Home Is Where the Ok Is? Early Okayplayer Message Boards & an Ethos of Acknowledgment

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Abstract
In this essay, the author considers the online community of Okayplayer (OKP) as a pivotal progenitor in the development of a Black digital ethos. In particular, the author situates and interrogates Okayplayer as a “dwelling space” where self-identified Black identities developed digital voices and a communal ethic of acknowledgment. Indeed, 5 years before Facebook, and 7 years before Twitter; Okayplayer was a social media precursor—made for and by black folks. Prior to social media era, the OKP message boards were the rare space where black digital voices could be heard and acknowledged by peers and fellow recording artists such as Erykah Badu—a digital home or dwelling space. In this essay, I sample and extend Hyde’s redefinition of ethos as “home”; to online communities of color. Hence, this essay retrospectively examines OKP’s digital ethos as a cultural communal co-production where “discourse is used to transform space and time into dwelling places where people can deliberate about and know together some matter of interest” (p. xiii). By viewing OKP as discursive site, the paper interrogates the function of rhetorical voice in establishing dwelling spaces. My critical lens is informed by Mitra and Watts advocacy of marginalized digital voice. Voice is actualized as an architectural event, only when it is acknowledged. In relation to OKP, Watts contends that historically, Black voices that find acknowledgment develop a dwelling place based on “a sort of collaboration…as a kind of “magic” by a communal will.

Keywords
digital blackness, ethos, voice, rhetoric, Okayplayer

Can’t overstate the deep innovation & pioneering work that @AngelaNissel & @questlove (and the community!) brought into the world with OKP. #thsitename changed the web, and music culture online, for the better, forever. Its influence is so omnipresent today that it feels invisible.—Anil Dash, technologist (2019)

Okayplayer is the motherland of Black digeratti . . . Thank God for Ahmir and Angie’s Baby

@fire—Okayplayer moderator since 2002 (Hardy, 2021a)

As I sat in my new Brooklyn apartment, this past year, I was struck by how many times I had experienced this event: a new place. In 41 years, I have lived and worked in 18 cities, 10 states, and countless abodes. Interestingly, only few times did I know this “new home” would be temporary, but in many ways each home travels with me on to the next. My slang terms move from “hella,” the phrase my bay area students used, or “What up doe” as a greeting from east Detroit. I often tell people I have never lived anywhere more than 5 years straight, and wonder what that is like; until I was reminded this was slight fiction on February 23, 2019.

I opened up Twitter app that morning and saw the @Okayplayer profile post “Today Okayplayer, a special community for music lovers (and music nerds) turns 20 years old.” (Okayplayer, 2019). Named after the black colloquialism of “Okay player, you got it,” the website Okayplayer.com created by college student/writer Angela Nissel and The Roots drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, was one of the first websites where members of the black post-soul nation could talk to one another and their favorite artists via
message boards (Dennis, 2020). Seeing the post, I instantly was transported to the countless computer labs and home offices I used over the past 20 years to log into Okayplayer.com. The Okayplayer merch I proudly wore to concerts, and even the rampant lying to friends as OKP member and fellow Brooklyn resident @donwill related “yall kno how much lying I had to do to explain hanging out with online people. Offline!!” (Donwill, 2019). Real friendships were cultivated. Meeting fellow Okayplayer’s at music festivals and breaking bread on my moving road trips became a common practice. I’ve dated Okayplayer members, found jobs, even got internships for my students over the years as if the website was my alma mater. In my mental slide show, I could see the black and white design of the message boards.

My sociology lab, where I wrote music reviews instead of doing research. The ok symbol next to moderators like my Detroit fam @mistamonotone or artists like D’angelo asking what his next single should be. I remember years before twitter, watching and live commenting on Kanye’s Katrina outburst. In the General discussion forum, celebrity storytime with Ahmir telling us about his infamous “date” with Rosario Dawson (Thompson, 2009), and say a @brokeymcpoverty who you might know from Netflix’s Strong Black Lead calling out the patriarchy of “nice guys” in the general discussion forum. Along with pop culture memories, I was recollecting the more personal stories like couples finding each other (dj tony tone, 2019), folks discussing going to grad school or the collective mourning for users who passed, such as my closest friend on the site Joshua Scott aka @Menphyel7. Beloved by many he was eulogized by former member and media personality Bomani Jones (2015) on his radio show and social media.

As my fellow player @Melanism once said, “Okayplayer was the Negro Leagues of Black twitter” (S. Campbell, 2019). The wit, the memes, the names, the jokes as founding member @DeePhunk explained you can trace these things now endemic to black twitter, to the insular world of early rap message boards, especially Okayplayer (@Hardy, 2021b). Four years before MySpace, 5 years before Facebook, and 7 years before Twitter; Okayplayer was a black owned and operated digital space used mostly by young black college based people to talk and be heard (Scott & Chesma, 2013). Okayplayer alumni are ubiquitous in digital culture, from the aforementioned media personalities such as @brokeymcpoverty and her annual tradition of little known black history facts on Twitter, @DJ R-Tistic spinning on HBO’s Insecure, Gene Demby “kicking knowledge” on NPR, Lesson board alumni Little Brother releasing a new album in 2020, to the bodega bro Desus moving from board moderator joking in GD, to a notable brand in pop culture. Due to this diffused omnipresence members often contend #thatsite runs culture, which is hyperbole but grounded in love for the community and a communal ethos of support.

Take this past year at the Oscars, Dee Phunk posted on twitter “#thatsite runs shit and then explained” I wasn’t just saying this to say it. @questlove is the #Oscar’s music supervisor. @AndreaChungArt is on his laptop. He played @FEofficial to commercial. @djtara spinning pre and post parties. Summer of Soul trailer premiered w/ art direction by @fwmj. We’re REALLY out here. “ (@deephunk, 2019) And per usual, a bunch of former members all showed support. I am not a member of any fraternity but I am a charter member of Okayplayer since 1999.

Introduction: Essay Overview and Critical Approach

Reading the posts and responses to the anniversary, reminded me of the importance of this home, to me and a community of black folks who didn’t realize we were pioneers in black digital culture. For example fellow member Dj R-Tistic
reminded me that “: #thatsite was killin the memes game waaaaaaaay before Twitter though (DJRTistic, 2020). Reactionary Gif’s, memes, names from a Wu-tang generator, weekend roll calls were used on Okp message boards back in 1999. Indeed, Grammy nominated musician, Phonte claims “Okayplayer was the first place you could talk to black people from all over the country who shared your experiences and interests (Dennis, 2020). This was rare, as J. Campbell (1999) reminds us that the handful of online endeavors reaching out to communities of color in the 1990s were “either owned or heavily financed by large, white-owned media corporations” (p. 3). OKP along with early citizens of black online communities, helped to cultivate a language, a grammar for black voices online. If you have said “we stan” to express love for an artist, made your screenname off a celebrity pun, or written “co-sign” as a phrase of agreement as @poetx always says “ blame “thatsite” aka Okayplayer (Poetx, 2020). That morning Twitter posts, like @poetx’s stood out and help guide this essay

1. Charter members @flyasimis’s (2019) tweet declared that “Okayplayer was the first online place that I called home. . .” and @StephBMore added “Shout out to @Okayplayer for celebrating 20 years. I met some amazing people on #thatsite. And so many stars have arisen from the boards. And amazing community. We family” (2019)
2. User @Jaboonday declared “: #thatsite is legend, and legion. Okayplayer may not be something many of you know about, but Black Twitter owes its ethos to the community that was built on this site (2019).”
3. User @Corey Richardson (2019) declared that Okayplayer helped him “hone his voice in writing and online spaces” and GeeDec215 (2019) declared, If it weren’t for #thatsite I’d prolly never be writing on the internet

I noticed a trend: Home/family, ethos, voice. An important troika for an online community; by making users feel at home, being able to develop your online voice and develop a communal character; one can cultivate community through digital discourse. As a rhetorical critic, I am interested in how digital discourse cultivates community and spaces of acknowledgment. How did the voices of Okayplayer cultivate a communal rhetoric that helped create an ethos, a home, a dwelling place of acknowledgment for black users across the country? How did this space cultivate notions of support, sincerity, and signifying as key topoi that imbue contemporary black digital culture? More specifically, how does cultural acknowledgment give life to black folks online?

That is, how during this early digital era, a predominately black online community created a space where black folks could escape the social death of the public sphere and instead a space of “Black Aliveness” (Quashie, 2021); through shared acknowledgment of each other’s humanity. Indeed, while social media platforms are more popular today, the “privacy” of message boards often elicited higher value for users with little social capital (Lai et al., 2021). This is made possible through identification with group or forum or what Kenneth Burke (1962) called sharing substance or being con-substantial with the group. In relation, studies have highlighted how message boards reduce suicidal ideation and racial stress via “acknowledgment and support” not seen on public social media (Wiggins et al., 2016).

In order to assess Okayplayer as a dwelling space of acknowledgment, I turn to Robin Boylorn (2013) work on critical autoethnography and Ananda Mitra and Eric K. Watts’s (2002) early work on voice as a critical digital concept. The latter, advocated a need to view digital spaces as discursive sites of rhetoric where “voice” is enacted to “create dwelling places.” In combination, these perspectives allow me to reflect on my own practices on Okayplayer but also observe and analyze the community I was a member of. In the next section, I briefly review the concept of ethos as a dwelling place and voice before moving into my analysis of the website.

Ethos as Dwelling Place: Creating Home Through Communication

As a rhetorical critic, home always points me to ethos. Rhetorical critic Halloran (1982) traces back the primordial meaning of ethos as “a habitual gathering place” (p. 60) where people can share experiences and ideas. Hyde reminds us that while ethos has to do with character; it is socially erected in a community, where multiple voices are “rhetorical architects” that through discourse “create space to invite people to feel at home and dwell and deliberate over a matter (Hyde, 2004). “Recently in rhetorical studies Baumlin and Meyer (2018) issue a call for the resuscitation of ethos as a site of inquiry, that helps us understand community.

A “rhetorical community,” delineates “an ethos—a locus communis—a place where interlocutors abide, about which they contest, and from which they draw appeals, (Miller, p. 198)” Those who dwell within a rhetorical community acquire their character as rhetorical participants from it, as it educates and socializes them. Online community rhetors can enact classic Aristotelian ethos that make a rhetor persuasive to other members of the community (Warwick, 2010). However, Asante reminds us that what is unique for black rhetorical audiences is a belief in rhetoric as a co-production of shared meaning (Gilyard & Banks, 2018). That is, persuasion is not the unitary goal, of African American Rhetoric instead; identification with one’s imagined community and communal recognition as skilled and sincere speaker are traditional goals of black rhetors. In relation, Miller (2007) highlights the concept of commonplaces of ethos; and how speakers can go to these commonplaces to persuade others that they are part of the community.
On Okayplayer, I contend the three components of its ethos are as follows: commonplaces of signifying (Gates & Bentson, 2014) (feelings of joy and play), sincere support (values of care; Jackson, 2005) and sincere criticism (practical wisdom and judgment) (Smitherman, 2006). In particular, I look at brief examples during my time on the site that demonstrate how this website developed an ethos of acknowledgment—a black digital dwelling space. Hyde in his treatise on ethos as a haunt contends that dwelling in a place and sharing is not enough you must care for the space. You must use ethos as a means of hospitality he argued, and we can see that process in early forms of OKP discourse as voices encourage, support and acknowledge each other on the boards (2000).

**Finding Your Voice via Online Communities**

Okayplayer.com was started as an online home for fans of rap band The Roots. As Deepphunk explained, “the common ground at the most basic level; we were all fans of The Roots and soon anything adjacent” (Hardy, 2021b). In this space Angela Nissel believed,

> there was a bunch of people who’ve always been looking for each other. To be young and urban, now you’re supposed to only like the music they play on radio. If you don’t it can be very lonely. Here everybody’s accepted. You’re an Okayplayer, its cool. (Wiltz, 2000)

Indeed, the rhetorical gesture of inviting others to dwell and talk with you creates the opportunity for acknowledgment via a shared space. When asked the inspiration for the site, Angela Nissel explained to that she was on rec.music.hiphop (RMHH) an early rap newsgroup/board in 98 and “those people became my friends like real life friends. I knew shared musical taste could connect people. Good people. Also I wanted The Roots to see how much love they had” (Hardy, 2020). Nissel enjoyed the community aspect of RMHH, even meeting people from the online space in Philly and reached out to fellow member such as Deepphunk on the boards, to build the kind of community cultivated there for Roots fans, what became Okayplayer.com. In our talk, Nissel (Hardy, 2020) explained that the “voices” of Okayplayer made it the community it is.

As the first moderator on the site, “I got to know that we were all craving connection with others who appreciated good ass music and cultural commentary” (Hardy, 2020). Indeed, in 1999, I wanted to connect with other black folks about things I liked and not feel the need to assimilate. That was the post soul (Neal, 2013) motive of Okayplayer. What Neal called a desire to reconstitute the black communal through technology; and Albert Murary reminds us black technologies are means of survival, an “idiomatic expression of life geared to aid black folk’s survival and sustenance” (Banks, 2010). Or more recently scholars of black placemaking who identify black digital commons as sites created for pleasure, play and celebration—a dwelling place of acknowledgment (Hunter et al., 2016).

For a fragmented post-civil rights generation, such digital spaces provided a space for “reunion” and connection for the sacred and profane, the hood and the bougie, the HBCU and the PWI alumni to “link up.” Indeed, Mitra’s and Watts (2002) work detailed how marginal voices in “cyberspace” used their “voice” to create digital spaces where speaking agents can comfortably dwell.” Hence, Watts’s rhetorical concept of Voice calls upon us to consider how rhetoric in general constitutes the ways in which a community sustains or reinvents itself via communication (Watts, 2006). In particular, their theoretical push invites critics to view these digital discussions as discourse rhetorical moments where Mitra and Watts (2002) contend, “These meetings cultivate dwelling places where an experience of the passion, joy, and pain of voice arouses and is constitutive of the potential for dialogue. Using their voices, these agents create their ethos or ‘dwelling space’ (p. 479).” However, this is only possible if their voices are “acknowledged and actually heard.” Watts (2001) contends a “genuine rhetorical audience” must hear voices be acknowledged. Genuine rhetorical audience speaks to a spirit of sincerity — or caring support that acts as a ‘social liaison’ (Jackson, 2005) to cultivate genuine relationships ingrained in this transaction of voice.

In relation, Dara Byrne’s (2007) work on black online spaces highlighted the mental health benefits and hush harbor similarities of these spaces:

Drawing loose parallels with Nunley’s notion of hush harbor rhetoric, these little theorized dedicated sites that fly well below the mainstream radar have also, for years, been developing a sense of group cohesion and rhetorical practices that members perceive as being very valuable to their online lives.

In addition, Florini’s work on black fandom extends the hush harbor to Squires (2002) view of black counter publics as liberatory, stating that “In this way, dedicated Web sites can be thought of as imaginary public spheres that overcome the complexities of real-world distancing (“2013)

In the same spirit, Robin Boylorn uses critical autoethnography of her own online experiences to identify how her voice cultivates community and a critical standpoint. Boylorn (2013) highlights how along with resistance, the simple act of her critical and personal voice finding space online was liberating her “from the systemic constraints’ of academia and whiteness” (p. 158). As Li reminds us, “What is rhetoric without place, without commonplaces?” She contends the notion that location underwrites all rhetorical situations is inherent in discussions of rhetoric, “but rarely does rhetoric focus on social conversations, like the ones in online communities, as vital” (Li, 2016, p. 45). Thus, my
analysis focuses on the conversations of OKP as rhetorical voices enacting a communal ethos, creating an abode of acknowledgment that is vital to its users then and for many currently.

In the next sections, I reflect on how the digital voices of Okayplayer helped to create an ethic of acknowledgment that was constructed by a *heteroglossia*—the presence of multiple voices within a text—of predominately black voices. Voices of communal support, sincere critique, and social signifying define Okayplayer rhetorical practices. These three common topoi function as commonplaces where users of OKP can “go” rhetorically to create discourse that renders their voices as acknowledged and consubstantial with peers. The notion of a “dwelling place,” adds to this concept by highlighting how these spaces travel with us, how our voices are “accented” by the spaces and how being heard endows these spaces with an ethos of acknowledgment. And ethos of a *black digital dwelling place* co-created between people who found commonalities and were devoted to build a place for voices to be acknowledged, expands current discussion of black digital culture.

**Okayplayer as Dwelling Space**

Dayum. How can all these people who probably never seen each other face to face, make such a tight connection on the net? Yall created something very real here. @Xenon Okayplayer. October 9th 2000. (Wiltz, 2000)

In 1999, I pull up the internet on Netscape Navigator and type in Okayplayer.com, a web address that was on my t-shirt. An all-black and white silhouette design with the name Okayplayer and roots concert news pops up. I was like “cool,” but moved to other sites with audio clips. I went back weeks later and saw the link boards. My classmate Stefon had told me about hip hop message boards like *mr. blunt* and *rec.music hip-hop* and I watched him interact with people all day after school. I would chime in or even take over his profile. It was fun. So I went back to Okayplayer, during my computer tech class. I clicked on it and Okayartist news was the only board at first. And there were reviews of The Roots concerts. I saw a post where people were asking the bands questions and they responded?! For the next 2 weeks, I went to the site every day. Soon more categories popped up similar to newsgroups or aol in early 2000 as I remember. The Lesson named after the classic The Roots posse cut was for music discussions. *General discussions* (GD) were for whatever roots news or music wasn’t related. Later due to the users discussions, *OKaysports, Pass the Popcorn* (film and tv reviews), *Freestyle Board* (poets, rappers) and *Okayactivist* rounded out the Okayplayer boards.10

On the message boards, an icon saying login would be at the top of the page, with a FAQ icon a hallmark of Web 1.0. I read over the FAQ of how to start and account, and how to post. After weeks of lurking, I noticed peoples’ names were either cool rapper like names or something that described their personality. I saw cool usernames like @Hot_damali, @Wu Gambina and @mista monotone. I liked the alliteration of the last one, so I decided to be @Mr. Mystery. I wouldn’t be able to post on the daily so I would just pop in here and there. You also could post a gif as your avatar and I went with the character Gator dancing in Jungle Fever, because I just thought it was hilarious.

Thankfully OKP has maintained board archives;11 it demonstrated the desire to maintain this home early on. In late 2000, members decided that posts that got a lot of replies or reaction should be anchored, meaning saved or archived to view later because most posts fade after 3–5 days. I decided to just “walk around” as if I was visiting my old home town and look at archived posts and threads from the early days of Okayplayer that I remembered or participated in. I see in early 2001 I commented on a The Roots concert. Although I always had friends and friends into music, I always had often kilter tastes compared to my local friends. Which made many of my college peers look at me as a weirdo; but, Okayplayer was this weird space, where I wasn’t the weirdo. In fact some people took rap a lot more serious than me. As Angela predicted, people were really craving connection with other black people about music. Phonte (Dennis, 2020) explained that there was still a stigma and fear of the internet post y2k, and Okayplayer “removed that stigma of talking to strangers because we had this shared bond in music.”

When you posted, The Okayplayer design listed your name, the number of posts, member status on the left as a heading for all of your posts and on the right you could add your AIM,12 ICQ, send a private message, have a signature, or look at someone’s profile by clickin’ on the head icon (Hardy, 2002).13
When I got my first home computer in 2002, I posted more often. The anticipation of getting the notification of a reply or views for my post was affirming. Someone actually agrees with my obscure NYC mixtape opinion. I would hear a song and think “man I can’t wait to talk about that on OKP. Here, my three paragraph treatise on Mos Def as the new slick rick finds an audience. And for that minor acknowledgment, I would show “love” support and appreciation for other posts and they would share thanks for my minor support.

As Meredith Clark (2014, 2018) has discussed, often times online engagement is a performance of lurking, observing, self-expressing, being heard, and reciprocating that hearing and learning how to interact in the community through these digital cues. I was learning to cut down my bio and respond with the right amount of support to get a response. As I combed through more of my earlier post what stood out was how many posts were just a “great idea,” “cosign” —a term for I agree with that. This attitude of reciprocity seen in many online communities, often translated in just offering support in the form of “I hear you,” to use southern vernacular. The coexisting of “varieties” of voices—heteroglossia—within a text strengthens a community’s narrative. The text of early OKP featured multiple voices of epidemic rhetoric—showing praise for self and others. Recent studies show reciprocity and anonymity of message boards instigate a level of identification not seen in popular social media platforms. After getting back familiar with the dwelling space, I decided to look for specific examples of support, signifying and critique and see how this process of voice and acknowledgment evinced group identification and a communal ethic in Okayplayer.

Okaplayers’ Ethic of Support and Acknowledgment of Voice

First, I searched back in the archives for posts I was a part of that demonstrated support or care for others. In the GD section I saw the topic “Let’s talk about crack” in 2001 (@SampolinMoako, 2005). The original poster wanted to share stories about its effect on other black folks. The post had one of the highest responses for a topic in the archives. It was a community hailing, “hey I am affected by this anyone else?” @SampolinMoAko gives a brief description of the era’s effect on his family and writes “add on” and invitation to supply your story. As I scroll down, I see posts of support for him opening up the conversation. It’s weird because just seeing the post I remember my original post-17 years prior. I see my story of my aunt’s former addiction and having dope boys in my hometown, who were my friends, supply her addiction. Quickly someone responds with “wow I can’t imagine, thanks for sharing” and “that’s tough keep your head up.” One User @Daniels remarked “omg my whole family on my moms side from Kinston do you know a montez?” (Hardy, 2005)14

In my response, there’s no code switching when I respond “I do know a Montez, oil slick looking nigger,” because that’s literally how we separated the two in my town. I later private messaged the user and found out I did know his family. Throughout the posts for weeks people added on their stories of family or even their stories as dealers and the guilt of it. As Kollock (1998) notes, online participants are generally motivated by the anticipation of reciprocity, the opportunity to build their reputations and the reputations of the sites, and the sense that their contributions directly affect the pulse of the community. But here there is an empathetic communal based baseline for the reciprocity. Looking through the post you see others offer support, ask questions in an inviting way, and share how for black users especially, the crack era colored our lives in a variety of ways. Even with such a dark post you still got some comic relief from users such as @Desus Nice (2005).

It is in these moments that the public forum/dwelling place also functions as a hush harbor as in, I couldn’t have these conversations in my graduate classes. It was a needed connection. In my autoethnography class I didn’t want to share my family trauma or air dirty laundry. But here I could get it out. Robin Boylorn, writes of how growing up in rural North Carolina, just like me you kept your personal business private. Even my own classmates didn’t know they served my aunt. However, Boylorn contends expressing the private in a safe space, for her a blog, for me a message board, felt “safe” in this space to share without stereotypical judgment and instead genuine acknowledgment. Indeed, Boylorn explains “we only shared our stories with kinfolk” (p. 74) but writing about the private publicly activated her voice to embrace her truths and help others negotiate these tensions of identity. Yet there is still a veil of privacy that this dwelling space affords. No one knew it was ‘Twan from Carriage House apartments. I and many other black folk felt safe activating our voice. However, I caution from fully calling Okayplayer a hush harbor, because fans like my man @Kosher Sam, @John Book and @badkitty for example, were all non black people who were consistent contributors and any Roots fan could check out the site.

I do agree with Byrnes (2007) contention that this space was often black by its content not by phenotype or name. Byrne interviews an online user who explained “I can tell by the expressions used on people’s pages or the way they describe themselves,” that connotes blackness. Unlike the sites designated by race in their titles, OKP becomes a black space based on the content of topics and the voices animated. Watts explains that in creating dwelling spaces “hearing,” means an active listening geared to what he calls “specific experiential encounters in civic life” (Watts, 2001, p. 185). We share specific experiences that only certain people understand and truly “hear” your voice:
To say that voice is a happening, is to highlight its essential status as a phenomenon that is actualized by *public acknowledgment*, by the attendance of a *genuine* rhetorical audience (reader). Understanding voice from this vista means that it is not a thing owned by anyone at all. It is a public occurrence (sprang forth from the dwelling place). (Mitra & Watts, 2002, p. 481)

Indeed, the genuine, caring audience of Okayplayer allows for voices to “happen” and generate “public” acknowledgment of one’s ontology. Care makes support more than phatic, but vital discourse and interactions. Boylorn reminds me that voicing one’s story is an invitation to the audience to share in digital life and Okayplayers grammar of invitation, generated an *ethic of acknowledgment* that defines this *dwelling place*. Looking back at the GD archives especially, this ethic of acknowledgment is seen in the commonplaces of care and support that is mediated through a black discursive epistemology of “I understand where you coming from.”

In the forums, this ethic of acknowledgment via care and support was visible in the ubiquity of the phrases *archive this* and “add-on.” The latter hinting at a digital call and response modality of black song extends to the digital. By critiquing of previous forms or society (Gates, 1989). Moreover the tradition continued in the form of jokes, the second ingredient to OKP’s ethos of acknowledgment.

**Jokes and Jokes and Jokes: Signifying as Commonplace of Acknowledgment**

When I think of Okayplayer my first thought is laughing, along with support “fun” was cultivated with the community. Black Signifying is of course rhetorical acts of indirection, transposing language, jokes, ironic contrast and other common strategies of black discursive identification—or sharing common substance. One motive of signifying is identification with one’s desired community; these are inside jokes for those inside your culture. Indeed, the other side of signifying not discussed as often is the intertextual revising of each other’s text. Gates writes of how signifying works as intertextual troping where black rhetors “riff, revise, remix” existing narratives and discourse by previous authors to show creativity, appreciation of past forms, identify with audiences, or offer a critique of previous forms or society (Gates, 1989). Moreover in music, black artists signify on previous artists as the call and response modality of black song extends to the digital. By responding to the previous songs call they add on to the intertextual voices; previously embedded in the song. This riffing is a “voicing” of black ontology and culture where each individual voice can add to the critical conversation and cultivate a dwelling space where signifiers of black nomoi are appreciated, articulated and advocated.

In relation, digital scholar Andre Brock (2012) tells us signifying can thus be seen as an articulation of a shared world view where recognition of the rhetorical form plus participation in wordplay signals in digital spaces “membership in the black community.” Thus, many Okayplayers’ activity and
performance of blackness, confirmed membership in the Okayplayer community early and was developed via participation in support but also signifying. The intertextual riffing, indirectness and sideways glance of black signifying was often most visible in posts about specific black experiences. One of the most popular posts on the GD board was “OKP Ghetto Church Announcements” (@Vision, 2003). I laughed out loud instantly as I remembered the original post. In the post we can see the playfulness, but also the call and response modality/af-am rhetoric inherent in this space. @Vision on March 3 2003 posted: “to all members of the . . . Okayplayer More than Conquerors new deliverance lily of the valley keep me Near the cross C.O.G.I.C. Holy tabernacle of praise non demonational church . . . “(2003).18 I like many black folk, grew up in C.O.G.I.C. churches and announcements were always long winded.19 This insider knowledge is necessary to “get” the jokes, to catch the implied premise—the enthymeme at work. But also as Angela Nissel states, “Okayplayer we will get you out of here if you come weak, not cancel you but. . . look! Came back harder” (Hardy, 2020). Maybe you were referencing your family down south, or your church in Chicago but again members are bound together by shared memories and experiences; as Watts (2001) reminds us it is the specific experiential experiences that generate the bonds of participants in online communities and the invitation to dwell together and share voices. If you have experienced this, you know church announcements are often random, about a building fund, involve veiled threats, coded confessions, and or accidental comedy. The church name”: Okayplayer More than Conquerors New Deliverance Lilly of the Valley Keep Near the Cross . . . (@Vision, 2003).” is a “riff” on the multitude of naming strategies visible in black houses of worship. @ Vision’s message combined standard church parlance with 2003 hip-hop talk, as she referenced the black church’s women’s clubs workshops with an ironic joke about learning how to keep a man from “Sista Shimmy” who might or may not sell Pure Romance sex toys. The joke both parodies the church activity by taking the announcement to the extreme while soft critiquing the paradoxes of the church congregation. The key part of the post is her invitation, “Now y’all add one”.

The invitation opens up the space to dwell in this case comically with visions’ post. It invites acknowledgment and signifying creativity; encourages sharing common substance and affirming kinship with your community—identification (2013). She made the call for people to respond and signify on her post, as multiple voices generated a text full of these varied voices in the post. Most responded with digital laughter of lol’s and lmbo’s, others just: added on. Post such as: @ Kahzy: Pastor Lunchbxx has requested that you please stop doing the Harlem shake and the chickenhead while y’all are up there singing da lawds music.20 Here a joke about doing turn of the century dances at church, refers to those shared experiences of days where you saw kids try to sneak a lil secular style into the activities. The comedy and creativity of Black twitter signifying that others have written about adroitly, I am re-witnessing at work nearly 17 years ago; jokes that both critique religious hypocrisy and awaken nostalgic memories such as @Hotlikefiyahs as head of chhiruns’ ministry post.21 The sharing of common substance about church announcements allowed others to add their take and invite their voices in. @HotlikeFiyah continues the hip-hop meets C.O.G.I.C. motif and adds annoying church mothers and the praise team being too risqué for “Reverend pastor.” Users began including themselves and others in the announcements, based on their user personalities. Pastor lunchbox, Sister fire, Deaconess Wu-Gambina, were members of the “congregation” The post is a series of cultural enthymemes that only make sense if you experienced a black church and familiar with 2003 pop culture. In this silly post, your way of thinking or making sense is validated, heard and acknowledged.

Even as a non frequent poster, I saw enough of Wu-Gambina’s funny posts or @hotdamali’s wit across the boards to know their digital personas and identify with them as community members. As users got to know each other better online and off, posts about “Okayplayer individuals” emerge as jokes about someone always in someones’ private messages22 was playful banter, or early stories of failed “fly-outs or offline meet-ups”.23 The commonplaces of support and signifying are interconnected as support even in these silly posts allows people to feel comfortable voicing jokes. Indeed, another popular post “lesser known figures of black history.” Often people posted to get help with homework which this 2003 post appears to be until you read it—early trolling.

Charter member @Jamall Yall introduces the game and invites help and shows how to play, by inventing a fact about the “first black man to flip a boss desk when fired.” The joke only works if you know a black man who has threatened to tear shit up if fired (or witnessed). The premise rhetorically is that, everyday black history is vital history too—even when fictional. Others pick up on his trend: @desus posts an invented pioneer of black club photos:
creatives got support from The Roots and support from the Phonte on his early mixtape.24 Site working with Brooklyn-Cincinnati’s Tanya Morgan and Canadian Superstar Drake would find early support on the OKP was “like a mini Soundcloud” to share your music. Were one of the first groups to generate an online fan base, as Pooh better known as Little Brother. The NC based group feedback, most notably 9th Wonder, Phonte and Rapper Big were there. Unsigned artists would turn to the board for sincere reflection on their constant objectification of female artists and that it was mostly met with genuine discussion and appreciation. I recently asked @fire (Hardy, 2021a) how she dealt with sexism as a moderator over the years and outspoken female music fan on the boards,

the fellas kinda ignored me on some “fix me a sandwich” at first but I stood my ground . the men were astounded because I knew so much about music, there were always newbies and men that did not take kindly to me but I wore those jokers out over time and they began respecting me . . . I handled it like all women should in the music industry [on the site] DON’T TAKE SHIT FROM ANYONE especially men (@, Hardy, 2021a).

The lesson boards can get intense but fire and others called out double standards and the space allowed internal critique. The lesson is infamous for intense music debates and according to historian Adam Serwer (2019) was “the strongest deliberative space in the early 2000s.” People argued passionately about music often criticizing the band that brought us there. Unsigned artists would turn to the board for sincere feedback, most notably 9th Wonder, Phonte and Rapper Big Pooh better known as Little Brother. The NC based group were one of the first groups to generate an online fan base, as OKP was “like a mini Soundcloud” to share your music. Canadian Superstar Drake would find early support on the site working with Brooklyn-Cincinnati’s Tanya Morgan and Phonte on his early mixtape.24 Phonte compared the site to a tech hub where these young creatives got support from The Roots and support from the Okayplayer audience (Dennis, 2020). Along with LB, countless producers and artists work shopped their art on the boards. This ethic is evident in group member Phonte’s armchair a&r post from 2005 following the lackluster sales of Little Brothers debut. Taygravy was his username.(Phonte, 2005). Phonte jokes about The Lesson boards being harsh, then lists a sample of their critiques: Jay and Nas lost, LB flopped, the south cant rap.” Phonte concedes “some of you cats make interesting observations when not being assholes,” and claims he will share with artists he knows. So an invitation to help major artists, and the acknowledgment that your feedback matters, creates space for sincere critique. You care about the artist enough to tell them what they are doing wrong with an unguarded belief that your perspective will be acknowledged. Phonte states that he will post an artist and forum users can post advice to help their career, beginning with his own group little brother.

User @Scorpion offers a detailed critique of what he likes about Little Brother, what he doesn’t like and what they need more of, and then delineates things ranging from “not collaborating more, emphasizing southern roots, to more live instrumentation like their live show.” Phonte responds with: Real talk as always Scorps. I respect That, My Nig. Scorps: For shiiz (2005).25 “And later saying “he is listing things straight from our meeting, be on the look out for these features!” Others like username .@Mica chimed in “excellent suggestions thoughts and explanation, you are the epitome of what a lessonhead should be” Others boosted Micas response and added “I gotta give props to scorps on this, well thought out, well worded, totally through diagnosis on what LB need to do”(2005). The @scorpion post seemed to set a tone, as mean spirited responses dissipated and concrete critique from people who considered themselves fans flourished. Phonte username @Taygravy responds “a lot of good constructive criticism and ideas going on here, this is the Lesson I fuck with” (Phonte, 2005).

And in The lesson, especially on this post, the constructive criticism often added what they also appreciated about the artist, following @Scorpion’s lead. Other artists ranging from Alicia Keys to Gucci Mane who despite the southern bias reputation of OKP got numerous responses and suggestions to help his career. It really summed up what a lessonhead was, a lover of music that critiqued what they loved. And when it came from a place like this, the critiques weren’t for clout or more views—it was for love of music. It changed the way I discussed music.27 This post was indicative of the boards increasing role in pop culture. Longtime moderator @fire explained that many famous celebrities used pseudonyms on the boards, “from Prince on down and interacted with us in disguise to try and receive honest feedback on their art” (Hardy, 2021a). Years before a Reddit AMA, it was a rare direct opportunity to offer feedback to your favorite artists. Common replacing the studio version of “The Food” on his Be album due to constant Lessonheads calls for the live version from the Chappelle Show was a minor triumph.

Sincere Criticism

In discussing ethos and dialogue, Hyde (2006) writes that acknowledgment is necessary for people to live, rhetorically the call of conscience that your humanity is recognized is vital and the lack of it engenders social death. Okayplayer, however, was not a utopia. Roberson-Johnsons’ (2012) article on the Lesson message boards’ misogyny and dismissal of female rap fans highlights how the space wasn’t immune from social norms harmful to black women. Although, as Angela Nissel reminded me Black women were the creative engine of the site behind the scenes. However, his paper adroitly shows how sincere critique of digital patriarchy was available on Okayplayer. Johnson highlights how board moderator @fire and other women engaged male users to reflect on their constant objectification of female artists and that it was mostly met with genuine discussion and appreciation. I recently asked @fire (Hardy, 2021a) how she dealt with sexism as a moderator over the years and outspoken female music fan on the boards,
Fellow Chicago rapper Lupe Fiasco was a beloved artist who openly talked to fans on the site, until he met massive blowback after forgetting lyrics at a Tribe tribute. “Because q-Tip is my friend and he asked me to” (Fiasco, 2007) by Lupe is still one of the most popular posts and first Okayplayer post to really get media attention in 2007. Lupe speaking directly to his critics was “notable” at the time, but most posted disappointment in Lupe as a fan and felt he disrespected hip-hop legends. His defense that he didn’t grow up a Tribe fan was met with calls to educate himself and to “do better.” But also sympathy from people who felt it was unfair pressure on a young artist. Lupe Fiasco explained that OKP was the only site he posted on because people can debate but also show support, “fans and artists like Phonte from little brother will say hey ‘I feel you, keep your head up’” or we still rocking with this and other sites its just Stop Bitching Lupe (Rodriguez, 2007).

The boards could be harsh but still let you know “we checking for the next album.” It was rare that people just acted like fans even with high-profile celebrity users. Comic writer Aaron McGruder notably caught flack for calling Levar Burton a bitch in one of his Boondocks comics because Geordi chose to be blind on Star Trek (McGruder, 2002a). User @Huggy Bear posted “Levar deserves better than Aaron” claiming that “outta all the embarrassments this is who you choose, you gotta do better than that.” Indeed, specific experiences led to a communal critique of Aaron; not a cancelation but a “do better if you know better ethic.” @Adub replied saying that the Star Trek character Geordi is “weak” for giving up his sight no matter what and Huey’s joke speaks to Black sci fi characters being fucked up in white peoples imagination (McGruder, 2002b). Eventually @Adub says he shouldn’t explain himself to us, but he was joking. A claim that he is taken to task for by user @Hot_Damali (2002)

She defends the hard work of this fictional character and “educates” Aaron on the fact that being sarcastic on message boards is still hard to pull off and suggests he be clearer moving forward. This 2002 post is an interesting snapshot of where social media would be going with celebrity interactions. Here, the community mattered more than the clout. Okayplayer was a dwelling space of support, signifying and sincerity via criticism that was a literal life saver for those in the community.

**Okayplayer Legacy: Ethos Endures**

On the anniversary many cited the success and continued support of Okayplayers. Of course beginning with the people celebrating the sites originators, the Oracle, Angela Nissel and her career writing and producing in television. And of course the ubiquitous work of Ahmir “Questlove “Thompson and The Roots For many it was a support group in so many ways. I remember posting excerpts of my Outkast based master thesis and Bomani Jones sending me his page 2 review to help. Soon, social clubs emerged off the site. I joined the screenwriters club and okay music club and shared music and film insight with other OKP’s. This shows the spirit of the *dwelling place*, went beyond the site, as the voices of the site create alternative dwelling places still connected to Okayplayer and extending acknowledgment and support. The identification and the acknowledgment was meaningful enough with or without the website, because the voices give the space power not the space in and of itself. Unlike public social media profiles, I didn’t have to worry about my job or classmates finding out as the anonymity of the message board ironically engenders open conversation about such stigmas.

In the early 2000s, for many black folk transitioning to a white working world, this safety net of Okayplayer was a god send. As several scholars have argued, online spaces generated opportunities for Black fans to identify with the text of others’ voices. It also allowed fans to invoke Black epistemologies and interpretive frameworks, transforming what would be an alienating experience IRL created from lack of representation and erasure into one that instead produced and maintained Black subjectivities via digital dialogue. Robin Boylorn (2013) reminds me that “While places map onto our identity, we also map and mark the places we live and inhabit.” Indeed, the support of multiple voices makes a mark on others and cultivates a “dwelling space” as an OKP member we carry with us, even as many left the boards for social media around 2010.
This space is rhetorically erected, creating identification—sharing common substance—for a community. Cultivating an ethos where acknowledgment is a norm of the community. And at the turn of the century, there were few black spaces like this. Okayplayer was *Cheers* for a contingent of black folk where not everyone but enough people knew your (screen) name. Being under the radar allowed for creativity and fun that I think endeared the site to many and as several pointed out to me it endowed them with networking skills in the digital age years ahead of their peers. Okayplayer is encoded onto my digital identity, I still say “co-sign” or “pics or it didn’t happen” when people tell a story; I still don’t know if Jay-Z can sell to a whale or a well (@atlantictriangle2019).

I am reminded of fellow member @improvian (The Golden Gucci Kufi Wearer, 2019) statement on the anniversary “It was home it was a place you never wanted to leave, it was ours. And we birthed so many of your favorites and styles. We’ve shaped and continue to shape the internet and the world. #Salute us.” It is not surprising that Hot damali, @ damali101 on twitter says in 2019 that for us Okayplayers, this site was the precursor of social media. It was a space we could talk about Arrested Development episodes in pass the popcorn board. Or gave Michael Jordan tragic nicknames such as Cheese Eyes, Bad Dad or Hennessey vision in Okay Sports. We argued with celebrities; even Jill Scott made a diss song about us (Hate on Me.). Most importantly we felt acknowledged. City, rural, hood, nerd thug, it didn’t matter. I talk to my students about what social media does for them, and the thing they always come back to is “my voice, I have a voice.”

Going back to Okayplayer, I am reminded of how powerful and life giving having your voice acknowledge was for me in my 20s. In the dwelling space of Okayplayer, you could critique and voice your opinion and not always get agreement—acknowledgment isn’t always positive—but you were heard. Watts (2001) writes of how the voice of black folks often fall on deaf ears in the mainstream thus spaces to be acknowledged have historically been vital. The ethic of communal acknowledgment of Okayplayer is something I miss. Yes I have a solid amount followers and people I talk to online. And it feels good to be RT’d and acknowledged that way. But it’s not a community where I can say something dumb and not have Jessie from Oregon in my mentions asking me to explain systemic racism. Or I can just speak to people who I know are like minded, outside of my group chat. It offered a light hush harbor protection at the turn of the century. Also, in this piece I wanted to demonstrate in this autoethnographic rhetorical analysis of Okayplayer how the concept of dwelling place expands our discussion of black digital culture by demonstrating how this website is mapped on the bodies of its users offline as well.

This extends the discourse of ethos and digital communities into recognizing the real life mechanisms of support, critique and signifying and the black joy generated from such online discourse means more than online “attention” or clout’ its “a life-giving gift” to paraphrase Hyde. More importantly, I wanted to highlight how the basic act of acknowledgment is an ethic that makes black digital culture function. The craving for connection with other black people is integral to Okayplayer; in the halcyon stages of digital culture. A black owned, operated and populated site that was a home, an abode, a haunt for post soul black kids to share meaning and be heard.

My academic voice, my digital voice is not the same without Okayplayer, it gave me and others the gift of acknowledgment that black kids on the margins of the margins craved. It will be interesting to see if the current message board popularity of *Kanyetothe* and *The Coli* online music message boards will create their own version of an Okayplayer community. The site has had much upheaval since it became a content creator/international website and recently after a litany of sexism and discrimination charges the former CEO was removed and replaced by a black woman, Ishay Sesay for the first time since Angela Nissel. The site has had a reboot with the boards back active again and some of the same moderators such as @mistamonotone.

Online spaces continue to be life giving spaces for many of us, but as moderator @fire reminds me we often forget how pre Facebook and how black and organic the early digital wave was. “What began as a fun/hobby turned into full purveyor of black culture generating millions of dollars, followers and a reputation that can only happen organically (Hardy, 2021a). The twitter 20th anniversary posts reflect such, as members thank Quest and Angela for creating this life saving space. Effectively demonstrating the strong communal bond and the continuing ethic of acknowledgment of black digital voices in this dwelling space endures:

poetx (@poetx) Tweeted: can’t even describe what #okp aka #thsites is and has been for so many of us. happy okayversary to you and @AngelaNissel and all the rest of y’all. (2019)

lmckr (@Lemu.) Tweeted: OKP has been integral to my life for 20 years. Thanks to everyone involved and RIP to all those we lost over the years. (This photo was the last RE in 06) @ Okayplayer @AngelaNissel @questlove #ThatSite. (2019)
@mistamonotone (@dj tony tone) Tweeted: Salute & gratitude to @questlove & @AngelaNissel for launching @Okayplayer on this date 20 years ago. Thank you for allowing me to preside over a nerdy ass faction of the community. Thank you to all my “virtual” friends, my real life friends & my beautiful wife. #THATSITE (2019b)

Donwill (@donwill) “Happy 20th to @Okayplayer & thank you @questlove @angelanissel for inventing social media (2019)

Okayplayer (@Okayplayer) “I think we have to agree with @questlove, @Okayplayer invented social media #okpis20” (2019).

To close out this digital reunion, I asked Angela what does she miss the most about Okayplayer’s heyday and how does she want the site to be remembered in the history of digital culture:

Whew . . . Moderation and community over profit. Spaces where people could feel like the owners cared about the individuals over who drives the most traffic on the site. We truly couldn’t pay our rent and server costs at times . . . caring about the people who helped you be a success. Knowing that for many, message boards, social media is their only way to be heard and appreciating that it makes me sad how many people don’t recognize it—and recognize that there was a black woman (me) supported by several other black people (tens of women on that board) who worked hard to build a community because we NEEDED it (her emphasis). I would love for it to be remembered as proof that a cared for virtual community can do great things! I miss that. I wish more social media [scholars] reached out to people who clawed their way through this before it was profitable and just recognized, people just want – and deserve - a voice. (Hardy, 2020)

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Notes
1. I will refer to Okayplayer members by their board usernames.
2. Method wise, I clicked on the two hashtags #okpis20 and #thatsite to collect my Twitter data. “But also special thanks to @fire, @mistamonotone, @deepunk, @donwill, @phonte, @poetx, @menphyel7 aka Josh and countless other Okplayer fam for all of their help.
3. It’s a sarcastic joke, that someone is a player or a person of influence.
4. User with my okayplayer fam and user @Jose5030 posting the video via sendspace hours late.
5. Which began on the General Discussion forums with the lesser known black history figures post by @Jamallyall post to “Lesser Known Black history figures.” February 3, 2003. https://board.okayplayer.com/okp.php?az=show_topic&forum=18&topic_id=91599&mesg_id=91599&listing_type=search
6. General Discussion Forum.
7. A hash tag for Okayplayer on twitter. And a means of locating fellow members.
8. Foreign Exchange is a Grammy nominated R&B group that was formed on the Okayplayer Lesson Forum with Icelandic producer Nicolay and North Carolina rapper/singer Phonte Coleman.
9. such as Irct news groups, rec room hip-hop (RRHH), Black planet, Support online OHH and later blogs such as Crunk and Disorderly.
10. High-Tech would latter be added.
11. But limited to the most popular posts.
12. Aol Instant messenger, ICQ online chat tool.
13. @Mr Mystery Response to post by Aaron McGruder (@Adub) “Geordi is a Bitch”: https://board.okayplayer.com/okp.php?az=show_topic&forum=19&topic_id=11798&mesg_id=11798&listing_type=search#11837
14. @Mr Mystery aka Antoine Hardy, “Lets talk about crack” Okayplayer General Discussion Forum June 21, 2005. https://board.okayplayer.com/okp.php?az=show_topic&forum=18&topic_id=57583&mesg_id=57607, https://board.okayplayer.com/okp.php?az=show_topic&forum=18&topic_id=57583&mesg_id=57611
15. Moderators were regular users who volunteered to moderate the forums from abuse or misuse with user feedback. An example of user and moderator communication.

16. I spent my summers in Detroit growing up and since 1995, I thought dilla was the greatest producer the world didn’t know. When I was diagnosed with pancreatic condition, I would listen to his Donuts album in waiting rooms and triage centers, to distract.

17. See the brief Okaplayer Documentary on YouTube for further examples Numerous Cats (May 29, 2007). WTF: An Okaymentary https://youtu.be/HyZB44043V8

18. Church of God in Christ a Southern black denomination known for lively church celebrations.

19. Church Announcement Examples https://board.okayplayer.com/okp.php?az=show_topic&forum=18&topic_id=32073
21. Okayplayer Version of Direct Messaging.
22. Ock Tales was a series of philly based stories shared by members, in GD and Okaysports inside jokes and critiques of visiting Okayplayers were popular: Fly out or meet up stories were very popular as members started to hang out more offline.
23. Drake and Phonte Relationship is really interesting. Google it.
24. Phonte’s Response: Phonte (2005, May 30) posted, “The official Lessonhead Armchair A&R Post.”
25. A hip-hop head who posts in the lesson.
26. In the private messages I talked with Menphyel about it for days. In 2015 we even considered revving it as a podcast..if you look, its still in my twitter bio Josh would passed a few weeks later.
27. Aaron McGruder (@Adub) post to “Geordi is a Bitch” Okayplayer. Com OkayArtist Forum. Agrub, post to “Geordi is a bitch” Okayplayer Okay Artist Forum. March 9, 2002: https://board.okayplayer.com/okp.php?az=show_topic&forum=19&topic_id=11798&mesg_id=11798&listing_type=search#11837
28. @Atlantictriangle, “One of my favorite debates don’t know if it was resolved.”
29. Writer/producer/director of shows such as Scrubs, Last O.G. and Mixedish based on her memoir, to name a few.
30. This is an exercise in combining both.
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