# The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community

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## Abstract

For African Americans, the legacy of oral communication within the community is being transferred to online spaces. Blogging provides a platform with features that mirror many of the components of the Black barbershop. The barber and beauty shop symbolize a space of retreat, wherein African Americans have formed alternate publics used to critique the dominant culture, foster resistance, and strengthen African American institutions. Analysis of nine African American–authored blogs using a method of critical technocultural discourse analysis demonstrates that each blog used traditional Black rhetorical strategies while making modifications to contemporary goals. The strategies involve modifications made to traditional Black humor and folktales. The writing style is highly performative, yet relies upon participant interaction. This reliance on orality is a necessary force in the maintenance of cultural traditions that have long worked to assist in group definition and acts of resistance in political power struggles. By utilizing modified song, narrative, and fables to articulate resistance and craft African American identity, African American online oral culture persists as a strategy to house political discourse within the often hidden enclave spaces of the digital barbershop.

## Keywords

blogging, African American bloggers, Black oral culture, barbershop, rhetorical strategy

For the African American community, the Black barbershop has been used to form and sustain counterpublics in a way that broadens the concept of political discourse. The legacy of Black oral culture demonstrates that political discourse of African Americans occurs in spaces that have been deemed apolitical by the dominant group. Oral cultural forms in the everyday and mediated communication of the African American community have shaped and modified racial identity for African Americans. While blogs provide features that replicate the offline Black barbershop experience, a critical examination of the use of blogs by African Americans to create an online space for political discourse is largely missing from the current literature.

Given the legacy of Black oral culture in the physical space of the barbershop and mediated spaces where African Americans gather to form counterpublics, this study examines online blogging communities for their potential to do the same. Past scholarship has referenced the idea of the barbershop to explain the "third space" that the Internet provides for African Americans (Brock, 2009). Absent, though, is a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to understand the production of African American oral culture as utilized within blog sites and within the discourse present on

those sites. Although scholarship in multiple disciplines has explored the oral culture of African Americans, blogs as a medium have not been sufficiently studied as replicating physical and mediated counterpublics that foster political debate and dialog for this community. The legacy of oral culture and Black counterpublics suggests that themes of political consequence emerge wherever counterpublics form. Through the process of CTDA, we can examine how the structure of blogs mirrors features of the barbershop, the rhetorical strategies employed on these sites, and why blogs fulfill a need within the African American community to create alternate publics by examining the political themes of discourse.

Twitter and other social media sites provide the means for African Americans and other populations to utilize some features of oral culture to engage in a critique of the dominant culture. However, the design and affordances of the platform fall short of allowing for the creation of a separate sphere of

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discourse that provides ownership (control and profit [social or economic] for the proprietor), builds upon the high-content culture of participants, and whose features best make use of the rhetorical strategies of Black oral cultures. Blog sites, unlike Twitter, provide a platform where the primary blogger and a community of involved commenters can utilize narratives, storytelling, extended metaphors, and other features of oral culture to preserve Black culture and challenge the dominant culture. The blog serves as a new barbershop, a means of cultivating active participation and re-mixing the features of oral culture present in shop talk.

## Black Oral Culture as a Rhetorical Strategy

Rethinking the online Black public sphere from a feminist and afro-centrist perspective begins with an interrogation of the role that orality plays in the unique experience of those of African descent in the United States. The United States was built and expanded with an emphasis on paper and literacy. Literacy has heavily influenced the structure of the government, our relationship to religion, and our creation of hierarchical systems of power distribution and social organization. Time-based media, such as speech, are limited by their extension into time and favor stability, community, and tradition. Space-based media extend influence and facilitate rapid change, development, and "progress" (Innis, 1950). In the United States, the dominant group's emphasis on space-based media links our mode of communication to our quest for dominance, order, and power. Literacy has been privileged in Western society for its ability to separate ideas from the thinkers and create an "objectivity" that orality does not (Innis, 1950). While literacy contributes greatly to contemporary society, orality adds symbolic complexity, individual creativity, and complex audience relations (Finnegan, 1988). Speaking provides the opportunity for reaction, whereas writing offers delayed response (Sidran, 1971). In prioritizing the rational, literacy has moved the dominant US culture away from an appreciation of emotionality and community. While writing has seemingly made us more "civilized" through the creation of the individual, the provision of continuity of time and space, and the uniformity of codes, and our ability to be more expressive and communal is diminishing greatly (McLuhan, 1962, 1964/1994).

Reliance on literacy, print, and now electronic communication have been instrumental in the maintenance of dominant US culture. Black culture was created and transformed in a process that included slavery and the merging of practices, traditions, and modes of communication of various Western African ethnic groups and colonial American (European) traditions. The hybrid culture that formed in the United States is strongly connected to African traditions of orality. Orality has implications for knowledge and recall, and possesses several salient features. In a primary oral culture, a person can know only as much as she can recall, making mnemonics important cognitive and social tools and proverbs emerge as a means to evaluate decisions. Oral cultures are not objective but empathic in their speech. The interiority of sound places man at the center of his universe within a society of primary orality. These features separate oral cultures from print-based cultures (Ong, 1988/2002). The traditional conception of the bourgeois public sphere centers knowledge within a literate society. Black counterpublics instead center knowledge and debate within the realm of orality.

The age of electronic media widely signaled a shift to a secondary orality for the dominant US culture (McLuhan, 1964/1994; Ong, 1988/2002). Patterns of interaction online further a shift back to the oral (December, 1993; Ferris & Wilder, 2006; Fowler, 1994; Harnad, 1991; Rheingold, 1993). Features, like their additive, redundant, and polychromic nature, signal that blogs and social network sites (SNSs) demonstrate the adoption of secondary orality in the dominant culture of the United States. Given the continuing significance of orality among those of African descent, it is not surprising that African Americans readily participate in social networking and blogging (Brock, 2009, 2011; Esco, 2011; Madden et al., 2013). Blog sites offer an interface, wherein users can connect with one another. Blog posts and comments hold political discourse, and blogging communities form insular spaces separate from the dominant culture to interrogate issues of concern to marginalized communities.

Four primary elements of African American oral culture in America exemplify the features of orality as described by Ong. These include the sacred song, slave tales, the secular song and humor, and African American folklore and folk heroes (Levine, 1977).

### Sacred Songs Hide Dissent

The sacred song, or spiritual, is indicative of how aspects of life like religion, humor, and politics are intertwined in the oral traditions of African Americans. The spiritual provided the slave a way of expressing a sense of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation and an articulation of the desire for freedom. During the period of chattel slavery, systematic attempts to suppress the native religions of slaves led to an adoption and re-appropriation of the Christian religion. While the laws and social codes restricted enslaved Africans in their ability to congregate, expression of Christian faith allowed for slaves to utilize the motifs of the Old Testament to create the double meanings of sacred songs used to guide collective revolt, signal rebellion, and voice dissent (Levine, 1977, p. 75).

Sacred songs provided a means to express out loud the anguish and peril of slavery and the hope of freedom that remained (Fisher, 1990; Thurman, 1975). Beyond the lyrics, the music of the spiritual was refashioned as a cultural form of expression that was unique to the African American experience (Southern, 1997). Africans who were living in enslavement re-appropriated Christianity, a tool of their oppressors,

in the pursuance of freedom. Since the dominant group was not aware of the dual meanings of the song, dissent could be voiced openly and without consequence.

### Folktales and Cunning

The folktales of slaves, which still exist today in many forms, enabled African Americans to craft a world where people of their own race were centered. Re-centering the experience via storytelling is a common facet of African Americans' oral communication. This world-building and centering function of storytelling allows oral cultures to foreground their importance even as they are often decentered in the discourse of more dominant literate cultures. Folklore is a communicative process, performative in nature (Ben-Amos, 1989), and "is constantly reflecting and refashioning the experience of the community" (Akoma, 2007). Common themes in the folktales of oral cultures are important indicators of cultural assumptions and values.

The trickster tale and the folktale showcase linguistic prowess and verbal cunning in stories that are about both content and performance. This dual purpose signals the importance of face-to-face community interaction within an oral culture. The introduction of writing, on the other hand, signals an alienation of the spoken word (Havelock, 1963; Ong, 1977/2012). When the need for recall and performance dissipates, so too can the aesthetic pleasure of storytelling and the cultural and philosophical thoughts embedded and enacted in the forms of interaction of a given community (Akoma, 2007).

### Secular Song Critique and Parody

Post-slavery, diasporic Africans living in America embedded themes of grievance and sexual relations within secular songs and humor that could not otherwise be addressed in sacred music. Humor allowed for a release of the aggression that typically had to remain guarded in conditions of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. An example of the combination of humor and culturally condoned release of aggression, as well as the importance placed upon verbal prowess, is the practice of "signifyin." In popular English vernacular, the term "signification" refers to the denotation of meaning through the use of a sign or word. Within the African American community, the term "signifying" generally refers to a verbal contest where the most imaginative user of indirection, irony, and insult wins (Lee, 1993). It is an elaborate, indirect form of goading or insult, at times making use of profanity (Bell, 1987). Signifying is also defined as implying, goading, or boasting by indirect verbal or gestural means (Abrahams, 1999). Scholars ascribe the origin of "signifyin" to the poem, "The Signifying Monkey," a story recounted in music and comedy routines since the beginning of the 20th century. According to Gates (1989), signifyin(g) "functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition" (p. xxii). In this context, authors reuse motifs from previous works, altering them and "signifying" upon them so as to create their own meanings.

Another subset of secular humor and cultural expression in African American communities is an activity called "playing the dozens," or more simply "the dozens." The key distinction between "the dozens" and signfyin(g) is the directness of the insult. "The dozens" is best described as a contest of personal power—of wit, self-control, verbal ability, mental agility, and mental toughness. In most cases, two parties exchange barbs with increasing intensity (Leland, 2004). Signifyin(g) and the dozens are also used to critique negative characteristics of the community as a form of community self-disciplining. As Levine (1977) explains, "the need to laugh at our enemies, our situation, ourselves is a common one but exists more urgently in those who exert the least power over their immediate environment" (p. 300).

### Work Songs, Heroes, and the Maintenance of Dignity

The work songs of African Americans were an instrument used to co-opt forced labor, removing the mental power from those in physical control. The songs acknowledge the power the Whites held in a racialized system of separation and the diminished status of African Americans in the 19th century (Bay, 2000). The songs, sung during the labor process that furthers this system of oppression, function as an act of community re-appropriation.

While used as a tool to recognize oppression, the songs often reified systems of patriarchy, colorism, and racial hegemony, cementing the ideology of the oppressor in the minds of the oppressed. African American heroes, who tended to be meek and quietly manipulative in folklore, became more powerful and confrontational of authority as African Americans sought additional rights. Exaggerated tales of African Americans fighting for their rights were important in crafting dignity and strength for the community. All of these aspects of African American oral tradition and orality, more generally, continue to help to build a community that developed in opposition to the dominant US culture in values, systems of power, and communicative traditions.

### The Black Barbershop as a Hush Harbor

The unique nature of Black hair care and the discourse that surrounds the practice make hairstyling an "in-group activity" (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). Early Black barbers catered to a White clientele by keeping personal identity hidden (Bristol, 2009). In sharp contrast, the Black barbershop of the later 20th century became an enclave within the African American community. In these shops, Black working- and middle-class male patrons received services for their hair while engaging in the rituals of Black hair care, and everyday talk is a place of retreat for African American clientele and

barbers. Outside the gaze of the dominant group, African Americans can openly discuss things personal to the community with no need to hide their opinions and ideas for fear of reprisal. The shop provides a place where no one is confused by African American hair, and no explanation needed for one's hair care needs. The need to explain or justify Black hair or identity is absent. Beauty shop talk also builds upon features of primary orality in its reliance upon empathic communication over objective knowledge. Rather than the debates of the barbershop, the beauty shop creates a safe space for communal sharing. Black feminist writers explain this differentiation as a privileging of personal ways of knowing and writing, narrative, and dialog rather than debate, validation of emotion, and personal accountability. Black feminist writers insist that theory and systems of knowledge that exist outside of what is normalized as scientific should be considered valuable as well (Lorde, 1984; Thomas, 1998).

In the case of blogs, Black oral culture and shop talk may provide African Americans with a unique ability to navigate and manipulate technology in the creation of alternate publics. For those who used the rhetorical strategies of Black oral culture in voicing dissent, re-centering the African experience, critiquing oppressive systems on the American continent, and maintaining dignity, everyday discourse is a political strategy. Therefore, in the history of Black oral culture, the lines between art, politics, and technology become blurred. While African American art, politics, and technology can be studied separately, understanding their interrelated nature in the African American experience provides a more in-depth analysis of how everyday discourse online can foster the creation of alternate public spheres. The literature has thus far lacked an in-depth analysis of Black blogs outside of the realm of traditional political discourse. Analysis of African American participation online requires a sociohistorical basis to better understand the rhetorical strategies of the group and the goals and motivations of online participants in blogging communities. This frees the space to be used by for other discursive purposes, including political communication.

## Mode of Analysis

CTDA works from the premise that populations other than the dominant group do not fundamentally lack technological capabilities, even though they have frequently been excluded from the literature (Brock, 2009). While similar to critical discourse analysis, Andre Brock's CTDA adds the examination of "structural analysis of an artifact with a discourse analysis of the cultural means through which users interpolate themselves within relations to the artifact" (p. 1087). As a method, CTDA favors the subjective analysis of the researcher guided by a conceptual framework in order to yield a more holistic analysis of the interaction between users, technology, culture, and practice. In this case, my

framework for analysis is built upon Levine's explication of Black oral culture. CTDA provides an analysis of not just the content of the blog posts and comments but how the affordances of blogging contribute to content and discourse (Sweeney & Brock, 2014).

The following analysis focuses on the rhetorical strategies employed by bloggers and their communities. To better understand how blogging accommodates or transforms facets of Black oral culture/rhetorical strategies, I conducted an analysis of the posts and comments of nine blogs. I archived posts over a period of 4 months yielding a total of 1,670 posts and 36,271 comments for this study. While content analyses of blogs traditionally rely on online search engines and directories for sampling frames, because of the interpretive nature of designating a blog as a "black blog," these tools are less useful in this context. Drawing upon *The Root*, a Black online magazine owned by *The Washington Post* and The Black Weblog Awards, the purposive sample included the following: *Very Smart Brothas* (VSBs) authored by Damon Young and Panama Jackson (lifestyle/humor), *A Belle in Brooklyn* authored by Demetria Lucas (lifestyle/relationships), *Until I Get Married* authored by Jozen Cummings (relationships), *Black Girl With Long Hair* (BGLH) authored by Leila Noelliste (lifestyle), *Necole Bitchie* authored by Necole Bitchie (entertainment/media), *Young Black and Fabulous* authored by Natasha Eubanks (entertainment), *Afrobella* by Patrice Yursik (fashion), *PostBourgie* by Gene Demby (news/opinion), and *The Field Negro Blog* by Wayne Bennett (news/opinion/politics). Selection for inclusion in the sample was as follows: Black/African American authored, oriented toward Black/African American community, active comments section, and no overt espousal of political agenda by authors. Therefore, while I included blogs where politics were discussed, I excluded those that had the word "politics" in the title or the description penned by the founder on the blog website.

## The High Context of Black Blogs

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

blogging and personal face-to-face dialog (Hall, 1976). Unlike some other social media platforms used by African Americans, blogs provide the space necessary for discourse that does not rely solely on pre-established communities but re-builds new communities over time.

One can see examples of the high context needed to participate in conversations on blogs like VSBs, PostBourgie, and BGLH. Writers on each of these sites regularly employ synecdoche specific to the blogging community. This includes simple acronyms on VSBs and a more complex categorization system for hair textures on Black Girl Long Hair. While this means of categorizing natural hair textures did not originate on the site, the bloggers never define the terms for the reader. Style icons on the bloggers of BGLH are identified by various categories referencing their respective hair textures. A post tagged 3C hair[1] provoked a higher than usual volume of comments, wherein readers debated whether 3C was an appropriate label given the pictures provided. The high context required to participate in this discussion demonstrates how bloggers take advantage of the features of the platform to create communities who share insider knowledge.

Writers on sites like VSBs and PostBourgie display the high context of the Black blogosphere by connecting with readers with whom they share cultural touchstones. Black pop culture references from the 1980s and 1990s linked readers to the present by reflecting upon a similar coming of age movie or album that is shared by the community. In a February 2014 post, Panama Jackson, blogging for VSBs describes the "People he hates the most." People who read while walking are first on the list. He explains,

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

Here Jackson references the shootout scene in the film Boyz in The Hood, wherein a beloved character, Ricky, is shot and killed. This interjection does not cause the audience to focus in any long-lasting way on the plot of the film. Rather, as a cultural touchstone, the film reference does the job of signifying upon women reading the post while tying the community together with a film reference widely known among readers. Such cultural touchstones are predominantly used as metaphors to describe the lived experience of the writers and readers in the present. There is a double meaning for only those who are a part of this community, both on and offline, and fully appreciate the metaphor, narrative, or joke in question. The high context required for participation not only sets a bar for understanding the content of the original post but

also affords readers the credibility needed to engage in discussions.

## Remixing Black Oral Culture

The four facets of oral culture created by Africans living in America during chattel slavery and the antebellum South were spirituals, folktales, secular song/humor, and slave tales as detailed by Levine (1977). While rooted in the legacy of enslavement, these components of Black oral culture have had a long and important history in the preservation of Black culture and Black cultural identity in America, and serve as a way of analyzing the rhetorical work done by Black bloggers and their communities in the online digital barbershop.

### Substituting the Sacred

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

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

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

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

The final way the author alludes to the double meaning is in the conclusion of the post which reads, "Happy Black History Month (Also, if you are offended and feel that we're trivializing Black history month . . . bye Felicia.)." The expression comes from the classic film *Friday* which features actors Ice Cube and Chris Tucker spending a Friday at home in south central LA. *Friday* was released in 1995. In the film, Craig (Ice Cube) and his friend Smokey (Chris Tucker) smoke marijuana, attempt to meet and hook up with various women, and are eventually involved in an altercation with a neighborhood thug. Felicia is a local drug-addicted woman who regularly interacts with the pair and displays many of the signatures of the stereotypical 'crackhead' in many African American urban comedies. Craig and Smokey regularly dismiss Felicia's requests for cash, drugs, or other favors with a simple phrase, "Bye Felicia."

These scenes are not an integral part of the plot of the film, rather they are a part of the mundane and normative experiences communicated by the film signifying life in an underserved African American inner-city community. This reference by bloggers and the blogging community is an example of substituting the sacred common in modern Black oral culture online. "Bye Felicia" does several things for its speakers. The expression creates an in-group space, wherein cultural context is required for participation. This cultural context is created both by viewing the film and by understanding the relative normality of a character like Felicia, one who is a part of the community but not a productive member of the community. Felicia, as the neighborhood crackhead, is welcome until she becomes an annoyance or disturbance to the overall maintenance of comfort and stability for the rest of the members of the community. A person who holds positions in contrast with the blogger or who is not worthy of attention is "Felicia."

The phrase serves as a means to diminish contrarian positions without the direct attack that one might find within the low-context dominant culture. Because protection of relationships is important in this space, "Bye Felicia" dismisses someone from the current dialog but does not exclude from the community. In this case, those who, in the opinion of the blogger, hold Black history month to be sacrosanct are not helpful and are doing relative harm to the complexity and heterogeneity of Black culture. After the satirical post, telling those who are offended "Bye Felicia" allows readers to take the assertions in the post as biting humor and lets

naysayers remain in the community but without the credibility to critique this position effectively.

## Blogger Tales

Slave Tales centralized the importance of the African living in an America that marginalized him. Through the creation of tales, the cunning, intelligence, and expertise of the slave were lauded, not as exceptional but as a norm. Slave tales worked to preserve dignity for a community that faced unending degradation. In the blogs VSBs and PostBourgie, one sees the modern manifestation of these tales. Used for the same purpose, bloggers routinely tell stories filled with humor, moral lessons, and examples of the wit and cunning of the central figure.

Panama Jackson and Damon of VSBs routinely tell stories filled with humor that demonstrates their verbal prowess and the strength and dignity of African Americans faced with the most undignified circumstances. Damon posts about his experiences in his neighborhood and fashions the post as a modern (slave) tale. In this blog tale, we follow him from sun-up in his Brownstone with his fiancé, through breakfast as he reflects upon the noisy neighbors and dilapidated buildings that surround his home. As he drops his fiancé off at work and heads back home to write, he blogs:

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

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

During the period of study, a new story about a Black high school student from New York's acceptance to eight Ivy League schools began making the rounds of various social media sites, news sites, and in the TV news. Many individuals and publications heralded the young man's accomplishments. None of the websites in this study linked to or mentioned the story. They ignored this example of Black male accomplishment, not because the achievement is scorned by the bloggers, rather holding this young man up as exceptional in the mainstream press works to discourage the public from thinking of Black males as typically excellent. By weaving conversations about education into the everyday stories, bloggers re-center their experiences as normative. There is no plea for Black males to go to college or reference to questionable statistics about graduation or incarceration rates. Discussions of college assume a familiarity with this experience for the readers. Instead of proving a point to the dominant group, their tales centralize the Black experience and establish the central figures in the story as normal. They are not coons or sambos, yet they are also not exceptional credits to their race. In this way, the modern blog tale, like the slave tale, reifies the African American experience as part of the American experience. Their struggles, like their accomplishments, are an ordinary part of being Black in America. The tales situate the bloggers and other characters in the tales as ordinary yet worthy of attention.

### Humor and Wordplay

All of the blogs in the study rely on humor and verbal wordplay in different forms and to varying degrees. For VSBs, verbal wordplay utilizing indirection and signifying are a part of the brand. One example of the use of indirection in signifying is the running themed post "Shit bougie black people do." In this post, the bloggers subtly reference Internet memes such as "Shit girls say" and the many others that followed to signify upon a group to which they belong. Another example of indirection directed within the community is the running joke of signifying upon the Black Greek Organization Delta Sigma Theta on the site, VSBs.

Blogger Maya Francis describes, in her 7 January 2014, post, "On D. Wade, Gabby Union, And Making Sense Of Non-Break 'Breaks' And Condomlessness," addresses the problems with irresponsible sex. She says, "One of my personal rules in life is 'never make a mistake you can't fix.' This is why I'm not a Delta." The single line that uses Delta Sigma Theta, a Black Greek organization, as the butt of a one-line joke signifies upon the women of the organization. The organization is respected within the community; therefore, there isn't any obvious harm done. Likewise, Damon (The Champ) Young's post published on 14 February 2014, "When Your Worst Behavior And Best Behavior Is The Same Damn Thing," begins, "We've all heard the story before: Boy spots Girl at 6th annual Delta 'Chicken Wing Eating Contest For The Mouth Gout Cure' . . . " This is the opening line of a longer tale woven by the blogger that makes a joke at the expense of the organization again. The joke works in this instance because it diminishes the high esteem of the organization by pairing them with an African American stereotype and a stereotype about uneducated African Americans. Again, because neither of these stereotypes would typically be assigned members of this group, the humor is not biting or defaming. Rather the humor does the work of strengthening group bonds. They can joke about the organization because they respect it.

The 13 January 2014 post, "Ode to Deltas," explains the running joke signifying upon sorority. The author explains that they joke about the Deltas because "they don't take themselves too seriously," "make a major impact," and "follow the blog more closely than others." This explanation, while complementing the Deltas, also subtly jabs at other African American sororities for whom the implication is that they do take themselves too seriously, do not make a major impact, or would not follow their blog. Signifyin, while present on other social media platforms, can be used differently by bloggers. Joking about the Deltas simultaneously makes use of a part of Black culture and requires readers to engage regularly on the site to follow the humor. Signifyin on the Deltas is a demonstration of group solidarity through the use of Black rhetorical strategy. This form of signifyin', as Florini (2014) explains, "often speaks to the shared experiences of Black Americans as raced subjects and can be a resource for encoding and expressing experiential knowledge about Black identities" (p. 224).

Bloggers reserve directness of address in humor for those who are detrimental to the Black community. Whether outsiders or members of the community, when the actions of an individual or group serve to oppress further, the bloggers engage in name-calling and direct critique. We see this on The Young, Black, and Fabulous (YBF) in the section titled Foolywang. Foolywang refers to individuals or institutions that engage in senseless acts of depravity, sexism, or racism. On 26 February 2014, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* was called out in the Foolywang section for calling 9-year-old Quvenzhane Wallis a c–t. Bloggers labeled J.R. Smith's actions as "foolery" in the "Foolywang" section of the site after he reportedly asked an underage girl for sex. The blog *Field Negro* regularly castigates African Americans whose behavior causes harm to the community or whose public image and discourse "embarrasses" African Americans. Secular Song traditionally served the purpose of this self-policing that Foolywang or "House Negro" does on the blogs The YBF and Field Negro.

### Performance, Narrative and Humanizing Heroes

The performative aspect of telling folktales and recounting the history of a community remains active in the Black blogosphere. Demetria Lucas an author, life and relationship coach, and co-star of a cable reality show is the proprietor of A Belle in Brooklyn. A Belle in Brooklyn is a lifestyle and

relationship blog wherein Lucus interweaves personal anecdotes about her romantic relationships with relationship advice and guidance. In both cases, we see the emergence of the blogger as griot rather than as diary writer or journalist. The blog is personal but not written for the self. The blogger understands the parameters of journalism, yet the blog posts exist as performance rather than prose. Too often, the lens through which communication scholars view bloggers is connected to expectations for journalists (Deuze, 2009; Gillmor, 2010). Bloggers are marginalized as writers because of their emphasis on the subjective experience. As Papacharissi and Meraz (2012) explain, "A hobby for most, blogging is motivated by goals and priorities that are subjective, aimed at connecting bloggers to their social sphere and a variety of publics, and involving them in the process of information production and consumption." The insertion of self into "reporting" disqualifies the blogger from the realm of the professional. The attempt to compare blogging to standard practices of journalism obscures the creation of a new category of writing that is personal and professional, simultaneously individual and communal. Within the African American oral tradition, the insertion of self and personal experience brings validity to the conversation rather than weakness to one's argument. Re-centering one's experience, or the experience of a sub-culture within the dominant society, replicates the practices of folktales and songs common in the Black oral tradition.

Within an oral culture, the performance of narratives and tales is as important as the material content. Folktales along with secular songs were performed by a person equipped to share messages of cautionary tales and critiques of the community along with powerful, confrontational heroes. Lucus' blogging style commonly elucidates the folktale as well as the secular song/humor. Posts like "You never held it while he pees?" use a comical story of romantic encounters to bring levity to an awkward conversation about relational intimacy. Rather than an advice column about how to know or determine your level of intimacy, Lucas's 18 February 2014, blog post, functions like a secular humorous "song" of traditional oral culture, eliminating the difficult path to navigating intimacy with a romantic partner.

Extended narratives differentiate the interface of blogs from sites like Twitter. The Black Twitter community talks about the television show Scandal regularly, but it does so for 1 hr each week and 140 characters at a time. This prevents a facilitated dialog about the complexity of character development and the ability to formulate impassioned arguments regarding the development of characters in relation to the larger significance of their representation on prime-time television. The blog, insulated from the dominant culture, does not need to protect main character Olivia Pope, producer Shonda Rhimes, or the representation of Black women on television. PostBougie's weekly recap of Scandal features open letters from two different bloggers giving their take on the week's drama. In a post on 7 March 2014, bloggers Stacia

and G.D. laude the White wife of the president as their favorite character rather than Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington), one of the few Black female prime-time protagonists. G.D. blogs about Mellie's take-control attitude and explains: "This shit right here is why I'm Team Mellie."

The PostBougie community understands the significance of the show culturally and, therefore, can critique it using extended narratives. They can use Olivia Pope and her relationship failures as cautionary tales and treat characters like Rowan Pope, Olivia's father, as heroes who stand up to the President and hegemonic power. The blog post functions as the performance of two storytellers responding to each other with commenters and engaging in the call and response typical in Black oral culture.

## Discussion

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

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

Though dominant US culture and African American culture evolved over the same period and often in the same geographic spaces, the communicative features of the two are often in direct opposition. The high context needed to participate in African American oral culture is in opposition to the highly structured, public, and codified communication of the dominant group. The preservation of oral communication is evident even as African Americans embraced literacy. African American oral rhetorical strategies are a part of a cultural legacy rather than a cultural deficiency. Furthermore, they serve as a strategy used to pass on history, empower, subvert oppression, assert agency, and create representations of self and community (Fulton, 2006).

According to Ong (1988/2002), writing separates ideas from the thinker and acts to create a sort of "objectivity" that orality cannot. The form of writing is significant in ordering and privileging our understanding of the text (Ong, 1988/2002). The dynamic structure of blogs, where newer posts appear at the top of the screen, challenges the traditional horizontal–vertical system for organized formal writing, instead of reflecting the dynamic character of spoken communication. Many new online platforms allow users to replicate features of oral culture, creating a more natural process of explanation and storytelling. On SNSs, blogs, and other online media, there is a shift away from elite notions of knowledge, definitive "correctness" in writing, and notions of traditionally conceived privacy that reflect the community-building priorities of orality more than the hierarchical priorities of literacy.

Examining the rhetoric of the metaphorical barbershop demonstrates the ingenuity of African Americans as a marginalized population able to reimagine a medium that was previously considered exclusionary. The barbershop reflects the same ingenuity and reclamation of space. Previously, Black barbers were forced to exclude Black men from their shops, and Black beauticians were taught that they had to accommodate White standards of beauty. The present-day barbershop exists as a space of reprieve for Black men and a means of economic advancement for Black entrepreneurs. The reclamation of these spaces is made possible by the use of Black oral culture to foster dissent, re-centralize the importance of the African American experience, and preserve dignity in the face of oppression. Though bloggers in the communities within this study modified many of the facets of Black oral culture, the goals of the original rhetorical strategies remain intact.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Note

1. 3C refers to the curl pattern and texture of the hair. According to Naturallycurly.com, 3C hair is Curly Coily Hair which is usually very voluminous, with tight ringlets that look like corkscrews (http://www.naturallycurly.com/pages/hairtypes/type3).

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