Spatiality at the Cyber-Margins: Black-Oriented Blogs and the Production of Territoriality Online

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Abstract
This essay analyzes the challenges African American–oriented blogs must confront in terms of spatiality, specifically that associated with racial trolling. I argue that racial trolling, which encompasses a set of actions wherein users make inflammatory comments in a manner designed specifically to advance racist tropes, represents a mode of spatial aggression that operates in ways reproductive of the power relations that characterize the offline world. I further argue that neoliberalism, which has transformed these sites from relatively small, niche communities of primarily black users to commercially oriented sites open to mass participation, has strengthened the mobility of whiteness on the internet and exacerbated the trolling behaviors. In confronting the challenges these spatial aggressions pose, community members invoke their own sense of agency regarding space, mobilizing various types of user moderation as means of preserving these sites as their own cyber-territories. In constructing this argument, I conduct a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) of discourse from the comments sections of two black-oriented websites, TheRoot and VerySmartBrothas.

Keywords
race, space and place, trolling, cyber-territoriality

Marginality has fueled the production and maintenance of black cybercommunities wherein racial identity forms a foundation for membership and an unapologetically racial lens underlies the circulation of perspectives on current events that depart from—and are critical of—dominant societal discourses. Blogs that enable visitor comments are particularly important in this regard, as they afford a wider community of participants the ability to shape the conversations that flow from a particular topic. In this sense, they are the digital equivalents of the barbershop, churches, and other gathering places that have historically served as sites for conversation, fellowship, and the development of worldviews. In occupying the roles of these more traditional institutions and facilitating the development of networks, communities, and kinship, these blogs constitute cyberplaces.

Situating black blogs as cyberplaces necessitates a focus on the spatial dynamics underlying them, particularly the challenges they must confront as meaningful online spaces constructed by and for people of color for the articulation of their perspectives on current issues. Far from serving as racial utopias free from invasion by hostile ethnic outsiders, these sites are vulnerable to the very same spatial dynamics that operate in other areas of the social world. Recent high-profile incidents of “existing while black,” in which African Americans have been subjected to police intervention for performing mundane activities in public, have highlighted the ways in which space has traditionally been used in the exertion of racial power. Similar to the ways that black bodies are hyper-policed in the offline world, the surveillance of black online discourse has taken the form of racial trolling, which I define as a set of actions wherein users make inflammatory comments that intentionally disrupt conversations online in a manner designed specifically to advance racist tropes. While trolling behaviors have been the subject of much scholarship, with a number of studies examining those aimed at websites focused specifically on sensitive issues such as gender (Herring et al., 2011; Jane, 2014), few have focused on race. Racial trolling extends beyond the distractive aim of nonspecific forms to serve the additional purpose of impeding these
sites’ abilities to create supportive environments for discussion. Therefore, it is conceptualized not only in the racist content of the comments themselves, but also in the very capacity to direct them to the targets. Comments sections are especially rich sources of data for analyses of racial trolling, as they constitute significant sites in “transforming the discursive shape of racism” (Hughes & Daniels, 2013, p. 333).

In this essay, I examine the discourse on two sites, *VerySmartBrothas* and *The Root*, to contend that black-oriented spaces have become particularly vulnerable to invasion in ways reproductive of similar territorial behaviors in the offline world. I further argue that neoliberalism, which has transformed these sites from niche communities of primarily black users to commercially oriented sites open to mass participation, has exacerbated these behaviors. I conduct a critical discourse analysis to examine the ways in which whiteness shapes the contours of the trolls’ actions, as well as the ways in which a historically resistant form of blackness underlies the communities’ responses to them. In both cases, spatiality serves as an explicit or implicit discourse, as white dominance and fragility undergird the need to occupy and control online spaces created by and for African Americans, and the responses to these intrusions, at times, center on claims to black-centered discursive spaces free from the incursion of outsiders. In analyzing these challenges, I address the following questions: In what ways does spatiality provide a useful theoretical framework for addressing the challenges of marginality online? How might the aggressions associated with racial trolling be analyzed in terms of spatial discourses? How do African Americans and other marginalized groups confront incursions into their online communities while invoking spatiality as a mode of resistance? How might interventions from cultural geography provide a critical standpoint from which to study digital media?

I develop this discussion in three parts. First, I offer a general discussion of race, space, and the production of cyberplaces, with attention to the ways in which racial trolling has situated them as *cyber-territories*. Next, I extend this discussion to focus specifically on the challenges these sites must confront, with an emphasis on the ways whiteness and neoliberalism operate concomitantly to disrupt the conversations. Finally, I discuss cyber-territoriality in *VerySmartBrothas* and *TheRoot*, specifically the nature of the trolling comments, which fall into categories designed to advance particular tropes centered on white hegemony.

**Black Geographies Online: Race, Space and the Production of Cyber-territories**

McKittrick and Woods (2007) have theorized black geographies as racialized demographic patterns shaped by history and determinant of the material and physical geographies of human environments. Essentialized notions of race, they further argue, have constructed hegemonic norms that have excluded the concerns of African Americans, rendering black geographic narratives and lived experiences disruptive of dominant modes of power and productive of emancipatory spatial practices. An awareness of the operation of black geographies is thus critical to understanding the trajectory of black space, place, and territoriality online.

LeFebvre (1992) conceptualized space not as passive, but rather as agential, a social product that is “both a field of action and a basis of action” (p. 191), simultaneously a determinant and product of social relations, with boundaries that are produced and communicated through discourse and signs. This function makes its connection to power explicit, for “social relations are bearers of power; what is at issue is a geography of power relations in which spatial form is an important element in the constitution of power itself” (Massey, 1994, p. 22). As this relationship suggests, space is defined by inequality and difference (Neely & Samura, 2011). Race has historically served as one of the more powerful social categories through which spatial boundaries have been constructed and enforced, as the processes of racial formation and spatial production are inextricably linked. In the more explicit manifestations of this co-production, race has been a determinant of who is allowed to access particular spaces and who is excluded from them, as well as the authority to allocate space and the mobility to traverse all spaces unimpeded. In the offline world, this exclusivity and privilege has taken many forms, including historical policies of colonialism, imperialism, and de jure segregation, as well as the creation and maintenance of sundown towns and other structures of occupation and displacement. It is also expressed through contemporary practices of gentrification, de facto segregation, the hyper-policing of public and private spaces, and similar apartheid-style mechanisms. In the online world, it is enacted through racial trolling.

The intersection of race, space, and power also manifests in the conception of space itself. The same forces that produce racialized spaces have informed differences among groups in terms of the utilities they assign to them. As Lipsitz (2007) has argued, in contrast to the dominant perception of space in terms of its exchange value, African Americans and other disenfranchised populations have developed very different ideas about space, understanding it in terms of its sociability and augmented use value. This “counter-spatial imaginary,” he suggests, has turned “segregation into congregation” (p. 14). In this configuration, spatial boundaries are produced by kinship and the discourse that flows from it. Offline, these have taken the form of social institutions devoted to the development and sustenance of the networks crucial to living in a hostile society. Online, black social networks have served the same purpose.

These kinship ties have fostered strong attachments to spaces, constructing them as places as they are invested with value. In the case of black social networks, the value lies in the production of “useful mechanisms of solidarity” (Lewis, 1991). Online, these mechanisms have assumed the form of cyberplaces, where the discourse on blogs, social media,
other forms of digital communication render them as sites for the production of a sense of collective consciousness with respect to race, as well as the alternative perspectives a marginalized status often brings to bear on contemporary issues. In this way, they serve simultaneously as spaces and places for the development of counterpublics, or “dialogic spaces that counteract the exclusionary violence of the American public sphere and offer alternative forms of assembly” (Warner, 2002, p. 85). This need, and particularly its commercial potential, led to the development of black sections of more mainstream websites where users can read stories of particular interest to themselves and comment from their own perspectives. Notable examples include HuffPost Black Voices, a community group within the blog Huffington Post, and Black Kos, a section of the Daily Kos blog.

However, the presence of such sites does not mitigate the need for spaces where users can engage performances of an unapologetic blackness for each other, and may do so away from the prying and controlling white gaze. This ability is vital to the formation and functioning of black counterpublics. Those sites that are black-controlled and enable visitor comments are especially instrumental in this regard, as they provide a mutually supportive community for these exchanges. They are spaces of empathy, understanding, and belonging where blackness, rather than whiteness, is the default. As such, they are guided by their own logics in the governance of “authentic” identities, where both socializing and socialization occur (Hughey, 2008).

This may be seen in the communitarian values advanced through the comments sections. One of the more important transmission modes involves the communication of experiences, particularly those centered on structural racism and racist encounters with whites. While white framing of blackness has traditionally relied on the propagation of racist images, black framing of whiteness emphasizes direct experiences with whites, particularly discriminatory behaviors (Feagin, 2010). These experiences form the basis for most of the conversations, as commenters connect their interpersonal interactions to the broader subject of the article and to other visitors’ posted comments. The articulation of these experiences typically involves forms of narrative and storytelling, which are features of black oral culture mobilized in blogs as means of critiquing the dominant culture (Steele, 2016).

Another important expression of communitarian values involves the language expressed on the blogs. Warner asserts that counterpublics “tend to frame their addresses such that the audiences are explicitly marked by their evolving discourse” (p. 85). This is apparent in the comments sections, as community membership and cultural and racial “authenticity” are signaled through the use and knowledge of a particular vocabulary. A few examples include terms such as “wypipo” as a descriptor for white people, “caucasity” used to denote behaviors coded as emblematic of whiteness, “colonizer,” a pejorative term for whites that invokes both history and space, “mayo” or “mayosaxon,” descriptive terms for whites and white fragility, and “Hotep,” a derogatory term for black people or discourse that is ostensibly “pro-black” and progressive while adhering to hegemonic values, such as respectability, patriarchy, and homophobia. Typically originating on social media, these terms evoke a form of “insider” knowledge wherein even a one-time black visitor can draw upon their experiences to comprehend their meanings.

The construction of these cyber-places as sites for racial struggle, including the experiential and linguistic borders they produce, constitutes them as cyber-territories.

A conception that incorporates, yet extends beyond the meanings assigned to places to encompass a sense of guarded sovereignty over them, territoriality consists of a set of actions designed to “influence, affect, or control objects, people and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic space” (Sack, 1983, p. 56). McKittrick and Woods have suggested that black territoriality, though reflective of dominant modes of geographic thought, is nevertheless potentially disruptive of normative practices and productive of alternative imaginings of the world. Cyber-territoriality operates in this way, not just in the desire to create racialized spaces online, but also in the need to protect them—and the oppositional discourses they produce—from encroachment. One of the more basic ways in which this occurs is through content moderation, which while not unique to black-oriented sites, enables third-party regulation of the commentary.

In addition, there are two forms of distributed moderation that occur on sites with large comment communities, both of which vest the community with substantial power in defining itself and strengthening solidarity among its members. User moderation enables community members to serve this role, empowering them to banish other commenters to the “spaces of exile” colloquially referred to as “the greys,” a sort of comment “purgatory” for those whose remarks violate community standards. The term serves as shorthand for comments that have been marked for moderation—and possible deletion—and thus appear as gray, rather than the standard black of accepted comments. This occurs through flagging, up- and down-voting, and other mechanisms. Exiling someone to the “greys”—or pulling him out of that liminal space—affords agency in terms of deciding who belongs and who does not, effectively “cleansing” the territory of hostile invaders and building the desired community. Space is thus negotiated and made visible through the construction of both desirable (black) and undesirable (gray) places. Overall, this represents a sense of spatial power largely unavailable in the offline world.

Another type of moderation involves the community’s responses to the attempts of racial trolls to invade its space. This “spontaneous moderation” takes the form of user comments about other comments. On black blogs, these often involve the assertion of these spaces as by and for African Americans while inviting the troll to post his comments elsewhere. Both types of moderation illustrate one of the
more significant forms that territoriality assumes online, constituting these sites as spaces of resistance and mutual obligation. In conjunction with the development of the linguistic cues constructed through the sites, they resonate with the historically resistant forms of blackness performed in offline spaces.

While cyber-territoriality offers a useful heuristic in terms of describing the community-building and guarding aspects of these sites, it is also important to understand its other side, which highlights an important challenge they face. Back (2005) has suggested that racism is, by nature, a spatial and territorial form of power. In addition to securing spaces designated as “white,” it functions to claim, occupy, and dominate all spaces, including those created by and for nonwhites. In this sense, policing black discourse online is central to whiteness as a social identity. Territoriality thus constitutes a core characteristic of racial trolling behaviors. In the next section, I detail these behaviors in terms of two powerful underlying discourses: whiteness and neoliberalism.

**Whiteness, Neoliberalism, and the Invasion of Black Cyber-Territories**

While the transformation of space into cyber-territories brings to the fore the complex web of social relations that define the offline world and its reproduction online, an analysis of it is incomplete without focused attention to the ways in which relations of power and identity intervene in this formulation. Shome (2003) has argued that spatial relations of power are integral to the production of the modern self. An analysis of racial trolling, then, must extend beyond a limited focus on racism to account for the features of whiteness itself as an influential social force. As whiteness is territorial in nature, its destabilization of the boundaries of nonwhite spaces online has a de-territorializing impact. Neoliberalism, an ideology that imposes economic/market logics on all areas of social life, strengthens the mobility of whiteness on the internet, enhancing its capacity to invade and disrupt nonwhite cyberspaces and heightening the territorial vulnerability of black-oriented websites.

Fichman and Sanfilippo (2016) have defined trolling as an intentionally disruptive behavior that occurs in the context of internet discourse among users who have no existing relationship in real life. It occurs when a user makes unsolicited, often controversial comments on an internet forum to disrupt the conversation, provoke emotional reactions from other users, and generally sow discord, confusion, and distrust within the community. Trolling behaviors have been the subject of recent scholarship, with a number of studies foregrounding their psychology, motivations, and impact (Cheng et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2018). This research has identified narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadistic personality, known as the Dark Tetrad of personality, as the primary traits associated with online trolling (Buckels et al., 2014). Furthermore, Herring et al. (2011) suggest deception as a primary characteristic, with the pretense of critical conversation serving as a conduit for the interjection of offensive commentary into discussions.

While racial trolling must be considered with these features in mind, they present only a partial explanation for it, which differs from nonspecific forms in that the disruptive behaviors take on racial meanings. As trolling may generally be seen as an assertion of power, in addition to the individual influence that the Dark Tetrad and the desire for deception suggests, racial trolling represents an attempt to exert systemic power through the assertion of racial authority, particularly that associated with space. Spatiality provides a discursive framework through which racial trolling may be situated within a broader rubric of negative online behaviors referenced as incivility. Though “incivility” relies on subjective judgments and is therefore difficult to define, Coe et al. (2014, p. 3) offer a description illustrative of its relationship to racial trolling: discussion features that “convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics.” In extending beyond other conceptualizations to emphasize the targets of discourse, this definition operationalizes incivility in terms of intent, which highlights racial trolling as a specific mode in which white supremacist tropes are interpolated into black-centered spaces. Though intent is difficult to ascertain, spatiality enables us to analyze the ideological work that racial trolling performs.

One of the common assumptions in popular discourse on trolling is that the typical troll is a white male (Sierra, 2014). There are millions of sites where comments steeped in racism—usually inferential, sometimes overt—would not be deemed controversial, as well as numerous sites wherein white supremacy forms the basis for collective consciousness. In fact, Higgin (2013) has argued that the targeting of race and other social categories online represents an attempt to preserve the internet as a space free of challenges to white male heterosexual hegemony. However, this conception applies to those spaces coded as white—which encompasses most sites, including those that are facially neutral—and is therefore inadequate in addressing why individuals or groups seek to disrupt the dialogue in communities constructed as black spaces. A key feature of these behaviors lies in the fact that they are intended to disrupt the dialogues advanced through sites assumed to be “safe” spaces for critical black perspectives on often-racially charged subjects. A more comprehensive analysis, then, must emphasize the features that lie at the intersection of whiteness and spatiality.

Contrary to early proclamations that the internet would serve as a space wherein anonymity and mutability would erase racial identity, race matters in cyberspace (Kolko et al., 2000). Indeed, with respect to the power relations that underlie identity, it matters as much on the internet as it does offline, with anonymity and mutability enabling the users to act in ways online that are largely unavailable to them in real
life. Notably, Rashid (2017) found that on Black Twitter, white trolls sometimes create fake accounts in which they pretend to be black—using black avatars—with some white supremacist sites even offering how-to primers. When this digital blackface performance occurs, it is enacted as a means of imposing white supremacist talking points into black conversations, often employing the linguistic markers of a stereotypical, imaginary blackness. Racial identity is thus enacted in these spaces, with trolling representing one of the performative aspects of whiteness.

In addition to the sense of entitlement to occupy any and all spaces, this performance mobilizes three specific, intersecting features. The first involves the construction of whiteness as a dominant identity. As such, it relies on the normativity of adversarialism, which assumes contests and conflict as normal parts of human nature and necessary models for human organization while defining relationships with others in terms of domination, rather than cooperation (Karlborg, 2004, p. 36). As an identity based on exclusion, whiteness is inherently antagonistic; the relational nature of space suggests that the interactions between whites and people of color (and their allies) in cyberspace is characterized by a dialectic of domination and resistance.

The second feature involves the desire to exercise control over the black gaze. Black-oriented spaces online are aential spaces wherein the critical Black gaze offers resistance to the assumptions of whiteness and their supporting hegemonic structures. Whiteness sees itself as always right, with a commitment to demonstrating that power before the disempowered in ways that mirror the historical and contemporary spatial aggressions emblematic of racial hierarchies. Furthermore, because white people can safely imagine themselves as invisible to Black people, any event or condition in which they lose the ability to control the Black gaze, such as occurs when African Americans form their own online cyber-territories, builds a sense of discomfort (hooks, 1992). In initiating chaos, racial trolling serves the ultimate purpose of redirecting the Black gaze.

The third involves the desire to center and re-center whiteness, and to do so in ways that promote the notion of innocence crucial to the maintenance of white supremacy. Relatively protected from explicit racial critique in the offline world, white people have developed a heightened sensitivity—or fragility—to online interrogation of whiteness, yet the identity’s territorial ambitions foreclose the simple solution of avoiding critical spaces and preserving comfort. Cheng et al. (2017) found that discussion context is one of the variables that triggers trolling, with sensitive subjects, such as those connected to race and racism, more likely to attract the attention of trolls. White fragility is thus enacted through trolling comments intended to steer the conversation away from racism toward the notion of white blamelessness. This includes claims that whites are the true victims of racism, with the attendant moral authority conveyed through victimhood.

Neoliberalism exacerbates the enactment of whiteness on these sites, as the African American sense of place comes into conflict with neoliberal hegemony. Communication systems are implicated in the formation of capitalist logics, with media systems becoming increasingly market-driven over the last few decades (Phelan, 2014). These logics have manifested in the development of media systems dominated by corporate interests, with a corresponding preoccupation with increasing audiences and maximizing profits. In cyberspaces, neoliberalism functions abstractly as an overarching ideology, as the conception and design of the internet as the “marketplace of ideas” allows anyone to contribute comments to a multitude of conversations online, thereby creating a troll-friendly environment. It has also operated in another, more concrete way: all human activities are seen in terms of their economic value and all human beings are configured exhaustively as market actors (Asen, 2017). More specifically, it has transformed online communities into commodities and resituated their members simultaneously as consumers and workers. These market-based roles co-exist with more traditional communal roles.

In contrast to traditional media, where value is produced at the point of production, a significant aspect of the value produced through the internet comes from the unpaid labor of users. Sites with the ability to generate huge clusters of visitors become attractive to advertisers, with user commentary serving as one of the ways in which this unpaid labor is performed (Jakubowicz, 2017). Site-to-site links and “clickbait” headlines are among the most effective of the mechanisms deployed as means of generating unique visitors to a website. Racial discussions are a significant means of generating views. “Clicks” on these websites, regardless of the quarters from which they emanate, bring in advertising revenue. This sometimes includes those generated through links from websites with communal values that are antagonistic to those of the receiving site.

According to neoliberal logics, it follows that commoditized websites become attractive to corporate interests and subject to acquisition. Communities of belonging and mutual exchange are thus subsumed within hyper-visible corporate-controlled spaces in which the collective ethos becomes somewhat more nebulous. As black social networking is often viewed as a commodity capable of delivering clicks from predominately black users, their nonblack allies, occasional visitors, and racial trolls, a number of Black-oriented sites have become more vulnerable to “invasion,” with the susceptibility of particular sites contingent on the social media visibility of its most prolific writers.

Two sites, VerySmartBrothas and TheRoot, provide case studies of the ways in which whiteness and neoliberalism have combined to breach the territorial integrity of black cyberplaces. In the next section, I conduct a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) of trolling in the comments sections of these blogs to detail the functioning of
white and black cyber-territorialities. CTDA draws from technology studies, communication, and critical race studies, combining the features of more traditional discourse analysis into an approach that attempts to ascertain the role of culture in shaping technologies. In foregrounding technology’s discursive and cultural production, CTDA lends itself to analyses specifically foregrounding the role race plays in user activities (Brock, 2012). In addition, it enables an examination of not just comment content, but also of the ways in which the affordances of blogging—including user moderation—contribute to content and discourse (Steele, 2016). As an avid reader of these sites, particularly the comments sections, for over 7 years, I have developed the aforementioned features based on this engagement. In the next section, I analyze a subsection of these comments, highlighting 14 articles and approximately 200 comments over 2 years. I have narrowed down the comments to emphasize those that best illustrate the discursive features that advance and resist these tropes. It is important to note that, regardless of whether the user self-identifies as white—either in the text of the comment or via his or her user name or avatar—a comment will be marked as such, as racial trolling occurs when discourses of whiteness are advanced, irrespective of any claimed racial identity. The comments are publicly available on archived webpages of TheRoot and VerySmartBrothas. In each case, the user’s name has been represented as it appeared in the comments sections, with no additional identifying information. These factors informed the guidelines I employed in this research.

Case Studies: VerySmartBrothas and TheRoot

TheRoot, an online black culture and politics magazine, was founded in 2008. It is ranked third among black-oriented websites, with just under 5 million monthly unique visitors (Ramanathan, 2016). VerySmartBrothas, a creation of Damon Young and Panama Jackson, is a black culture blog founded in 2008. In 2017, the site was acquired by Gizmodo, a unit of Univision, and became a vertical of TheRoot. In 2017, the author critiqued the perceived tendency of divergent staff? Those are the types of things I want to know. Not minorities? How does he treat minorities and does he have a diverse staff? Those are the types of things I want to know. Not even funny by pretty much all societal standards in the mid-80s. People who weren’t alive then and can’t even tell you how different it was (and it was) just 30+ years ago...I can tell you that what’s in that photo was considered acceptable and even funny by pretty much all societal standards in the mid-80s. So show me Northam today. How do his policies impact minorities? How does he treat minorities and does he have a diverse staff? Those are the types of things I want to know. Not some Halloween picture from three decades ago. But current outrage won’t allow those questions. They think if you do something racist at any time in your life then you’re a racist for life. *only applies to white people.

In a February 2019 article in TheRoot discussing the controversy over the revelation that Virginia Governor Ralph Northam had been photographed in blackface while in medical school, the author critiqued the perceived tendency of whites to adopt progressive public personas while masking racist pasts. In response to a comment thread in which the users agreed with the author’s perspective, a troll using the moniker “Booger Pressly” wrote,

*People continue to put 2019 standards on 1980s reality and society. People who weren’t alive then and can’t even tell you how different it was (and it was) just 30+ years ago...I can tell you that what’s in that photo was considered acceptable and even funny by pretty much all societal standards in the mid-80s. So show me Northam today. How do his policies impact minorities? How does he treat minorities and does he have a diverse staff? Those are the types of things I want to know. Not some Halloween picture from three decades ago. But current outrage won’t allow those questions. They think if you do something racist at any time in your life then you’re a racist for life. *only applies to white people.*

When another commenter defended the author’s position, the same troll responded with the retort, “what’s it like being a professional victim?” In response to an April 2018 post
title “How to Make White People Uncomfortable” on VerySmartBrothas, a user calling himself “LugNut” offered some suggestions from a white person’s “perspective”:

Immahelpouht. Perma-grey here. Your list is full of stuff that you care about that you presume we do as well. Heads up, we probably don’t (at least not as much as you think). Actually a lot of your list is common sense things that we expect/hope for (black) people to do; perhaps your sometimes mistaking surprise for “uncomfortable.” You probably should have just asked a white dude what makes us uncomfortable, so let me help amend your list.

He continued by listing a number of “black” public behaviors that, in his mind, fuel white racism. It constitutes a form of victim blaming, and serves the discursive function of reconstructing racism as a black problem, rather than a problem of whiteness.

Another trope involves making defensive claims of “reverse racism.” This reflects a worldview that has historically perceived advances in racial equality as leading to corresponding losses in white hegemony; these “zero-sum” discourses have found their contemporary expression in the post-racialist rhetorical myth that whites are now the group most likely to be the victims of racism. More specifically, it attempts to short-circuit accusations of racism by turning the table on the accuser, thereby imbuing the accusation of racism with a greater sense of moral injury than the racism itself. Making these claims diverts attention away from white commentators’ experiences and centers it on whiteness, and as is the case with accusations of black “victimology,” advances the assertion of innocence integral to white supremacy. In a February 2019 article in TheRoot discussing the racial politics of the film Ma (2019), a troll calling himself “icame-fortheoffensivebanter” wrote, “Ahhh, the good ol root. Where blacks can be more racist than whites. Keep up the offensive banter” wrote, “Ahhh, the good ol root. Where blacks can be more racist than whites. Keep up the offensive banter.”

This shit right here needs to stop. If that was written to say “when black people don’t mind their business” people would rightfully lose their minds. Why is this ok? Why does it even say anything at all about color? In the press release I see nothing suggesting race has anything to do with the story . . . so why is it in the click bait headline? Why is it ok to write headlines with a racist undertone if it’s negative about white people? It can’t be written the other way without static so it shouldn’t be written this way either. Proof that nobody wants racism to stop, just want it to align with their agenda . . . it’s sickening.

In a February 2018 comment thread on TheRoot from an article titled “An Open Letter to White People Who are Upset Because Black Panther is So Racist,” a troll calling himself “whyareyousoracist” responded to another commenter, I was reading an article about cars on Jalopnik and there was a big “open letter to white people . . .” up in the corner. I’m sorry that clicking on this and objecting to the racism in it angered you so deeply.

This particular instance explicitly demonstrates neoliberalist intervention, as a troll who was triggered by the headline clicked on the article from a website for vehicle buyers and was subsequently able to gain access to TheRoot to assert claims of “reverse racism.”

The third trope involves the interjection of right-wing political narratives and racial dog whistles, particularly those that have been critical to public support for policies with racial impacts. In a February 2019 article discussing the response on Black Twitter to a Trump tweet about “angry blacks,” a troll likely pretending to be Black wrote the following:

There is no race, TRUMP has already won and stupid fucking articles by niggas that live in a fairy tale bubble world, like this one are the THE REASON a lot of us blacks are voting for THE POTUS, Trump. We’re tired of lazy, poor, uneducated blacks (in BLACK NIGGA!) making us look bad, causing widespread systemic laziness, and low energy. Every nigga I know that’s born after 1980 wants everything without doing anything. They are trying to scam, hustle, fool, or just profit with as little work as possible. Fuck The Blacks. Again, IM BLACK!

Sometimes the discourses are subtler. On 11 May 2019, a story in TheRoot about an author whose book contract was canceled after she tweeted a photo of a black transit worker eating on the job, “fuhamno” responded in the comments as follows:

This is complete bullshit. The person in the wrong is the one who violated the rules, not the one who reported the violation. You people live in a bizarro world where crime is a badge of honor and honesty is a crime. Fuck you and your debased culture.

The problematic nature of this comment goes deeper than the refusal to acknowledge the uneven enforcement of societal rules; the notion that black culture is a “debased culture” performs the same ideological work performed by the racist pseudoscience of the past, with cultural arguments as stand-ins for biological ones. The idea has historically served as an influential dog whistle in right-wing politics.

The final trope involves “concern trolling,” which takes place when a user attempts to derail conversations about race and racism through insincere expressions of concern about the consequences of such discussions. It takes many forms, but a primary form—tone policing—is illustrated here. Tone policing involves the suggestion that discussions of racism result in more racism, with the implied exhortation that blacks stop talking about it. For example, in the comments section of a November 2017 article in VerySmartBrothas
In a September 2019 comment thread in TheRoot, in which a troll dismissed the site as “the internet equivalent of Chinatown,” “Wryrock” offered a response drawing explicit equivalencies between spatial relations in the offline and online worlds. “Does he mean because it’s beset by whiteness with the suggestion to go elsewhere?” an article about the film Black Panther, a troll dismissed the site as “the internet equivalent of Chinatown,” “Wryrock” offered a response drawing explicit equivalencies between spatial relations in the offline and online worlds. “Does he mean because it’s beset by whiteness with the suggestion to go elsewhere?”

Similarly, “Melaninja” responded to a troll on the TheRoot article about the film Ma with the suggestion to go elsewhere for articles and commentary more to his liking. “You know Fox News and The Daily Stormer exist, right,” they wrote. “Nobody is stopping them from being racist.” In another example, one commenter on the VerySmartBrothas article on white discomfort calling themselves “Siroxx” wrote,

Damon could have hyperlinked EVERY ONE of the numbers above to relevant examples of wypipo illustrating each point. What you deem as “white people bait,” represents REAL, ACTUAL suffering experienced by REAL, ACTUAL people right here in this country, every year, week, and day. Just because a dialogue is not one that YOU in particular find necessary or want to have, doesn’t mean it’s not a serious dialogue. That’s just you insisting we prioritize your discomfort-slash-feelings . . .

Other responses invoke cyber-territoriality in more direct ways, emphasizing the spatial dynamics underlying racial trolling. In these cases, users have expressed the connections between the online behaviors and similar offline actions. In the comments section of the Black Panther article in TheRoot, a user called “AGAINWITHTHISSHIT” wrote,

The fact that you came into a black space and started criticizing and trying to invalidate what you read and comment is exactly why whites are seen as fragile. When you take the generalization and make it all about you instead of hearing the voices of those who have often been ignored, you reinforce that perception of white fragility. You exemplify the worst of white people in America . . .

In another example from the same comment thread, a self-identified white user, “Actually, I Am a Robot,” made a similar point:

Why do you feel compelled to defend white people? I am white and didn’t ask for that post nor do I feel like you do. I don’t see The Root as “complaining about white people at every single opportunity,” and even if that was the case, it wouldn’t matter to me. It is obvious that systemic racism exists in every part of our culture, and it’s so ingrained that here you are “defending” white people on website that is written by black folks for their consumption. Can’t people of color have ANYTHING? If it bugs you, read something else. Our culture is completely dominated by what white people want—I’m sure you can be entertained elsewhere.

In a September 2019 comment thread in TheRoot, in which a troll dismissed the site as “the internet equivalent of Chinatown,” “Wryrock” offered a response drawing explicit equivalencies between spatial relations in the offline and online worlds. “Does he mean because it’s beset by whiteness
on all sides,” they wrote. “Does he mean because it’s resented for being a tiny space in ‘their’ country (or ‘their’ server) where whites and whiteness aren’t centered 100 percent of the time? Because he might have a point then.”

These responses emphasize, with varying degrees of explicitness, the function of the blogs as safe spaces for the articulation of views seldom discussed in the offline world. In each case, the user expressed their exasperation that even these spaces are subject to an imposing whiteness. Importantly, these observations were connected to broader systems of racism that the discourse on the sites—including the trolls’ interjections—is intended to highlight.

Other cyber-territorial responses emphasize the role of neoliberal mechanisms in weakening the site’s boundaries. In the VerySmartBrothas article on white discomfort, “Lugnut” wrote, “let’s not kid ourselves, Damon [the author] posts these things as white people bait in order to get page views, and so the masses can post ‘this gonna b good’ an popcorn eating gifs.” In the TheRoot article focused on Black Twitter’s interrogation of Trump, a poster called “Mud’s Not Yer Buddy, Pal” wrote of trolls, “Arguing with them raises pageviews and ad rates. The powers that be actively encourage them.”

Finally, the agency in consigning a user to the “greys” forms an important part of the response to trolling, as commenters point out the need to enforce territorial borders using the more concrete means of moderation available to users. Indeed, trolls are sometimes referred to in shorthand as “grays” or “greys.” “Who let attention-starved Sammy out of the greys,” asked “TampaBabaYaga” in the comment thread on a November 2018 article in TheRoot. “The white tears in the grays should be exciting. But truth is truth,” wrote “BedAndBreakfastGuy” in the thread of another article about the rise in white nationalism. “Who’s ungraying these nut sack ass grays? I remember when we used to get trolls that were actually worth a damn,” “Iculookin” wrote. “At least they would make me chuckle before I dismissed them,” to which “AuntBeetsyredux” replied, “I usually dismiss them, but I thought I’d at least let the one I was referring to stay—it makes my point.” In a post evincing an awareness of the alignment of white discomfort and trolling, one commenter effectively summed up the issues that form the basis for broader questions of race, space, technology, and power. In the comments section of TheRoot’s “clapback mailbag,” “Foxstar loves bashcraft” wrote that

[truth has a fantastic bonus of making people uncomfortable, which is likely why the Root next to Splinter has a crazy amount of racists and trolls in the grey who scream bloody murder every single time an article is posted, instead of maybe, you know, sticking to sites that suit their worldview.

These comments specifically reference the greys; users make clear the importance of maintaining the blog as a safe space and invoke their own agency in doing so. Notably, they highlight the available structural mechanism for doing so, and in different ways, acknowledge their own agency in activating this mechanism and maintaining communal integrity and authenticity.

**Conclusion**

Digital media technologies have expanded the opportunities for members of marginalized groups to express their views on politics and current events, and to establish communities of kinship and belonging in spaces formed by and for themselves. For African Americans, black-oriented websites do this work, providing spaces for performances of blackness that center shared experiences, deploy a critical, culturally specific vocabulary for articulating these experiences, and construct a sense of agency in regulating community membership. These functions call for spatial analyses of these sites, with particular attention to the ways in which territoriality produces the agency they construct.

Territoriality also shapes the challenges these sites face. Black and white cyber-territories provide an apt illustration of this dialectic, as the racial relations that structure social life in the offline world are reproduced online and are facilitated through neoliberal ideals that subject online spaces to many of the same market forces that have worked to produce marginalization in other areas of social life. This includes the policing of black spaces, which, regardless of the content of the trolling messages, reflects the desire to undercut the spatial agency of nonwhite communities and to create awareness in their members that there are no “safe” spaces free from hostile white intervention. The trolling comments themselves reinforce this power play.

In focusing on black and white cyber-territorialities, this study analyzes one of many ways that marginality takes shape online and highlights the mechanisms disenfranchised groups may employ to resist intrusions into their spaces. In so doing, it foregrounds their lived experiences and aids in the development of a body of knowledge that should use these perspectives as starting points for scholarly inquiry (Linabary & Corple, 2019). Spatiality represents a particularly productive theoretical lens through which these lived experiences may be examined, and the ubiquity and influence of digital media present myriad new frontiers for research. Given the importance of space and digital media in addressing broader questions of race and power, it would benefit us all to traverse them.

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Note
1. There are linguistic cues that, in combination, suggest that the commenter may not be black, including the overuse of the term “nigga” (including in all-caps “yelling”), the invocation of historical racial stereotypes, and the third-person reference to “the blacks” followed by the issuance of a seemingly “correction” claim to be black himself.

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