

## **CULTURAL APPROPRIATIONS OF TECHNICAL CAPITAL: BLACK WOMEN, WEBLOGS, AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

### ***Introduction***

Research on the social implications of information and communication technology (ICT) use by underserved populations is typically framed as a 'digital divide'. Conversations about bridging this said divide consistently link underserved groups with deficit models of attainment (Selwyn, 2004). Either minority groups lack material access, lack mastery of digital practices and literacies, or lack value systems promoting the educational achievement necessary to acquire base proficiency in digital systems.

These three premises illustrate the rhetorical power of Western ideologies of technology use and race. Technology becomes the hallmark of civilization, the arbiter of logic and reason, and the civilized are considered to have a 'natural affinity' for technology. Those on the margins are demeaned for their lack of technology engagement on material, cognitive, and ideological, or even moral grounds. Thus, instrumental rationality becomes inextricably intertwined with technical capital and cultural capital, and the underserved are considered 'irrational'.

Selwyn's (2004) article asks that researchers employ models that evaluate access and use of ICT along with the impact and consequences of engagement with ICT for marginalized individuals and groups. Using Selwyn as a launching point, we examine why and how Black weblogs combine technological resources with cultural resources in ways that are provocative, powerful, and popular for their audiences. Specifically, we consider weblogs as exemplars for illustrating the embrace of technical and cultural

capital by marginalized groups who use them to disseminate personal and ideological beliefs to like-minded audiences.

Our aim in this paper is to use cultural and technical capital as a sensitizing framework for exploring ways of thinking about technology and social inequalities. We take a particular focus on weblog discourses about Black women in the matrimonial market. The organization of this paper is as follows: We begin with a review of Bourdieu's theory of technical and cultural capital. In addition, we use Black feminist theory to provide further insights into accumulation and activation of cultural and technical capital by Black women. This is followed by a discussion of our research design, data collection and analysis, and research findings. Finally we consider the implications of our findings for understanding how ICT usage can be shaped by the information needs and beliefs of its users.

### ***Theoretical Foundations***

For Bourdieu (1976), marriage has historically been a means of distributing wealth and inheritance making marriage choice more about the exchange of economic, cultural and social capital, and less about romantic love. For Bourdieu (1986), capital refers to the skills, abilities and resources that allow an individual or group to wield influence and power over what is at stake in a given social arena, such as the matrimonial market. Capital is a force inscribed in subjective and objective structures, and gives regularity to the social world; "It is what makes the games of society – not least, the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241).

Capital comes in three principal species: economic (material and financial assets), cultural (scarce symbolic goods, skills, and titles), and social (resources accrued by virtue of membership in a group). In modern societies, people do not face an undifferentiated social space. The various spheres of life such as art, science, religion,

economics, law, politics, and marriage tend to form distinct microcosms endowed with their own rules, regularities, and forms of authority - what Bourdieu calls fields. In this paper, we focus on cultural and technical capital and Black feminist theory as sensitizing frameworks for analyzing web-based discourses about how African American women accumulate and activate capital through discussions of matrimony.

### *Cultural Capital*

The term capital is usually associated with a narrowly defined economic category of monetary exchange for profit. However, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is an attempt to expand the category of capital to something more than just the economic and to identify culture as a power resource. Bourdieu identifies three variants of cultural capital: the embodied state incorporated in mind and body; in institutionalized forms such as educational qualifications; and in the objectified state existing as cultural goods such as art or technology artifacts (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied cultural capital presupposes a process of embodiment through labor of inculcation and assimilation capable of securing a return on that investment. For instance, technological prowess cannot be acquired second hand; it requires personal investment in time and effort to convert external wealth into an integral part of the person. Institutionalized cultural capital provides a certification of cultural competence that confers on its holder a legally recognized and guaranteed value. Academic credentials, such as a degree in computer science, have the 'performative magic' to impose institutional recognition. The material and symbolic profits that academic qualifications confer depend on its scarcity, the necessary investments of time and effort, and the monetary value of the certification in the labor market. Objectified cultural capital is found in material objects and media, such as computers. While these material objects may be transmissible materially through legal ownership, the possession of the means of symbolically consuming a computer presupposes embodied cultural capital. Agents seeking to exploit ICT wield strengths

and obtain profits proportionate to their mastery of this objectified cultural capital, and therefore to the extent of their embodied cultural capital.

### *Technical Capital*

In his later work, Bourdieu (2002) recognized the need for an additional form of cultural capital (i.e. technical capital) to capture the specific skills that a person develops through engagement with modern computing equipment. Technical capital serves as a power resource as certain groups mobilize around their technical expertise to gain resources and position. This form of capital accrues through education, economic means, social networks that include others knowledgeable about ICT, and unfettered access to ICT. As a material good, ICT has a meaning that goes far beyond mere physical structure. ICT both expresses and betrays, in a more decisive way than many other goods, the social being and economic means of its owners. The consumption of ICT is primarily a product of the individual's purchasing power, their past and present position in the labor market, and educational attainment. Command of this cultural capital confers a higher degree of autonomy and digital skills, and would also help to explain variations in use. For instance, social class has been consistently found (e.g. in Pew Internet, World Internet Project, UCLA Internet Report and similar large-scale, survey-based studies), to be one of the most salient predictors of Internet and technology adoption, use, and usage behavior. The notion of a digital divide suggests that the consumption of ICT is a key element of social inequality and life chances. ICT consumption is, therefore, reflective and constitutive of the broader economic, social and cultural contexts in which ICTs are made - a point of considerable importance in the early years of the 21st century where ICT is used as an indicator of more general economic and social well-being (Kvasny & Truex, 2000).

### *Symbolic Power*

Bourdieu's concern regarding capital was how its continual accumulation and activation perpetuated social inequalities. Bourdieu saw cultural capital as breaking with the received wisdom that attributes success or failure to natural aptitudes, such as intelligence, talent, achievement and giftedness. Rather, Bourdieu explained success in marriage and other fields by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family and social milieu. Thus, to compete in the matrimonial field, a woman must be predisposed to enter that field. There is also a minimal requirement of capital in the form of knowledge, skill or talent to be accepted as a legitimate contender. Furthermore, investing in the field means that she will attempt to use her capital in such a way as to derive the most benefit or profit from participation.

In the matrimonial market, the cultural capital held by the Black woman is mediated by the object of competition between the woman and her competitors – a suitable mate. However, a system of evaluation works against her. This general phenomenon is described as *symbolic power* or a form of domination that is ‘exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ (Bourdieu 1992, p. 167). According to Bourdieu (1976), all actors tacitly acknowledge the legitimacy of power and the hierarchical relations of power in which they are embedded. Moreover, symbolic power requires that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it.

These power relations are built into institutional processes (e.g., marriage strategies) and provide a practical justification of the established order. Hence, to understand the ways in which symbolic power is exercised and reproduced, one must look at the emergence of institutionalized mechanisms which tend to fix the value accorded to forms of capital, to allocate the capital differentially, and to inculcate a belief in their value.

### *Black Feminist Theory*

Black feminist theory provides a lens for examining how Black women conceive of themselves as marriage market contenders with valuable capital resources. Research produced by Black feminists suggests that Black women often know their self worth, see the arbitrary nature of the social hierarchy and find ways to resist oppression. This is most notably evidenced by the concept of intersectionality, which was developed by feminists of color to analyze the ways in which women's daily lives are shaped by interlocking power relations such as androcentrism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, and classism (hooks, 1981). Intersectionality has evolved into a central concept for explicating ways in which group-based oppression imposes substantive differences in the lives of women. From this perspective, nationality, race, class, gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality are not individual markers of identity; rather, they are elements of social structures that foster inequality resulting in groups, their position in society, and their accompanying standpoints (Collins, 1997). However, proximity on a single marker of identity, such as gender or race, does not imply solidarity because individuals have differences on other variables. Collins (1997) notes, for instance, an increasing mismatch between what privileged Black women identify as important themes and what disadvantaged Black women deem as worthy of attention. As a result, it is more accurate to talk about a Black woman's standpoint rather than Black women's standpoint.

Black feminists take the position that all knowledge is socially situated and that no point exists from which to objectively evaluate the merits of other standpoints. The creation and legitimization of knowledge claims that confer normalcy to dominant groups are key components in the maintenance of power systems (Collins, 2000). However, what has usually been taken to be legitimate knowledge has been based primarily on the lives of men in dominant races, classes, and cultures (Allen, 1996). Dominant knowledge claims often position women and other marginalized groups as

outsiders who could be best understood by examining how they are different in relation to dominant groups. An example of this is the fact that the vast majority of discourse on Black women and marriage is positioned as how Black women deviate from what is taken to be the White, middle class female norm. The convergence of sexism and racism, beginning with chattel slavery and continuing to this present day, contributes to Black women having the lowest status and worst conditions of any group in American society (hooks, 1981). Black feminists start outside of these dominant knowledge frameworks and position Black women as agents with their own thoughts, histories and experiences (Smith, 1987).

These oppositional knowledge frames are developed as Black women face interlocking oppression that shape their awareness of and reaction to racist and sexist behavior (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989). When interacting with others outside their race and gender, they have to contend with the stereotypes of Black women (e.g. the mammy, jezebel, or sapphire) and the uncertainty that clouds intercultural communication (Bell et al., 2000). Black women must also work to resist hegemonic beliefs and values demeaning their beauty, intelligence, intellect, parenting skills, femininity, and integrity. We see these counter-hegemonic ways of knowing and coping skills as Afrocentric forms of cultural capital.

This cultural capital is evidenced discursively through the use of ICT. In the blog postings, for instance, Black women become the object of a whole set of verbal exchanges, of delighted comments on improvements accomplished or to be accomplished, and practical activities, such as dating. We consider how the Black women create self-definitions and self-valuations online that enable them to activate cultural and technical capital reflecting their unique standpoints on and social positioning in the marriage market.

## ***Data and Analysis***

For this article, we selected a topic that received much attention throughout the Black and feminist blogospheres. On December 10, 2009 the Washington Post's DeNeen Brown wrote an article on Helena Andrews, an upwardly mobile Black political reporter. Brown writes that "Andrews' life appears charmed" from the outside. However, for Andrews, this is not the case - she is lonely and confused. Inspired by a 2008 episode of Saturday Night Live in which Tina Fey announced that "Bitch is the New Black", Andrews decided to write a memoir with this title to work through her lack of matrimonial success to compliment with her professional accomplishments. Andrews describes her book, released in June 2010, as an intersection of "Bridget Jones' Diary" and "Sex and the City". The book is a composition of 16 autobiographical essays that discuss her accomplishments, her untraditional upbringing as the sole daughter of an outwardly homosexual mother, and the challenges she has faced in the dating arena. The title of her book, along with the article's focus on the woes of being single, Black, female, educated, and successful, are what attracted the furor in the blogs we examined. The article garnered nearly 500 comments in the Washington Post forums before moderators closed the thread for terms of service violations.

We analyzed three blogs (along with their resultant comment threads) that responded to the article:

- Essence Magazine's essence.com relationship blog post, "Commentary: Debunking the 'B' Word" (Lucas, 2009)
- Gawker Publishing's feminist/pop culture blog, Jezebel (jezebel.com), posted "Sex in the Diamond District: Race, love, and relationships in Washington" (Peterson, 2009)
- New Demographic's intersectional/pop culture blog, Racialicious (racialicious.com), posted "SBF seeks social validation: Why are so many Black women single?!?!?" (Muse, 2009)

We conducted a critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2008) on the gathered materials: close readings of the blog posts and the source material alongside a thematic

analysis of the comments. After comparing notes, we correlated our themes within our intersectional framework of cultural and gender logics, material practices, and history to understand how the commenters and bloggers worked to construct, maintain, or destabilize their discursive concept of a 'Black woman'. Critical technocultural discourse analysis also includes an interface analysis of the electronic artifact; accordingly we provide brief annotations of how each site's format, imagery, and code mediate the rhetorical strategies employed to articulate ethos for each site.

The limitations of critical technocultural discourse analysis lie primarily in its ability to scale and the strength of the interpretive framework employed. The thick description necessary to connect interface design and ideology leads to lengthy exposition that often decenters the narrative flow of research conducted with this method. Also, the conscious decision to display large chunks of user-generated discourse, while reflecting the methodological desire of representing disadvantaged groups in their own words, must be properly contextualized by the interpretive framework in order to maintain narrative cohesion. Our use of critical technocultural discourse analysis is intended to examine the mediation of online discourses by technological artifacts; a solely discursive analysis or solely technological analysis would by necessity obscure important interactions between discourse and technology.

### ***Background***

All three blogs in our study took their cues from the Helena Andrews interview on the Washington Post website. The article, "Successful, Black and Lonely: DC Author's Tale of Young Black Women's Loneliness Catches Hollywood's Ears", presents Andrews' forthcoming book, *Bitch is the New Black*. The book provides a satirical look at successful young Black women, and asks why these women cannot find a man. While Andrews is dressed in designer clothes, has an Ivy League education, is surrounded by

fabulous friends and has a great job, she is lonely. "For a lot of Black women, especially young successful Black women, we have a lot of boxes on our master plan list checked off," Andrews says. "We think happiness should come immediately after that. But that is not always the case."

Andrews describes herself as "a mean woman" and we see this in the way she treats a former suitor she nicknames "Cornrows". Andrews doesn't find this man attractive. She isn't satisfied with his conversation ("He can put together coherent sentences, but they are not in any way related to my life,") or his car ("I got in his car and there was this strawberry smell fragrance. I had to roll the window down by hand. I assume it's paid for."). At best, Cornrows can be her "Winter Boo" - a man who serves a seasonal purpose:

*someone you hook up with when it's cold outside, someone good enough to take to office holiday parties, someone who has a car and who can drive when the wind is whipping down the sidewalk...A winter boo doesn't know he's a winter boo until summer comes and he has been set free.*

There is no mention of positive partners or dating situations. Rather, Andrews adopts the "Bitch" persona to provide protective armor against slights and perceived weakness. The article's meta-narrative illustrates the perils of being Black, female, and middle class by focusing on the scarcity of quality mates for these otherwise successful women. In this way, the article reinforces patriarchal and heteronormative paradigms complicated by racial stereotypes.

Marriage rates in the US have steadily declined since the 1950s, while divorce, separation, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, and single parent households have increased (Malone-Colon 2007). While this is fairly consistent across all races, African Americans' marriage experiences diverge significantly from Whites. It is believed that "with respect to marriage and child rearing, Black and White Americans do live in

substantially different worlds” (Besharov and West, 2000, p.95). However, in presenting these statistics, those worlds are not often described or explained.

Take, for example, the following recurring statistics: Although the overall marriage rate in the US declined 17% between 1970 and 2001, according to the US Census, it fell 34% for Blacks. Also, African American women are half as likely to get married than White women, spend half as long married to their spouse, are twice as likely to divorce, and four times as likely to be separated (Besharov and West 2000). In addition, cohabitating unions lead to marriage quicker for Whites than Blacks (Raley, 1996). These statistics are consistently presented and interpreted through stereotypical images of Black women including the jezebel (the alluring seductress with an insatiable sexual appetite), the mammy (everyone's favorite aunt or grandmother), the matriarch (the mother with poor parenting skills) and the sapphire (the evil bitch who emasculates men). As a result of these portrayals, the question often becomes “what is wrong with Black women?” In the next section, our analysis examining how technical and cultural capital are deployed through each blog’s approach to the topic of Black women and matrimony, followed by an overview of the technical and cultural capital articulated by each blog.

## ***Analysis***

### *Audience*

Each of the three sites examined bring a slightly different audience, format, perspective on womanhood, and ethos to their discussion of Helena Andrews’ plight. One way to measure audience is by examining blog rankings and web traffic statistics. The table below lists the blog rankings (Technorati)<sup>1</sup> and web traffic (Alexa)<sup>2</sup>, along with

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<sup>1</sup> Technorati ranking reflects a site’s linking behavior (linked to and linked from), categorization, and other associated data over a short, finite period of time

the website URL and number of comments per blog post. We have included stats for the #1 ranked blog in the country, The Huffington Post, as a benchmark.

Blog/Website (URL)	Technorati Rank and Authority	Alexa Traffic Rank (worldwide)
The Huffington Post (huffingtonpost.com)	1 963/1000	156
Jezebel (Jezebel.com)	25 812/1000	4,600
Racialicious (Racialicious.com)	N/A 621/1000	103,848
Essence.com (Essence.com)	N/A N/A	24,423

**Table 1 - Weblog rankings and web traffic**

*Format*

Essence (Figure 1) is not technically a blog; following a massive site redesign in late 2009 the magazine moved from a mirror of its print content to a Web 2.0 format featuring blog ‘channels’, twitter feeds, videos, and a tag cloud. Both Jezebel (Figure 2) and Racialicious (Figure 3) feature layouts symbolizing a range of blog design.

Racialicious opts for a spare, minimal presentation featuring a two-column layout, lots of White space, and minimal use of imagery featuring people of color. Jezebel follows the Gawker template of a three-column layout, with post previews and page hyperlinks above the site’s header, a prominent contribution box in the header itself encouraging submissions from visitors, and a masthead filling the far left column.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexa traffic ranking is based upon a 3 month average of daily site visits. It is not considered terribly accurate, but does serve as an general indice of a website’s popularity

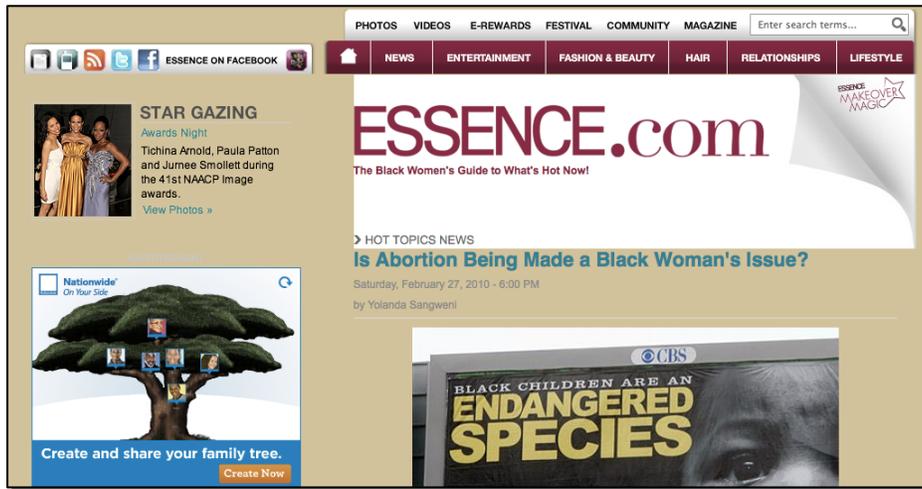


Figure 1 - Essence.com

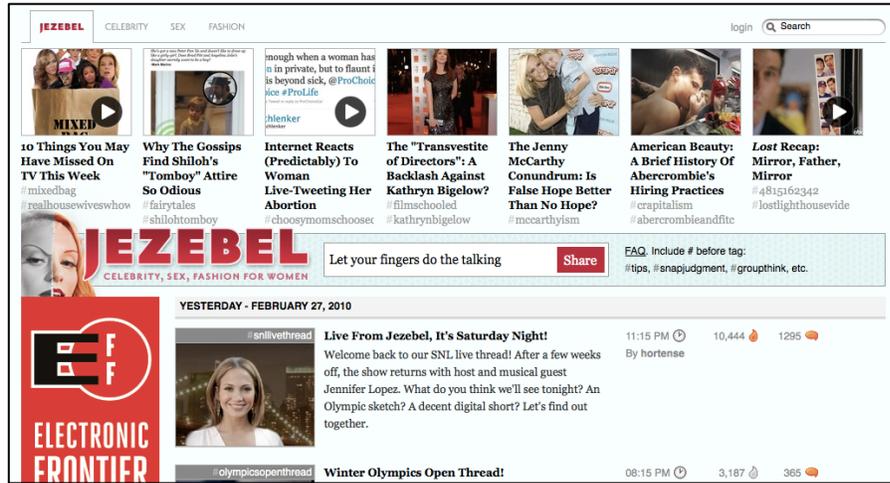
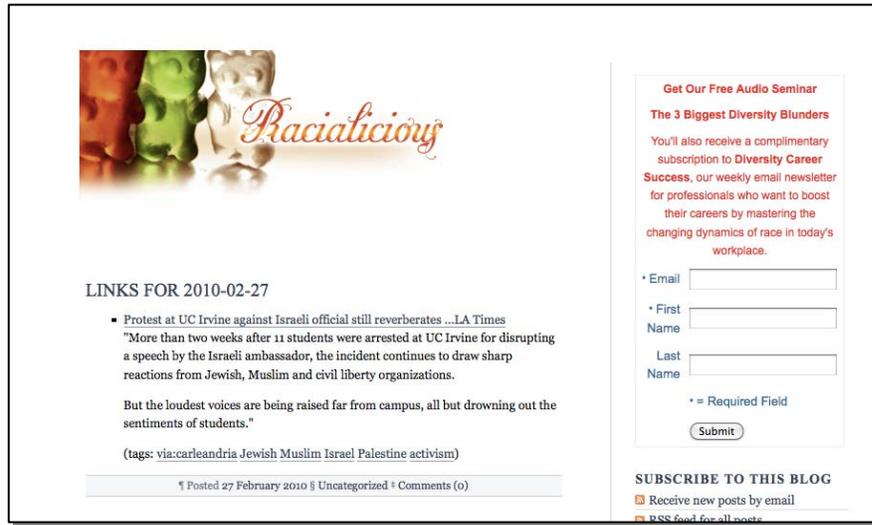


Figure 2 - Jezebel.com



**Figure 3 - Racialicious.com**

*Perspectives on Womanhood*

Each blog chosen represents varying cultural perspectives on womanhood. Jezebel is the blog that, in our opinion, hews closest to liberal American ideals of womanhood and feminism, and their audience skews to younger, progressive professional women who visit for a snarky ‘feminist’ take on the day’s events. Essence.com staunchly represents the Black cultural perspective, catering to an audience of middle-class, middle-aged Black women. Racialicious falls in the middle of our demographic spectrum, publishing content for multicultural audiences that address issues concerning women’s rights, LGBT affairs, or media representations. We should note that all three blogs, though primarily serving female audiences, also have male commenters adding their own definitions of how women (and Black women in particular) should act. Although they were a minority, their comments often attracted multiple responses and served to solidify the female commenters’ definition of Black womanhood through opposition. Cultural capital is evidenced through these definitions of and cultural perspectives on Black womanhood that critically interrogate intersecting forms of sexism, racial oppression and class that shape Black women’s lived experiences.

According to the LaRue (1995, p. 172), “The black woman is demanding a new set of female definitions and a recognition of herself of a citizen, companion and confidant, not a matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker.”

### *Ethos*

Jezebel is part of the Gawker media empire, which also features the highly trafficked technology blog, Gizmodo, and other subject focused blogs such as Kotaku (games), Gawker (media commentary), and Lifehacker (productivity/technology). To give you an idea of Jezebel’s popularity, the site averages over a million visits (not page views) a day. Jezebel’s tagline is “celebrity, sex, and fashion for women”, but we argue that the primary audience is young, affluent White women. This comes to light particularly when Jezebel bloggers cover topics concerning race. The comments following those posts reveal that the audience responds based on White-oriented racial frameworks in terms of their personal experiences and attitudes toward race matters. In fact, one of Jezebel’s editors had to issue a separate post taking her membership to task for their lack of empathy or understanding of racial matters (Stewart, 2009). This correction by the blog editor mirrors Black feminists’ critique of White middle-class feminists’ lack of thoughtful consideration of racial oppression.

Racialicious, which in a previous incarnation was known as “Mixed Media Watch”, bills itself as a blog examining “the intersection of race and pop culture”. As such, the site falls in the middle, demographically, of the three sites examined in this paper. The site critiques mainstream portrayals of race, gender, sexuality, and other identities in film, music, politics, videogames, and art. As a consequence of its topical focus and the resultant draw of assholes and well-meaning racists, the site works to strictly enforce an ethos of respect and civil discourse in the comments section. The moderators have a more finely-grained commenting policy about “oppression” discourse than other sites, which results in more thoughtful commenting on average.

Essence is the web destination for the Time Warner-owned Essence, a Black women's lifestyle magazine. Essence has a long and storied history of catering to the informational and lifestyle needs of middle-class Black women, but that reputation has a double edged sword. Readers old and new complain about the staid and conservative outlook on Black womanhood, especially following Essence's sale to Time Warner in 2007. Up until 2005, Essence's website represented an old-media take on the web, where a website's only purpose was to send traffic to the print version through subscription. As such, the site had little interactivity and mainly served as advertisement for upcoming print articles. Hurricane Katrina's exposure of the lack of mainstream Black news sources served as a wake-up call to Essence's editorial staff, however. The website transitioned to a more news-oriented format, which included daily reports from journalists and a vow to "encourage fair and balanced reporting by the media and sustained action long after the cameras have moved on to another story [about Black communities]" (Essence, 2005).

### ***Construction of Black Women***

#### *1. The Strong Black Woman*

Given their varying perspectives, one of our first interests was to determine how each site constructed Black women through discourse. Because all three blogs took their cues from the Helena Andrews interview on the Washington Post website, the starting point of discussion was Andrew's embrace of the stereotype of the 'strong Black woman'. Black feminist theory argues that Black women are cognizant of the ways that sociocultural hierarchies construct them through the interlocking lenses of race and gender. The comments examined here offer evidence to support that claim.

Essence and Racialicious commenters spent some time examining the media's role in perpetuating that stereotype. For instance, a Racialicious commenter states:

*The problem these type articles [sic] is that so many Black women believe this stuff. And if Black women believe they are lonely and can't find a suitable mate then some go on to make that prophecy come true...The majority media has always painted a negative picture of Blackness. Today however we have ways to counter this propaganda in the form of our own media with blogs, etc.*

Online environs such as Racialicious and Essence have become new 'third places' and (reasonably) safe spaces within which women of color can reflect upon their discursive construction in media and in policy. This woman not only critiques the media's treatment of Black women, she believes that women can use their technical capital to create blogs and other online venues to combat these stereotypes. This critique also contains the recognition of hegemonic discourses leading Black women to embrace cultural patterns that are, perhaps, counter to their lived experiences. A

Racialicious commenter argues:

*[I]t is pretty ridiculous to race a thing like loneliness— but unpacking this phenomenon is a pretty interesting place to talk about queering the family, romantic relationships, and raced bodies. because yes, some professional Black women are married, but why are we so afraid of Black women living "single" lives? because, we could talk about these marriage stats, these multitudes of unmarried Black women as an imagined possibility of lives lived outside a married family life. Look at the picture here— these Black women are hanging out, talking about this, right? so they're together, making spaces that could be thought of as, well, not lonely. so i think another interesting question would be not why don't we talk about everyone as lonely, but rather what is the discourse of the lonely professional Black woman doing to prevent certain spaces from being made and utilized?*

An Essence commenter also critiques both old media and new media,

*Writing these articles about 'successful, Black, lonely women' does not in any way enhance the life of a woman in this predicament....Essence STOP WRITING THESE ARTICLES!!!! They only work to feed into this stereotype.*

Interestingly, Essence's commenters do not question the implications of Time Warner's ownership on the website's discourses about Black femininity. The criticisms offered here imply that Essence's ideological stance is motivated by class ideologies, lending

credence to our earlier observations about the differences between privileged and disadvantaged Black women's standpoints. The web's ability to simultaneously showcase these levels of inequality within one space— the magazine contributor versus the commenters – also demonstrates possibilities for less-powerful audiences to contest privileged viewpoints.

Jezebel readers (many of whom identified themselves as Black women) noted the reifying effect of the strong Black woman stereotype and loneliness:

*I also hate, **HATE** the stereotype of the "strong Black woman" and how that equals "cold-hearted bitch." If you grow up in a society that tells you every day that you are not valued, that you are "less than" not only because of your color, but because of your sex, that the rules that "protect" white and other women don't apply to you, that you are "pretty for a Black girl," that you somehow occupy a space that is somehow concurrently slutty and not desirable, and that you should be happy that any man deigns to give you the time of day, let alone desires you, then, yes, you may have developed a tough exterior that is all about self-protection. I have really been exploring that perception of me in my life. It doesn't even occur to people to give me help, because I'm so "capable." Well, I'm very efficiently ushering myself to an early grave. I am not an automaton, if you prick me, I most certainly will bleed. Only in the last month or so, when my life has totally crumbled, has there been even the intermittent offer for help. The sad thing, is I see the horror in my friends eyes: if I'm losing it, then it must really be bad. No, it's just that I have been losing my shit for so long, I can no longer manage to hold up the façade of anything being anywhere near right.*

We do not presume to imply that this comment is typical of Jezebel's audience's stance on race and gender; however, it is important to note the commenter's willingness to expose her life experiences to the often-critical Jezebel community as well to the wider Internet. Her openness serves as an indicator of Jezebel's feminist ethos; one that offers marginalized women of color the chance to participate and even influence a mainstream discourse community.

This can be seen elsewhere in the Jezebel comments; Jezebel readers considered intra-group factors that put tremendous pressure on Black women to excel in every area of their lives:

*Perhaps this is due in part to the idea that Black people (especially Black women) always have to do "better" than everyone else; study harder, practice more, get that degree in 3 years instead of 4, and ...maybe that adds up to us putting WAY too much pressure on ourselves to do "better" and have everything just to somehow prove that we can and we did...as opposed to just having the right proportions of whatever it is in our lives to make us, as individuals, happy. I think our cultural society (both of America and Black America) has a tendency to want to box in Black women more so than most others (or so it seems to be), we are pushed in the ways I've stated above, and also, when thinking about the romantic issue, we are constantly encouraged to find a "good Black man" whatever the hell that even means...and so then many of us box ourselves in and feel like failures.*

These discursive constructions of Black female identity through reflective accounts detail structural inequalities in gender, race, and matrimony that contest mainstream views (and those expressed by Andrews) and offer insight into how weblogs enact technical and cultural capital for women of color. The discussions taking place on these three blogs demonstrate the significant challenges Black women face as they seek freedom of choice and equal opportunity in online environments. □ Black feminist theory aids in our understanding of the interlocking oppression that shapes Black women's awareness of and reaction to racism and sexism (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989) that is evidenced in the discussions above.

The Black women commenters above resist hegemonic messages of dominant society that threaten their beauty, intellect, parenting skills, femininity, and integrity. However, a quotation from a Jezebel commenter illustrates the essentializing nature of these intersecting problems the commenters grappled with:

*I mean, I've read other articles that targeted all women that have said, "oh, you can't have a flourishing career and a marriage/boyfriend." But never have I read an article that said, "oh, you can't have those things... if you are BLACK. If you're black you've got to put your guard down and*

*be less "bitchy," first of all, and THEN you've got to be less educated and successful. And THEN you might get a man."*

We see these counter-hegemonic ways of knowing and coping skills as Afrocentric forms of cultural capital. The next section details how the female-centered discourse environments structure interactions between men and women on the blogs we examined

## *2. Bitch Attitude*

All three blog posts recounted experiences in which Black women were told that their negative attitudes contribute to their dating woes. Across all comments, gender differences clearly differentiated the responses: men cosigned this perspective while the women actively resisted. Over at Jezebel, a woman stated:

*The article made this huge deal about how Anderson's 'bitchiness' was the only thing standing in her way to meeting the man of her dreams. And it seemed like Anderson's idea of 'bitchiness' was really just ambition, drive, and her frank manner of speech. So, the article seemed to be hijacking this loaded, gendered word 'bitchy' and saying, 'Oh well, these women are just too bitchy to get a man', but it's why they're even successful in the first place... what a conundrum!*

At Racialicious, one man's repeated insistence on blaming women's attitudes for their dating problems resulted in a late-thread argument and the resultant closing of the comments. Although the man was at fault, it is noteworthy that the (female) editor of Racialicious exercised her moderation policies not to quiet the man, but to quell the bickering that resulted from his misguided statements and contaminated the reasoned, civil discourse that had taken place up until then.

Essence readers were prompted to consider a structural approach by blogger Demetria Lucas, who wrote, "The association between Black women and the word 'bitch' is as old as Sapphire, and probably Methuselah too. Still, the age of the epithet and its link back to us doesn't do anything to diminish the sting of it". She later goes on to imply that Andrews should consider adopting a 'softer' attitude to attract a quality mate. Her readers eagerly chimed in, arguing that Black women can be strong but should follow

religious principles of being submissive to their mate. Some commenters added, however, that *Essence* was complicit in promoting dysfunctional Black relationships. They argued that *Essence* should not urge women to submit and that the magazine spent too much time focusing on relationship issues.

The concomitant stereotype of Black women as “Sapphire” implicitly reinforces sexist hegemony, but the *Essence* readers didn’t challenge the deployment of this stereotype. Sexism comes into play as Black women face the obstacle of the “two-steps-behind” philosophy prevalent in Black communal discourses, which mitigates against equal benefits on the fallacious assumption that employment discrimination has had far more serious repercussions for Black men than for Black women. Black women must now take a back seat to the Black man as he “catches up”(Carroll, 1982).

### *3. Interracial Dating*

While *Essence* readers were more interested in promoting Black-on-Black relationships, *Racialicious* and *Jezebel* readers were vocal in discussing the possibilities of interracial dating. Several argued that Black women were ‘limiting’ themselves by only dating Black men. A *Jezebel* reader wrote:

*I don't agree that women should be labeled picky if they're looking for a certain type of guy, but if you limit yourself by race, education, religion etc, not only are you limiting your dating option, but you also limit the vast, variety of great guys you might meet. I don't agree that all guys of other races either fetishize (sp?) us or are looking to just try something new. You have to find the right guy, regardless of race, and that takes time.*

The pejorative concept of “limitation” as applied to Black-on-Black relationships exposes the framework of White masculine privilege on gender and race and its hegemonic affect on people of color. Black women dating non-Blacks is seen as a liberatory move, while their choice to date Black men is portrayed as working against color-blind ideology.

Racial preferences and aesthetics received attention across the blogs as women considered interracial dating; not every non-Black male is open to dating a Black woman. One Black woman at Racialicious, for instance, observed unique challenges in pursuing interracial dating.

*I suppose I could try and meet men of other races, but my observations of white and Asian males in the South has shown me that they probably wouldn't be too interested in dark skinned, nappy headed me.*

A second Racialicious commenter recalls the cultural challenges that contour interracial relationships and makes a case for why she is only dating Black men:

*It's really so good to hear. These days I just feel like the sky is raining good Black men. Yes I said Black men. I know who I am, what I want and where I fit in this world, and for me that means a Black man. I dated a lot interracially when I was in high school and somewhat in college and it just really taught me a lot about myself and where I fit. I really think it's erroneous to assume that it's so easy to fit into someone else's culture, it's not and more power to those who are making it work, I just don't want to be one of them.*

These conversations on Jezebel and Racialicious point to possibilities for expanding the online evocation of Black women's issues to more racially diverse websites. Doing so unfortunately exposes these articulations and personal narratives to color-blind and androcentric critiques. When interacting with others outside their race and gender, Black women have to contend the uncertainty that clouds intercultural communication (Bell et al. 2000).

Jezebel and Racialicious are conscious of these pejorative possibilities, however, and actively deploy technical capital (banning) and cultural capital (censure) to maintain a civil discourse environment. This positive development speaks to the growing inclusion and protection of Black women's right to speak online. In today's information society, these conversations have spilled over to the Internet. It is our contention that this phenomenon – the articulation of cultural capital mediated through technical prowess – is a strong argument against the deficit models of minority ICT use promoted

by digital divide research. Our commenters' participation in the discourses about Black womanhood illustrate their command of the cultural and social capital necessary to interact with other like-minded commenters while their command of technical capital is illustrated by their participation as audience, author, and editor on the weblogs we examined.

### ***Conclusion***

During our analysis, we found that across the three blogs studied, women of different ages, social classes, and races all contributed to the idea of Black womanhood. The quotations above demonstrate nuanced discussions about what it means to be Black, female, and hoping to marry. The participants employed their personal experiences, structural analyses of racism and sexism, media criticism, and aesthetic arguments about Black women's worth, beauty, and value to articulate their vision of Black womanhood. In earlier times, these conversations would have taken place in sewing circles, beauty salons, or other gendered spaces where they could proceed unknown to broader society.

Along with the internal representations of Black womanhood we found during our analysis, external representations played a part in the discourse. We discovered that non-Blacks and male commenters also contributed to the discursive construction of Black womanhood on each of the blogs we examined. While this was not unexpected, we were gratified to see that Black women by and large controlled these out-group representations, correcting them where necessary and even expanding upon them to regain control over their own identity. This development is possible through the interactive capabilities of the Internet; old media forms limited the amount of participation available to Black women, effectively promoting uncontested negative stereotypes. LaToya Peterson's presence on Jezebel and Racialicious, we found, was critical to the editorial and technical control over the online discourses concerning Black women we examined. Peterson's contributions structure the electronically-mediated

ethos of both sites in ways that explicitly demonstrate that Black women's command of technical capital allows for control over cultural capital.

Another example of technical and cultural control over external representation is illustrated by the contestation of the Andrews interview on the Washington Post. By hyperlinking directly to the article, the blogs were able to reference original source material while controlling discourse engendered by that material. Moreover, that control took place in spaces that were configured to represent diverse views on race and gender. Thus, Jezebel's high ranking and traffic numbers serves to highlight the demand for woman-centered spaces on the male-dominated Internet. For Black women in search of friendly online spaces, Jezebel can serve as a mainstream feminist locale where issues pertaining to Black womanhood can be discussed civilly. Racialicious serves audiences of a more progressive anti-racist and pro-feminist mindset, while - for those who prefer a more racially homogeneous environment. Essence.com reprised its role as an old media arbiter of Black middle-class values by becoming a surprisingly popular online destination for discussions of Black issues. It is ironic, however, that Essence is derided as being conservative by its audience even as they contribute to expanding its new media presence.

The command of technical capital, then, revolves around elicitation of cultural appropriations of technology alongside the social behaviors necessary to participate within increasingly technological milieus. The messages transmitted by ICT work to promote the worldviews and beliefs of the dominant groups. The normalization of their appropriation of ICT reifies the perception that those who do not share those beliefs lack the 'capital' to participate. Instead of applying deficit models to ascertain why underserved groups do not use the Internet at the same rates that White males do, we have applied Bourdieu's theory of technical capital and Black feminist theory to posit

that the articulation of cultural touchpoints promoting a more diverse set of beliefs will raise ICT participation rates by underserved populations.

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