DIGITAL SOCIOLOGIES

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“They’re just too urban”: Black gamers streaming on Twitch

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Marginalized gamers are often simultaneously active participants within gaming as well as savage critics of the hegemonic cultures in which they exist, resisting many oppressive and hostile realities within games, among gamers, and in gaming culture in general. One area in which they resist hegemonic Whiteness and masculinity specifically is through Twitch, a live streaming platform featuring players and actual gaming content. Black gamers specifically empower themselves by continuing to Twitch in the midst of so much racism and harassment by other gamers viewing and posting content while they stream. In one of the most well known quotes from Michel Foucault (1971: 96), he claims that “Where there is power, there is resistance.” And as Lila Abu-Lughod (1990: 42) observes, “Where there is resistance, there is power.” The mere act of existing, engaging, and producing within this hegemonic culture can be situated within the field of cultural production. While unpacking this claim, this chapter situates their actions within a framework of Black cyberfeminism as Black masculinity is punished and marginalized within Twitch as a segment of gaming culture, and this is made apparent through public comments about Black Twitchers in online forums.
Twitching as cultural production

Twitching can be examined through the lens of cultural production, as it is material generated by non-professional users (Strangelove, 2010). Twitch allows users the ability to actively engage in gaming culture by providing their own narrative and commentary while simultaneously playing. This act of actively participating within the game extends immersion of users within games; while gamers utilize Twitch differently, a primary reason is to provide in-game commentary. As de Certeau (1984) argues, audiences are not passive consumers, but instead active interpreters, and the ability for gamers to interpret games through their own lens empowers these users. This follows Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model of communication (1997), where each person will create their own meaning from the same text, depending on their situation and unique background. As such, it is important to allow the marginalized voice to become active in hegemonic arenas such as videogames (Gray, 2015).

Twitch, as a technology that allows one to be disengaged from commercial media dictating game narratives, has the capacity to produce counterhegemonic messages unarticulated by the cultural industries. Henry Jenkins (2006) believes that digital content creation is capable of operating in unauthorized ways outside of industry control. While this form of “do it yourself” labor still benefits the capitalist structure of gaming, users still feel empowered, and their labor should not be diminished. As Tiziana Terranova (2000) suggests, the internet does not truly turn users into enfranchised creators and producers, although it is in the interest of the culture industries to let them think that — to present them as wielding cultural and economic power/capital rather than as laboring as part of the culture industry’s efforts to monetize culture. Additionally, Mark Andrejevic (2007) asserts that participation is not always the same thing as power sharing. But among users within Twitch, participation is viewed as contributing to gaming culture in meaningful ways. Bourdieu (1984) acknowledges that no cultural good is inherently better than another that leads to an important designation within cultural production: notions of legitimate production are contestable. Gamers of color, as Twitchers, are excluded from this area of discussion to decide what an appropriate contribution to the field is; it is decided for them by the default gamer. Their presence within Twitch exists counter to the hegemonic norm. Their bodies and mere existence runs counter to the conformist cultural practices operating not only within Twitch, but gaming culture in general.

Bourdieu and Johnson (1993) explain that no cultural product exists by itself and products are direct reflections of their producers especially within realms of power. The unequal power relations operating with virtual worlds manifests through the body: more specifically, privileged bodies. The performance of Whiteness and masculinity are accepted as legitimate and embedded in the continued cultural practices within digital technology (Gray, 2012b). Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice reveals the material and symbolic production of cultural goods and acknowledges the mediators who contribute to the work’s meaning and legitimation (Tkatch, 2006). Symbolic capital determines a specific economy of the field and is based on the speculation that what constitutes a cultural work is socially valued or significant contribution to a particular culture. Within virtual communities that value privileged bodies, oftentimes the marginalized populations’ contributions to the field, to innovation, to knowledge are not valued or not seen to contribute to the cultural work within the digital era.

Symbolic capital includes an authorized validation of a cultural producer and a cultural product as legitimate according to the existing standards and trends of the community or culture. What is significant in applying cultural production to virtual settings in this manner “is the definition of the limits of the field, that is, of legitimate participation in the struggles” (Bourdieu, 1996: 143). When default, privileged users within virtual settings suggest that “that’s not how you Twitch” or “console gamers aren’t real gamers” or “they are too urban,” or any host of other disparaging comments, it means that a cultural product is denied in legitimate existence and excluded.

Cultural production and the (in)valid knowledge of Black Twitchers

The presence of women and people of color in spaces traditionally dominated by privileged bodies deems them deviant (Gray, 2012a). Sociological theories and empirical studies suggest that deviant identity is the result of being formally or informally sanctioned by social audiences. The process by which an individual develops a deviant identity is linked to the performance of some identified deviant behavior (Gray, 2012b). Although deviance is mostly a socially constructed concept, deviant behaviors in most real world settings have been agreed on by a consensus.

Deviance exists because social groups react in a condemnatory, punitive, or simply disapproving manner to any individual’s behavior(s) and/or characteristic(s) that are in violation of the social standards prevailing in those groups (Clinard and Meier, 1998: 7). Stigma, on the other hand, has been defined as a sign or a mark that designates the bearer as “spoiled” and therefore as valued less than “normal” people (Goftman, 1963). An important similarity between the two is that both deviant and stigmatized individuals are perceived as individuals who failed to conform to normative standards in society. However, stigma involves perceptions of deviance that relate more to an individual’s character and identity. Stigmatized individuals are not considered to be legitimate participants, but instead are considered deviants (Dovidio et al., 2000). As and researchers have suggested, deviating from the
White, heterosexual, male norm within the space designates one as deviant (Gray, 2012a).

Because people of color are not recognized as legitimate participants in virtual spaces, disparaging realities exist leading to their exclusion and full participation in the community. No matter the content, the dominant culture of video gaming still gets to decide who is valid and who is not. This is what Bourdieu calls “symbolic exclusion” or the effort to impose a definition of “legitimate practice” and “universal essence” (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993: 14). Any practice within cultural production then becomes the symbolic site of struggle over the power to enforce the dominant definition from a hegemonic standpoint that delimits and restricts access to certain populations, defining who’s entitled to take part in defining and shaping virtual spaces.

Black cyberfeminist thought

Black cyberfeminist thought can help contextualize the experiences of marginalized users existing within Twitch. Specifically, Black cyberfeminism concerns itself with three major themes: (1) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces; (2) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces; and (3) the distinctness of virtual feminism. While the focus of this research is mostly on Black male Twitchers and responses to these Twitchers in online forums, this framework addresses marginalized identities and Black masculinity is marginalized within this space. Black males, for failing to conform to the White male norm, are unable to take advantage of hegemonic masculinity within this space leading to an identity of marginalized masculinity.

Social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces

Examinations of institutional racism, stereotypical imagery, sexism, and classism are routinely addressed by Black feminist thought. Incorporating the inherent masculine bias in technology and the privileging of Whiteness within virtual spaces (Gray, 2012a), this tenet within Black cyberfeminism is imperative. Kolko (2000) argued that the internet is far from liberatory, but rather is a space that continues a “cultural map of assumed whiteness.” Kolko (2000) pointed out that attempts to make race and ethnicity present are met with colorblind resistance. The assumed White masculine body excludes women and people of color. As previously discussed, the mere presence of their bodies marks them as deviant in these spaces (Gray, 2012b).

Ignoring the diverse lives of virtual inhabitants also leads to the inability of marginalized bodies to define their own virtual realities. Marginalizing narratives perpetuated through the media reinforce limited conceptualizations of women. Black cyberfeminists urge the marginalized to regain control of hegemonic imagery to be able to define themselves, and internet technologies allow for this. Twitch users are able to demonstrate their knowledge of the game with some earning significant amounts of money from their followers. However, Black gamers are largely excluded from this practice as they are not deemed valid participants within the space.

Intersecting oppressions in virtual spaces

The second theme of Black cyberfeminism is that marginalized users of any technology must confront and work to dismantle the overarching and interlocking structure of domination in terms of race, class, gender, and other intersecting oppressions. Because individuals experience oppression in different ways, we must not create a one-size-fits-all understanding of oppression. Black cyberfeminism requires an understanding of the diverse ways that oppression can manifest in the materiality of the body and how this translates into virtual spaces (Gray, 2015). Black cyberfeminism also requires recognition of the privileges that some marginalized bodies hold before we can begin dismantling these privileges and understanding the multitude of ways that intersectionality can manifest.

Black cyberfeminism encourages a privileging of marginalized perspectives and ways of knowing, because race, gender, class status, disability, sexuality, and a host of other identifiers generate knowledge about the world. Valuing these perspectives is the only way to liberate the oppressed from the confines of hegemonic notions deeming these identities unworthy (Gray, 2015).

Although all oppressed groups share a common struggle, examining the intersecting nature of their realities reveals the distinctness of their lived experiences. Women may share sexual oppression, but it is not clear how this can unite all women whose lives, work, life expectancy, and family life are also structured by the hierarchies of racism, ethnicity, colonialism, or nationalism. People of color may share racial oppression, but the gendered and classed nature of their experiences manifest in real ways. Within the current context, examining race and marginalized gender reveals a particular reality for Black men within Twitch.

Accepting the distinctness of virtual marginalization

Black cyberfeminism also addresses the distinct nature of how marginalized users employ virtual technologies. The focus of the current work is on Black males and their marginalized masculinity within gaming culture. But looking at gaming culture broadly, Blackness within gaming culture is deployed in very stereotypical ways. For instance, within video games, Black masculinity is most
DIGITAL SOCILOGIES

often stereotyped as hypermasculine, hyperphysical, and heterosexual (Gray, 2014). And while Black men still continually engage in, they resist in other ways, and that leads to their empowerment. One of major ways that Black men assert their power to resist is by constantly inserting their masculinity into spaces dominated by hegemonic masculinity. This process can be referred to as resistant masculinity. Scholars define the paradigm of resistant masculinity as an attempt by Black men to resist oppression and assert their masculinity in a society that sought to strip away any sense of manhood. There is a correlation between White southern manhood and slavery where White men established their masculinity by using slavery to make Black men inferior to them. This is apparent in men's interactions in Xbox Live. The mere presence of Blackness incites many males to lash out aggressively toward Black masculinity in the space. In turn, many Black males within Xbox Live will reassert their manhood and masculinity and attempt to reclaim the power that is trying to be usurped and diminished in the space (Gray, 2014). This is the process involved in racializing public space within virtual settings. Racialized hierarchies have manifested within these spaces situating marginalized bodies as second-class gamers. And this process becomes apparent in seeing the Twitch community's response to Black Twitchers. Many gamers have taken their concerns that Black gamers just “don’t have what it takes” to gaming forums.

Research method

By examining the comments posted about Black Twitchers in a public gaming forum, this study intends to investigate the online discourse surrounding Black Twitchers as well as colorblind racist attitudes expressed about these gamers within the same forum. Analysing their narratives reveals insight into the perspectives of the gatekeepers who regulate Black gamers to the margins of gaming culture.

Methodologies in the digital era must be “racially literate” to truly interrogate the presence of power inherent in constructing racialized narratives (Hughey and Daniels, 2013: 338). Just as scholars have outlined how racial code words reproduce “real-life” racial segregation and inequalities, scholars must also become acquainted with the slang and language of virtual racial invective and messaging (Hughey and Daniels, 2013: 337). As such, this study analysed online forum comments generated by Twitch users. The online forum comments were posted over a two-month period in response to a Black gamer getting banned for using racist language. The data gathered was obtained from a discussion board forum where there were 24 total users, 13 actually identifying as active Twitch users. There was no way to ascertain actual race or gender of the forum posters.

“THEY’RE JUST TOO URBAN”

Analyzing the data

To analyze the data, I employed both thematic and critical discourse analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to establish the broader cultural norms operating inside Twitch, while critical discourse analysis formed the basis of the discourse that illustrates notions of power and the racialization of space. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to establish broad themes or patterns that highlight cultural norms. As Anzul et al suggest, “it can be thought of as the researcher’s inferred statement that highlights explicit or implied attitudes toward life, behavior or understandings of a person, person, or culture” (Anzul et al, 2003: 150).

The presence of both micro- and macro-level comments within the forum led to the inclusion of critical discourse analysis, given that several commenters normalized the behaviors and actions of the racialized discourse on Twitch and within the forum. So thematic analysis was useful to establish the discursive practices that existed within Twitch, and critical discourse analysis was used to analyze the interactions of specific discourses. Using both highlights the connections between participants’ use of a particular discourse within Twitch (and online forums) and the larger discourses occurring in virtual communities and culture broadly; thematic analysis is an appropriate macro approach, which leads to the microanalysis of texts, for which I turn to the methods of critical discourse analysis.

Findings and analysis

Contextualizing Twitch culture: racializing virtual publics

The data collected for this study highlighted the racialized nature of the Twitch community. Although the data reveal a diverse range of conversations operating within the space, I describe in detail only those events that fit within the narrative schema of racialized rhetoric. For instance, the quote provided by one commenter, “They’re just too urban. I mean, if they would just be more normal, like regular gamers, then they could probably get more followers,” highlights the overarching theme of the entire chapter. Stuart Hall (1997) makes it clear that while language is a very important vehicle of a given discourse, imagery is also heavily involved in how people are represented, and therefore carries with it significant social repercussions. Although these are just words, the symbolic and visual nature of the creation of these words, “urban” makes it very clear that there is a particular population in mind when uttering this phrase. And as Bonilla-Silva suggests (2006), it’s a method employed to mask racist practice and intent. While the study of discourse is not limited to any one particular form, format, or modality of discourse—what Foucault (1971) referred to as “orders of discourse”—the various discourses concerning
"race" online take place in interactions in both public and private settings. And the anonymous spaces of the internet allow these once private conversations to be revealed publically. While discourse is fluid and constantly changing, when attached to physical bodies, any racialized discourse associated with Blackness is always immobile and unchanged. 

While the comments overall are not directly hostile or negative, the assumptions inherent in them reveal extreme discontent with the presence of Blackness. These comments reveal this: "But no one wants to hear all that. We can’t relate," and "What do you expect when the majority of the player base seems to be white people?" are just two examples that capture the essence of the colorblind and covertly racist commentary leading to the exclusion of Black Twitch users. This exclusion occurs through the "othering" process that refers to discursive acts that establish a binary divide between "Us" and "Them," where "They" are deviant, abnormal, and otherwise different in a negative sense, and "We" are normal and acceptable (Hall, 1997). This builds on Richard Dyer’s argument that in order to understand the world, actors have to engage in organizing information into "types," or "general classification schemes" (cited in Hall, 1997: 257). Using systems of meaning, individual objects can be collapsed into groupings based on similarities to and differences from other objects, which enables actors to orient themselves accordingly as they encounter new objects. This othering is a discursive practice constructing Black users as undeserving of the full label of gamer.

Framing Black Twitchers as deviants through discursive practices
As previously explained, deviance is a term that refers to behavior that does not conform to socially accepted norms. While deviant social behavior "manifests in the materiality of the body," not all bodies are subject to the label of deviant, especially among Twitch users (Terry and Urb, 1995: 2). As researchers contend, most often, Blackness and any association with Blackness is punished the most violently within public spaces (Gray, 2012b). As Radhika Mohanty (1999: xiv) explains, "blackness is a discursive practice exercised by the confluence of history, economics, geography, and language," and these spaces continue to expand. With the diffusion of internet technologies, digital spaces (users and owners) are now reflective of this patriarchal, capitalist structured trend confirming the hegemonic domination of Whiteness (Gray, 2014). The comments posted within the Twitch forum also reflect this trend:

I never SAY I’m black, not in game. That’s almost as bad as admitting your a girl.

They showed the black dude from The Walking Zed and everyone started dropping the N-bomb and asking ‘LUCIAN IS THAT YOU?!’

It’s harmless. Damn. We said ‘oh hey it’s a joke guys!’ Y’all are too fucking sensitive. Discourse associated with framing Blackness as deviant dates back generations, and has very little to do with actual dangerousness and more associated with Blacks crossing cultural and racial boundaries established by Whiteness. As was stated earlier, Blackness is immobile, and when it does attempt to cross some artificial boundary or border, it is met with swift punishment. As the comments above suggest, the deviant identities of femininity and Blackness are normalized as deviant within the space and punished as such. The third comment that even attempts to diminish the seriousness of racism and sexism is part of a larger theme associated with anonymous spaces where default users will say and do things not wanting to be taken seriously. Discourse of colorblind racism

Even though some comments may not come across as racist, they still belong under the category of colorblind racism. And the comments below may at face value appear to not be overtly racist or colorblind, they actually are on further investigation:

95% of popular Twitch.tv chats are filled with memes, mindless drivel, and oftentimes offensive messages. It's just part of the culture. It's not meant to be taken seriously. Anonymous people acting like idiots. It's been around forever.

This really isn't something I think people should be getting bent out of shape about. Sure, Twitch.tv viewers can be ludicrous sometimes, but that's just how things are.

These posts urge Twitch users to just accept the reality of racism by normalizing these acts. This process of normalizing creates a racialized hierarchy where Black users and any user associated with Blackness are relegated to the periphery of the culture. This extension of othering resides directly within power relations, justifying the imbalance of power cementing members of the dominant group at the top of the social hierarchy (Hall, 1997). This racialized, social hierarchy highlights the racial privilege afforded White Twitch users. Furthermore, other comments still hint at the lack of mal intent diminishing the serious of the textual acts of harassment and violence:
DIGITAL SOCIOLOGIES

You get upset over words? Grow up.

I won’t tell anyone to not be offended, but I’m inclined to believe most if not all of these messages are meant to be vulgar for the sake of it without having any actual malice behind them.

Yep. Just anonymous morons. Really not worth getting worked up over.

As Bonilla-Silva articulates, and as these comments detail, many Whites continually fail to connect their racial attitudes to systemic practices of power and domination from which they participate and benefit. This echoes Blumer’s (1948 [1986]) sentiments regarding racial identification – that taking on a racial identity and assigning racial identities to others is a necessary precursor to forming ideas about (one’s own and others’) racially marked bodies. Bonilla-Silva (2006) takes the additional step of reminding us that those racially marked bodies exist in a social system that has been and continues to be marked by power differentials, domination, and oppression. The absence of power in these analyses results in a depiction of Whites’ racial attitudes as somehow non-racial at worst, and as secondary to other structural forces (for example, social class) at best. So, in the absence of a framework that foregrounds the relations of dominance and oppression that exist between racial groups, Whites’ concerns with Blacks’ violations of American values and norms, for example, appear as just that – moral-cultural concerns devoid of racial sentiment (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Racializing (virtual) public space

“Race ... in a worldview ... a cosmological ordering system structured out of the political, economic, and social realities of people who had emerged as expansionists, conquering, dominating nations on a worldwide quest for wealth and power” Jane Hill explains (1999: 26). We have a very limited understanding of what space is; we assume it to be this fixed and permanent structure, but in reality, “space and place are not fixed or innate but rather created and re-created through the actions and meanings of people” (1999: 3). Space and place are co-produced through many dimensions: race and class, urban and suburban, gender and sexuality, public and private, bodies and buildings (Giesecke et al., 2014). While the era of public segregation may be gone, modern segregation mirrors the historical practice of designated space as Whites only. These practices come in many forms including lack of inclusion, toxic environments, and outright hostility, harassment, and violence in many contexts. Virtual spaces are direct mirrors of historical segregation as overt racism permeates (Gray, 2012b).

"THEY'RE JUST TOO URBAN"

In society we “think of space in three interactive, interconnected ways. There is psychological space, political space, and physical space. They are all interactive, and they are all highly racialized ... for example ... once you say ‘Occupy the Hood’ everyone knows you’re talking about people of color. The reason that this is true is how we’ve racialized physical space through housing policies, land use planning, and many other public and private actions” (Wiley and Shiffman, 2012: 113). This affects how we treat each other in a public space and how we decide who to include and who to exclude is ultimately driven by political space and misplaced fear.

Contemporary examples reveal just how engrained into the public psyche word association is with racialized places. For instance, when media reports use the term “ghetto,” “inner city,” or “urban” are used, they are mostly referencing Black spaces to situate the reader into something “other.” The ideological framing of these words are rooted in colorblind racism. As Bonilla-Silva (2006: 2) states, colorblind racism is a new ideology that explains contemporary racial inequality as “being the outcome of non-racial dynamics.” This type of racism is subtle and institutional, and strives to be non-racial (colorblind) in order to maintain structures of White privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003: 272) write that colorblind racism “is as effective as slavery and Jim Crow in maintaining the racial status quo.” Additionally, “the beauty of this ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards.” Bonilla-Silva (2006) effectively contrasts today's colorblindness with overt racism that permeated society during Jim Crow, by describing it as “now you see it, now you don’t” (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003: 272).

The elements to “new racism” include the (1) increasingly subtler nature of racial discourse and practices; (2) avoidance of racial terminology and a dependence by Whites on their experience of “reverse racism”; (3) invisibility of mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality; and (4) incorporation of “safe” or model minorities. This terminology is directly rooted in this new racism. It’s a way to talk about racial minorities without sounding like a racist.

As Hughey and Daniels (2013) explain, coded racial language is used to convey subtle racial meanings in ways that appear normal and reasoned. Yet this discourse is discriminatory and contributes to the reproduction of racism. Racialized discourse is the focal point of this chapter. As Gildersleeve and Hernandez (2012) discuss, discourse is the talk (or language) and action of a text. In relation to hegemony and colorblindness, racially coded language allows racist views to be expressed without seeming “racist” and this, in turn, creates a climate where “non-racist,” “neutral,” and common-sense language reproduce Whiteness and the status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Toni Morrison adds depth to this argument by stating that language constitutes violence and needs to be exposed:
Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malignant language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary check – it must be rejected, altered and exposed. (Morrison and Denard, 2008: 201)

Twitching, as a form of cultural production, creates the opportunity to blur the boundaries of restricted production within this community. Black Twitchers may not be allowed access to the spaces and industries controlled by their White counterparts, but they are not silent, nor are they passive bystanders consuming White, hegemonic masculine ideology. Black Twitchers act as agents of social change regardless of their intent. The mere presence of their marginalized bodies disrupts the norm of the space designated for privileged bodies. They participate as social agents that engage in a dynamic and ongoing process of producing and reshaping the discourse about what it means to be a true gamer. Although they participate as cultural producers who produce meanings and values, the authority of their discourse is partly determined by the default user within virtual settings, leading to the invalidation of their knowledge. Black Twitchers lack the symbolic capital needed to be seen a full participants within this culture. And dominant culture interpretations of “Blackness” as a site of negative visibility often complicate the ability of African Americans to inhabit public spaces.

References


