intentionally code their words and hashtags to convey blackness. This can exclude users who are not familiar with the rituals, language, and syntax of that community. The distinct marking of the territory by black users also ensures that if one knows the code, they can participate effectively and thus feel as though they belong to the community.

Brock also argues that “Black hashtag signifying revealed alternate Twitter discourses to the mainstream and encourages a formulation of Black Twitter as a ‘social public’, a community constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike” (2012 p. 530). Meaning that black users were already using Twitter in mass, as demonstrated by multi-year Pew Internet Research Surveys but the coining of the name Black Twitter as a cultural descriptor brought attention to the use of social media by African Americans. However, Brock takes some issue with the framing of Twitter as specifically relegated to use by black individuals because Twitter’s interface and conventions frame and construct external perceptions of Black Twitter as a social public. The problem is that Twitter was not created by black people to be used by black people. African Americans have since adopted and appropriated the platform for their specific needs but Brock’s contention is important. Because Twitter was created by white elites for white elites, the way language is structured and the actual application itself is limiting for those who are not part of that group. Thus, Black Twitter cannot be completely representative of blackness because it is and always will be bound by the social construction of Twitter itself – and that social construction is primarily white. The structuring of Twitter as white limits the way messages can be performed and also how they will be received. White users perceive Black Twitter as an aberration, thinking that Twitter is predominantly used by white people instead of the reality that Twitter is dominated by Black and Latinx use (Smith, 2011).

Brock’s conceptualization of Black Twitter and the Internet in general builds on Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation theory which posits that race exists as a result

of and within social structure and cultural representations. Brock argues that the Internet exists as part of that same social structure and thus race is an integral aspect of the Internet (p. 531). Thus race was built into Twitter. By default, as noted by Hall (1997) and Papacharissi (2012) earlier, that default culture is mainstream majority white. Therefore, Black Twitter is a cultural performance that is intentionally marked as different in order to be distinct from mainstream Twitter.

But, Black Twitter does not represent every black Internet users just as racist comments on YouTube and other platforms do not represent all white people that use the Internet. Thus we have to understand Twitter from the standpoint of mediated blackness and responses to that performed blackness online, in the specific spaces that these representations are acted out in (Brock, 2012 p. 533).

Similarly, Vats (2015) argues that “Black Twitter does not reference a monolithic black voice; rather, it refers to racialized content and practices, often marked by ‘ambiguous racialized humour’” (p.2). She sees that coded texts work together to disrupt Twitter’s usual whiteness. She also argues that the general frame of Twitter is primarily white and that most users conceptualize Twitter as a white space. But when Black Twitter topics occasionally trend (even more so now since the time this article was written), black users disrupt the illusion that Twitter is a predominantly white space. For example, the hashtag “#PaulasBestDishes” emerged on Black Twitter as a response to allegations that Paula Deen specifically hired all black servers to work at her brother’s wedding because she wanted the party to be reminiscent of the Old South (slavery). After these initial comments were released, some of the employees said that Deen openly uses the “n-word”

to which she replied “only in a joking way”. After Deen was dropped from Food Network and had lost numerous product endorsements, she turned to social media to repair her image. She asked what she likely perceived to be an all-white audience to tweet her their favorite dishes. Black Twitter seized the moment to socially sanction her for the racist remarks. Vats argues that #PaulasBestDishes responses such as “Massa-roni and cheese” , “40 Acres and a Moscow Mule” , and “Back of the Bus Biscuits” describes Black Twitter as “an assemblage describing the ‘relative magnitude of Black (especially African American) activity, and in particular the creation of certain kinds of ‘hashtags’.” (Vats, 2015 p. 1).

She also posits that racialized hashtags are a new type of identity negotiation and politicization. Although the hashtags poke fun at issues in a joking matter, they actually offer a social critique of dominant paradigms, such as backstage racism.

Tweeted recipes mock Deen’s imaginings of the South, highlighting racialized practices of cooking, serving, and eating. Further, through the juxtaposition of food and historical time in a medium which itself facilitates rapid digital rhetorical accumulation, the tweets demonstrate the continuing realities of racism and equalize the often unequal politics of time across race. #PaulasBestDishes thus illuminates Twitter’s role in circulating counternarratives of food in ways that confront embedded forms of inequality (Vats, 2015 p.2).

Schmittl and Sanderson (2014) also view Twitter is a viable mechanism for activism and the negotiation of identity for African Americans. Their case study focuses specifically on minority athletes’ engagement in activism and their ability to initiate

important conversations about social justice issues (p.1). They claim that given their special social standing, athletes have a special ability to influence national conversation about race (see Pelak, 2005 and Edwards, 1969). Now athletes of color have greater opportunity to advocate for their political platforms on social media. They focus specifically on reactions from members of the NFL to the George Zimmerman verdict on Twitter. This article is particularly insightful because it demonstrates the fluidity of social relations, transcending the on-line offline divide in that NFL players gain notoriety because of their offline, on the field activities. They then use that fame online in order to get others to listen to them. But their actions inspire conversation both on and offline as well as social action that occurs both on and offline. The conversations that they inspire online carries over into offline discourse about white dominated spaces and white dominated thought. Specifically because the comments issued by players on Twitter incited reactions from white fans; reactions that caused NFL management to issue sanctions to the players that commented on the perceived unfairness of the Zimmerman trial, again calling attention to the white dominated space that encompasses U.S. sports in general. The player's comments generate an economic loss for NFL ownership and management, a physical, tangible consequence for online action. This cyclical pattern of offline-online attitude change in conjunction with collective or group identity mirrors Mead's conception of the self and society. "Fundamental attitudes are presumably those that are only changed gradually, no one individual can reorganize the whole society; but one is continually affecting society by his own attitude because he does bring up the attitude of the group toward himself, responds to it, and through that response, changes

the attitude of the group” (Mead 1934, p. 180). But instead of merely pointing out attitudes to one’s self, Twitter allows individuals to discuss those attitudes with their peers, inviting others to engage in their formative identity process.

Following the cultural studies constructionist perspective on race and Twitter use, Sharma (2013) argues that “the Internet has always been a racially demarcated space and today the plethora of online communication platforms (instant messaging; email lists, blogs, discussion forums and social media) continue to exhibit varying degrees of identity marking and racial segregation”. She suggests that these spaces replicate offline racial demarcations for example, “the rise of social networks witnessed the ‘white flight’ of users from Myspace towards Facebook” when Facebook first opened to those outside of the Ivy elite. danah boyd (2012) also contends that “distinctions in social network site adoption and the perceptions of teens – and adults – have about these sites and their users reflect broader narratives of race and class in American society” (boyd 2012, p. 205). Though similar, boyd’s contention differs slightly from Sharma’s. For Sharma, racialization mimics segregation that users likely encounter or live in offline. For boyd, Internet spaces like Myspace and Facebook have a constructed racialization of their own. They do not mimic offline racial stereotypes, the sites themselves are socially created with ideas about race according to who uses which sites. Though subtle, this distinction is important because it suggests that spaces in which multiple racial identities lay claim, the recorded racial identity negotiation becomes particularly valuable as there is likely greater racial tension.

For instance, Sharma emphasizes that on Twitter, “blacktags” or racialized hashtags (i.e. #livingwhileblack or #blackgirlhairproblems) act as a form of social contagion.

Blacktags as contagious digital objects play a role in constituting the ‘black twitter’ identities they articulate and interact with. Beyond conceiving Black Twitter as a group of preconstituted users tweeting racialized hashtags, Blacktags are instrumental in producing networked subjects which have the capacity to multiply the possibilities of being raced online (2013, p. 46).

I see this racialization as neither bad nor good but a tool to be used in working out identity for black users of social media, Twitter in this case. Though individuals on the outside may misinterpret the messages that black users are broadcasting based on their understanding of race, the value here is not for the outsider. Black Twitter is of specific value to the black community because, as stated earlier, it provides a space of insulation from the otherwise, hostile world both on and offline. In addition to providing a space of inward support and solidarity it also provides an active catalogue of identity negotiation; a record of peers thoughts and actions. The writings of Mead affirm the idea that a record of identity negotiation can help sociologists understand the formation of social ideas and collective identities. He conceptualized the self as a social process: “A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over institutions of that community into his own conduct. He takes its language as a medium by which he gets his personality” (1934, p. 162). Considering Mead’s perspective, the acting or performing of racial identity on Twitter by individuals helps to establish, re-establish or challenge *group*

conceptions of a certain race through continuous dialectic engagement with ideas and one's self:

The self is not so much a substance as a process in which the conversation of gestures has been internalized within an organic form. This process does not exist for itself, but is simply a phase of the whole social organization of which the individual is a part. The organization of the social act has been imported into the organism and becomes then the mind of the individual. It still includes the attitudes of others, but now highly organized, so that they become what we call social attitudes rather than roles of separate individuals. This process of relating one's own organism to the others in the interactions that are going on, in so far as it is imported into the conduct of the individual with the conversation of the 'I' and the 'me' constitutes the self (Mead, 1934 p. 179).

Social media provide an even greater organization of the interaction between society and self than Mead could have imagined. Concerning self and community in terms of racialization further complicates Mead's dialectic. As mentioned previously, social psychological perspectives indicate that individuals develop self-esteem more effectively when imbedded in a community (Eirkson, 1964). According to symbolic interactionist perspectives, not only does the self best develop in light of community, the community absolutely needs the existence of healthy selves to function.

CHAPTER III
RACE AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN INTERNET RESEARCH (OR LACK
THEREOF): A LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following chapters, I will present two case studies by which I explore the relationship between racial identity and community in light of online representations of blackness. In this chapter, I outline my approach to the intersectional study of racialized online communities. Keeping with the theme of pushing the theoretical boundaries of application for symbolic interactionist perspectives, I also offer a critique of emerging scholarship that lacks the full explanatory power that is needed concerning race and media representations.

Intersectional Representation

Hall argues that representations of race are constantly renegotiated. But representations must not solely investigate race because of the multitude of identities that people engage the world through. Additional identities which are also marked as “other” must also be questioned. When discussing race, gender, and sexuality, we should always include the binary power relations – the identity that is marked as other: **white/black man/woman, straight/gay** (Hall, 1997). When we talk about any one of these issues by name, we are always talking about the other, even if only implicitly. Accordingly, an intersectional approach is needed in order to fully investigate the lived experience of othered identities and communities. An intersectional framework addresses the interrelationship between political and representational practices concerning race, gender,

class, body, and sexuality. Crenshaw argues that structural domination, political domination, and representations of those being dominated should all be considered in an intersectional approach.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1997) conceives intersectionality “as a provisions concept that links contemporary politics with postmodern theory” and explains that “on the simplest level, an intersectional framework uncovers how the dual positioning of women of color as women and as members of a subordinated racial group bears upon violence committed against us” (p. 248). People encounter multiple layers of domination –living life as the other in the binary category: the place women of color, lesbian women, and lesbian women of color (amongst other intersectional identities) is an example of the apex of othered experience. “This dual positioning, or as some scholars have labeled it, double jeopardy, renders women of color vulnerable to the structural, political and representation dynamics of both race and gender subordination” (p. 248).

In the same theoretical tradition, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues:

“As a historically oppressed group, Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory – it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like – but the purpose of Black women’s collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and / or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice”

For Collins, black feminist scholarship is the language of the intersectionally oppressed. Tracing those heavy layers of oppression throughout the U.S.’s unique socio-political history, Collins observes, “Race, class, gender, and sexuality all remain closely

intertwined with nation”. In exploring these connections, it is important to distinguish among the terms nation, nation-state, and nationalism. These ideas are often used interchangeably (though they should not be), but they refer to different concepts. A nation is a collection of people who believe that they share a common past and will likely share a common future. That belief is usually founded in shared cultural characteristics, language, customs and a well-defined (though socially constructed) geographic territory; encompassing the belief in a common point of origin. And the idea that members of the same nation are closer in all of the aforementioned attributes than members outside of that nation and a shared sense of difference from and sometimes hostility toward groups around them. Nationalism is a political ideology that is expressed by any group that self-defines as a distinctive people or nation. But the issue here is that though many in the United States like to enjoy the delusion of shared points of origin, many persons of color, black communities in particular, have a completely different conception of that shared past. Most black families in the U.S. find the roots of their existence in the U.S. in slavery. Further complicating the intersectionality puzzle, Davis (1981) argues that slavery is responsible in part for the hierarchical, gendered treatment of black women. “Expediency governed the slaveholder’s posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles” (p. 6).

Intersectional approaches to race are particularly valuable in that they investigate multiple layers of inequality and lived identity experience. Concerning my research with

media and social media, considering the intertextual representations of race, gender, and sexuality, it is difficult to work with any one of these concepts individually. Intersectional approaches to race are conducive to media studies because media often attempt to represent multiple perspectives at once (though it often fails).

Kishonna Gray (2014) updates intersectional race perspectives for the 21st century, critiquing identity role playing on video games. Recent events in the news regarding threats or attacks against female gamers has proven that the social inequities that exist in our daily lives like race, gender, and sexuality inequality are reproduced or are reflected in online and virtual spaces. Further, role playing that occurs in some video games allows for virtual cultural appropriation, and ethnic identity tourism. Virtual actions and ideas almost always have tangible repercussions in our lives offline because they are rooted in the symbolic meanings we interpret. In *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins*, Gray offers an analysis of the ramifications of race and gender in virtual spaces; particularly in game playing communities. Outlining the commodification of the ‘other’ in virtual, role-playing spaces, Gray discusses the long-standing history of the exclusion of ‘girl gamers’, predominantly women of color, in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG), Role-Playing Games (RPG), and in First-Person Shooters (FPS) (p. xxii).

She describes the atmosphere of the Xbox Live community and culture; stating that Xbox Live memberships must be purchased and that users must create or purchase an avatar that is associated with a user ID. ‘Avatars can sometimes embody the player’s offline presence in this gaming space, although some people opt for an avatar bearing no

resemblance to the self' (p. xix). In doing so, she describes gender segregation that is present in these communities – arguing that gaming spaces have been constructed primarily as white male spaces and secondarily as asian male spaces. The thesis of her book centers on the idea that the narratives throughout MMOG communities can and does serve as spaces for ideological negotiation, symbolic meaning-making and resistance.

Applying critical race theory Gray argues, 'By employing Omi and Winant's (1994) conception of racial project, we can see how many popular video games fit within this theoretical schema wherein racialized ideas, bodies, and structures are constructed, mediated and presented through a safe medium' (p. 4). Linking a critical race analysis with Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Gray (2014) argues that game narratives hold three important functions: '(1) a means of social control (2) a hegemonic process enhanced by the narratives' ability to colonize consciousness, and [are] (3) a contributor to hegemony to the extent that they conceal the social organization of their production and plausibility' (p. 6).

Where Gray turns to Gramsci, a neo-Marxist for explanatory power, I return to Symbolic Interactionists perspectives to expand the analysis of racialized online spaces. While there is no contesting the hegemonic nature of spaces where othering is the norm, the symbolism is apparent. Game narratives and those who participate in the othering process replicate the types of behaviors that they engage offline. Explicitly, people and narratives are racist online because they are racist offline. Using James's model of the synthesized self, a sociological reading of racialized interactions in MMOG communities indicates that structural racism is fluid across the fictive online-offline boundary.

Moreover, these behaviors are not specific to MMOG communities; rather, they can be observed in othering spaces across the net.

Aisha Durham also applies an intersectional approach to media representations. Durham uses a variety of ethnographic methods to experience, interpret, and discuss the lives of black women in the presence of a culture that has been saturated in hip hop. In doing this, she invokes the ideologies of hip hop feminism which she describes as the resistance to the male hegemonic framing of hip hop. She analyzes the “complementary and often contested narratives about hip hop” that women provide (Durham 2014, p. 12).

By “revisiting spaces and places where we are, we not only can articulate how living memories gain meaning in our everyday, but we can reimagine hip hop and the dynamic possibilities of a feminist politics that can help homegirls survive, escape, and dismantle the colluding exploitative systems that render us in/visible” (Durham 2014, p. 128). In addition to the overtly stated objectives, I believe another objective of her thesis is to give voice to those that are generally absent from critical dialogues. She extends the images and stereotypes that are created by hip hop beyond the actual music. The idea that *hip hop is everything* is critical for the development of the subsequent arguments because the ideas espoused in hip hop narratives leach out into every area of life.

As a black woman, Durham has a unique perspective on feminism, within hip hop culture that white women do not have. Though they live in the same culture, the experience it differently than black women and they are often used as foils to reinforce existing stereotypes about black women. Taking an auto-ethnographic approach, Durham focuses on her lived experiences as well as those of her friends and relatives to examine the way

black femininity exists within this system. In doing this, she introduces a unique and often over-looked perspective in cultural studies and the overarching umbrella of mainstream feminism.

As stated above, hip hop culture is pervasive and colors the lens with which the black female body is viewed. But this lens is complicated by the existing and competing narratives of colorism within the black community and cultural appropriation and / or the performance of blackness by white participants in hip hop culture and popular culture at large. The white performance of blackness further complicates issues of colorism and makes it more difficult for hip hop feminism to reach its goals. More often, white artists are enacting these tropes and get away with it because they are simply performing the conception or representation of blackness. They can, and do, leave the performance behind whereas black women and men cannot. *They* embody hip hop because hip hop is interpreted through blackness (Durham, 2014). As a nation, we symbolically embrace this commodification of blackness and accept it the accompanying white standards that are placed on blackness.

Artists like Miley Cyrus and Macklemore perform blackness by invoking the pimp status and / or the hot mamma / jezebel. They perform blackface even if they do not actually paint their faces black – though Miley Cyrus might as well. Even more frustrating, Macklemore has been able to reach acceptance in white middle class homes where conscious rap artists of color like Common have been excluded for decades. And as Durham (2014) emphasizes in the introduction to her book, white female hip hop artists (Miley Cyrus) all too easily fit into the white feminist trope. Not only does Miley perform

blackness, she unashamedly exploits black women in her videos and stage performances. In a so-called “post” feminist, “post” racial moment, Miley’s exploits are dismissed but they do more harm than what is presented on the surface. Similarly in online cultures, video bloggers and fashionistas appropriate black culture for their own means. While many women have recently been called out for their inadvertent appropriation of black hair care and styling, the ongoing production of these videos suggests acceptance by the masses who consume them.

This historical moment of blackness in culture ties in with the pervasive colorism in the black community and racism in society overall. Certain bodies are allowed to perform in ways that others cannot. “Hip hop culture gets read through blackness, which is inscribed with racist ideologies of deviant black sexuality. In mass media, both black women and men represent a racialized group with uncontrollable, animalistic sexual appetites. Physicality, movement, dress, and language become ways to talk about deviant black sexuality as well as hip hop culture” (Durham, 2014 p. 65). The presence of white and lighter-skinned hip hop stars effect the way hip hop is interpreted, especially within the black community. The blurring of this space contributes to the colorism; the same can be said of online portrayals of blackness. White women are co-opting black / hip hop culture to construct themselves as desirable. As evidenced by Durham’s discussion about Ludacris, men want a lady in the streets but a freak in the sheets. Or as, Slim Thug put it, “black women are undesirable partners because they beg, are disloyal, and do not ‘bow down’ to black men who are treated like kings by white women” (2014, p. 82). White women in hip hop fulfill this trope. They can perform blackness but their white skin

connotes that they are subservient. Black men, particularly those that are recognizable in hip hop culture, have forced black women of color to compete for their affections by creating a hierarchy where “snow bunnies” (white women) are the most desired group, then light-skinned women, and finally darker skinned women. Black women feel disrespected and/ or conform to this hierarchy; each claiming that their group is to be desired over the other. But the issue of colorism is seldom, if ever, discussed in the mainstream media, so these ideas are perpetuated by the culture industry without mainstream higher ups, ever acknowledging their involvement in this cycle.

The *Spector of Sex*, by Sally Kitch offers another intersectional perspective and argues that gender ideology helped to generate a ‘public epistemology’ of race and to rationalize the racial devaluation of individuals and groups on the allegedly natural, biological grounds of gender difference, hierarchy, and normative standards. Concerning reproductive rights as they have been framed by men or other majority voices throughout history, Kitch suggests that “By exposing that connecting thread, women of all races may avoid having their reproductive lives determined by artificially concocted racial demands, such as those fueling controversies over abortion even today” (Kitch, p. 228). Earlier in the text she notes, “It is also reasonable to protest the patterns of reproductive manipulation that have helped to establish and maintain the racial paradigms that produce those harms and power differentials” (Kitch, p. 228).

Racial Formation Theory

Omi and Winant (1986) provide a comprehensive view of race and race relations in the U.S. Taking a comparative historical approach, they argue that racial theory is shaped by the actually existing race relations in any given historical period.

The dominant racial theory provides society with ‘common sense’ about race, and with categories for the identification of individuals and groups in racial terms. Challenges to the dominant racial theory emerge when it fails to adequately explain the changing nature of race relations, or when the racial policies it prescribes are challenged by political movements seeking a different arrangement. (p. 11).

As they see it, three dominant paradigms exist within the sociological exploration of race: ethnicity, class, or nation. But departing from preceding theories and theorists, Omi and Winant construct their approach to race on the idea that “race is a sociohistorical concept” (1986, p. 60). The idea of the black race emerged as a result of the ideology of slavery that had to create moral distance between white and black, stigmatizing black as filthy, dirty or evil in order to uphold the idea that slaves were not human and thus could continue to be treated like animals. Racial order is reinforced by a continuous and reciprocal process. Therefore race becomes an organizing “principal of social relations” (p. 68). They “use the term racial formation to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings”. Race provides cues about who we think a person should be.

I liken the sociohistorical approach to race to a specific racializing of the generalized other. If people believe they exist in primarily white spaces, the generalized

other may also assumed to be white. Or in Mead's words "the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called 'the generalized other'. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the *whole* community" (1934, p. 154). If the greater society persists in ignoring the existence and difference of communities of color, then their outlook on those communities will follow. As Mead (1934) suggests, the ideas of the community are informed by the ideas of the individual. It follows that the generalized other would reflect specific group's identities.

Because our generalized other reflects the members of our community, when we are unable to determine a person's race, Omi and Winant (1986) suggest that we are uncomfortable because it is a central axis of operation in our society. Therefore, when individuals are unable to reconcile their identity with that of the generalized other in all of its shades and identities, they turn to colorblind ideologies instead.

Colorblind Racism

In *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Bonilla-Silva argues that "Shielded by color blindness, whites can express resentments toward minorities; criticize their morality, values, and work ethic, and even claim to be the victims of 'reverse racism'" (Bonilla-Silva 2010, p. 4). Overall, the task of his thesis is to illuminate the way white people engage racism in the post-Jim Crow and post-Civil Rights era.

Reproducing interviews with students from various universities Bonilla-Silva highlights the way people practice and reify racism even when they believe that their sentiments were harmless or even that they are acting in advocacy for minority

populations. He argues that colorblindness operates in subtly. Most white people subtly critique the lifestyles of African Americans unduly, sometimes without deliberate intent.

While Bonilla-Silva demonstrates how colorblind ideologies are formed from the perspective of the dominant group, unprivileged groups in the same class position were not as well represented. Instead, he argues that America is moving toward a tri-racial order. This tri-racial order will be born of the color-blind society that we are currently living in. The *new white* includes: whites, new whites (Russians, Albanians, etc.), assimilated white Latinos, some multiracial, assimilated Native Americans, a few Asian-origin people. *Honorary whites* will include: light-skinned Latinos, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, and most multiracial individuals. Last, the third category as theorized by Bonilla-Silva is *Collective Black* which includes, Vietnamese Americans, Filipino Americans, Laotian Americans, dark-skinned Latinos, blacks, new west Indian, African immigrants, and reservation-bound native Americans.

The problem with this conceptualization as I see it is that this middle category is still an operative of the black-white binary. This fictive binary, along with several other fictive binaries (i.e. gender and sexuality) are worth mentioning when discussing the interpretation of racialized representations. Individuals who find themselves in these groups only have access to whiteness at certain times. That is why they are afforded honorary whiteness. When they can serve the purpose of white people, in terms of electoral power, honorary whites are afforded that temporary esteem. But as soon as honorary whites, minorities go against the dominant ideology, they are excommunicated from the

group and situated back in the mainly black group. Thus, this new ideology and others like it are representational equality in the Baurdillard sense.

Ethnicity

Several contemporary scholars seem to be answering questions about the classification of ethnicity among individuals, groups, and societies. Their ideas discuss the perception of ethnicity from both the perspective of the insider and the outsider but lack an intersectional approach.

As described by Lopez and Espiritu (1990 p. 199), panethnicity is “the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among subgroups of ethnic collectivities that are often seen as homogenous by outsiders”. It can be both unitive and derisive depending on the power dynamics involved. They theorize that this type of structuring is an essential part of ethnicity. I argue, that panethnicity is an essential part of constructing *one* of *many* ethnic identities and may not deserve as much significance as the authors have given it if it is disjointed from other identity work. And if one wanted to, he or she could perform affiliative ethnic identity (taking on the characteristics of another culture and taking it on as one’s own – think Rachel Dolezal) in relation to panethnicity which may cause certain groups to question the authenticity and legitimacy of panethnicity.

As Lopez and Espiritu argue, panethnicity can be fragmented and contested just as affiliative ethnicity can. Both by people outside of the ethnic group who, as the privileged or dominant group, may question the needs of the minority ethnicity or by individuals within the ethnic group who question the legitimacy of outsider’s claims to their ethnic

identity. It seems as though these practices, whether dabbling in panethnicity or choosing to take on an affiliative identity, can sometimes be a strategy of ethnic boundary making.

Jimenez (2010, p. 1760) writes: “With affiliative ethnic identity, individuals distinguish themselves from a mainstream by drawing on a culture linked to marked ethnic categories. In short, assimilation involves becoming more similar, while affiliative ethnic identity entails becoming more different.” While it is true that assimilation means becoming more similar in all cases, the process of affiliative identity is not as simplified as Jimenez makes it sound. Individuals that are trying to affiliate themselves with an ethnicity may be becoming more different from their historical ethnicity but they are trying to become more like and thus assimilate with members of their new affiliative identity. In online spaces, it is important to recognize this difference in the way that individuals experience ethnic identity – affiliative or not because the performance of those identities can be fictive.

Other scholars question what ethnic assimilation looks like in America. “What can assimilation look like in such a diverse and ethnically dynamic society?” (Alba & Nee, p. 9) They caution that some of the old ideas of assimilation still have validity and are the core ideologies for understanding the assimilation process. Assimilation as defined by Alba and Nee is “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences” (p. 11). This overall conceptualization encompasses several implicit points: ethnicity is a social boundary (made through everyday decisions that people make that shape their actions and feelings toward others), living out these ideas through actions allow people to solidify the “us” and “them” mentality, assimilation, concerning ethnic change,

may take place on both sides of the boundary, assimilation does not require the disappearance of ethnicity (individuals can retain cultural specific practices and yet assimilate), and the relationship between mainstream culture and smaller subcultures is not dichotomous – both change as both groups adjust. Further ethnic assimilation is context bound, incremental and intergenerational, and cannot be explained by any singular causal mechanism.

Systemic Racism: A Rejoinder

In *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*, Joe Feagin (2006) outlines the structural relations that contribute to and develop racial oppression in the United States. Throughout the book he points out numerous structural reasons that have contributed to racist ideology and discrimination in America over time. He also discusses how these ideologies and frames affect younger generations. In general, this is a good tactic and it helped to bolster his point; that racist ideologies are internalized at a young age. Further, these ideologies help to reinforce racist stereotypes through repetitive action and thought.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs suggested that our personal understandings about society are not just in some nook in our minds to which we alone have access. Instead, our social understandings, and thus important interpretive frames, are regularly reiterated for us by interpretive frames, are regularly reiterated for us by external groups. The groups of which we are part give us the ‘means to reconstruct’ such frames if we ‘adopt ... their way of thinking.’ An individual’s important understandings, images, knowledge, and framing hang on together substantially because they are part of the ‘totality of thoughts common to the group’. Over time our groups, small and large, become major repositories of congealed group memories and associated social frames (Feagin 2006 p.16).

Feagin states that “over time, a majority of whites of all ages mostly accept the dominant racial frame and conform to many or most of the significant prejudices and stereotypes of white relatives, friends, teachers, or coworkers. Negative views of Americans of color as well as positive interpretations of white identity and privilege, enable whites to become full-fledged members of the white social networks and groups in which they spend most of their lives” (Feagin 2006, p. 242). The study done by Leslie House and Feagin corroborates his earlier ideas. Together they collected journal entries from white university students over time. The journals explored the way white students operate within their conceived space of whiteness and. Many of the students talked about their experiences with black people (or lack thereof). When discussing the results of the study he adds; “Lacking much opportunity for repeated close contact with a wide variety of blacks, whites depend heavily on cultural material, especially media images, for cataloguing blacks” (Feagin 2006, p. 249). Again media representation play a large role in race relations in the U.S.

Though I find his theory to be generally comprehensive, it fails to account for some important social context. First, most of his studies are conducted in the south where race is arguably more problematic. Another idea that is central to system racism is that racism is built into the U.S. social structure, including politics, economics etc. While I do not disagree, the theory seems to imply that all white people are racist in the same manner. We know that racism, like race is performative and takes on different meaning depending on the social context. While Feagin is not summarily stating that white people have these thoughts, the general tone and premise of the book seem to suggest it. I agree with Omi

and Winant's critique of his framing of systemic racism in that the theory ignores the presence of anti-racist whites. Even though these anti-racist whites are still operating in the same system which is being examined, their presence cannot be ignored. Even though their presence is minimal, their efforts to alter the structure still have an effect. Sometimes, unfortunately, the efforts of white allies are more impactful because they belong to the majority group.

Stemming from Feagin's theorization of Systemic Racism, Louwanda Evans provides excellent real-life examples of systemic racism in the aviation industry. *Cabin Pressure: African American Pilots, Flight Attendants, and Emotional Labor* (2013) does an excellent job of bringing hidden systemic racism to light and provides a more realistic social critique using a systemic racism framework. It also explores explicit racism on an individual level, refuting the belief that we are in a post-racial society. She begins by providing statistics of the exceedingly small number of black pilots and flight attendants. Generally these roles are fulfilled by white Americans. When people encountered black flight attendants and pilots – going against the dominant framing of white individuals as superiorly qualified to fly planes, white passengers often leave the plane. Evans insightfully remarks that the act of deplaning is a *public* act. Representing public shaming and disciplining of implicit social norms which these passengers view as having been broken. Although the white people were exhibiting racially motivated aggression, they couldn't physically harm the pilots but they could publicly defame, embarrass, and disrespect them. Harkening back to a time when whites were free to oppress blacks publicly.

Taking an intersectional approach to her study of systemic racism, Evans also details the lives of black flight attendants (both men and women) through several lengthy interviews. She bridges the past and the present by highlighting the types of harmful attitudes and behaviors still exist concerning race and black female servitude. But beyond providing an overview, the interviews conducted reveal the emotional labor that women of color have to deal with as flight attendants. Not only do these women have to deal with new versions of historical racism from their classist and racist passengers but they also have to deal with a range of sexism and racism from their coworkers who unknowingly reify these beliefs. I include Evans study in this literature review because she discusses the emotional burden of being intersectionally oppressed. Often internet researchers discount the influence of emotional labor on behavior in online communities.

In conclusion, there are many different approaches to studying race and ethnicity. My preferred approach to race and ethnicity is multidimensional and must importantly, intersectional. Whether concerning representations or lived experiences, layers of inequality and power imbalances must be examined in the context of each other. No singular identity can explain all of a person's experienced prejudices. Instead, collective experiences are represented in and by media, contributing to our group memories and the future reification of race and ethnicity.

Though racial theories that fail to account for multiple identity perspectives are lacking, they are still valuable in understanding society's construction of race and the representation of that race. Altogether, these foundational ideas should not be abandoned but updated.

With this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated the need for intersectional approaches to studying race and ethnicity both online and offline specifically because of the meanings attributed to all identity signifiers by those producing and consuming meaning. When studying online communities, the perspective of both the producer and consumer of meaning becomes particularly important because messages can be interpreted through so many lenses. In the following two chapters, I present case studies of online communities – one on Tumblr and the other on Twitter to demonstrate the communal and individual consumption of meaning in racialized online spaces.

CHAPTER IV

ON THURSDAYS WE WATCH SCANDAL: COMMUNAL VIEWING AND BLACK TWITTER¹

Sociologists have long-debated the nature of communities online. We have questioned the authenticity of communal experiences online ad nauseam (see Agre 1997; Bateman and Lyon 2000; Baym 1995; Hampton & Wellman, 2003) Nonneck, Andrews & Preece 2006). Yet there are still some who challenge the idea that community, as defined by classical social theorists, can exist in the context of digitally mediated communication. If not questioning the integral properties of human relationships, some scholars contend that technology facilitates the departure from true face-to-face interactions; suggesting that the face-to-screen-to-face interaction presents negative unforeseen consequences (Turkle 2011).

Empirically, we know that African Americans use Twitter in higher proportions than other racial groups. Pew's 2013 social media report found that one in four Twitter users is African American. Beyond demography, Black Twitter showcases cultural knowledge and insider access. In addition to performing racial identity, black users also use the site as an arena for class portrayal, to mitigate identity claims, and to challenge outsider groups' perceptions of blackness (Florini 2013). Not only does Black Twitter seem to have all of the makings of a community but it also produces meaningful discourse

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and organizes resistance both online and offline; much like black community organizers have done throughout black cultural history.

Thus the aim of this case study is to contextualize Black Twitter as a community. In order to do so, I will describe Black Twitter in terms of commonly accepted sociological definitions of community via Ferdinand Tonnies' (1957) conception of *Gemeinschaft* and Symbolic Interactionist perspectives. Tweets, hashtags, and trends associated with the television show *Scandal* will serve as a case study. Communal watching or co-viewing of shows like *Scandal*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *Empire* suggest that there is a sense of social cohesion that emerges from online interactions and co-viewing. In a similar study of YouTube, Haridakis and Hanson (2009) suggest that co-viewing of videos encourages future "post-viewing discussion" and enhances interaction among viewers (2009, p. 330). Due to the intertextuality present in the online discussion of shows written and produced by a black woman, with black women and men in leading roles – specifically within the context of Black Twitter, *Scandal* provides an opportunity to explore layered levels of meaning both in the relationship that the viewers have to the show and the relationships that they have with each other.

Using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, I will analyze tweets from several thousand users who have interacted with Black Twitter. Additionally, I will present portions of in-person interviews that were conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the way black users conceptualize Black Twitter. Finally, I will argue that as a meaningful community, Black Twitter has the capacity to cause impactful change both on- and offline.

Literature Review: Community – Online/Offline

The concept of community, like all of our lives, is socially constructed. Our online communities reflect this socialization process and the boundaries of that community are defined by those who identify as part of it as well as those that exist outside of the space though the versions of those definitions may differ remarkably. Accordingly, newer communities occupy many spaces to create meaning on multiple platforms (Gatson, 2011). Concerning race, online community has become particularly salient to activism and organization both on- and offline. In this context, the fictive on- offline binary becomes even less apparent.

Beyond engaging with communities online, individuals in communities are also continuously negotiating their own identities. One idea that both bodies of literature – “offline” and “online” identity development – suggest is that racial identity is developed in light of, or as a reflection of, communal identity. That is to say that self and community cannot exist without each other; particularly concerning racial identity. This idea is reflected in foundational scholar Charles Horton Cooley’s writings on the *Looking Glass Self* and is further supported by Erik Erikson: “True identity depends on the support which the young receive from the collective sense of identity which social groups assign to [them]: [their] class, [their] nationality, [their] culture” (Erikson 1964, p. 93). Concerning community Cooley informs:

“Fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one’s very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this

wholeness is by saying that it is a ‘we’; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which ‘we’ is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aims of his will in that feeling” (Cooley 1956/1998, p. 23).

Moreover, Tönnies’ delineation between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) posits: “in *Gemeinschaft*, we are united from the moment of our birth with our own folk, for better or for worse. We go out into *Gesellschaft* as if into a foreign land” (1887/2001, p. 17). Tönnies’ theorization of community translates to the idea that one’s ethnic or racial identity affiliation may inform their conception of community. In fact, his idea of folk closely resembles the concept of a shared cultural history among black Americans in general, online and offline: “The word ‘folk’ must be given still another more particular meaning. I daresay that it connotes not only the living but also the dead, and those to be born. Indeed it especially encompasses the unity of these three levels. A community wherein the dead by far outweigh the living” (Tönnies 1967/2014, p. 7). Considering the cultural history of the American Slave Trade, the case can be made that black Americans share a collective socio-historical consciousness about “folk” and kinship (Stack, 1974). That sense of kinship carries over or is reflected by black social media use.

Recent scholars, Marwick and boyd (2010), support earlier theorists’ ideas and hypothesize that online identity and community operate within “context collapse”; suggesting that our online and offline lives often merge to create an inseparable space for identity negotiation. Social media allow users to project experiences to an audience that

aligns with a preconceived narrative of identity being deployed. The audience consists of users' followers and the things that they experience. Marwick and boyd suggest that users also reference an imagined audience in addition to their followers and friends on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media. They contend that users are aware of the potentially limitless audience of social media and use cultural norms to conceptualize an audience in their mind. In the absence of these cultural cues, users gather their information from the general social media environment to imagine an idealized community even though the imagined community may differ from the audience who is actually consuming the posts.

As much as community may be about the ties between people, it is often understood to be both a grounded place, as well as a thing whose grounded experiences may be carried along in the imagination. The things we can do in a particular space make that space more or less comfortable for us, and in becoming comfortable therein, we make it a meaningful place. This connection between the material and the symbolic highlights the community as a metaphorical concept, an amorphous one often standing in for specific place and space boundaries (Gatson and Zweerink 2004, p. 97).

That is, the community is imagined (Marwick & boyd 2010) but the people that make up that community are not. Moreover, Hampton and Wellman (2003) highlight two advantages of online communication in terms of building relationships: individuals are not bound by time – “people do not have to be connected simultaneously to communicate effectively” (Hampton & Wellman 2003, p. 285) and individuals can engage with multiple others at a time, with varying levels of intimacy. These advantages facilitate the communing process online which in turn can foster a shared sense of community on – and

offline. Connection is fluid and impacts the construction of social networks on and offline with little impediment. In terms of online social organization, community more closely resembles a network instead of a localized group (Hampton & Wellman, 2001). Community, defined in terms of identity, solidarity or shared interest is not confined by a singular place or space. Rather, it is identified by social support and social cohesion (Hampton, 2002).

Classical theorists seem to agree that social cohesion or the feeling of “we” is central to the idea of community. Contemporary scholars that study ethnic identity and community argue that the feeling of togetherness, inclusion, and “we-ness” is important to encouraging mental health and well-being in black individuals (Marama and Velasquez 2012; Keys 2009). Therefore, it is important to analyze the framing of Black Twitter as a community pitted against a racially divided *Gesellschaft* or a race-specific generalized other instead of simply an aggregate of users. The communal interactions that occur on and through Black Twitter provide social support; allowing it to function as a community that inspires real, tangible action offline.

But before delving deeper into a discussion about black community online and the idea of Black Twitter, I would first like to discuss traditional conceptualizations of black community offline.

Individuals must resolve issues about self in order to have a stable self-concept that Erikson (1964) describes as achieved identity. Phinney (1992) describes the main components of ethnic identity as self-identified ethnic identity, ethnic behaviors and practices, affirmation and belonging, and ethnic identity achievement. She stresses that

self-identification as a part of an ethnic group is separate from simply belonging to a group. Membership in the group is determined by parents' ethnic heritage. She cautions that although individuals may identify as part of a single group, ethnic identity development varies over time and is shaped by historical and social events. But Phinney and Alipuria (1990) note that race identity is not the central aspect of identity for all people. Perceptions of other groups are not a part of an individual's self-concept of identity however ideas about others' groups may shape how one feels about her or his own identity. When one does not develop a clear understanding of self, the result is identity diffusion and confusion about one's place in society.

Erikson (1964) theorized that individuals make decisions about identity early in life but need a period of moratorium wherein they choose what their identity will encompass. They will use that foundation to navigate the rest of their life choices. Phinney and Tarver (1988) found that ethnic identity development follows the general trajectory of Erikson's theorized process of identity development.

Methods

Shonda Rhime's *Scandal* airs every Thursday during thirteen week seasons. It generates considerable discussion on Twitter. The hashtag "ScandalThursdays" was created by the network to encourage discussion by viewers. Users in Black Twitter have co-opted it and #ScandalThursdays trends regularly on Thursdays. Thus, #ScandalThursdays will serve as a case study in online community. The sample for this study is a subset of a larger sample for a study on race and social media use. For the initial random sampling, five university pages on Twitter were selected based on the location

and size of the University; two in Texas, one in Maryland, and two in New York. From those five university pages, the first 100 followers displayed were followed that were not commercial accounts. Over the course of 19 months, I followed these initial 500 users as well as others in their networks. All of the twitter handles are pseudonyms.

In an effort to provide a more comprehensive view of Black Twitter on Scandal Thursdays, I also present a larger data set collected from Twitter by the Crimson Hexagon² service. Crimson Hexagon is an “enterprise social listening tool [that] provides practical insights for strategic business questions, from topic research to audience analysis” (Crimson Hexagon). Crimson Hexagon sources tweets and posts from Twitter and Facebook, among other outlets, in response to queries specified by the researcher. For this study, the service provided results based on the following input: “black twitter” AND “blacktwitter” AND “scandal” AND NOT “veterans”³. Results from Facebook and other platforms were not part of the query and are not included here.

Finally, to ascertain a more nuanced view of the way black users identify with and describe Black Twitter, I present follow up interviews. Out of the initial 500 users that were followed, 40 agreed to an in-person interview. The sample was racially diverse but here I only present responses from the 17 individuals who identify as black or African American. Combining these three methods yields a more comprehensive view of Black Twitter – both on a micro level, encompassing the way individual users think about Black

² Access to the service was generously provided by Harmony Institute; a media research center.

³ AND NOT “veterans” had to be included because of a scandal involving veterans that had nothing to do with *Scandal* and / or Black Twitter.

Twitter, and on a larger scale, offering a view of the formation of community within Black Twitter.

Results

Over the course of 22 months, 7,105 tweets were generated by users that contained all three of the search characteristics “black twitter” or “blacktwitter” and “scandal”. Users also use the hashtag #ScandalThursdays. While it is difficult to search for key words that hint at togetherness, belonging, and community, black twitter members use other words and phrases to signify these ideas. These phrases cannot be searched for by keyword which is why real time observations are included in this study. Black users on twitter actively assert that viewing *Scandal* while communicating with other Twitter users is part of the viewing experience. “Discussing how my favorite part of #Scandal is #BlackTwitter. It’s 100x better if you watch it real-time and get on Twitter.” “Feels good to watch Scandal with #BlackTwitter! #Hilarious – Been working the last 3 wks and had to watch it on Hulu with the boo lol”. Further, some users explicitly describe the communal viewing experience as a family activity. “I love when #BlackTwitter comes together and watches TV as a family #scandal”. “Black Twitter family about to come together for another sitcom lol #Scandal”. More to the point, those who express a relationship with Black Twitter and *Scandal* seem to recognize or claim a collective power toward influencing change. “Boosie home, Annie is black, MJ got a love child AND Scandal tonight? Black Twitter, we did it!”. “If you wanna act a fool, do it on Thursday night bc that’s Scandal night and black twitter will be too busy #BlackTwitterWelcomeManual”. Tweets like these are common interactions on #ScandalThursdays. From these tweets we can observe that some

users that identify as part of Black Twitter identify it as a family that spends time together; a family that has power to cause discussion or activate observable change. Still, we can only learn so much from 140 characters. In the next section, I have reproduced several conversations with participants of the study that identified as being part of Black Twitter.

How Do Black Twitter Users Conceptualize Black Twitter?

Q:How frequently do you use hashtags?

@crazz: everyday. I catch myself using hashtags in text messages.

Q: Ok. Do you ever use the hashtag blacktwitter?

@crazz: Oh all the time. I definitely feel like I use #blacktwitter on nights when we all watch television together.

@sidekick: Well see I don't – is black twitter- people that are black on twitter? Is that what that means?

@crazz: (to @sidekick) Yeah like –ok so black twitter, you say stuff like... I always see like when a show's coming on, award shows that black people are gonna watch, people will tweet, "I love black twitter when we watch TV together." Like Black Twitter is definitely alive and well on scandal night. Definitely.

I want to note here that we had not talked about Scandal during the interview at all up until this point. The participant introduced the idea of talking about Scandal and Black Twitter without my prompting. It is also interesting that though the participant identifies as a part of Black Twitter, when asked by her friend to describe it, she struggles to find the words to do so and instead resorts to giving examples of interactions that take place on Black Twitter. The question raised by @sidekick is an important one; "Is black twitter

– people that are black on twitter?” that I will return to in the discussion. But as our conversation continued, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how both participants thought about Black Twitter. I was surprised and caught off guard by the responses to my questions.

Q: So what kinds of things do you associate with Black Twitter, like when you hashtag it, what types of things do you talk about usually? (to @crazz)

@crazz: Niggas. Doing nigga shit.

@sidekick: – She cannot write that.

@crazz: Yes she can, it’s a study, Niggas doin’ nigga shit on Black Twitter.

At this point, the atmosphere shifted noticeably as I had been granted insider access to the participant’s feelings about Black Twitter. Though I cannot state with certainty that this conversation would not have happened if I was a white woman, the literature seems to support my understanding of the interaction in that moment. In re-reading the transcript, I wondered why I did not ask what the participant meant by “nigga shit”. But at that point in time, I had a shared understanding of what she meant by the phrase based on some of her previous responses. It was clear by her laughing tone that “nigga shit” was not said with malice. Still, her use of the term warrants further exploration in the discussion portion of this article.

The previous discussion occurred with two black women. In the following discussion, two black men echo some of the same sentiments and attitudes.

Q: Do you ever use the hashtag black twitter?

@onthagrind: I have –

@theboss: I don't think I've ever used it. I've said some things about black twitter before because I'm definitely in black twitter.

Question: Ok so what kinds of things do you say when you talk about black twitter?

@theboss: All the ratchet stuff that you seein'. All the craziness that goes on. That it's so different from white twitter. 'Cause I have some white friends that I have from high school that are on white twitter and you can totally tell the difference.

@onthagrind: You can tell the difference. Black twitter is all like *Scandal* and *Real Housewives* – *Real Wives of* – or *LHHA*. It took me the longest time to figure out that that was *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.

Q: Ok so when you use the hashtag black twitter, what types of things do you talk about (to @theboss)?

@theboss: Mostly it's like things that everybody is talking about at the time so like the last BET awards it was like #blacktwitter and everybody was talking about the performance and we gone talk about who's performing or how bad they outfit looks. Or who almost fell on the red carpet.

@onthagrind: Who doin' hoochie stuff. Who dressed like this 'cause they know all the black people watchin' this stuff so they just put the black twitter on there.

@theboss: Football games, basketball games, any sporting event. The Super Bowl definitely. Beyoncé. Anything about Beyoncé.

Both participants demonstrate that they conceptualize Black Twitter as a space for black people. And both sets of participants as well as one from the previous conversation make a conscious and explicit differentiation between black twitter and white twitter.

“You can totally tell the difference.” Interestingly, when white participants were asked about black twitter, the most common response was “Do black people use twitter?” Of course, this points to Granovetter’s (1973) thesis on the strength of weak ties however we know empirically that black people use twitter in much higher numbers than do white users (Pew Internet, 2009). Both men think of Black Twitter as a forum for blackness, citing topics such as fashion, sports, and other forms of entertainment. And again, one participant, @onthagrind, references *Scandal*. Even if only mentioned in passing with a few other prime time television programs, it is clear that for @onthagrind, watching television together is part of participating in Black Twitter. “Black Twitter is all like *Scandal* and *Real Housewives* – *Real Wives of* – or LHHA.”

While it seems that most of the participants who agreed to a follow up interview can agree that Black Twitter is for black people, some expressed reservations about others’ perception of Black Twitter.

Q: Are you familiar with Black Twitter?

@bfskylight: yes

Q: Well, what is your opinion of Black Twitter?

@bfskylight: Well I think I became like aware of Black Twitter...I think it was on like CNN. I don’t know they were talking about it on the news, and this had to be like last semester maybe, and there’s definitely a difference between like Black Twitter and just the whole Twitter population. And I know like Twitter is mostly made up of black people so I don’t think that it’s negative. I don’t think that it’s negative. It can be

negative but I don't think that it's negative. I just prefer not to, not to put a label on there, you know?

Discussion

All of these interactions provide a basic understanding of the way black users talk and think about Black Twitter. But the interactions that go on during *Scandal* can reveal a much more vivid picture of how race is negotiated on Twitter. I wanted to understand how these ideas about Black Twitter and community play out on Twitter. Further I want to point out how the feeling and experience of community is replicated on Black Twitter. The participants represented a wide variety of sentiments both via tweets and the interviews. A common thread that is clearly observable is the idea of togetherness or of belonging to the group. This is central to Cooley's ideas of primary group interaction in a community. The fascinating thing here though is that in several of the accounts given, participants use language and conversational style with me that connotes insider access. Had a white interviewer asked the same question, "What kinds of things do you associate with Black Twitter?" the respondent probably would not have responded with "niggas doin' nigga shit on Black Twitter". The respondent and their friend both laughed because we all understood that to be a joke – not of derogatory nature. But someone from an outsider's position may have reacted differently. This was an act of signifying. When the respondent talks about Black Twitter in this manner, they are demonstrating some familiarity with the group that they are discussing. And the historical context that goes along with the word "nigga" in particular connotes insider status because blacks are the only group for which it is socially acceptable to use the term.

Many scholars have debated the use of the term “nigger” and all of its variants in the present vernacular (e.g. Nguyen 2013, Judy 1994, Young 2007) but I find that Jacquelyn Rahman’s (2012) summation of the term to be most fitting for the purposes of this article:

“Despite the general societal ban on use of forms of nigger, a variant finds continued acceptance among some members of the African American community for intra-group self-reference... Use of this form allows a speaker to construct an identity representing awareness of the history of African Americans and practical knowledge of the nature and implications of the diaspora experience (2012: 137).”

In Rahman’s nuanced analysis of the use of the term *nigga* by the African American community, she argues that a core social meaning of *nigga* related to survival was part of the counterlanguage that early Africans in America developed. The core meaning signaled Africans and Africanness in the role as survivors and participants in the diaspora experience. Members of the African slave community shared knowledge of this core meaning, which endures in present-day uses of the term (2012: 141). She also argues that the use of the word *nigga* can be used to self-identify as part of an ethnic group while also being used to ascribe or project identity onto the person with whom the term is being used. It can also be used in an exaggerative sense to add humor to the struggle of being black (2012: 154).

Perhaps most relevant to the use of the word in this context, Rahman distinguishes solidarity as a signal of a unified, common experience. “While projecting identity as an African American who is conscious of survival in the diaspora, *nigga* may add a dimension

to that identity by projecting an attitudinal stance that shows solidarity with another African American or with the African American community” (2012: 155).

Considering an additional element, Neal (2013) finds that the use of nigga by African Americans can be used to construct and signify authenticity to others within the diasporic community (2013: 559). The scholarly community seems to reach a consensus on the use of term as a method to connote insider status; even if some would prefer the word not be used at all. The fact that the participant used the word in conversation with me, in direct connection with Black Twitter signifies at the very least, a shared cultural experience from which she positioned her responses to my questions.

Another trend that emerged in the interview data is the belief among Black Twitter users that Twitter is comprised mostly of black users. Black participants consistently stated that Twitter is a black space. Whereas white users believed Twitter to be dominated by white users. Unsurprisingly, Twitter is actually dominated by black users. According to the 2009 Pew Internet study, 66% of Twitter users are black. Perhaps users feel a closeness or a sense of togetherness with others in Black Twitter because most of Twitter *is* Black Twitter. By that I mean that Twitter is saturated in black community. Black users indicate an absence of white users in their networks when they say that Twitter is for black people. This finding may support the insulation hypothesis in that black users are surrounding themselves with other users that look like them. Thus when they compare themselves to the general other, they are insulated from the negative effects of discrimination because their general other is one that reflects and privileges blackness.

Beyond community, Black Twitter sees itself as an entity that can inspire change. It has demonstrated this to be true on a number of occasions. Even when discussing something as trivial as #ScandalThursdays, the data demonstrate that Black Twitter discusses social justice 6 times more and the Affordable Care Act 14 times more than non “Black Twitter” does. These findings suggest that though the primary purpose is the communal watching of television, other social issues (along with other cultural hot topics) are also being discussed within the confines of the community.

Black Twitter also serves another important function both for those who participate in it and society at large. It is an excellent space for resisting racial prejudice and overall systemic racism. Because it keeps a written record, it has become invaluable in disseminating information quickly in times of protest. Black Twitter also rallies against racial ideologies which operate to normalize the interests of the dominant group. These normative over generalizations and micro-aggressions are often present in Twitter interactions. These moments are blatant and overt acts of resistance to the normative white racial frame (Feagin 2013). At times, particularly concerning the show *Scandal*, these interactions are less obvious. In his book, the *White Racial Frame*, Joe Feagin argues that counterframes replace existing systems of white dominance with new paradigms. His “critical counter-frame thus incorporates a *countersystem* analysis, one that examines the institutionalized and systemic character of white racial oppression and calls for its replacement with a new social system” (Feagin 2013: 162). Concerning Black Twitter’s discourse on *Scandal*, the new paradigm that is being actively created, is one of black community.

Interestingly, two dialogues about race exist side-by-side. The integrated segregation (May, 2014) that occurs on Twitter is not new but it is distinct in that both sides can see what the other thinks of it. One can easily *some* of what Goffman (1959) would term the backstage – the preparatory or private spaces of life. In this way, Twitter removes the curtain and things that people used to say in private are now laid bare. Perhaps this is why Black Twitter uses coded language in order to maintain some social bounds of where the community begins and ends. The observation of these discussions and interactions in real time provide a window into how race is constructed for the benefit of those in power. One issue here is that Twitter is a performative space that is used in constructing one’s identity (Marwick and boyd 2010; Williams and Aldana Marquez, 2015). Individuals may tweet or post sentiments that seem to be in support of racial equality while hiding individuals’ true feelings. For this reason, I included white subjects in my interview sample but their responses have not been reproduced here. Mainly because they are saying the same things; that they only use Twitter for sports or politics or that they genuinely believe white people are the only ones using Twitter. However as Stanfield (2011) discusses, white participants are less likely to reveal racial prejudices to minority interviewers. I found this to be true with some of the participants in my study. There were numerous things that I observed online before and /or after communicating with them in person that were not always congruous with our conversations.

Conclusion

Inspired by the oral tradition of our ancestors, watching television together in conversation with each other is a way of passing down shared cultural knowledge from

generation to generation. Twitter allows for this to happen on a much larger scale. Black Twitter watches television as a community: a group whose members feel a sense of belonging and togetherness. As a community, Black Twitter creates new social meaning, generates cultural and tangible capital, and inspires its members to action both on- and offline. It's about more than consuming television together; #ScandalThursdays is about being together in a society that is at times hostile. We've already learned that social media gratifies the need to feel close to others (Chen, 2010; Zhao 2006). As the participants in the study expressed earlier, watching *Scandal* together is being a part of Black Twitter. The communal watching experience allows Twitter users to actively negotiate the community including who can be in it, and what ideas are allowed to exist in the space.

CHAPTER V

FAT PEOPLE OF COLOR: EMERGENT INTERSECTIONAL EXPERIENCE IN ONLINE COMMUNITY ⁴

Introduction

Fat People of Color is a Tumblr page (social media site) that invites followers to submit images of themselves that are usually accompanied by thick descriptions of the photos that act as counter-narratives about fat bodies. Women of color negotiate what it means to occupy a fat body in the online communal space. In this case study, I will explore the experiences of fat women of color that work to create a intersectional community that resists normative standards of beauty on social media.

As many feminist scholars have argued previously, “fat is a feminist issue” because fat and fatness challenge the unrealistic expectations of women that are presented by mainstream culture (Bordo, 1993; Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012; Orbach, 1986). However the concept of fatness, the stigmatization of fat, and resulting fat phobia are complicated. The very idea of fatness and the use of the term “fat” are contested by members of the fat activist community. Fat acceptance, body positivity, body politics, fat activism, and fat studies encompass various cultural and identity projects. Though different individuals or groups may have various ideologies and may be working toward

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the same goals, the methods for achieving those goals are diverse. These corporal projects have no singular identity or theoretical basis from which they operate (Colls, 2012 p. 20). Further, the presence of multiple, interlocking yet separate discourses causes many scholars to question the validity of some aspects of the “movement” including the framing of the discourse as a movement. Throughout my analysis, I step away from arguments about the nature of the movement and instead focus on the community itself.

Accordingly, this analysis will refer to the process of achieving fat acceptance as fat activism and fat acceptance because they are used in this way by the community presently being studied. I use these terms interchangeably however; the terms body positivity and body politics are disputed ideas amongst scholars and the communities to which the terms are often applied. Therefore body positive narratives are specific to the philosophy of body positivity (which encompasses health, beauty and moralist claims about fat) and are not interchangeable with fat acceptance ideologies.

As multifaceted as these issues seem, research on the topic thus far has been surprisingly monochromatic. Most of the research that focuses on the questions and inner dialogues within the fat activist framework focus on the relationships and ideas of white women (Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012). The research that comes close to understanding the position of women of color within the ongoing fat acceptance discourse comes from nursing and health journals that explore the performativity of body and preferred body type (see Robinson and Ward, 1991; Allan Mayo and Michel, 1993; Kwan, 2010).

Fat People of Color occupies a contested space and represents a common struggle over ideology of the fat activist movement; often women who employ a fat positive narrative feel conflicted about how their ideas of selfhood work against or help achieve the goals of fat activism. I find that *Fat People of Color* takes an intersectional approach to community, building fat acceptance *and* body positive discourse that is inclusive and representative of the pantheon of fat body experiences to construct counter-narratives of fatness; taking back the power to define one's self and existence in a fat body.

This research contributes to an understudied area of sociological inquiry by presenting an analysis of the experiences of fat women of color within a feminist framework. Some feminist theories of fatness and body size are underpinned with racial and class binaries that reinforce existing hegemonic representations of lower income women and women of color (Peltier and Mizock 2012, p. 95). Ignoring the variation of these experiences further upholds the types of privilege that fat activism and feminism are trying to dismantle. These differences also influence and regulate the relevance of feminism and fat activist discourse to all women, not just white women. Further, fat acceptance lifestyles are diverse and experiences vary according to race. I argue that the distinction in the way that women of color engage with the fat activist framework suggests that women of color may view their bodies differently and abide by a different set of normative beauty ideas than do white women.

Fat Activism, Frameworks, Divisions, & Limitations: A Brief Review

The West, especially the U.S., operates under gendered ideas of beauty that emphasize thinness as the ideal body type. A portion of Americans claim that they would

rather die young than become obese (Brewis, Wutich, Falletta-Cowden, and Rodriguez-Soto, 2011). Though fat activism as a discursive framework is most prominent in the United States where the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) is spearheaded, fat activism and anti-fat phobia have become international issues. Brewis and colleagues (2011) offer a global perspective on body size politics and find that “there has been substantive globalization of slim-body ideals since at least the 1980s” (p. 269).

But What About Health? Situating Health in Fat Activist Discourse

Both globally and locally, researchers and fat activists offer two separate views or frameworks to achieve fat acceptance. A liberationist approach “celebrates fatness and tries to secure for the fat a positively valued experience of difference from the norm” (Colls, 2012, p. 22). Whereas the assimilationist approach works for “equal rights for an unfortunate group of handicapped people” but may “still possibly conceive of fat as a problem” (Colls, 2012, p. 22). The somewhat controversial Health at Every Size (HAES) organization seems to fall under the assimilationist approach because they ascribe to ideas that fail to question the morality of healthful discourse. Opponents to the assimilationist approach argue that instead of assimilating to dominant ideas about the amorality of fat, people should be allowed to occupy whatever size they choose (or do not choose) without fear of judgment and social ramifications such as missed job and relationship opportunities. Moreover, they contend that constructed notions of health fail to acknowledge culturally specific factors and indicators of health (Monaghan, Colls and Evans, 2013).

Meleo-Erwin (2012) also casts doubt on assimilationist views of fat activism and fat politics and instead argues for a framework that emphasizes ownership of the body over the ascribed identity that comes from others. She insists that the narratives presented by proponents of HAES ignore the fact that some individuals' weight is directly linked to their eating habits. Individuals should have the freedom to eat high calorie food if they want to and should not be stigmatized or "demonized" based on moral standards (p. 393). Instead she suggests that we work towards dismantling "moralizing, healthist discourse" (p. 393).

In addition to differences in the theoretical discourse, some also question if the movement is truly a social movement. Meleo-Erwin (2011) marks the distinction between a social movement and an "embodied health movement". She argues that there is not enough proof to validate fat activism as an overall social movement. Whereas Sastre (2014) attempts to answer this question but states that defining the two is a "nebulous task" (p.930). Indeed, it is somewhat difficult to find the line between body positivity and fat acceptance; adding to the disunity of belief in fat activism as a movement. Sastre (2014) bases her understanding of the two on the political value that both ideas offer. She describes body positivity as a lifestyle or philosophy while fat positivity or fat acceptance is defined as a movement with specific political goals (p. 930). Those political goals must encompass the destigmatization of fat – including absolving ourselves of the notion that to be fat means to be lazy, unclean, or otherwise undesirable; whether our bodies are perceived as healthy or not. Body positivity dictates that people should be proud of, and embrace their bodies, but that they should be kind to them by eating healthful foods. Under

a fat acceptance framework, each person is free to decide for her or himself if they want to embrace the issues that may accompany long-term intake of unhealthful foods without being judged on the moral validity of their body's existence. Thus body positivity is distinct from fat activism in that it is still beholden to the idea that a particular body size is acceptable only if it is healthy.

Before delving deeper into a review of the literature I would like to acknowledge the ongoing negotiation of fat acceptance and body positive discourse on both a communal and individual level. For “fat women” and fat activists, these issues are deeply personal as reflected by the choice to reclaim the word fat in hopes of casting off the negative stigma that is associated with the word. Although fat activists know how they want to feel about their bodies, achieving a positive body outlook without holding onto hopes of thinness is often a difficult task (Meleo-Erwin, 2011). Women have to actively choose to fight the belief that thinness equates to happiness. Within the community, there is tension about these desires.

Fat Spaces – No Asylum

Fat accepting spaces (both on- and offline) are intended to be safe arenas of support in which members of various communities can feel free to be themselves without worrying about being policed according to normative beauty standards. In other words, Mead's generalized other (1934) mirrors their reality in a fat body, facilitating the communal experience. Fat women seek out fat spaces as a way of countering oppression by communing with women that they believe occupy social status that is similar to their own (Colls, 2012, p. 21). In these spaces:

Members of stigmatized groups publicly share everyday stories and embrace moments of celebration and pride, as well as shame and fear, using a strategy of cultural resistance. Through these stories, non-normative modes of embodiment – deemed invisible or intimidating through mainstream media – become familiar and ordinary, and thus intelligible (Maor, n.d., p. 7).

Even within fat accepting spaces, Maor (n.d.) found that hegemonic ideologies can still be pervasive. These narratives reinforce female bodies as the passive recipient of the male gaze. In these spaces, fat *and* fat female bodies are not only the passive recipients of the male gaze but they are also stigmatized as these bodies are consumed in a way that is unique to fat accepting spaces. In Colls' (2012) study of a fat positive night club in the UK, she found that men would attend the club to watch women dance but would not pursue them after the club closed – even after frequenting for prolonged periods of time. They also feared bringing their friends around fat women that they were involved with because they did not know how the other men would react to their attraction to fat women. Saguy (2002) argues that this fetishizing of the fat female body is similar to the dominant male gaze present in “thin heterosexuality” in that both treat women as objects of sexual consumption. Fat men, as Kwan (2010) suggests, experience less body oppression due to their male privilege. They are respected because they are men, regardless of their weight or size (p. 155). “Overweight women are uniquely situated in a culture that not only exhibits a strong hierarchy mandating thinness, but also a gendered body hierarchy mandating female thinness” (Kwan, 2010, p. 155).

Swami and Tovee (2012) suggest that a woman's perceived liberation from societal restrictions (by eating whatever she wants without regard for weight gain) becomes sexually arousing in this context. Additionally, men who encourage weight gain

or “feeders” may be attracted to obese women because the relationship between feeder and “feedee” is reminiscent of the typical damsel in distress narrative (Swami and Tovee, 2012). In this sexual relationship, the woman relies singularly on the man as her source of nutritional strength and as a source of sexual gratification (Swami and Tovee, 2012, p. 93; Saguy, 2002, p. 555).

The research done by Swami and Tovee (2012) and Colls (2012) demonstrate that fat women are told that they are sexy by men but are also portrayed as “dirty” or unworthy of love when the men they date refuse to introduce them to their friends and families. Fat heterosexual sex can be a portrayal of difference rather than of sameness (Saguy, 2002, p. 555).

Fat Women and Media

Tuchman (1978) convincingly argues that women were, at the time she was writing, symbolically annihilated from mass media. Presently, fat women are similarly symbolically annihilated from mass media. Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, and Brownell (2003) found that only 14% of the 1,018 roles that were included in their study of primetime television programming, portrayed overweight or obese females. These numbers do not represent even half the percentage of obese women in the U.S. Fat characters were also symbolically removed from public view or stigmatized by the roles that they occupy when they do appear on screen. Greenberg and colleagues (2003) found that these roles supported existing fat-prejudices by maintaining the stigma of fat in areas of romantic relations and displays of affection. They conclude by noting that “overweight

and obese television characters are associated with specific negative characteristics” (p. 1342).

Even when fat characters or roles are the main focus of a program, Peltier and Mizock (2012) maintain that “pseudo-fat acceptance” demonstrates an underlying fat phobia that is pervasive throughout American television programming. While reality television purports to reveal some form of authentic narrative, it may actually be harmful because of the inauthenticity that is often present in reality television. It provides a narrative that privileges male fatness over female fatness; reinforcing the gender privilege (Peltier and Mizock, 2012). Shows like Fox’s *More to Love* offer forced portrayals of fat positive characters. The construction of the female contestants on the show as fat women ultimately supports and privileges fat phobia (Peltier & Mizock, 2012, p. 93).

Beyond privileging fat phobia, pseudo-fat acceptance serves to silence the truth about what the show is portraying, the unreality of fat women’s lived experiences. It can be hard to pursue romantic relationships when both women and men are conditioned to value thinness in a partner. Though many have tried to hold various media accountable for the unachievable representations of beauty that they often relay, media operatives maintain that thinness sells more products than fatness does. But Diedrichs and Lee’s (2011) research presents findings that are oppositional to the belief that models must be thin in order to sell beauty and clothing products. Their tests used average size models in order to measure reactions from women and men. Both groups responded as positively as they did to thin-sized models (Diedrichs and Lee, 2011, p. 1286). While respondents reacted with equal positivity to the products being sold, they still reported having better self-body

image when items were modeled by average size models than when they were modeled by thin-sized models. These findings, in conjunction with those of Peltier and Mizock (2012) as well as those of Greenberg and colleagues (2003) suggest that women *and* men would benefit from accurate portrayals of a variety of body sizes in the media while suffering no loss of economic incentive.

Fat Activism on Social Media

As more people turn to social media as an additional space for community, the fat acceptance movement has followed suit. Earlier research documented *body positivity* in offline spaces but recently, scholars have noted that a majority of *fat activism* takes place online (Meleo-Erwin, 2011). Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) argue that the “fatosphere” is “a loosely interconnected network of online resources aimed at creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat” (p. 279). Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) contend that “fatshionistas” perform fatness on fashion blogs in order to resist normative ideals of thinness and beauty, in this way, “fatshion” blogs do serve as active resistance against anti-fat ideas and fat phobia. Meleo-Erwin (2011) adds that the online fatosphere has become a communal space that is central to fat activism *and* body positivity. Moreover, the communing process allows for the cultivation of a stronger sense of self. Strong online communities allow fat women to take on the role of the other – an other that resembles their selves.

Fat Women of Color

Thus far, I have recounted the overarching framework of the fat acceptance discourse. Notably, however, most of the research is lacking attention to the potentially varying experiences of fat women of color (e.g. Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012). As a fat woman of color, I find that my own life experiences do not mirror many of the accounts provided by white women in the studies I have reviewed. The gap between my lived experience and my scholarly understanding of fat acceptance is, in part, what prompted this study. I wanted to know why and how the experiences of fat women of color diverge from those of their white counter-parts.

Considering the impetus for this exploration, the research surrounding this topic is unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, limited. However, the existing literature seems to confirm my own experiences as a fat woman of color. Allan, Mayo, and Michel (1993) found that “white and black women described attractive body sizes very differently” (p. 330). The responses of their white participants reinforce their overall findings; “An attractive and healthy body to me is Christie Brinkley...I don’t want an ounce of flab” (p. 330). Whereas black women emphasized the “shapeliness, the fit of clothing, some hips and femininity...‘I want to look like a female, like a grown-up woman, not a little kid. I want a waist and some curves and some meat, not straight up and down like those thin white girls’” (p. 330). Overall, they found that white women felt that their partners wanted them to maintain smaller waistlines while black women felt that their partners preferred for them to be a few pounds (or more) overweight.

Kumanyika, Wilson, and Guilford-Davenport (1993) report similar findings. In their study, 40% of overweight black women (defined by BMI) “considered their figures attractive or very attractive”. They also perceived less weight-based discrimination in regards to job acquisition as well as fewer struggles in finding a partner. Further, out of their sample, fewer than 40% of the women were dieting –including women the researchers classified as severely overweight given their high body mass index. Moreover, the women in the study indicated that they relied more on their own self-image, i.e. appearance in the mirror or tightly-fitting clothing to indicate a need for weight loss over the advice of a partner or a close female friend. Overall, their findings supported existing literature that claims that “black women are less preoccupied with dieting and somewhat more tolerant of [being] overweight than white women” (1993, para 22). Further, their findings suggest that “the social environment of black women is less negative about obesity than might be commonly assumed based on data for white women” and that “being overweight is not necessarily synonymous with being unattractive” (1993, para 22).

Rubin, Fitts, and Becker (2003) also argue that desired body types reflect varying cultural persuasions in ethicality and morality of the body (p. 54). In their study, participants of color referenced a “set of body ethics” (2003, p. 55). Black women in the focus groups indicated that style was a dominant factor in the formation of ideas about beauty (p. 56). “I’m gonna have to say for our community, like for us growing up... the emphasis was not on your body. Like you can see someone who is huge, but as long as they’re dressed, like it’s more [a matter] of dress to present yourself” (Rubin et al., 2003, p. 56). Affirming Robinson and Ward’s (1991) results, Rubin and colleagues (2003) also

found that black women actively portrayed certain self-presentations in order to resist mainstream portrayals of black women in media. Robinson and Ward (1991) reported that black women often use hair styles, i.e. natural styles or dreadlocks, as part of an active form of political resistance through self-presentation. Black women use their bodies to portray resistance to dominant narratives of beauty, a point I will return to later in the results and discussion section.

Kwan's (2010) research also suggests that higher levels of what she terms, "body consciousness", leads to forms of "body management" (Kwan 2010, p. 144). Kwan's research demonstrates how "body privilege" advantages thin bodies over larger bodies.

A Western cultural body hierarchy thus creates body privilege, an invisible package of unearned assets that thin or normal-sized individuals can take for granted on a daily basis. These 'normal' bodies, because of size, shape, or appearance, unwittingly avert various forms of social stigma, while simultaneously eliciting social benefits. Their privilege is protected by structures that venerate a narrow conception of beauty, particularly for women (Kwan, 2010, p. 147).

In addition to size differences that can contribute to social stigma or otherness, women of color are doubly othered. Kwan (2010) also found variation in the effects of body privilege amongst individuals from differing racial backgrounds. Surprisingly, although women of color are arguably stigmatized in certain social settings because of race or ethnicity *and* size, overweight black females reported experiencing less body oppression (p. 150). Body oppression was not an everyday concern for black women. In concluding, she cites several factors that protect black women from body oppression: "a broader view of an ideal body type, family support that contributes to the development of independence, strength, and self-esteem; and supportive peer community relationships that value distinctive, individual styles" (Kwan, 2010, p. 158). Supportive peer community

appears to be a trend in discourse about fat black bodies (i.e. Kwan, 2010; Rubin et al 2003; Robinson and Ward 1991). Supportive peers and family members in immediate close social networks help fat black women to develop a positive body image. But online spaces such as *Fat People of Color* facilitate the exchange of experience with strangers, eliminating geographical boundaries; allowing the intergenerational and cross racial sharing of experiences.

Method

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) “is concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences. Therefore it is centrally concerned with the meanings which those experiences hold for the participants” (IPA.uk). IPA as a methodology was born of Symbolic Interactionist perspectives (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). As such, it pairs nicely with American pragmatist interpretations and, of course, a Symbolic Interactionist approach to studying observable phenomena. Adding a layer, I perform a critical reading of the web space *Fat People of Color* to understand how users negotiate societal inequalities through their experience and interaction with the community.

I use IPA to examine the fat activist framework and accompanying dialogue in the *fatosphere*. As a network of blogs and online spaces, the *fatosphere* supplements the mainstream body positive discourse in media (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013). However, for fat people of color, the *fatosphere* facilitates a discourse (replete with symbolism) that is made possible by technology online. Without the webspace *Fat People of Color*, (and others like it) people who are not white would be largely excluded from the fat acceptance

movement. I argue that fat activist resistance online “does ideological work” and acts as a “form of social action” (Van Dijk 2001 p. 353).

Fat People of Color is a Tumblr page that was founded in April of 2011. Since that time, users have posted over 1,600 pages about life as a fat person of color with 639 individual posts. The site invites followers to submit images of themselves that are usually accompanied by thick descriptions of the photos either provided by the person featured in the image or by the moderator of the site. The posts vary by content as some are a singular image with a description while others are devoid of images but full of descriptive text. Both images and text serve as data for analysis precisely because they provide explicit counter-narratives by combining images submitted by members of the community with descriptions of their own bodies about their experience that directly and explicitly challenge normative beauty ideals.

Using the archive function of the website, each post was individually counted, yielding a result of 639 individual posts. Though not every post is original (i.e. it may have been reblogged from another Tumblr), most posts are accompanied by an original contribution that is specific to this site (via the caption or other contextual elements). Additionally “notes” the term Tumblr uses to connote “reposts”, “reblogs”, “comments”, and “likes” was used to source the most influential posts. On the low end, some posts have only one note. Alternatively, the most popular image post was tagged with 87,677 notes while the most popular text-based post was tagged with 137,462 notes. Despite the variation in activity surrounding posts, I include every post in my reading of the site

because I choose to focus on the community as a whole – in that context, the numbers play a less significant role.

Each of the 639 posts were read and annotated (e.g. notes were made about specific hashtags used, style of writing, clothing choices, and references to body size and ethnic and racial identity markers) – taking care to note posts that are in conversation with each other. Themes were generated using the constant comparative method. This method, based in the broadly interpreted grounded theory approach, is concerned with suggesting themes with explanatory potential not testing specific hypotheses. Thus each image was “read” with an eye toward author descriptions of images as well as the positioning of the body and clothing in images. From this initial reading, major discourse themes were quite apparent. In the next step, I compared notes as well as portions of author descriptions to each other. As topics repeated, they confirmed existing themes. Similar images were compared to each other within categories to ensure continuity and authenticity. This iterative process resulted in the creation of three main themes and various subthemes that I discuss in the following section:

1. Resistance in the everyday
 - 1.1. Explicit discourse on exclusion
 - 1.2. Fashion as resistance to normative beauty standards
2. Intersectional examinations of fat politics
3. I own my body – Not a fetish

To interpret these themes, I situate them socio-politically while exploring the discursive limitations and affordances associated with self, community, and identity

politics on Tumblr. The images that are presented here were chosen because they represented a particular theme well and perhaps more importantly because the people in the image gave permission for their images to be used in the context of this research. Full written permission was granted by each of the participants to reproduce their photos. Further, all comments were collected with IRB approval. Names have also been changed to protect participants unless they explicitly asked to have their names or screen names included. To provide additional transparency and added validity to claims made here, participants were invited to read this article before publication. In the following sections I examine how participants use their images to contribute to new body identities and form an active community of support online for a generally marginalized community – fat people of color.

Results & Discussion: Intersectional Body Positivity

Fat People of Color is a tool that facilitates discourse on dominant beauty narratives for people of color that is “dedicated to encouraging and showcasing media of fat (and non-‘straight sized’) people of color. [It is] anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-classist, anti-queer hatred, anti-transphobic, and generally an all inclusive space”. This description from a moderator is representative of the type of discourse that is facilitated by the webspace, *Fat People of Color*. In addition to creating a space for people of color to celebrate fat identity, moderators also draw attention to the white privilege that is inherent to white feminism. White women have historically excluded women of color in feminist discourse (Carby, 1997). The following posts highlight the privilege with which fat white women get to operate. Instead of reaffirming whiteness as the default, *Fat People of Color*

works to unite people of color across the sexual identity, body identity, and gender identity spectrum. Moderators and community members engage intersectional discourse to actively negotiate mass circulated rhetoric on black, brown, queer, and fat bodies.

I think my least favorite thing about the fat acceptance movement is when white people act like it is more difficult to be a white fat person than a fat person of color.

There was this post in the fatshion tag a while back about this woman complaining about how the nearest store that had clothes in her size was in the 'getto' and she wanted acknowledgement that white women could be fat too. She didn't want to go shop next to the scary brown women to get her bras.

And this one time there was an article about this plus size fashion show [where] most, or all of the models were people of color. And someone left a comment like, "That's nice, but what about positive body image for white women?" I shit you not. Someone said that.

What white people have to understand is that society's beauty standards are in favor of whiteness. Being fat does not erase you[r] white privilege by any means. Being fat does not mean you experience anything similar to racism.

People of color get to have spaces. We get to have our fashion shows. We get to not need to cater to whiteness all the goddamn time.

Nearly every body positive space I have seen is run by white people and most of the contributors are white people. White people, you have your space. Don't complain when we won't let you into ours.

~Jen

The phrase "*That's nice, but what about positive body image for white women?*" highlights the need to assert whiteness into the conversation. Even in the societal margins, people of color's ideas about their bodies are still expected to conform to the standards of white people and compared to whiteness. Moderators play an integral role in facilitating the discursive nature of *Fat People of Color*—they serve as gatekeepers to the community. The moderators of the site work to fill the gap that Jen speaks about above by creating a

space that is inviting to all people of color, regardless of other signifiers of identity such as class, sexuality, and gender identity. They repeatedly make mention of the space as a communal resource and a safe haven; a separate entity from the mainstream fat activist circle. Jen's post also addresses another layer of meaning, the absence of intersectional approaches to fat acceptance. White women don't address other identities because they have fat white privilege that fat people of color do not. They are othered on the basis of their size but not their race. Addressing fatness as a person of color necessitates resistance of ideologies and stereotypes at meeting points of identities. In the following, FPOC moderators reposted a widely shared letter to white fat activists that explicitly addresses the need for intersectional resistance and counter-narratives about fat bodies of color.

This letter is written to our fat community to express great concern over what appears to be a growing divide among us. We continue to see fat activism growing and our community expanding, and while this brings great joy, it also becomes more and more apparent that we are not doing the work to prevent our community from being divided along race and socio-economic lines. We are not having the hard conversation needed to build the truly solid foundation of inclusivity and diversity that we rest much of our argument of anti-oppression upon. This is particularly important since both government programs and the diet industry have been specifically singling out and targeting people of color in recent campaigns...

While fat activism in the United States continues to be predominantly white, there is an emerging wave of fat People of Color (POC) activists moving out into all aspects of our communities. Joining with fat POC activists who have been working for years to create space for the unique challenges faced by POC within our mainstream diet culture, this has the potential to be a time of enormous shift in the perception and face of fat activism in the U.S. We are excited to be a part of this paradigm shift, and to see more of our experience reflected in the work of fat activism...

When open and authentic conversations about race and class fail to happen, we see these attitudes in the ways that people are left out of conversations. We see people who live with great privilege speaking as authorities on the impact of racism and classism, without basing their approach in the ally model. We see large size acceptance campaigns launched without coalition among diverse groups, thoughtful discussion around inclusivity, or well-

versed allies on hand to help answer questions and facilitate community conversation. We see white allies depending heavily on POC and poor people to discern, direct, and implement the work of addressing these concerns within our communities only after or in response to work being presented that does not include their voices. We see white allies responding defensively and closing down conversations when presented with clear questions about taking steps to do their own work of finding ally mentors, addressing the ways their own acknowledged and unacknowledged privilege directly affects members of their community, and engaging in thoughtful dialogue about the interconnectedness of oppressions and the diverse ways those oppressions affect different members of our communities.

In turn, thousands have responded with letters of encouragement, affirming the idea that fat spaces for people of color are limited. The fatosphere is white and mainstream fat activism is experienced by people of color as exclusionary. Thus the need for the Tumblr, *Fat People of Color* is deeply recognized.

You folks are doing a great job! I would really like to see this space remain exclusively for Fat identified people of color, because this might be the ONLY SPACE on tumblr to do both of those things. I also appreciate that this blog isn't all about the haters, you know? I know we all catch shit from the world, but it's not our job to educate the ignorant, and when we respond to every mean anon, the blog becomes about them and not about us.

~ Shantal

Shantal's post not only speaks to the void of representation in fat activism but also references anonymous posts from those who disagree with the fat acceptance agenda. In her observation, the moderators' refusal to post and respond to dissenters contributes to the value of the space. This affordance is specific to Tumblr. The "Ask" function allows users to post questions anonymously or with their handles. Moderators of blogs can then choose to respond publicly or privately – giving the community some degree of control over who can participate in their community. In addition to protecting the community, the

“Ask” function also serves as a wading pool for newcomers. If people are uncertain about the appropriateness of content, then can ask anonymously without consequence. For example, anonymous asked: “Is it okay for biracial people to submit their photos?” The moderator publicly responded in hopes of encouraging the original questioner and future inquiries.

Fashion as Resistance to Normative Beauty Standards

As moderators work to protect and encourage the continued growth of a much needed space for discussion and connection, users respond by submitting images of themselves that capture a variety of experiences and presentations of self. Those who post, submit commentary about their images that range from everyday life, fashion, where to purchase clothing, and explicit counter-narratives that challenge existing paradigms. But even when users are not explicit about their defiance, I argue that every post acts as a form of resistance simply by virtue of being proud of a fat body of color. Pride in the fat body of color resists the framework of shame that we have become accustomed to. Further, the discursive power of selfies and other actions online has already been demonstrated by (Williams and Aldana 2015; Brock 2012). Posting a picture or selfie communicates information to other users who are familiar with that cultural conversation. Even when users do not explicitly caption images, selfies express gender, racial, and ethnic counter-frames (Burns, 2015; Williams and Aldana Marquez, 2015). But here, users do create captions that specifically address the identity being employed. Thus, selfies posted on FPOC communicate layers of meaning through the image itself and the words that accompany it



Figure 1 Spilt photo; One close up and one full body photo.

Image description: split photo. One close up and one full body photo. Person wears a floral chiffon robe, dark top and black leggings, red lipstick.

In the picture you see me, a half African American and half Navajo. I look like an art teacher... But I'm not xD. Welcome to the story of my life~ (reproduction permission granted)**

The image and accompanying description explicitly reference a multiethnic perspective while conveying aspects of their life story – drawing attention to the type of intersectional, radical act that is presented by the lived fat body experience such as getting dressed and celebrating fat bodies. As argued previously, the act of posting the selfie serves dual purpose, to affirm one's sense of self and it also acts as a type of resistance to commonly circulated racialized stereotypes (Williams and Aldana Marquez, 2015). Unique to FPOC however, is the nature of the space. Unlike public conversations on Twitter, public discussion and communities are moderated. Tumblr blogs such as FPOC represent a mediated public sphere. Users are expected to engage in an intersectional manner, as per the description of the site. Community members regulate each other's behavior. Anyone who participates is expected to adhere to anti-ableist, anti-racist, and anti-sizeist discourse. Alternatively, in spaces where users coalesce around a cause via the

use of a hashtag, users participate with a greater risk of encountering opposing views that may be potentially triggering.

Thus, negotiation of self that takes place on FPOC is fundamentally grounded in fat acceptance within a true *Gemeinschaft*. In this space that negotiation is powerful because the people in the images are outside of what is considered normative even when they are engaging in everyday activities such as discussing fashion. Instead of being the passive recipient of other's ideas, those who post selfies sometimes do so to reconstruct their own narratives (Williams and Aldana Marquez, 2015). Thus when FPOC community members post of a selfie or a picture of an outfit's composition or where an outfit came from, it becomes an act of defiance for several reasons. Most obviously, positioning larger bodies as attractive and desirable defies beauty standards of thinness. The choice of clothing also communicates visual meaning to other viewers. Fat bodies have a harder time finding clothing in stores because retailers refuse to make them in sizes outside of the usual range. Companies that do make extended sizes usually charge women more for larger sizes while comparable sizing in men's lines does not change price. When clothing fits well and is enjoyable, sharing the outfit not only helps others to find clothes, the wearing of the item encourages retailers to continue expanding clothing sizes. Tumblr's user interface is also useful in this regard. Users can easily repost or reblog an image and the details about where to purchase clothing to their personal blogs.

Sharing where clothing can be posted also helps build community in that people communicate about which brands honor their bodies instead of trying to hide them. Note

that Guadalupe, in a crop top, talks about feeling freedom. An inner freedom that has rejected other's ideas about what a body is "supposed" to look like.



Figure 2 Woman in the desert displaying plus sized clothing.
How about feeling freedom within yourself?
Photo by: Kevin Wilford Photography
Clothing from Forever21+ & Boots from River Island UK

An Intersectional Examination of Fat Politics

Intersectional approaches to discourse on fatness emerged as a distinct theme and represents a large portion of the conversation that occurs on FPOC. Community members often acknowledge the intersections of their identities and harness them to further celebrate the diversity of fat bodies.



Figure 3 Intersectional identity frames

Some of my intersectionality makes up the visual frame of who I am and I will never apologize for this. To all my fat, brown, poor people out there, I feel you, I love you. It can be so fkn hard to navigate in this racist, colorist, classist, sizeist society and we're some tough people who keep going but we have power.

~ Marisole (Permission granted for reproduction)

Marisole's post (figure 3) discusses the additional issues that contribute to the construction of fat bodies in American media. As earlier literature has shown, fat people are viewed as lazy or morally reprehensible (Colls, 2012; Meleo-Erwin, 2012; Monaghan et al. 2013). In the minds of most, fat people are fat by choice. They choose to overeat or not to work out. Fat by choice is not often the case however, as many struggle with inadequate food choices because of income constraints. Still, many *are* fat by choice or by some other contributing health factor and yet they are still healthy. Discourse on this webspace offers people of color a space to negotiate their own personal definition of health and size while being mindful of all of the various social spaces that they occupy. Elements of Marisole's photo and accompanying description specifically allow for a discourse on

poverty and size. Marisole's stance is one that is resistant to the idea that women should take up less space, with legs firmly planted and hands on hips. The setting of the image, a mobile home park, also directly engages the poverty narrative that dictates that one should be ashamed of their social standing or income, and clearly she is not. Community members of *Fat People of Color* actively produce counter-narratives and re-define what it means to live in a fat body through their images that powerfully assert what fatness means to them. The words placed over the image remove any doubt about the discursive nature of the photo: "I will never apologize for being fat brown & poor". Instead of succumbing to the expected societal norms, Marisole has decided to resist. The 3,317 reposts of this image on various blogs across the Internet are indicative of literal and figuratively shared resistance.

Resistance to Fetishization

In addition to creating counter-narratives about fat bodies, *Fat People of Color* also actively resists the fetishizing of fat bodies of color with elective disclaimers that accompany the images:

Being positive about my body is so hard some days because truly, I've been told my whole life that my body is wrong and takes up too much space. But I've definitely come a long way. Last month, I would never have posted pictures that showed this much of my arms, stomach, thighs, etc. Last year, I would never have tied this shirt up, worn it without a tank top, and I SURE AS HELL would not have taken or posted pictures in it.

So these pictures are a giant FUCK YOU to everyone who has ever tried to make me feel bad about my body. It's a fuck you to all of the people who wanted to like me in private because they couldn't handle my body. It's a fuck you to everyone who has ever offered me dieting or exercise tips that I never fucking asked for. And most of all it's a fuck you to everyone who fetishes the fat body. I don't want your fucking help. I am not your fucking fetish. I will not hate my body to fit your standards

******DONT REBLOG THIS TO YOUR FETISH/PORN BLOGS that's not what these are for***

~ Adriana

Disclaimers like the one above are common throughout the site and are a direct commentary on the exploitative male gaze. The warning “not for porn, bbw (big beautiful women), fetish or whatever blogs” is likely posted as a result of previous images appearing in those very locations. The necessity for such disclaimers affirms previous work (Saguy 2015) that theorized that fat bodies are fetishized in private. Adriana’s post also speaks to Colls (2012) observations – that men who fetishize fat bodies are reluctant to express interest in fat women in public: “It’s a fuck you to all of the people who wanted to like me in private because they couldn’t handle my body”.

As Adriana’s post demonstrates, fat people that participate in the fat acceptance lifestyles constantly negotiate for themselves what it means to be healthy, attractive, and fat. She alludes to the emotional labor associated with balancing these ideas and resisting dominant beauty frameworks. In addition to fatigue associated with racial macroaggressions, fat people of color also expend unnecessary energy dealing with “dieting or exercise tips that [were] never fucking asked for” or being made to feel ashamed of their body size. Another FPOC community member, Simone (figure 4), uses her images to provide commentary on the fetishizing of the fat body:



Figure 4 Fat mermaid: not for porn.

NOT FOR PORN, BBW, FETISH OR WHATEVER BLOGS. I don't care what nomenclature you have for your blog. If you post a lot of explicit content, don't reblog me. I think I've made myself clear.

#fatmermaid #fatkini #fatspo #mermaiding #effyourbeautystandards #honormycurves #plussize #alternative #bluehair #naturalhair #fatshion #blackmermaid #POC #WOC #pinup #africanamericanmermaid

Adding a layer of resistance beyond “not for porn, BBW, Fetish or whatever blogs”, Simone also creates counter-ideology with her statement “eff your beauty standards”. Her hashtags “pinup”, “fatshion”, and “honormycurves” demonstrate that she views her black fat body as not only beautiful according to her own standards but worthy of being emulated.

This image presents an additional opportunity to explore the meaning-making process that occurs on FPOC via the affordances associated with Tumblr. Hashtags become particularly important as they facilitate the exchange of layers of meaning and conversation among community members. The hashtags in the post above speak volumes

about the discursive power of the webspace Fat People of Color. First, hashtags yield insight about the motivations behind posting the image. The hashtags touch on size, natural ethnic hair, beauty standards, and race. In addition to telling users outside of the community not to use their pictures for unintended purposes, Simone also makes identity claims about natural hair, gender, and size. Next, hashtags provide a record of similar claims. Specifically, users can click on a hashtag and see what other users have said about the same subject. Thus, discourse and experiential exchange are not constrained by time. No matter how old a post is, if a user is willing, they can find similar posts from as far back as the website's origin. Users can then recall previous dialogue about similar topics, enabling discourse to transcend time. Because of the multiplicative ability of hashtags, users can communicate several different ideas at a time. Simone communicates with other users about her body and hair both in the present, past, and future. Sequentially, visitors to the site will construct discourse with the possibility of engaging with Simone's hashtags. In this case, the post has been shared, reposted, or referenced nearly 25,000 times since it first appeared on Fat People of Color.

Conclusion

Though it is disheartening that fat activism and fat acceptance frameworks do not readily include a space for women of color, the network of fat accepting spaces of color is rapidly growing, and with it, the discourse on the intersections of race, gender, class, and body size. Fat women of color are committed to dismantling heteronormative, male-centered fat phobic imagery and ideologies by creating counter-narratives about their own bodies.

As the network of fat blogs and websites expand, it becomes easier to observe the discursive nature of sites like Fat People of Color; cross postings, and reposts indicate just how commonplace narratives like the few I have shared are. With posts like Simone's having well over 24,000 reposts across various Tumblr pages, it is apparent that spaces for fat people of color are valued and cherished. Beyond being appreciated, the interconnectedness of the posts across the platform empowers the people who submit their images and commentaries while also making space for a conversation about race within a predominantly white discourse.

Tumblr – Affordances and Hindrances

In using IPA for my exploration of FPOC, I chose to conduct this study as a participant. The affordances I observe here are a result of my personal experience as a user as well as that of the other community members in FPOC. I do not intend to claim that the affordances I have discussed here represent an exhaustive list of affordances associated with Tumblr or even this particular page. Moreover, there are several particularities of Tumblr that do not best facilitate critical discourse (a point I will return to in the following chapter). As touched on above, platforms such as Twitter and Instagram offer an opportunity to dialogue with people that hold opposing views. If the goal of critical discourse is to advance a political cause, this is hard to do when political lines are not being crossed. Is there space for safety and mental wellness when working toward the advancement of a political goal? There must be. In fact, a social movement that is so focused on body politics would be remiss to compromise the mental health of participants. Still the tension of mitigated vs. somewhat unmitigated discourse on Twitter and

Instagram is tangible. In light of this tension, I theorize spaces like FPOC as a necessary safe haven where like-minded individuals can recharge for the more public battles that occur mainly online.

Limitations

In the spirit of Fat People of Color's inclusivity, I acknowledge that the space is dedicated to more than just the liberation of fat female, cis-gender bodies. Men and gender nonconforming individuals also contribute to the wealth of this space by sharing their fat body experiences. Because this chapter critiques dominant feminist frameworks, I decided to focus this initial study on women who post. Additionally, given the overabundance of women who post to the site, it seemed unfair to make generalized sentiments from such a small number of representatives. In the future, I hope to devote greater attention to the experiences of fat, queer, gender-non-conforming and men of color as this area of research is gravely understudied.

Implications – Towards a New Understanding

Tumblr pages like *Fat People of Color* represent a framework that is divergent from normative body positivity. Moralistic discourse about health is noticeably absent, suggesting that for women of color, ideas about fatness and size fall more closely in line with a liberationist approach that “celebrates fatness and tries to secure for the fat a positively valued experience of difference from the norm” (Colls, 2012, p. 22). Even though they use body positive language which often falls in line with assimilationist approaches, the discourse that occurs on FPOC leans heavily towards liberationist ideologies. Moreover the intersectional approach of this space that the moderators work

so diligently to cultivate, helps shape FPOC as a communal space. We've learned from earlier studies that communal or group identity may impact body image and self-esteem (Keys, 2009). Communal fat spaces contribute to overall health because mental health plays an essential role. And indeed, FPOC has all of the markers of both classical and contemporary theorizations of community in a sociological sense: a feeling of inclusion or togetherness (*gemeinschaft*), a network of support and social cohesion (Hampton, 2002).

This study also revealed some departures from previous literature on fat Latina women. According to previous literature (Rubin et al. 2003; Neri et al. 2005), fat Latina women were more likely to be ashamed of fat bodies and preferred an assimilationist approach. However, I was surprised and encouraged to find that fat Latina women also participate in discourse on fat bodies of color. Whether this shift in participation is in response to less communal support offline or an indication of *more* familial and communal support offline cannot be concretely determined from analysis of images and text alone, but my findings suggest that fat Latina women are “fat brown & down: down for the fat poc revolution” (Yessi, participant).

Finally, I want to draw attention to the absence of fat accepting discourse offline. This discourse is almost entirely occurring online in the “fatosphere”. The absence of these discussions in the mainstream media is a form of symbolic annihilation of a great deal of fat Americans and fat Americans of color. Misrepresentation and the absence of representation of fat bodies harms all of us in the long run by presenting outlandish standards for body size and distorted, culturally insensitive narratives about health. To

conclude, I would like to acknowledge the ever-shifting nature of this research. Because of the subject matter of these platforms, the women featured here are particularly likely to shift their ideas and goals for fat acceptance as they participate in fat accepting communities. It is not my intent to say that any one of these comments wholly represents any of the women portrayed. Nor can I fully represent the character of the platform, Fat People of Color in its entirety. The sentiments are representative of ongoing negotiation of self and others – a constant examination of several identities at once.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION: THE SEARCH FOR “AUTHENTIC”

COMMUNITY

In this dissertation, I set out to demonstrate that Mead’s conception of mind, self, and society as it relates to the relationship between self, experience, and community operate on fundamentally different levels for various groups. Specifically, the communal and group processes as they relate to individual identity (and vice versa) in black communities are markedly distinct from similar processes for white individuals. Further, the conception of *Gemeinschaft* or true community cannot be homogenously applied to the “generalized other” – at least not in the manner that Mead (1934) intended for it to be used. In my theorization, the Symbolic Interactionist perspective on the interaction of self and community must be paired with Tonnie’s (1957) conception of *Gemeinschaft*. Only with his description of community as an entity that is defined by “mutual furtherance and affirmation” can we typify that which constitutes “the generalized other”. Because for Mead, “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called ‘the generalized other’. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the *whole* community” (1934, p. 154). Thus, the negotiation of self is directly impacted by the nature of the community in which one finds themselves.

In the preceding chapters, I present two case studies in which I first establish a contemporary understanding of Tonnie’s (1957) conception of *Gemeinschaft* in Internet culture for black users. Having fleshed out the meaning of online community by using Black Twitter as an example, I then move beyond it to expand my study to include other

online communities that exist specifically for people of color in order to further examine the experience of self and community. Hence, in observing similar patterns of experiential meaning-making processes on both Black Twitter and *Fat People of Color*, I make several conclusions and observations. First, I have established that Tonnies' feeling of togetherness is not universal. There is no great community. In fact, for Tonnies, great or universal community is an oxymoron. It does not exist. Rather, community as opposed to society (Gesellschaft), "is based upon intimate knowledge of each other in so far as this is conditioned and advanced by direct interest of one being in the life of the other, and readiness to take part in his joy and sorrow" (1887/2002, p. 47). Communities within Black Twitter and those on FPOC fit this descriptive.

Next, I note that many of the perspectives held by earlier theorists (i.e. Gemeinschaft and the generalized other) are disjointed from the contemporary study of Internet culture. Future research should attempt to converge classical understandings of offline phenomena such as community with newer observations of empirical evidence of online community, culture, and society in light of the Postmodern turn.

Since the dawn of the Internet age, or rather at the time that it became available to the general public, the Internet and the emerging media that it brought with it, have created polarizing views and theoretical viewpoints. Many theorized that the Internet is the apex of cultural growth. For a time in the late 80s and early 90s, sociologists and communications scholars thought of the Internet and other mobile / digital technologies as the great equalizer – hypothesizing that gender, race, and class would no longer matter as much as they had in the past. Because of its great accessibility, some of these scholars

believed that education and information would be more available than ever thus closing the social inequality gap. The hyper-enthusiasm about Internet access or Internet utopianism, existed (and still exists) in tandem with Internet dystopian. As quickly as enthusiasm grew for the Internet and emerging media, fear about its many uses also spread. Perhaps the greatest anxiety – people were concerned that the “great community” may be disrupted (Dewey, 1927). Somehow, the Internet and “new” media would create greater social distance between individuals instead of bridging social gaps as Dewey theorized that “older” forms of media might.

Since the emergence of Internet cultures and the study of those cultures, these two bodies of thought, Internet access as utopia or dystopia have been pitted against each other. I argue that the Internet, media, and social media are neither inherently bad nor good. Instead, these tools are used by people all over the world in ways that may progress and / or hinder social progress through a continual meaning-making process. There is evidence of utopia and dystopia in every aspect of the Internet and Internet use, including social media, television streaming programs, online education, machine learning, and beyond.

Because social media, especially Twitter offer such an open view of racialized interactions, they are paramount to our understanding of 21st century race relations. Social media allow for multiple layers of identity negotiation and class and racial conflict in the same space. Though the many layers are interwoven and complex, the ability to see how multiple races, ethnicities, classes, genders, and sexual orientation identities interact provides sociologists with a view that we’ve never had before.

Members of various groups can and do watch each other and often participate in territory that was previously unknown to them because of the level of accessibility of social media. As demonstrated by the reaction of NFL players' to the Paula Deen debacle, race is actively negotiated in and through social media. This ongoing negotiation informs individuals' versions of self, in light of others, further contributing to the socialization of race.

Considerations: Race & Postemotional Community Online?

But what happens when racialized portrayals of self are contested? What makes someone authentically black online? As researchers, how do we know that the subjects being studied are indeed people of color? Does the presence of interlopers disrupt the social cohesion and support that online communities offer?

In response to these types questions, the use of Walter Benjamin's work has seen a resurgence. Due to Benjamin's analysis of authenticity in reproductions, his work is particularly relevant to Internet research and online communities. The authenticity of representations have come into question: reproductions of art, representations of humans online (avatars), representations of emotions, representations of death and violence (think police dash and body camera footage). When we experience these things within online community, are we experiencing them or merely a representation?

The Internet exists in postmodernity yet I insist on using premodern theorists to analyze it. I do so because the phenomena of self and community have remained largely the same. The medium with which we connect and negotiate self has changed. Our selves and communities exist across multiple platforms fluidly—online and offline. However, the

existence of the screen as a mediating factor cannot be ignored. Screen culture is distinctly postmodern (Baudrillard, 1986). Therefore, concerning screen culture, the “we”, “community”, and “society” that we speak of is always postmodern.

Consequently, I suggest, via Baudrillard, Benjamin, and Mestrovic (1997), that a new type of authenticity of representation, experience, and community exists online. Though Benjamin’s (1936 / 1992) work is currently in vogue among scholars who study digital media, diverse interpretations of authenticity divide some of this work. Scholars who ascribe to critical theory interpretations favor Benjamin’s idea that authenticity is uniquely connected to the space and time in which the work originated. However, the authenticity that these scholars seek, a truly Benjaminesque authenticity, imbued with an almost ethereal aura that comes from being situated in time, place, and ritual is no longer the type of authenticity that we experience. In today’s world of simulacra and the hyperreal, we crave the auratic type of authenticity but instead we consume a postemotional authenticity. “Postemotionalism involves the use of ‘dead’ emotions from a nostalgized tradition and inner-directed past, that are almost always vicarious and conspicuous and are treated as object to be consumed. The emotions do not disappear but are transformed” (1997, p. 62). Postemotional authenticity then, is that state of being copied, without origin, is unverifiable and is only valid as a theoretical tool when it is situated in the context of simulacra and individual experience.

In proper context, Mestrovic’s use of dead here suggests a different type of emotional experience. I argue that in postmodern, racialized online spaces, different experiences can and do emerge out of shared consumption of socio-historical imagery and

representations. Moreover, digitally shared experiences of pain or joy for black communities can result in the strengthening of social bonds while the same imagery can drive away people outside of the community, in the larger society.

For example, social issue campaigns on Twitter and Facebook invite users to change the world through tweets, posts, and likes; however, those movements lose momentum quickly. These types of viral social movements rely on the postemotional nature of social media users. Users that have grown up in a postemotional society are accustomed to the cyclical nature of emotional displays by the media. Though social media can facilitate the diffusion of awareness and knowledge, awareness of an issue does not always coincide with a willingness on the part of white users to address it nor does it automatically predispose people to mitigate existing social inequality.

I suggest that postemotional apathy on the part of white users may be impeding progress toward social justice. Social media users are constantly bombarded with dramatizations that they do not truly experience because they do not belong to the community. They are instead bombarded with the *representation* of the pain of people of color. There should be no surprise about users' inability to connect issues with the real and legitimate hardship of others. Perhaps the notion of Marcuse's (1964) happy consciousness is more applicable to the racial divide in postemotional society than it was to his original audience. The happy consciousness emerges in response to repressive desublimation – the idea that citizens can be momentarily placated by the gradual decline of social injustice. The numbing effect of desublimation allows the controlling powers to exercise control over a seemingly liberated society. Concerning screened images, theorists

like Walter Benjamin (1936/2009) have warned about the potentially negative, desensitizing effects of mass media.

Contemporary scholars argue that the effect of violence in the media can be captured by cultural spillover theory. “Cultural spillover theory holds that the more a society tends to legitimate the use of violence to attain ends for which there is widespread social approval, the greater the likelihood of illegitimate violence” (Bloom & Smith, 1996 p.65). To expand my argument, I remind the reader that “inner-city” and “inner-city violence” are code words for representations of blackness. Thus, when social media users consume representations of blackness en masse, they become blasé. They may be unable to distinguish between authentic suffering at the hands of people of color and representational, fictive suffering. Though they are aware of social issues, social media users have become so accustomed to the postemotional dramatizations circulating in the mediated worlds of old and new media that the apparent display of emotions on newsfeeds is mistaken for lessening oppression.

Considerations: Digitally Mediated Blackface

On the other side of the same coin, some individuals may be drawn in by representations of blackness and portrayals of black pain. Instead of rejecting these portrayals they seem to buy into them. Visceral reactions to racialized commentary online can be observed in the comments on almost every news media post. People on this end of the spectrum resist the representations of violence against communities of color, but to do so, they must believe in them; even if this belief is miniscule.

Still others resist by mocking these communities. I am returning to a question asked in the beginning of this chapter, “how do we know that those participating in online spaces are authentically black?” This is an important question because people enjoy catfishing their audiences (Williams, 2016). Certainly people attempt to participate in online communities but their presence is often revealed by those communities. As discussed earlier, individuals gain entry into communities because they can perform the code. They must pass an authenticity test (in a postemotional sense) even if this test takes time. There will be occurrences when individuals can participate in digitally mediated blackface however their ability to disrupt the community is limited because of the constant meaning-making process. Imposters are buffered out.

Final Considerations

Undoubtedly, we will continue to question the nature of self and community online. I have attempted to contribute to this area of research by expanding our theoretical bounds. The digitally mediated self exists within the context of digitally mediated communities just as the relationship between self and community exist offline. As people become more immersed in screen culture, the break in offline and online selves will continue to diminish. In fact, for many, it already has already all but disappeared. In using a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, I have explored the relationship of self and community in racialized communities – hoping that this area of study will garner greater attention.

As a final conclusion, I note that as discipline, sociologists have resisted the transition to media and screen culture as an area of study. Future work should embrace the

Internet as a sight for exploration of the same types of study that scholars conduct offline. I hope that my research will contribute to the expansion of sociological theory. Specifically, future work should continue to bridge the gap between widely accepted classical theorists such as Mead and the study of online community. A close reading of works such as his will help demonstrate that society still operates via the mechanisms sociologists know to be true. The Internet has simply multiplied greater opportunities for human interaction. With greater opportunities, society also creates new interpretations of those interactions.

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