

Black Womanhood in the Digital Age : Persuasive Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the digital media landscape where black female media citizens engage in a deeply affective form of “information play” that replicates the enduring practices of testifying and witnessing. In the process of the information play, the audience or witness is just as important as the performer. As I explain, “however passive their role may seem,” those who bear witness to some performance of self are critical to affirming the reality that the testifier seeks to construct through their performance [9]. Thus the confirmation that black women receive from presenting their versions of black womanhood to a community of witnesses is invaluable to their interior sense of self. When their voices are heard and their conceptions of black womanhood are witnessed, black women get the affirmation required to continue performing black womanhood on their own terms.

Keywords: Black Womanhood; womannist theory; Digitalization; Communication; Persuasive Discourse.

Introduction

In the five years that I have spent studying black women, I have come to understand the broad categories that commercial media use to define this group—gold digger, angry black woman/bitch, strong black woman, welfare queen, fat funny woman, whore, etc... Identifying those categories leads one to the absences, the human realities of black womanhood that always fall somewhere between the extremes [11, 1]. Time and time again throughout the research journey, I have been reminded that my estimation of what is missing from the media landscape of black womanhood depends on what I am looking for in the first place. For example, when I was asking one day a black woman, I spent a lot of time searching for representations of single black women who were also professional, emotionally balanced, and not living in fear of single *doom*. In other words, I was looking for a woman whose life resembled as self made woman, and it did not take long to see that such women were few and far between in commercial media [2]. With the guidance of study participants, I have come to more fully recognize that the scarcity of diverse black female representations leaves many black women on the same search to find someone whose reality reflects that of their own [7, 3].

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The beauty of the present digital age while ‘White ladies’ are sleeping in there, however, is that many black women have stopped looking for those representations altogether, and instead begun creating and sharing these narratives on their own terms, online. This work explores the media landscape as both a place where black women perform the self, and a place where the black female self takes shape [4]. Data presented here—derived from interviews and participant observation—are not fixed on a singular theme; rather, participants move across dimensions of the self in their discussion of media and black womanhood to address issues of capitalist media hierarchies, identity negotiation, and the gendered notions of racial uplift ideology. The strategies that black women use to intervene in the media landscape in the digital era are not completely different from those deployed by black women confronting the same enduring tropes in past decades. A tendency to slide back and forth along a continuum of respectable black femininity is still prevalent [7, 9]. In the struggle to negotiate the tensions between performances of self that garner external support and performances of self that meet internal yearnings black female media citizens continue to invoke the womanist principle of making do. That is to say, they become particularly adept at working outside of the commercial media culture to bring forth more nuanced expressions of the black female self [6].

1.1. Public gestures

The content created for and by black women online is phenomenal in breadth. There are dozens of online communities where black women share hair maintenance tips (CurlyNikki.com, BlackGirlWithLongHair.com); discuss strategies for navigating the politics of black culture as someone who identifies as LGBT (MoodieMills.com and Politini on iTunes); and share in the pleasure of seeing the everyday of black life depicted in fictional series (BlackandSexy.TV, ChicRebellion.TV). Each of these spaces offers an experience of media engagement that traditional commercial outlets fail to provide: [1] visions of black womanhood unrestricted by the constraints of profit margins and marketing schemas, [2] a more vast range of representations which enable media citizens to inhabit different facets of the black female self, and [3] an interactive exchange where audiences and content creators co-construct meaning through the sacred process of testifying and witnessing [9, 7]. At a time when commercial media outlets have turned their attention toward black women more than ever before, online content often created by amateurs continues to expand and evolve. Decades ago, one could have predicted that commercial media outlets, with their money and reach, would only have to compete against each other in the campaign to win the black female market. Yet, the affordances of the digital era have significantly widened the amount of easily accessible black female content—forcing everyday black female media citizens-turned content creators out of obscurity [8]. Amid this shift in the media landscape, the work of multiple actors—from corporate advertisers to amateur content creators—must be reexamined. This article explores the misguided and willfully ignorant attempts made at managing black womanhood in all of its complexity, with a focus on the missteps of white media executives. This part focuses on black female media citizens as content creators confronting the same complexities of race, womanhood, sexuality, class, and agency in their own public narratives [9].

Some of the content creators interviewed for this work have experience with the inner workings of large media corporations. Most of the study participants whose voices are found here, however, work outside of commercial media and have committed to publicizing their own scripts for black womanhood in the form of (video) blogs,

web series, magazines, lifestyle web sites, and various online social media profiles. Their insights speak to the importance of public gestures and testimonies for black women in their journey to make sense of, or reimagine, the interior black female self. Throughout the analysis, I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of content creation for black women who rely on this practice as a mode of self-care, or attending to one's wholeness and wellness across multiple dimensions of life (e.g., physical, emotional, spiritual...). Advantages include affirmation and validation of one's own script for black womanhood, while disadvantages include personal critiques and amplified public scrutiny. I was surprised and delighted to find that so many study participants have turned to creating content in order to come to terms with the meaning of living life in a black female body, to work through major life transitions, to connect with other black women, and to validate their thoughts and ideas [4, 10].

It is important to note here that there is no single show, or blog post, or magazine article, or song, or film, or video that speaks to the entirety of black womanhood. These representations are sketches of the black female self and are therefore imperfect and can always be altered and redrawn. Creating mediated content is one strategy that black women use to navigate the misrepresentations that mask their complexity, diversity, and humanity. Content creation is a way of pushing back against the marks of stereotypes and caricatures that crowd the canvas of identity—or at least reorganizing the canvas to emphasize the images that fit one's own imagination of the black female self [11].

1.2 The power of voice : Black women and participatory culture

Given the historic anxiety about mass media that casts audiences as passive receptors, content creation by media citizens has been welcomed, by some, as the ideal the anti-dupe, a remedy to mindless media consumption.¹ Participatory culture describes a shift away from the unidirectional flow of media production, and toward a more fluid, omnidirectional flow of content and ideas favoring empowered media citizens [2, 4]. The growing sophistication and declining price of “do-it-yourself” production technologies have facilitated this redirection of content. Scholars and media conglomerates have therefore been forced to attend to the labor of interpretation and take seriously the meanings that audiences bring to the media landscape [11]. Ultimately, the abundance of published user-generated content where nonprofessionals create original narratives and re-appropriate pre-made content underscores a shift in power [5, 1]. The media landscape is not simply made up of producers and consumers, but rather media citizens or actors who fall along a continuum of power. More specifically, scholars have found that media citizens who create content online are more likely to be psychologically empowered and more engaged in their communities. Content creators perceive that they have control over their lives and are confident in their capacity to productively participate in their societies. When black female media citizens create content online, they enact the power of voice and deny the commercial media structures that would otherwise render them silent [1, 3].

When Brittany, a Southern woman in her 20s, first decided that she would become an actor, she found inspiration in British comedies and variety shows that aired on public television. Black female comedians who delivered cultural critique in their humor with the style that Brittany felt could one day be her own were rare. Thus, instead of focusing on career role models that resembled her identity, she clung to a variety of different

actors that appealed to her artistic aesthetics. By the time Brittany had become an adult and started auditioning for roles, the industry had barely improved. In the few years she spent as a professional actor in the film and television industry, Brittany concluded that “as a black woman the more difficult thing is being able to find parts that you want to play, that either say ‘no ethnicity specified’ or that actually specify African-American.” Rather than settle for stereotypical roles that did not appeal to her or be rendered silent by Hollywood, Brittany decided to establish her own web series focused on a comedic retellings of popular black history narratives.

Brittany: Being able to create my own work has been tremendously helpful as a person, because I think we all come to acting, well at least I do, I come to acting because I love the art of theater. I love storytelling. And being able to create my own work means that I can continue to act, and I’m not at the whim of producers and writers writing stuff that excites me, or stuff that I fit, you know, getting the part. I get to create what I want to be a part of.

Brittany is drawn to content creation, in part, because of a direct lack in her profession. Understanding that commercial media only envision black women in very limited roles, she has embraced the absences as an opportunity to create black female narratives on her own terms. In this way, Brittany is enacting her power of voice in the womanist tradition. describes voice as a force through which black women articulate experience and conceptualize the self and the world (191). In her YouTube series, Brittany redefines the black female self and even re-conceptualizes her cultural heritage through a retelling of black womanhood in historic narratives [4, 5].

Naturally, as Brittany creates alternative roles for herself, she also opens the door for a range of new portrayals for others. The web series that she created online grew to include more than a dozen other content creators as actors, producers, and editors. Brittany found creative chemistry with another black woman featured in a couple of her webisodes and went on to create another series. Hence, she finds freedom for herself and a community of other black actors through her content creation.

Digital storytelling technologies—YouTube in this case—have opened the door for many more content producers who would otherwise be restricted by a lack of financial resources. Content creators like Brittany can create an entire film or series that can be distributed immediately and reach millions of people, without managing additional pressures from commercial sponsors [5, 2].

Autonomy and freedom from commercial constraints are among the most salient advantages of black female content creation. Study participants like Erica, a teacher in her thirties, appreciate digital outlets like blogs because they offer the freedoms of personal journaling and the access of formal publishing. The cathartic quality of content creation emerges from the mutual benefits of these two features, autonomy and broad publishing capability, working in concert.

Erica: I think [blogging is] just the easiest way to just get your thoughts out across to different people and your loved ones. You don’t have to go through the bureaucracy of publishing. You write what you want, you put it out there, and it just spreads. I think it’s just the easiest way to share your emotions and feelings through writing. I think that’s why I chose it.

In addition to the personal benefits that black women experience as media citizens engaged in participatory culture, study participants also revealed a womanist ethic of community service and uplifting dialogue in their motivation to become content creators. Within the womanist tradition, black women claim a right to voice with the understanding that their platforms demand an attention to community. The responsibility of black female content creators, within the womanist framework, is to create content that ultimately edifies and benefits black women at large, and not just the black female self. Specifically, Katie G. Cannon credits black women with developing a “collection of moral counsel [that] is implicitly passed on and received from one generation of Black women to the next” [4]. Cannon further explains,

The moral wisdom does not rescue Black women from the bewildering pressures and perplexities of institutionalized social evils but rather, exposes those assumptions which are inimical to the ongoing survival of Black womanhood... As moral agents struggling to avoid the devastating effects of structural oppression, these Black women create various coping mechanisms that free them from imposed norms and expectations. The moral counsel of their collective stories accentuates the positive attributes of Black life.

Content creation in its highest form is therefore not taken up haphazardly nor with selfish desires in mind. Rather, black women produce content with the intention of encouraging others to embrace a more autonomous and liberated way of being. Although none of the study participants identified themselves as womanist nor spoke the word at all, many of their motivations for creating content aligned with this womanist value.

1.3. Black Women Back Stage: Performances of the Black Female Self Online

Religion by definition is fixed and rigid. The rules are pre-established and followers are required to adhere to them in order to prove their devotion. In much of the digital content created by black women, however, religion is unrecognizable by these traits. What one finds, instead, are blogs, video diaries, and captioned images that depict multiple expressions of faith without the yoke of tradition [7, 11]. In an effort to construct the black female self on their own terms, several study participants have also had to re-construct God and the ways in which they express their faith and relate to other Christians. While these black women may blend into the crowd of congregants at worship services, their online expressions of self enable them to fully inhabit the parts of themselves that go muted on Sundays—the parts that want to feel sexy, go to night clubs, and engage in pre-marital sex [2]. They use the Internet as a “backstage” where they are free to perform the black female self in all of its contradictions. Study participants generally understand and define the black female self as an unfinished “reflexive project”—something which each individual must perpetually manage and construct using digital channels. The ways in which study participants use media technologies to give meaning to their understandings of black womanhood support Anthony Giddens’s proposal that “we are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” 75. Giddens argues that the work of coming to know oneself is less about “self-understanding” and more about the “inclusive and fundamental aim of building/rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity” (75). Online blogs and social media profiles are sites where this construction of self takes place [10].

Within ten minutes of talking to an interviewee named Jade, I thought about how disappointed my parents, leaders of a Christian church, would be at my affirmative responses to her re-mixed interpretations of scripture.

Her comments about doctrine, sexuality, and predominantly black churches are full of generalizations that can easily be critiqued. In fact, I disagree with several of Jade's ideas. However, the way in which she dares to speak them, and live them, is frankly inspiring. She is accustomed to people questioning her faith and attacking her views, yet, she believes them so deeply that she continues to blog, tweet, and post them online. Jade identifies herself as a church girl, and yet, she believes that "half of what the church taught us was some bull." Hence, her blog and podcast function as corrective theology with everyday applications [6, 4]. One day, she might be discussing megastar Beyoncé as a role model for "the sexually captive church girl," and in another entry, she might be critiquing how the church teaches believers to manage their sexuality. At times Jade can sound like a renegade on a grand mission, but at the core of her public gestures of critique is a desire for interior blessings of wholeness and affirmation of self. Jade uses the cultural resources available to her via digital technologies to create a virtual domain where she can perform black womanhood in a way that might otherwise be rejected. Jade, who says that she "never considered herself a writer" developed the courage to publish her thoughts in a blog after two years of writing essays that she only sent to an e-mail group consisting of close family and friends. The essays were a way for her to think through the radical ideas she had as she "struggled with the idea of how do I make my place in this world". The journey of self-reflection compelled her to question much of what she had learned growing up in predominantly black churches, and she ultimately came to the conclusion that she would have to redefine the terms of her womanhood. The content that she creates is intended as a self-affirmation, just as much as it is intended to edify Jade's audience.

Jade: I wanna write in a way that these moments where we're hanging with our friends and you know we might dance to a song and we might have a glass of wine, I want us to get to a place where we aren't hanging with people who love us feeling convicted, because that used to be me for a long time. Friends would invite me out places and I would be like I can't go there because I don't want them to think that, you know, that's where church folks are supposed to go. I don't want them to think church folks are supposed to drink. Instead of just feeling like this is an amazing night with people who love me and in my darkest moments have been there for me, I begin to think about what everybody else would think if they saw me in those spaces. Self-policing is inherent in the religious tradition in which Jade was raised. The "conviction" that she once felt engaging in activities that brought her pleasure and that fell outside the realm of respectable behavior speaks to an enduring racial uplift ideology that is ingrained in the very consciousness of so many black women. Jade's testimony reveals that in some social contexts, little has been done to alleviate the burden that black women carry to represent the best of the race with their behavior [9, 3]. The principle of perfection that black women confronted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries remains intact. Jade finds herself having to represent both her race and her community of faith at all times. "You have ways that you are supposed to conduct yourself because of your religious beliefs," she says. "But because you're a black woman you're also forced to confront a world of stereotypes of what women like you do, and who women like you are." Even as Jade finds herself wanting to become disentangled from the traditions that would sully her pleasure during a night out with friends, she continues to value the benefits attached to her church girl identity. The church girl moniker does important identity work for her. First, it signals to others that Jade understands herself as descending from a heritage of black women who love God, who uphold the highest moral virtues, and who play a critical role in racial uplift. Jade therefore retains enough status in her social network to be considered credible, a woman writing and

speaking about intimate experiences that she knows firsthand.

Second, the church girl moniker functions as a symbol of Jade's radical nature. Identifying as a church girl while rejecting key church doctrines and disqualifying the validity of those doctrines makes Jade a living example of the form of liberated self she is attempting to write into existence [5, 10].

In addition, Jade's narrative moves back and forth between what "church folks are supposed" to do and the desire to feel comfortable in spaces that would be deemed holy and unholy. Like the women before her, she struggles with the risk of playing into any number of stereotypes if she throws off the weight of respectability. Resisting the traditions of her faith community also means potentially losing status and acceptance [3]. Thus, Jade's performance of womanhood through her physical and digital presence is always stretching between various versions of the self. It is the flexibility to build and re-build the self in the digital environment that facilitates the process by which Jade stretches her understanding of God to fit her shifting understanding of self.

Jade: You can find me on Facebook discussing my work on black girls, and for two hours I may have a rant about that. Later that day I may post a gospel song that has been like in my spirit. And then I may go to twerk¹ Zumba and love it...I love the fact that I can be on social media live-tweeting about a *Love and Hip Hop* episode, and people are like *wasn't she just talking about the state of the union*.

Rather than rendering a performance of self online that is false or insincere, Jade's online performance is very much an authentic rendering of the parts of herself that she cannot fully express when she is in religious spaces. Jade's online profiles, specifically on Facebook and

Twitter, become the "backstage" where the background and context of her understanding of black womanhood comes into full view [3].

Importantly, the difference between the front stage or church performance that Jade exhibits and her back stage performance is not a matter of sincerity. As I explains, the performance of self that one displays in front of particular audiences may be no closer to reality than the back stage performance. Rather, in the case of Jade and other study participants, the difference in performance between these differing regions is a matter of wholeness. As Jade explains, the Internet is a space where she offers a "fully integrated" performance of self—bringing her church girl identity alongside her scholarly self, her hip hop self, and her sexual self. The internet is a media domain where the ratchet and the religious meet [2].

Miracle, a social worker in her twenties, must also work against the traditional black girl image in order to fully embrace the complexity of her black womanhood. Miracle's understanding of the black female self is expressed through the summation of her social media accounts. The mundane performances of self that one finds through Miracle's pages are a demonstration of Potter and Banaji's concept of self-curation. Miracle defines and performs black womanhood online through the process of self-curation—"the collection, distribution, and exhibition management of the self across social media". At times, she posts scriptures on her Facebook page or invites friends to submit prayer requests via her inbox. Yet, her Instagram pictures feature a smiling Miracle in a bra only, as she exhibits her fitness evolution. Online technologies enable Miracle to show parts of herself that

would be deemed inappropriate in the front stage domain of a worship service, and to digitally link herself to distant role models like Heather Lindsey [5].

Lindsey's message is conservative by contemporary standards, so it became clear to me that it was not just the content that was so appealing to the women who have made Pinky Promise so popular. Rather, it was the aesthetics. Scanning Lindsey's various web pages feels a lot like being transported into an episode of "Barbie Reads the Bible," if such a thing existed.

Lindsey's words of wisdom are painted in pink and bedazzled. Each page is decorated with images of Lindsey in her typical uniform of couture clothing and stilettos with long flowing hair, her large home, and her picture-perfect family; Lindsey and her husband, a black pastor in Atlanta, have one child and another one on the way. She uses the low-cost publishing tools available online to create a virtual world where black women are dainty, devoted to Christ, and patiently awaiting their divinely-inspired mates. Creating an online experience that is free to access and appeals to multiple senses enabled this relatively unknown black woman to galvanize a group of (mostly black) female millennials around a message of sexual purity and abstinence. Although Lindsey often talks about a sinful and unfulfilling past in New York City, where she worked for MTV, she identifies her current life, and all of its trimmings, as an example of the prize one gains by adhering to the lifestyle guidance that she broadcasts. Part of that guidance is scriptural and the kind of advice one might receive in a Christian church [8]. The other parts of her message, like the tips in her healthy eating cookbook, are the kind of content one would find in a commercial women's magazine. Ultimately, Lindsey's brand rests on an underlying appeal of being a sexy, youthful, 21st century black woman who is upper middle class, respectable, and committed to a Christian lifestyle.

2. Conclusion

This work is a collection of testimonies that confirm the urgency of reinvestigating black women's media landscape and the ways that they engage it. Study participants assert agency as media citizens to create content that is therapeutic, disruptive to dominant ideologies, and encouraging for other black women. Although none of the study participants interviewed for this part identified themselves as womanists or spoke of womanist theories, their practices of content creation were indicative of womanist ethics. Black women in this study think about their content, and themselves, in relation to other black women. Their presentations of self in blogs, social media profiles, and other creations reflect a race-gender consciousness that is often complicated by religious culture and class dynamics. Black women, therefore, are not engaging in public testimonials for the sake of flattery and guiltless self-promotion. Rather, they write narratives of black womanhood in the hopes of creating alternative scripts to correct the shortcomings they see in commercial media—even when the task seems too restrictive or challenging to attempt. Online content creation has become another way of making do.

The pleasures of digital identity management are not unique to black female media citizens; however, the contingencies placed on black women's self-presentations make digital content creation and identity formation a critical site of study. Postmodern identity technologies of the digital era invite, and even encourage, a type of identity play where one can try on different ways of being, or experiment with different strategies for managing

public perceptions of the self. Yet, for black women in particular, the liberatory promises of online identity formation and management are always constrained. Even something as easily modified as a social media profile, for example, is subject to public scrutiny, which measures black women by the same hegemonic ideas of black womanhood that inform repressive images.

Researchers recognize that it is commonplace in the digital media landscape for media citizens to seek out online spaces for their unique, although imperfect, publishing features. Specifically, Trammell and colleagues (2004) argue that content creators who blog expect to achieve six aims: "self-expression, social interaction, entertainment, passing the time, information, and professional advancement". Technology that allows black women with minimal technical training to draw and repeatedly manipulate expressions of themselves using words, sound, still and moving images, and hyperlinks, at little to no cost, facilitates new formats of mediated self-creation. Certainly, the instinct for autonomous self-curation is not new.

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