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"Who Do You Think You Are?": When Marginality Meets Academic Microcelebrity

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Abstract: Populists and capitalists conceptualize academic public writing as a democratizing process. I argue that interlocking structures of oppression contour neoliberal academic appeals for public scholarship. Using data from a public academic blog, I conceptualize the attention economy as stratified by attenuated status groups. I also discuss the methodological promise of digital texts for sociological inquiry.

Introduction

I am a sociologist. That means many things but for the purposes of this analysis it means that I am inclined to count and to think in terms of groups and structure. It is also helpful to know that I have been writing and publishing online and in traditional media for over a decade. I did so first as an unaffiliated representative of one, namely myself. As my professional and personal roles shifted I have written as an embedded authority in higher education, media, and cultural institutions. My organizational role, authorial voice, and legitimacy have shifted across time, space and context (e.g. from graduate student to blogger to writer to sociologist). With those shifts, my audience and platform have changed. What changes less frequently is my embeddedness in institutions and social hierarchies that can define me against my will and constrain my efficacy in public engagement. In contrast, my social location as a black woman is read with comparable stability across multiple contexts. Consequently, as my scholarship diffuses across various audiences the risks associated with being read through marginality increase. A systematic analysis of my public writing makes the case that as academics are increasingly called to "publicly engage," we have not fully conceptualized or counted the costs of public writing from various social locations.

I am not just a woman but also a black woman performing a particular type of expertise for large, multiple publics. As such, my experience of negative comments differs from the dominant gendered narrative of online abuse. For example, I have never received a single rape threat. Instead, increased scale and multiple publics

(generated by both digital writing and social media) have elicited comments and threats specific to my illegitimacy as an intellectual, e.g. expert. It's why some form of "who the fuck do you think you are," as one commenter put it, is the most commonly expressed sentiment among the thousands of negative comments on my blog, As a public writer, academic and black woman, my location at the bottom of a racist, sexist social hierarchy mitigates the presumed returns on academic public engagement specifically and makes a case for reconsidering the theoretical assumptions of microcelebrity more broadly.

Academic capitalism promotes engaged academics as an empirical measure of a university's reputational currency. Academic capitalism refers to the ways in which knowledge production increasingly embeds universities in the new economy (Berman 2011; Rhoades and Slaughter 2010). Calls for academic public-ness have been critiqued for obscuring neoliberal transformations of intellectual labor into market capital that separates the "real" academic superstars from the rank-and-file academic proletariat. Others make a populist appeal to democratized knowledges, encouraging academics and scholars (I use both to signal that one need not be an academic actor to be a scholar) to tear down institutional barriers of access. The capitalists and populists make similar assumptions: each assumes that when writing for publics, actors are individuals simultaneously embedded in institutions and dislocated from stratified status groups. But when women writing publicly have pushed social media sites to create mechanisms to report accounts for making rape threats, they have made the implicit claim that microcelebrity and attention do not operate in the same way for all status groups.

Microcelebrity refers to the affective capital engendered and commodified by various social and new media platforms where identity and brand are merged and measured in likes, shares, follows, comments and so on. Alice Marwick calls microcelebrity a negotiation practice that: "[I]nvolves creating a persona, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of closeness, acknowledging an audience and viewing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to maintain interest" (2010; 2012). Microcelebrity's attention economy and the institutional incentives for academics to traffic in it share the same political economy: neoliberalism, financialization, and market logics. It should be no wonder that public engagement has been rebranded as academic microcelebrity. It is all the reach with none of the critical politics.

Cultivating attention and value for academic scholarship shares similar activities with critically engaged research. Engaged research emerged from various critical interventions of academia's white, male, elite Western bias. Black studies, feminist studies, critical education studies, and queer studies directly challenged the power relations embedded in academic knowledge production. Whether it is called "community engaged," "culturally responsive" or "participatory action" research, these epistemological projects are overtly political (Cahill 2007). They aim to bring marginalized voices to the academy and to recognize the lived experiences of the marginalized as valuable. Traditionally, these research models also aimed to engage non-academics as co-creators of their own knowledges (Olesen 2011). This often includes advertising one's research and other consciousness-raising activities.

With technological diffusion, critically engaged scholarship has embraced digital platforms to communicate, diffuse, and archive. Scholars who are also members of marginalized groups disproportionately take up this kind of engaged scholarship, often without commensurate credit from university administrators or colleagues (Ellison and Eatmen 2008; Park 1996; Stanley 2006; Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Turner et al 2008; Villalpando and Bernal 2002). Those activities look very similar to those associated with cultivating academic microcelebrity. There is a sense of a "public" to which we are in service. There is the ethos to disseminate scholarship and to leverage technology to de-institutionalize information.

But, whereas engaged scholarship has a political imperative, academic microcelebrity has a market imperative. Academic microcelebrity is ostentatiously apolitical, albeit falsely so because markets are always political. Academic microcelebrity encourages brand building as opposed to consciousness-raising; brand awareness as opposed to co-creation of knowledge. It creates perverse incentives for impact as opposed to valuing social change. Microcelebrity is the economics of attention in which academics are being encouraged, mostly through normative pressure, to brand their academic knowledge for mass consumption. However, the risks and rewards of presenting oneself "to others over the Web using tools typically associated with celebrity promotion" (Barone 2009) are not the same for all academics in the neo-liberal "public" square of private media.

As a participant in and critical observer of the various forces shaping academic capitalism (McMillan-Cottom and Tuchman 2015), digital media (Cottom 2014) and structural inequalities I aim to put these into conversation in this essay. My approach is

grounded in critical black feminist theory for its attention to interlocking oppressions, processes, and power relations. Studying interlocking oppressions calls not just for an account of identity, but an account of power (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2000) that is conducted in a "process centered, institutionally complex way" (Choo and Ferree 2010:131). Because I study education and work, I am particularly keen on the organizational processes that manifest at various intersections of marginality when scholars become brands and universities become corporations.

Microcelebrity and Academic Engagement in the Age of the Corporate University

Institutions, publics, and some media elites are encouraging academics to be more visible in the public sphere. From the institutional perspective, it makes sense to encourage your academic superstars to represent a university's brand in widely read publications. Within the context of what Gaye Tuchman and others have called the corporate university, public engagement leverages attention into brand awareness which, in turn, somehow contributes to greater prestige in the competition for prestigious students. The "in turn" part of transforming awareness into prestige is always a little fuzzy. That is likely because the process of making prestige is itself tautological: a university is prestigious because prestigious students attend and prestigious students attend universities because they are prestigious.

The populist appeal for academics to engage the public imagines a democratization of specialized knowledge. This appeal is also unfolding within the organizational context (I will use the term "logic" in the organizational theory sense to mean situational schemas that rationalize norms, behaviors, etc.) of the corporate university. Just as the proliferation of digital tools engenders a feeling of "free" and "public" access to vast amounts of information, profit logics demand that publishers, professional societies and all manner of those with claims to intellectual property erect borders to define "us" from "them." How else will "we" profit from "them" but to clearly demarcate who is who? Populist and capitalist positions for greater academic engagement with the public both aim to leverage a type of academic microcelebrity in service to their respective ideological goals.

There are multiple overlaps between academia, public discourse, and digital media. Not only are academics developing these microcelebrity practices in the cultivation of brands but also they are doing so using the digital tools from which the microcelebrity concept is derived. Engaged academics are not confined to traditional mainstream

media. They are encouraged to use ostensibly democratizing tools like Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. There is a sense that one can cobble together a common public by overlapping various social media platforms and audiences. Many of my colleagues are doing a fine job of problematizing the intersections of private social media and the university. The larger project from which this essay is drawn is part of that emerging conversation. But this essay focuses specifically on the context of microcelebrity as I have experienced it from a specific social location as a racialized, gendered person who is reconstructed by multiple publics as performing expertise. The account is specific but not singular. Black feminist theory has conceptualized race, gender, class and sexual identities as expressions of intersecting structural and social processes rendered visible in every day life. When a black woman is performing expertise through public writing, she is doing so from a location in a set of interlocking oppressions that condition the incentives to participate in academic microcelebrity practices and obscures the risks of doing so.

What's a Nice Sociologist Doing Online? The Case of An Academic Blog

A new media class probably is not supposed to happen at a public historically black college (HBCU). For a host of historical, social, and economic reasons rooted in institutional racism, black colleges in the United States typically have less funding, fewer political ties, and paltry institutional endowments to seed emerging disciplinary programs like new media. My new media writing class was housed in an English department and taught by a new professor. The course covered writing for different publics as a rhetorical practice but it also included attention to institutional processes like Creative Commons copyright and digital attribution. The course continued a historical practice among HBCU faculty of embedding dual curriculums in traditional institutional disciplines. In this way, students who are less likely to be exposed to emerging knowledge discourses because of structural inequities become part of an underground railroad of resistance in institutional settings. By the end of the course, my professor encouraged me to purchase my own domain. Her concern was for authorial control that would signal to readers that my content should be treated according to the media and academic logics where citations and attributions are normative. I used a pre-paid credit card to purchase my domain and the website followed me to graduate school.

My earliest posts were guided by class assignment prompts. They included meditations on race, education and identity. I have since made about half of those earlier posts

private. That decision was absolutely shaped by the shift in my professional identity from student to doctoral student to public writer and back again to the quasi-academic role that has now been assigned to me. Those early posts were more likely to include specific references to my family members, peer groups, and geographic location. As a student, I felt that content was in many ways protected from the scrutiny of microcelebrity. Methodologically, online digital texts such as blog entries and social media content can be used to construct truncated life histories of persons, groups, and social contexts. Diaries have been used in various social science disciplines to increase respondent recall of subjective experiences. Viewing my blog content as event history diaries allows me to document objective experiences like time but also to observe narrative changes relative to changes in my role, authority, and audience differentiation. Theoretically, the shift in content and voice maps onto the unintentional cultivation of microcelebrity that was partially an effect of my academic identity and network ties.

Marwick and others have primarily observed intent as a causal condition for microcelebrity and the practice of cultivating it as a set of activities as opposed to the institutional conditions of those activities and microcelebrity's various effects. Microcelebrity can be a tool to develop a personal brand, to leverage attention to generate income of job prospects, and to distill media and public attention of social movements. I consider microcelebrity's cause-and-effect from my multiple attenuated status positions. My agency to create, perform or strategically reveal information is circumscribed by my ascribed status positions. As my professional and public-facing identities shift, my social location remains embedded in groups with a "shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power" (Hill Collins 1997: 376). Academic capitalism and microcelebrity promote neoliberal ideas of individualism. But power relations circumscribe the utility and value of cultivating attention in ways we rarely note, much less redress.

The shift in my authorial voice and control across time and role transition is a prime example of how attention operates variably by attenuated status identities. My transition to graduate school generated role conflict and identity negotiation common to most graduate students but that are particular to black graduate students. Numerous studies in the U.S. and the U.K (where racialized group conflict is more likely to be specific to blackness as it is understand in the U.S. context) report that black graduate students are often not integrated into their departments. One study on race, gender and the graduate student experience found the effects of gender and race matter, as

"African American women appeared to be the most isolated and dissatisfied" (Ellis 2001). They report social isolation, enclosure of critical informal knowledge networks, hypervisibility and low expectations for their intellectual abilities. My posts about that early period of transition were inextricably linked to social processes of underrepresentation of minorities in high status institutional organizations, logics, and cultures.

That isolation and dissatisfaction informed my choices about what and how I would write on my blog. As the context of graduate studies sought to transform me through professionalization processes steeped in historical white male Euro-centric renderings of "graduate student-come-scholar," I sought venues wherein I could retain that of part of me which I did not want to be transformed. There is nothing particularly onerous about being a black woman. I rather enjoy it. It comes with a social-cultural- linguistic history in which I have developed over 30 years of expertise. It grounds me in a body politic and an intellectual tradition that rightfully locates whatever is onerous about my identity in the systems of power that define and constrain me against my will. Public writing became a venue for retaining parts of myself that I would not submit to institutional transformation.

But channeling those parts of myself in public writing did not escape institutional and structural ascription. That ascription brought with it a unique set of challenges that are analogous to those of other graduate students, other academics, and other writers but that exist singularly at their intersections. Again, it is important to consider the organizational context within which I write. My professional identity is embedded in an institutional relationship, i.e. my academic department and university. Roles in those contexts are ordered hierarchically. The "graduate student" role is arguably near the bottom of that hierarchy. That position attenuates the power, social networks, and capital (cultural, social and economic) at my disposal to buffer the effects of microcelebrity. Those effects include increased scrutiny not just of your person or of your cause but, given that my legitimacy is rooted in my academic role, that scrutiny also often includes critiquing my academic bona fides and intellectualism.

Were I white or male or of a higher class, it is possible that I could leverage the adage that all press is good press. The negative effects of microcelebrity are transformed into positive attention when made legible through bodies and identities more closely aligned to the assumed "natural" embodiment of rationality, intelligence and ability. That is to say that the difference between a black woman muckraking with an academic

library card can be read differently than muckraking by white elite graduate students at new media outlets like Jacobin or in the public rendering of Evgeny Morozov. These persons' social locations conform to the hegemonic ("natural") embodiment of intellectual critique. This affords them a legitimacy rooted in academic authority even when they are not yet, or are still, academics.

But, as the literature on social isolation of black women in academic communities attests, there is a conceptual framework for legitimate intelligence that situates GENDER x RACE as negatively correlated with expertise (Matthew 2014; Sanders 1997; Stanley 2006). To extend this conceptual causal chain to the digital context, microcelebrity would interact with GENDER x RACE x EXPERTISE in ways that mediate the assumed value of attention in an attention economy. Put simply, all press is good press for academic microcelebrities if their social locations conform to racist and sexist norms of who should be expert. For black women who do not conform to normative expectations of "expert," microcelebrity is potentially negative. Race and gender not only shape the direction of causality but the rendering of attention as dichotomous. When attention is theorized in the context of unequal power relationships, it is a continuous variable that maps onto racist and gendered hierarchies. The difference can be seen in how my content changed as microcelebrity increased attention (e.g. traffic, comments, and diffusion to other new media platforms). My public writing position shifted in response to the volume and content of feedback from various publics: non-specialist readers, specialist readers, and academics.

Mo' Numbers, Mo' Problems: Scale, Microcelebrity and Complex Publics

At the time of this writing my website has 219 posts that are viewable by the public and 19 set as private. The publication dates range from January 14, 2012 to June 6, 2014. In that time, readers (inclusive of spam accounts) have posted 5,550 comments, 1,382 of which remain in a moderators queue. The blog has had 2,743,127 views in that time with an all-time daily high of 203,195 views in a 24-hour period. My most active month of 429,362 visitors occurred in October 2013 with a six month total of 310,416 visitors in 2014 on track to best the previous year's total given people remain at all interested in reading my content. I have 2,947 blog followers from twenty-four countries in North America, South Asia, Africa, and South America. Social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, and Digg in that order) drive the majority of my blog traffic, with significant showing from external blogs like Shakesville.com and Feministing.com. Some content "jumped" platforms: eleven posts written for my blog were eventually cross-posted to

new and traditional media platforms. It is impossible to track the ways posts became remixed and diffused through sites like Tumblr and Reddit, which are designed specifically for those purposes. But linkbacks from those posts and a general search reveals that it has happened often.

I share these numbers to give an idea of scale and publics. One of the consequences of scale and attention is that it produces multiple publics. Scale is actually the dependent variable of interest among both capitalist and populist appeals to academics to increase their public engagement. Theoretically, we assume that multiple publics represent increased attention. Increased attention is conceptually understood as a positive relationship with either productivity metrics (if you prefer the capitalist take) or social good (if you prefer the populist approach). But, that relationship is based on an idea of a normative, stable identity of "academic" or expert that conforms to the rendering of expert in the imagination of multiple publics. Being black and female problematizes those assumptions and scale magnifies them. At my blog, engagement with multiple publics has introduced a greater number of informed, respectful readers. Many email me or send me comments about how they appreciate reading a perspective so different from their own. As one reader put it, "I'm as different from you as probably anyone can be. And I don't understand all you say. But, I always walk away with something I'd never thought about." That's the impact populists hope for and capitalists aim to measure. But those comments are in the minority at my blog.

As publics multiply and increase in complexity, I find that there are a greater number of renderings of my legitimate claim to expertise. Those renderings are absolutely about my race and gender (obvious in my avatar images and not at all obscured in my writings). Whereas white women tend to report a significant number of rape threats when they write publicly, the overwhelming threat issued in my comment section and inbox are threats to my academic credibility. I have received 11 death threats, 19 threats of what could be considered general bodily harm, and exactly zero rape threats in three years of writing to over a million of readers. My most contentious and most commented upon posts deal directly with racism, sexism and normative beauty ideals. Those subjects are similar to what many white bloggers and public writers write about. Whereas they are threatened with rape, I am most often threatened by challenges to my institutional affiliations and credibility. In a Twitter dialogue about this essay, Natalia Cecire noted similarly that her blog comments express "indignation that [she] would dare to have a Ph.D. or talk in public" (2014). She goes on

For the research project that generated this essay, I code these "just who the fuck do you think you are" comments (so named for how frequently that sentiment is expressed) by discursive signals of the logic used by the commenter. They span readers I code as: specialist readers, non-specialist readers and academic readers. The context and tone of the threat is specific to each group's logics, but the basis of the threat is the same. For example, a specialist reader is one coded as a frequent commenter, a blog follower, who also follows and engaged with me across more than one social media platform. Their comments most often use the sociological language or broad academic concepts in responses. They discursively signal they are "insiders" by talking about social theory specifically or appealing to generalist expertise, as in "I have long had an interest in Roman slavery." Negative comments from specialist readers include assuming that my adviser is "black like [me]" or arguing that I am in "black studies" to locate me in a context of low expectations of intellectual rigor.

Non-specialist readers have generally read a single post out of the context of my blog's organizational logic and corpus of work. They mention that they were directed to the post through a Facebook post or similar content sharing mechanism. These commenters increase when a post goes viral or jumps social media platforms. Negative responses from this group most often condemn intellectualism generally (e.g. "liberal college elite") but also specifically my location as a black woman in a university. These comments most often reference affirmative action and threaten to contact my University. The latter is particularly interesting as it supposes that their dissent will carry more weight with an organization they view as sponsoring my content than will my own formal institutional affiliation.

While the assumed authority of specialist and non-specialists is often grounded in some fictive value of amorphous whiteness, academic audiences appeal most directly to their formal institutional affiliations. Academic readers are narrowly defined here by those who use their .edu email addresses and/or institutional titles in their comments. All but one of the negative comments from academics included in this analysis (n=119) imply that they know senior academics, have more elite affiliations than do I, and that they will use those ties to reveal me as not an intellectual inferior so much as a junior scholar. Conceptually, the two designations are similar in their implication that I do not have the power to exert dominion over my intellectual capabilities through writing for a public. It is an indirect appeal to power that has the same motivation: separating who I am from what I am legitimately allowed to know.

Even the death threats allude to some sense of killing me at my university, in my department or during a public lecture. One writer says that they "will fuck me up in front of [my] students so they know what shit I have been teaching them." Another commenter wants to "blow [my] brains out." A larger project analyzes the content of posts, comments, and institutional contexts of all the data from my blog. Preliminary analysis reveals that negative comments outweigh the bad (although close to evenly matched) and negative comments are more numerous and abusive for content that has been shared across multiple media platforms. And the violent insult of choice focuses not on sexual violence but on attacks to the perceived incompatibility of my person with my institutional legitimacy. Really angry commenters want to have me fired, sanctioned by the university, and my brains violently excised from my body.

In all, there are twenty-nine references to divesting me of my actual brain matter. A content analysis of all 5,552 comments (those that are published and in queue, and excluding those filtered out by a spam plug-in) finds that three-fourths of comments that can be coded as "negative" most often: call into question my academic affiliation, the merits of a university that admitted me, and explicitly or implicitly cite affirmative action as the reason that I am in a PhD program. The comments are most contentious, violent and personal on posts that have platform jumped (as one might expect, see: Davis and Jurgenson 2014). If we conceptualize platform jumping as a metric of increased number and complexity of publics, more publics means more attacks on writers whose identity is most universally reviled as inferior. The stability of my black female identity, and its near uniform ascription as low-status, anti-intellectual, and non-expert, would operate most consistently across multiple publics.

From benign disagreement to death threats, the source of ire is overwhelmingly with the institutional legitimacy that constructs me as "intellectual" or "expert." While non-black women public writers have commented on dismissal of their intellectual acumen (thus the phrase "mansplaining") and expertise, the near total focus on my institutional ties and morbid fascination with alleviating me of my actual brain seems to be specific to the ways in which publics similarly read the source of my violation. It is not specifically in my gender or in my race but in the incompatibility of my race and gender with normative renderings of who should be an expert.

Other black women academics who write publicly report similar experiences. In 2012, Dr. Anthea Butler experienced one of the more coordinated attacks to unfold across social media platforms. Butler has the kind of academic microcelebrity that administrators presumably dream about. She has over 25,000 Twitter followers. She is regularly cited in mainstream publications. She has appeared on major network news talk shows like MSNBC's *Melissa Harris-Perry Show*. She is a renowned religion scholar with all the accompanying bells and whistles, e.g. tenure, publications, and citation counts. But when Butler used her expertise to speak publicly about religion and free speech (Butler 2012), a conservative social media swarm orchestrated a multi-day, multi-platform attack on her legitimacy and professional status. The website *SocialSeer* offers an informative account of how that attack unfolded. Butler's comments were aggregated and posted by a conservative media watchdog site that encourages readers to use the power of social media to amplify their negative responses to what they perceive as liberal media bias. When the site has focused on black women scholars, its attacks have been specific to their social location and particularly vitriolic. It is an example of how microcelebrity works conversely when social media platforms converge with powerful status positions.

You might think that this is just a reaction to her comments; many people strongly disagreed with them. But to think that this was an organic reaction would miss the hand of an outside force: Twitchy.com, a website run by Michelle Malkin, whom Wikipedia describes as a "conservative blogger, political commentator and author." *Twitchy.com* is conservative and features Malkin's style of snarky rants about the left served up with over-the-top faux outrage. Like in *Spinal Tap*, *Twitchy* is always set at 11. When detractors are always set to 11, an academic's ability to ride out the outrage wave is greatly determined by institutional and social inequalities.

Groups like *Twitchy* target liberal/progressive voices on social media but they are just a formal example of the type of organic social media attacks that happen frequently when social media users target other users for mass critique. However, these attacks are not confined to social media. Butler has reported that *Twitchy* users have contacted her university. While these kinds of social media "piling ons" certainly happen to users across identity, the specificity of the violation and the direct appeals to institutional authorities are about power. Butler has tenure, which provides her a level of institutional support. However, African American women and white women are less likely to achieve tenure than are white men. These structural inequalities make academics who are black and female more likely to be the objects of ideological attacks and more vulnerable to attacks on their academic bona fides.

In 2013, new media outlet *Biology Online* approached scientist D.N. Lee to contribute an essay for publication. Lee is African American and a woman and at the time had a significant public writing platform at *Scientific American*. She had also developed a following for connecting science, science writing, and minority youth cultures across several social media platforms. When Lee asked about payment for the essay, the *Biology Online*'s agent called her an "urban whore." Of the insult, Lee said:

> It wasn't just that he called me a whore – he juxtaposed it against my professional being: Are you urban scientist or an urban whore? Completely dismissing me as a scientist, a science communicator (whom he sought for my particular expertise), and someone who could offer something meaningful to his brand. (Lee 2013)

The slur worked on multiple levels to remind Lee of her presumed social location.

The insult is most legible when read through the discursive practice of race, gender and class as mutually constitutive social locations of powerlessness. Lee bills herself as an "urban scientist." First, "urban whore" reworks Lee's blog title to belittle her self-titling. Like "ghetto," urban can also be used as a racialized slur to signal the cultural denigration of space and place. Whore, of course, is a gendered insult derived from puritanical normative boundary making between acceptable and unacceptable femininity. As instructive as the initial attack is the institutional response to Lee's published defense of her academic bona fides, *Scientific American*'s response is an example of how public discourse interacts with institutional marginalization. *Scientific American* removed Lee's popular blog from the website for two days while editors vetted the appropriateness of Lee's response. They expressed concerns that Lee had used "hip hop" language in the post (which, incidentally, can work like "ghetto" and

"urban" to denigrate culture produced by black and Hispanic youth). When outraged readers, many of them scientists, pointed out that the voice of the post was in keeping with Lee's previous posts, the editors relented. The post was eventually restored to public view with an editor's note to readers that did not go so far as to apologize for censoring Lee's defense of her academic bona fides. Attenuated group status operated here on three levels: it created a space for Lee's person to be attacked within the logics of her professional networked identity; it defined the specificity of the verbal attack; and it defined the legitimacy of her official institutional affiliation as marginal.

The Question is, "Who Are YOU?" Method, Theory and Praxis in Digital Texts

Individuals experience microcelebrity and attention differently relative to the status groups in which they are embedded. With greater publics and attention, one's social location becomes more salient to the risks and returns to attention. But, scale and attention can also nudge us towards conceptualizing digital media content as meaningful socio-cultural artifacts. I speak of numbers because, again, I am a sociologist and I count things. But, also, the diffusion and growth of my blog is the organizational context for how my individual writings are linked to patterns in new media proliferation, networks, and simultaneously responds to calls for greater academic engagement with the public while running afoul of several critical academic norms.

Considering the scope and embeddedness of my blog in these processes and structures is one way that I link my analysis of digital autoethnographies to historical and social debates about identity, neoliberalism and inequality. When I make a blog post it is an asynchronous medium. The audience is largely hidden from me. Changes in search engine algorithms have even made many of the "key search terms" that readers use to find my blog invisible to me. For over a year at the time of this writing, "unknown search terms" has been in the top five of searches that drive readers to my blog. The structure of my digital platform (WordPress) and digital mechanisms (Google's encryption of search terms) and personal choices about comment moderation (I erected a moderation layer in 2013) all shape the extent to which my populist public writing medium is embedded in institutional new media practices and normative structures.

The tendency to dismiss digital writing as narrow fields of "me-search" misses the complexity of the medium and ignores the diversity of those writings. Humanities scholars have been in the forefront of those seriously considering digital artifacts as

texts and data. My experiences suggest that sociologists miss an opportunity to mine emerging representations of groups, inequality, and communications when we view digital content as individual representations. All texts are socially constructed. Digital texts are not only embedded in social construction but in political and technical systems that reinscribe power, identity and relational exchanges in texts. As I have shown, the corpus of texts from my blog allowed an event history analysis of content change that was embedded in role negotiation, status ascription, and legitimation. The architecture of the platform where I published allowed authorial control of content but could not control context collapse or social interactions. Geographical proximity in social relationships can now be reimagined as space. That reconfigures the assumed role of place and proximity in all manner of social relationships.

Mark Carrigan and others have called for a "digital sociology" that will explore "the opportunities which digital tools afford for rethinking sociological craft" (2013). The call is heavy on tools — the platforms, architecture, and cool gadgets that visualize patterns — but I caution that things and patterns are but a small bit of the promise of digital sociology. If we consider first the disciplinary value of sociology and the theoretical frameworks of digital second, we arrive at a much more satisfying future for the intersection of digital and social. The question of "who the fuck am I" instead becomes a methodological process of interrogating who are you, each of us who produces digital texts and the context within which we produce them. C. Wright Mills' appeal to a sociological imagination is useful here to consider. Digital texts embody the intersections between history and biography that Mills (1959) thought inherent to understanding social relations. Content from my blog is a ready example. I have access to the entire data set. I can track its macro discursive moments to action, space, and place. And I can consider it as a reflexive sociological practice. In this way, I have used my digital texts as methodologists use autoethnographies: reflexive, critical practices of social relationship.

The potential of digital texts goes beyond autoethnographies. Political communications produce digital texts to exert influence over civic bodies and futures. Studying those communications in the context of their organizational logics, historical context, and digital platforms is a sociological endeavor in the methodological tradition of event history analysis. Digital texts are constrained by normative choices embedded in platform modalities. I can self-define as queer on Facebook but my gender and race on Twitter is largely an ascriptive process, aided by character limits on bios and the prominence of profile images. These connections between digital structures, logics and

status group ascription are, again, ripe for sociological inquiry in the organizational studies tradition. I imagine a critical sociology of private and public ownership of content that differently privileges some status groups over others. I think here of the ways in which institutional affiliations among white feminist groups have clashed with unaffiliated black and Hispanic feminists on social media. What is the value or effect of institutional embeddedness in platforms marketing as populist? These are questions that are squarely in the tradition of critical race theory, black feminist theory, and queer theories. Viewing digital texts as conceptual and methodological tools allows us to explore these kinds of questions in ways that do not obscure groups or inequality, but centers them in the analysis.

Theoretically, attention economies benefit when researchers explicitly think through group processes of inequality, particularly ascribed status groups. Status groups necessarily engage historical, economic and social processes that can be difficult to disengage in aggregate "big data." Observing the texts produced from different social locations within the matrix of interlocking oppressions is a theoretical framework for understanding digital texts as sociological processes of identity, group, organizational and political processes. Methodologically, texts can be interrogated as embedded representations of institutional practices, normative behaviors, and organizational logics. Internet studies scholars and critical humanities have done the most work there methodologically. But sociology can contribute a systematic methodology of qualitative textual analysis (discourse, content and organizational studies) to further our understanding of the social in the digital. Finally, I have argued that racialized gendered positions complicate both capitalist and populist appeals to democratized knowledges. We must attend to the ways in which social inequities, historical and contemporary racism and sexism, and the precarity of women and African Americans in institutions makes them vulnerable in knowledge production that traffics in digital attention economies.

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—CITATION—

This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review** (http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/ada-issue-7/who-the-fuck-do-you-think-you-are-academic-engagement-microcelebrity-and-digital-sociology-from-the-far-left-of-the-matrix-of-domination/) .

◀ PEER REVIEWED

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Ai-Khanh Nguyen
MAY 13, 2015 AT 2:48 PM

Thank you. Reading your work here has given me a conceptual under-standing and language in which to think about what's left out in "a new culture of learning," a fusing of information economy and virtual collec-tives (Thomas & Brown, 2011). The Internet, in itself, doesn't democratizes. The marginalization of African-American women, as well as other marginalized groups, continued to be rendered opaque in society at large; when the potentiality of the digital world is treated apolitically, it makes such dispersion even less tangible. The impetus for instantness can make it easier to overlook, even to be oblivious of, the collapse of context that you speak of. I say this as someone whose trying to see the positive sides of the various platforms afforded my the Internet and to participate in them in ways that is enriching personally and professionally as a future teacher.

Angela

MAY 14, 2015 AT 2:50 PM

I personally needed these insights today! Thank you!!

Do you know anyone who provides personal/professional coaching in this area?

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