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Kovie Biakolo
DePaul University

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Race discourse online: How do we discuss Blackness in popular digital media?

Kovie Biakolo

Submitted to the School of Communication
of DePaul University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

Barbara Speicher, Faculty Adviser

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In honor of my grandmother, Lady Christina Emoefe. Your spirit lives on mama.

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Abstract

The Internet has been socially accepted as an equalizing platform where media is concerned, despite the digital divide and other inequalities that continue to persist in the space. Digital media in particular has become a source of news and opinion for many subjects including race. This research studies how race and Blackness is discussed in three popular digital media publications – *The Atlantic*, *Salon*, and *Slate*. Themes that arise across the publications are discussed, and an in-depth social linguistic analysis is performed on three articles. The importance of the personal narrative in digital media where Blackness is concerned is observed, while it is also noted that these narratives center on male and straight perspectives, and some potential problems from traditional media continue to infiltrate digital media. This information can impact how the Internet and digital media in particular confronts discussions of race and Blackness.

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Introduction

How do we talk about race? If you ask this question, it is sure to elicit different responses based on the individual's socio-politics, education level, interests, and of course, race. In the summer of 2013, a Gallup poll found that most people in the United States believed that race relations across all groups were becoming better. In late 2014, another poll showed an increase in race relations as a major problem within the country, with Black Americans attitudes strikingly different from White Americans. There have been a few studies in recent years that reveal that White people in the United States believe that racism against them was on the rise. And yet there continues to be highly publicized incidences of racism against Black Americans in education, in politics, and in society as a whole. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* showed how racism manifested in a new age – a more sinister, more covert age both individually and in America's institutions.

It is apparent that race continues to be a subject that is important to the identity of Americans individually and collectively, as a country. In the age of online media – which consists of traditional media available in the web space - as well as new forms of media such as social media platforms and blogs, Americans are having these important conversations about race and identity in a new way. And this new way allows for people to share thoughts about events instantaneously, to draw attention to particular causes and issues, and to participate in the public dialogue about sociopolitical issues in an unprecedented and sometimes unpredictable way.

The Internet, and in particular social media, has been heralded as a way of giving previously or historically disadvantaged people a new way to voice their thoughts and concerns in the country, as well as form communities and spaces that address their needs in a way that didn't exist before. There are those who argue that despite the Internet being more equalizing, it continues to suffer from many of the same problems that the rest of society suffers from, in terms of equality of voice and representation - because the same groups in society that have power in traditional media tend to also have power in the same media online because of access. That is to say that People of Color, in the context of race, still have disadvantages online that White people may not.

In spite of access and the disadvantages that People of Color may face, ordinary people in digital spaces discuss subject matters such as American racism, anti-Blackness, colorblindness, and the idea of a post-racial America. Moreover, the constructs of Blackness and the commentary that centers on the interests, concerns, and representations of Black people are now more openly discussed, albeit imperfectly, to more people because of the Internet. Not only are people from different perspectives discussing Blackness openly and sometimes unapologetically, but the portrayals of Blackness are also being challenged and given new meaning through the many public voices that can now participate in the conversation.

Notwithstanding the United States' Black-White binary in race conversations, my interest in studying the portrayal of Blackness in digital media and in popular digital media sites lies in a desire to understand how public commentaries are taking place, and what topics are at the center of these commentaries. Are we discussing race and racism in a specific way online? What is the language being used to discuss Blackness and

racism in this digital era? What conversations take central roles with regard to Blackness and race? And ultimately, what are the old constructs that have stayed and new constructs that have emerged in American conversations on Blackness in digital media?

Given that it is for the most part claimed by many race writers and scholars that we are in an age of covert rather than overt racism, and one where many people are uncomfortable talking about race, the Internet, which many believe is the space where people can still have free conversations of this nature, was a good site to study modern American public conversations on race and Blackness. Moreover, as more and more people are spending their time online, and as online identities become part and parcel of an individual's identity, research into new media's conversations about important matters such as race would serve to update our communicative understanding of how we talk about race, and especially how America talks about Blackness in the digital age.

For my study, I used popular digital media to conduct a linguistic analysis about conversations on Blackness and race. Literature was reviewed to determine what we know about race and media – both traditionally and in the digital space. This was followed by a content analysis that looked at the general subject matters surrounding Blackness in digital media, followed by an in-depth analysis of the language use in articles that were considered representative, and would provide social linguistic understanding of the language being used to discuss Blackness and race in digital media.

Literature Review

Race, as a factor of diversity, is prevalent in digital media conversations in various ways. From digital inequalities and access, to the online discussion of social, political, and cultural issues concerning race, race discourse inhabits online spaces. The interest in studying Blackness specifically is rooted in the social-cultural curiosity of how Blackness is constructed, depicted, and discussed in new media – a form of media that is often politicized and perceived as having removed barriers to entry and equalizing racial historical disadvantages. The literature reviewed however, goes beyond critiquing Blackness and “Black issues” - issues that may specifically pertain to the experiences of Black people. In analyzing Blackness, race – which affects all people directly or indirectly – has to be considered. In order to analyze the state of race discourse online and specifically the discourse of Blackness online, scholarship was reviewed to identify digital equality and inequalities, power, language use, and rhetorical devices in discourses about diversity, concepts concerned with how Blackness is constructed and discussed in public spaces, and the variety and inclusiveness of voices in media overall.

Digital Media Inequalities and Race Rhetoric

Despite the Internet being seen as an equalizing medium, there are socioeconomic discrepancies that affect its ability to level the playing field – usually characterized by access and accessibility (Van Cuilenburg, 1999). Such socioeconomic discrepancies ultimately lead to inequality of representation, of voice, and ability to participate in social

life online. We have a tendency to overestimate the Internet's ability to democratize our society (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). That people have access is not the only consideration in terms of understanding socioeconomic limitations, but even the ways in which people use the Internet such as when they have access, inequality in the availability of social support, and inequality of skill and ability, is defined by socioeconomic inequalities that highlight the problems of the "digital divide" in a new and more encompassing way (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001).

Still, the Internet is the most equalizing medium we have had to date, but at the same time we cannot overestimate its capacity in our desire for diversity and equal representation (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). The Internet has not escaped having some of the structures of traditional media because power holders also dominate online. They have the most wealth and are more likely to influence larger audiences than those without access to economic and social power (Van Cuilenburg, 1999). Access is important in either form of media and ethnographic studies demonstrate how notions of access will ultimately inform rhetorical power (Coleman, 2010). This suggests that new media cannot completely rid itself of the biases that are embedded in traditional media structures (Coleman, 2010).

Beyond the ability to obtain access, diversity concerns of digital inequality should be expanded considerably beyond the digital divide to include socio-cultural and political contexts. This means broadening the understanding of inequality to include differences between support, skill level, and the autonomy of different groups that use the Internet. (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001).

A survey of current approaches revealed that anthropologists' study of digital media in a cultural context is limited considerably because of restricted access as some communities' participation online involves closed membership (Coleman, 2010). Closed membership in this cultural context means that participants have to prove or verify their identity in some shape or form in order to obtain membership. But anthropologists at large, have also ignored in-depth studies on race, ethnicity, and digital media in favor of century-old debates of liberal politics, personhood, and the like, as well as language change. The result of the survey indicates that anthropologists should focus on how digital culture shapes specific diasporas in different communities as they exist in the information age, and how participation in digital culture can transform the culture of a group as a whole. (Coleman, 2010).

Myths in digital media narratives suggest that these narratives are perceived as producing storytelling that is different in function and in reality for readers from traditional media, because hypertext reception makes a difference. The rationale behind this view is readers of digital storytelling will receive information incrementally, where fragments are revealed as the reader goes through the story (Ryan, 2002). Unlike print media, digital storytelling can be edited and changed quickly, and can offer readers interactivity or the ability to become part of the story as they read. Comparing these notions to traditional media narratives, whether the narrative is or is not affected by the medium becomes a matter of interpretation in which one can claim that some stories are fluid throughout all mediums, whereas other stories are best told in specific media (Ryan, 2002). Without referring to specific examples, Ryan (2002) contends that hypertext

distorts the way in which sequence occurs. In traditional notions of narrative, the audience must follow a linear pattern – but this is not the case in digital narratives.

New media often aims to distinguish itself from old media through the rhetorical devices it utilizes. One way it does this is by recognizing the power of individual voice, and not just group voice, in the space (Zappen, 2005). Because individual voice is important in new media, it is seen as having the capacity to contest traditional media spaces. However, characteristics that often define digital rhetoric are both an affordance and constraint of digital media, for example, speed and anonymity. Speed and anonymity allow for instantaneous communication by anyone with Internet access without necessarily providing personal information. But speed of digital rhetoric also means that communication has a greater risk of error without full information being provided. Similarly the sense of anonymity does not hold people accountable for their communications. Additionally, new media uses traditional persuasion theories, such as Aristotle's views on motivation, to counter traditional rhetoric (Zappen, 2005).

Language use in terms of the importance of narrative in digital media is a way to entertain the public that reads and interacts with the source. That is to say that digital media takes on its own life form in a literary context that is specific and separate from traditional communication for the public (Ryan, 2002). Language is not free from prejudice but rather reflects and is reflected by existing prejudices in how narratives are communicated (Stoudt, 2009). Thus the medium - traditional or new - will not in and of itself change the message if the language remains the same.

Prejudicial language is used to maintain social relationships and increase inequality through its use even within new media. Language, in a social context for example, can

get people to say, do, and believe racist things unintentionally (Guerin, 2003). Power dynamics continue to distinguish between advantaged and marginalized voices, and they create and perpetuate social constructions that are communicated in language. (Guerin, 2003) Language, therefore, is a function of the social structure as a whole, and it will represent the power that some social groups will have over others. (Stoudt, 2009) But it will also present an opportunity for social groups in marginalized positions to have to resist (Guerin, 2003).

Digital media affords a new arena for looking at how race talk manifests itself in a space where sometimes the immediate racial identity of subjects is unknown. However, historically marginalized groups still experience both racism and racial disadvantages in digital media (Daniels, 2009). Language itself within the online media space can be manipulated in order to cause prejudiced experiences for particular groups. Notably the language of cyber racism is often hidden in positive talk (Daniels, 2009). The language of particular sites can become sites of dominance where particular forms of language and the implications of those forms become sites for power struggle (Warschaue, 2000). “Cloaked websites” promote racism covertly, and do so without explicitly stating a political agenda or by concealing their political agenda. These cloaked websites are designed to undermine particular issues within socio-political context from race to women’s issues. They do this by sometimes ignoring particular experiences of marginalized groups and other times, questioning the experiences altogether even where these experiences may be situated in historical fact (Daniels, 2009). In a particularly blatant and unethical example of a cloaked website, a public relations firm hired by Walmart created www.forwalmart.com as a way to pretend to engage in dialogue about how

Wal-Mart helps communities, particularly poor communities with its presence (Daniels, 2009).

Language constructs identity and imagines representations of identity for people. Language is useful in the digital space with regard to self-identification and group identification in the context of race (Warschauer, 2000). Race has historically and modernly defined experience and therefore identity, and the impact this has on cyberspace has transformed the construction of identity. Language then is an identity marker in the digital space and, from that vantage point, it privileges those who operate in Standard English. Still, the Internet is more democratizing than other platforms in the context of race, identity, and language, and it has been used to promote minority languages and identity. In the case of traditional Hawaiian languages for example, digital communication between younger people who have access to the Internet, has seen a revival of the language use thanks in part to their ability to connect with each other through online mediums (Warschauer, 2000).

Social Constructions Of Race

Black urban history and culture has evolved into a part of United States culture that is recognizable and valuable to American culture (Pruitt, 2007). The different stages of Black American involvement in the political, social, and economic constructions of American life, depicts the transformation of Black Americans over time. Within the social location of history, the traditions and elements of West African cultures that were maintained, as well as the adoption of a new United States culture, created a new culture of Blackness that is uniquely American (Pruitt, 2007). The emphasis of race and ethnicity

towards a center of Black nationalism is neither detrimental nor incoherent to constructs of Blackness or Black culture. However, the disadvantaged social position of African-Americans has constructed Blackness in light of disadvantage (McPherson and Shelby, 2004). This is to say that Black people being proud of Blackness in their American identity should ideally not threaten their identity. However, due to how these constructions are received by the White American public, facets of identity that are historically Black and reclaimed can be perceived as threatening to Whiteness, such as when Black people wear their hair in particularly Black styles. Afros, for example, which are considerably centered around pro-Black or pro-African politics, are deemed “un-American.”

Whiteness is defined by what it is not rather than what it is, and in American social conversation this means not “being of color,” and all the social implications that affords individuals and communities. Whiteness, as a matter of cultural depictions, avoids responsibility in much of the same way non-White groups cannot avoid it. In popular culture texts such as *City of Joy* Whiteness reveals itself as what is normalized and good, while non-Whiteness is othered and differentiated, needing the assistance of Whiteness in order to be civilized (Shome, 1996).

That Black people suffer in the United States because of socio-economic disadvantages can be easily observed and analyzed. But the ability of the group to define itself in a coherent manner is also a social suffering that may need to be rectified through a reconstruction of Blackness in the American social imagination (McPherson and Shelby, 2004). Blackness as an identity juxtaposed to other racial identities, and in particular Whiteness, is entrenched in a resistance to the negative social constructs of

Blackness. The film *City of Joy* showcases how Whiteness is manifested in popular culture. With stereotypical presentations of People of Color's cultures as primitive and needing to be saved, *City of Joy* presents Whiteness in the form of a White Savior essentially coming to save the people of a small village in Calcutta, India. Depicting how the invisibility of Whiteness allows for preemptive assumptions of its importance and its necessity, the film presents an almost paternalistic vision of what non-Whiteness constitutes (Shome, 1996).

Diversity discourses and specifically race discourses operate and function in our ideological understanding of race in the American imagination. Critical race theory implies Whiteness' constructions differ from non-Whiteness due to its subtlety and invisibility (Shome, 1996). The rhetorical strategies of Whiteness that Shome (1996) discusses is summarized by the White Savior complex as well as the modern situation of color-blind racism in which color is constructed to be invisible when in reality the only color construct that is invisible is Whiteness.

White privilege is invisible to White people. That is to say it is something that most are taught not to see or be aware of, or pay attention to in their experiences (McIntosh, 1992). In the host of advantages that one earns by the virtue of being White or being seen as White, unearned advantages of Whiteness are not considered as such, but rather they are seen as simply a way of being because the privileges are unconscious (McIntosh, 1992). Stewart et al. (2012) noted that white people whose White Privilege Awareness or WPA was increased in an experiment were more likely to have improved attitudes towards African-Americans.

Blackness and its survival in the United States is inherently disadvantaged because of history, but also because of the ways Blackness has been viewed under the constructions of Whiteness (McPherson and Shelby, 2004). But like many race discourses in the public, the constructions of comparison are White vs. Black leading to a Black-White binary understanding of race (Alcoff, 2003). The Black-White binary oversimplifies race dialogues and conversations in the United States. The binary ultimately harms race dialogue in public spaces and has narrowly defined race to the detriment of public conversations. The exclusion of Non-White and non-Black communities in racial discussions disrupts the potential for building coalitions between all groups. It is particularly problematic for Asian and Latino/a Americans but more broadly for race discussions and progression as a whole (Alcoff, 2003).

Separate from the Black-White binary, colorblindness has become a phenomenon that counters notions of racism in modern American culture by ironically claiming not to “see” race (Neville et al., 2008). In the eyes of colorblindness, racism then becomes defined in particular ways that have less to do with institutionalized processes than with overt acts of discrimination because of race (Simpson, 2008). This negation of color ultimately leads to a limited understanding of racism and how it functions in the experiences of non-White people in the United States. Ultimately, colorblindness preserves a racial order and minimizes the effects of racism while presenting itself as a rational belief and course of action (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011). To many White Americans, Obama’s election is symbolic of the end of racism and fits in with colorblind ideology. The success of Obama, however, is that he distances himself from certain aspects of Blackness and embraces a certain post-racial attitude to racial politics (Bonilla-

Silva and Dietrich, 2011). This is to say that Obama adopts some colorblindness in his political approach to the topic and has avoided rhetoric that may position him as having a sort of “Black agenda” in order to succeed in being elected president.

Colorblindness not only negatively affects race talk, but also derails dialogues centered on diverse racial experiences, often to the disadvantage of People of Color. Critically, colorblindness allows any race talk to be perceived as a form of racism despite claims that dialogues about differences lead to more productive outcomes than dialogue that focuses on commonalities (Simpson, 2008). Thus the harmfulness of Whiteness is also experienced in colorblindness as it inhibits productive race conversations in the public sphere that would otherwise enable effective interracial dialogue, greater understanding, and provide a path toward systemic solutions.

Colorblindness is also a function of maintaining White supremacy within the culture as it promotes an ahistorical view on race, ignoring systematic processes in institutions that become the lived experiences of people. In this way, colorblindness is not just an ally of White Supremacy but it facilitates racist beliefs among those who hold it as an ideology. Whiteness, in a colorblind lens, continues to be preserved while the experience of societal others, in the context of race, is neglected (Simpson, 2008). Colorism – which is inter-ethnic prejudice where the darker one’s complexion , the more prejudice one experiences - can be particularly harmful to Black Americans. It results in internalized blame of disadvantaged Blacks who are depicted as deviating from the normalized, White mainstream. When Black people accept the racial ideology of colorblindness, it often negatively affects individual and socio-political interests for the group as a whole (Neville et al., 2008). Specifically, it creates a psychological false consciousness resulting

in victim-blaming attributions of racial inequality, internalized oppression, and justifications of social roles (Neville et al., 2008).

The social construction of race provides a greater understanding for how the historical and cultural attitudes about how groups identify are important for understanding conversations about race. In particular, the understanding of Blackness and what it means juxtaposed to Whiteness is the context for America's binary racial understanding and subsequent constructions that affect attitudes, rhetoric, and eventually, social experiences in the digital age.

Race, Representation and Media

As a whole, diversity within media systems plays a positive role in culture in order to more authentically represent and reflect groups (Howard and Smith, 2007). Representations in media and in particular television become the vessel by which groups can contend for greater rights because of awareness. Representations and how they change over time have been particularly useful in making groups aware of each other (Meyrowitz and Maguire, 1993). Diversity matters because it shapes the news and information perceptions of the public, and therefore shapes the cultural lens by which individuals, groups, and communities view each other. Voice matters because perspective matters and has the capacity to shape public opinion (Baker, 2008). And more importantly voice, as a function of socio-political engagement, is entrenched in power dynamics.

That America was a traditional melting point is something that exists only in the nation's imagination; America's melting point is truer at present than in the past.

Television actually became a medium which encouraged resistance and change from disadvantaged groups including minorities and women because it informed them of how they are perceived (Meyrowitz and Maguire, 1993). This experience allowed minority groups to demand greater access to the social, cultural, and economic privilege that had been afforded to mostly well-to-do White men. The effect of minority consciousness on media, aside from the societal impact on subcultures and groups, is narrowcasting, and a media culture of diversification according to subcultures and groups. This increase in minority consciousness when engaging in the public space leads to one's performance of identity becoming much more significant than before because of one's heightened awareness (Meyrowitz and Maguire, 1993).

Ownership of media – that is who owns the mediums that deliver messages to the masses - affects the platform and messages of media in shaping diversity. Diversity in ownership is shown to more accurately represent and reflect groups (Howard and Smith, 2007). A lack of diversity in ownership leads to a lack of adequate representation in media of minorities and contributes to racial stereotyping. If accurate representations as well as a lack of diversity persist in media, then structural matters, such as who owns and controls media and therefore creates public perceptions, are largely responsible for inadequate representations (Baker, 2008). Also, advertising and financial motives, in addition to ownership, affect viewpoint in the media (Baker, 2008). It is up for debate as to whether the FCC's online auctioning of access to the public spectrum has improved diversity across the board for minority-owned and women-owned businesses. One finding revealed that minority owned applicants qualified at a much lower rate than non-minority owned applicants for FCC licenses (Howard and Smith, 2007). The finding also

suggested that potential reasons for a lack of diversity in ownership including, such as lack of know-how, lack of economic and cultural capital, and the FCC's system, may still favor mainstream media over potential minority media because of the procedures that are involved in the application (Howard and Smith, 2007). Overall, the main reason to support diversity of ownership is democratization of media and improvement in media quality.

With regard to stereotypes, the mainstream assigns Black women stories and representations that are rhetorically violent and harmful. Black women's representations in American culture, and how they are shaped, culturally deviate from the mainstream resulting in outcomes that are negatively viewed by White American culture as a whole (Meyers, 2004). A comparative analysis between how White women and Black women perceive beauty indicates that cultural group differences both harm and protect Black women's representation in the context of beauty (Fujioka et al., 2009). For Black women, strong membership identification with their racial identity led to less negative emotions about comparisons to the White mainstream (Fujioka et al., 2009). The study also revealed there are racial differences in the personal importance of thinness, the desirability, and the fear of fat, with White women strongly identifying with all categories, while Black women significantly identifying less than their White counterparts (Fujioka et al., 2009). Notably, however, White women had fewer ties to racial identity so personal desirability was hugely important. And despite Black women's much stronger racial identity and group membership, thin models overall were still viewed as personally desirable (Fujioka et al., 2009). It is possible then that as thin Black

images become more normalized in mainstream, it may entirely affect racial identifications and cultural notions of beauty of Black women (Fujioka et al., 2009).

Women of color are often depicted as oversexualized and consequently they are often blamed for violence committed against them. Even within their own communities, women of color who accuse men of violence are branded as traitors and liars (Meyers, 2004). In the examination of *Freaknik*, an event in Atlanta in the 90s that drew Black Americans from mainly historically Black colleges and was the site of partying, drinking, dancing, etc., revealed how Black women are blamed for their own violence. In analysis, the news essentially portrays Black women doing “provocative things” and being welcoming of demonizing behavior, in order to later trivialize the violence that some Black women would encounter (Meyers, 2004). Even prior to *Freaknik*, analysis of news coverage shows consistent references made to violence in that part of the city and references to the youth there as coming from problematic backgrounds (Meyers, 2004). The result is a narrow generalization of Black women’s experience of violence that is seen as justified according to media narratives (Meyers, 2004).

Traditional forms of media representation, majority culture perception, and viewpoint serve to negatively represent historically disadvantaged groups in terms of race (Jeffres et al., 2000). Often, traditional media representations that attempt to showcase diversity, almost always end up perpetuating old stereotypes of *othered* bodies. The importance of the media in shaping these attitudes about race continues cycles of racial prejudice and portrays disadvantaged bodies under a White gaze (Johnson et al., 1997). The media then can be seen as a social agent that represents and performs some of the work of larger institutionalized systems (Jeffres et al., 2000). Mass media, therefore, is

the system that sets the agenda for what is important to the public and what isn't and acts as the societal body that constructs what is normal and what it isn't (Fürsich, 2010).

Even with the advent of new technologies, and in particular the Internet, which can disrupt old stereotypes and representations, problematic representations may still prevail (Fürsich, 2010). The representations of minorities in contemporary media still embed themselves in historically prejudiced gazes, albeit in less obvious ways (Johnson et al. 1997). Considering the role of globalization and subsequent international movement patterns, there is a growing need for White society to distinguish “others.” The production of normalized ideologies is the outcome of media representations. The process of *othering* is problematic especially when depictions of cultural diversity fail and the culture is left with erroneous representations of historically disadvantaged bodies (Fürsich, 2010). A potential solution to problematic representations and a lack of cultural diversity may be in hiring more diverse media personnel and, on a more individual basis, improving the quality of media education of the citizenry (Fürsich, 2010).

Race is highly correlated with activity and public journalism, especially as a factor of conflict in reporting. Examinations of newspapers demonstrate that race in particular is instrumental in how news stories are perceived and digested by the public (Johnson et al. 1997). The media pluralism viewpoint in smaller communities leads to conflict avoidance in reporting. But in larger communities, the viewpoint claims that reporting ought to emphasize conflict. This means that in small towns where there is less variance in attitudes, the reporting will likely avoid conflict. In big cities, where there is more variance in attitudes, the opposite is true – reporting will not only be more diverse but may focus on differences in attitudes (Jeffres et al., (2000).

Race is shown to be an important factor in decision-making when it comes to assessing violence. The Black body is already criminalized in American constructions and perceptions of Blackness, thus Black men are considered more violent as a matter of disposition; even without full information available to a subject consuming traditional media (Johnson et al., 1997). One study showed societal bias against Black men by exposing some but not all participants to violent news, revealed that participants were more likely to attribute a Black male defendant's behavior to disposition in those exposed to violent news as opposed to those who weren't. However, there was an insignificant difference in the attributions between a White male defendant's behavior whether the participant was exposed to violent news or not (Johnson et al., 1997). This reveals the implicit bias of Black male representations as opposed to White male representations. Even when the experiment was controlled for exposure to violence by both sets of men, the perceptions of Black men were worse than those of White men.

Network news also showed an effect with respect to how Black Americans are stereotyped. Through a survey conducted of nonstudent adult Americans, the results showed a relationship between news exposure and racialized perceptions (Dixon, 2008). While there was no causal relationship, there was a link that revealed African-American incomes were underestimated by those who watched more network news, and increased the perceptions of stereotypes such as Black Americans are intimidating (Dixon, 2008). In a different study that was undertaken to show the effects of local news on crime perceptions, a survey of response of Los Angeles county was undertaken and found that heavy consumption of Blacks as criminals increased perceptions of Blacks as violent (Dixon, 2008). Somewhat related to (Johnson et al., 1997), racial differences were also

analyzed: Survey responders were more likely to believe a Black suspect was guilty than a White suspect

Social media and digital participation can offer narratives that counter mainstream and traditional media representations as a form of resistance (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). How race is discussed in the public space of social media becomes politicized and therefore needs to be interpreted carefully because contexts may be difficult to establish in the digital media space, and especially in social media in particular (Pole, 2005). On the one hand, race can be a difficult subject to tackle in this new space. On the other hand, minority groups and the ways in which they address issues of race use online platforms as part of resistance (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Black bloggers in particular are disproportionately underrepresented in online spaces in the United States. One study, focused on the experiences of Black bloggers, revealed that controlling for race, Black bloggers are similar to their White counterparts in socio-economic class, education, and largely, interests (Pole, 2005). However, Black bloggers do talk about race more, are more likely to encourage political participation for an audience in their writing even though many reported not being able to be completely forthcoming to a larger, mainstream audience (Pole, 2005).

The trivialization of hashtag activism in comparison to “real” activism is often used against groups that are most likely to experience negative representations of physical activism, and therefore turn to digital activism (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Hashtag activism as used in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of Michael Brown by police has political implications for racialized bodies and depicts the utility of a social media platform for creating new perspectives of historically *othered* bodies. The social

implications of Michael Brown's death, for example, sparked ground protests and digital activism that will be analyzed for years to come, but some implications are apparent in the eight million tweets about the incident that became a national subject (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). In order to understand ethnographic implications, the site of Ferguson, Missouri as a real place must be distinguished from #Ferguson as a hashtag (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Ethnographers have to be careful in using hashtags as a field site because both activists who sought justice for Michael Brown as well as people who believe his shooting was justified could be tweeting under the same hashtag. So not all of the tweets can be taken for granted as part of hashtag activism for racial justice (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Moreover, when a Twitter trend becomes important political news, participants who comment - both activists and otherwise - may do so under a different hashtag. Thus related hashtags may need to be taken into consideration during the time period in order to fully grasp its social importance and implications (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). The importance of this in relation to digital media's focus on race is that there are multiple ways in which the race and Blackness conversation becomes complicated – both in participation and in how researchers observe that participation.

Social research and ethnography in the modern era must include observations from digital data including digital questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs (Murthy, 2008). The use of research in social media would provide a better understanding of race and race experiences because digital mediums have become part of lived experiences. Social research actually enhances qualitative physical ethnographic research, as respondents are more willing to reveal more personal information online than they do in-person. Indeed, digital ethnography can enhance physical ethnography but it

can also stand on its own (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Social networking allows researchers to get in-depth information about social interactions between groups. But it also more explicitly reveals societal divisions, as social networking is limited to those who have access (Murthy, 2008). Analysis of representation in digital video reveals an interesting aspect of ethnographic research because video diaries or webcams are self-representations that may be created based on how the subject wants to be seen or portrayed, and are therefore, staged. Blogs have the most capacity to make digital ethnographic social researchers more accountable because they exist in the most public space, as well as are perceived as having the potential to be most egalitarian (Murthy, 2008).

Ethnographic research in digital spaces is covert as the spaces and the people that operate in them are often unaware of the researchers' presence and/or analysis, thus new ethical considerations must be debated as to whether ethnographers can "pose" in digital spaces in order to have access to cultures they want to study (Murthy, 2008).

Additionally, researchers must continue to be aware that what they view in digital spaces is contextualized in racial, cultural, gendered, etc. contexts (Murthy, 2008).

All the literature gathered is useful in understanding how power will play a role in new media communications, how ideologically race and race constructions transcends and transforms and are transformed by mediums and platforms. Although it can be deduced from the literature overall that new media in comparison to old media does offer changes to constructions, as well as gives opportunity for groups to shape identity and constructions, it is clear that language and how language is used and the kinds of power dynamics involved in language use, affects what the public at large understands about

race and how it is constructed and discussed in new media. With this literature as background, it is then useful to ask questions about what is discussed in terms of race and how the language in new media creates portrayals. Moreover, questions arise about the extent to which these portrayals perpetuate inequality on one hand, and how they create nuanced images and discussion on the other hand, especially where Blackness is concerned.

Methodology

Given that online media is a broad term that encompasses various forms including news, current events, entertainment, fashion, etc., the first task of the research methodology was to choose specific online media, and subsequently the texts and method of analysis to study the portrayal of Blackness and race.

Because this study takes an interest in language and how it exists in the digital age, as well as how popular culture discusses race and Blackness, I decided the written medium that would best represent online media would be digital magazines. I sought sites that were widely read and had the mission of illustrating, reflecting, representing, and analyzing popular culture, and determined that digital magazines with an interest in news, culture, and current events would best serve the interests of this study. It was also important to the research that these digital publications be noted for writing about elements of popular culture and having strong reputations for their popular culture writing. This was important to claim that the representations that these digital publications would constitute, could be seen as “popular culture” views.

A simple Google search of “best websites for culture and news” as well as “best websites for culture and news in the United States” would bring up numerous websites to choose from. Some were categorized for specific interest such as travel, and the green movement, others were more general and contained numerous subjects. To further limit my criteria given the vast search, the websites’ mission had to explicitly state one or more of the following words: “culture,” “politics,” “news,” “current events,” which at face

value would relate to topics that were concerned with race. Quantcast.com reported the demographics and traffic statistics of sites to determine sites with similar readership. I also did a search on “similarsite.com” as well as “moreofit.com” to further seek out sites that were already seen as comparative so an analysis could be drawn without too much dissimilarity between sites. Moreover, “popular” perspectives are associated with progressive sites, so I wanted to determine how Blackness was being discussed in these progressive sites - often seen as containing “enlightened” perspectives. Three digital magazines were chosen: *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, and *Salon*.

Herring (2010) offers a new paradigm for doing web content analysis which involves a non-traditional approach to content analysis called Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) which can be quantitative or qualitative or both. Citing Herring (2004), Herring (2010) gives a five-step process of conducting CMDA, which was useful to implement in this study. Borrowing from traditional content analysis, the 5-step approach in Herring (2010) is as follows:

- 1) Articulate research question(s)
- 2) Select computer-mediated data sample
- 3) Operationalize key concept(s) in terms of discourse features
- 4) Apply method(s) of analysis to data sample
- 5) Interpret results

However, Herring (2010) explicitly insists that researchers should use more practical approaches that are empirical in the data set they seek. She gives examples of time-based or event-based - or other coding categories that can be pre-existing or emerge from the data.

Borrowing the CDMA method from Herring (2010), I used qualitative methods in this analysis. First, each digital publication was searched for “race,” “Black” and “African-American.” But given the constructions of race with regard to how Blackness is described in opposition to Whiteness, I would also search for, “Whiteness” and “White privilege.”

I then conducted a qualitative reading of each article chosen to ensure that the article is specifically focused on the topics at hand, rather than just mentioning them in passing. In order to limit the search once again, the first ten articles most relevant to the search words in each site was assessed and chosen for analysis if it met the search criteria. This means a total of 30 articles were reviewed for their content and thematic analysis of race. Each article used in the analysis is listed in Appendix A. In addition, three articles – one in each magazine - was identified for a social linguistic analysis of how race is discussed in each article in terms of power and resistance language, and how each reflects the portrayal of Blackness.

Articles for this study were drawn from those published between January 1, 2014 and May 31, 2014 in the online magazines. The first ten articles that fit the criteria from each magazine were selected for analysis. The step-by-step process was as follows:

- 1.) (Using Internet search) Does this article mention race?
2. Is race the central focus of the article?
3. Is Blackness or issues concerned with Blackness discussed in the article at any point?
- 3.) Is this article within the time frame of January 1, 2014 and May 31, 2014?
- 4.) Gather 10 articles that have met all criteria from each of the three sites.

The articles taken from the three different magazines were analyzed thematically. The presence of themes throughout the review of the collection were counted and charted to

represent the quantitative analysis of the thirty articles reviewed. Beyond using the CDMA however, three representative articles were further analyzed using a social linguistic approach to discourse analysis. The process of selection for choosing three articles will involve the following criteria:

- 1.) Does the article contain both power and resistance language?
- 2.) Does the article have information that is nuanced in the discussion of Blackness and Black issues?
- 3.) Can this article easily be used as a content analysis example? Specifically, would this article provide enough themes that are discussed in the first analysis?
- 4.) Does this article contain multiple themes gathered from the general content analysis of all the articles?
- 5.) Does this article offer critiques of racism and how we discuss race?

The social linguistic approach in this research was used to determine the extent to which the language portrays Black issues in popular media in the three most representative articles. The assessment of such language followed the same approach used in Phillips and Hardy (2002), which states that the socio linguistic approach “....examines specific examples of text and talk...Researchers focus on individual texts, broadly defined, relating them only marginally to the distal context. The goal of this work is to undertake a close reading of the text to provide insight into its organization and construction, and also...other phenomena” (p. 22). Meyers (2004) provides a useful example in her analysis of African-American women in the news, and through an intersectional lens, provides a specific example for discourse analysis of representation. Although she contextualizes her analysis in video as well as rhetoric, her findings

provided an example for how to analyze rhetoric and deduce and explain subsequent meanings and representations. This analysis also utilized the functional descriptions in Potter and Wetherell (1987) regarding what discourse *does* - how it functions, the images it creates, and the ideas it constructs and how those ideas are situated in culture.

Findings I: Reviewing Race In Digital Media Sites

The data analysis occurred in the websites of *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, and *Salon*. In this first part of analysis, I reviewed 30 articles identified by race-related topics through a content analysis, and analyzed the main themes discussed about race in these articles. Because of the varying themes across articles, and wanting to show the differences between websites Table 1 (p. 81) shows how many times a theme was mentioned and discussed in the ten articles reviewed in each magazine. (Note that topics may overlap in any one article so multiple themes were discussed in each.)

Analyzing the articles, it becomes apparent that there are some consistencies and prevalent themes throughout the different magazines, which are best explained by comparing and contrasting the most prominent themes.

Media event trigger

Six of the ten articles in *Salon* were directly a result of particular news media events that garnered national attention, which included a diversity of subjects from Black girls winning national debates, to particular media personalities leading specific discussions on race. Six articles in *Slate* were also prompted by media events, but interestingly *Slate*'s articles that were prompted by a media event, often also used them as an opportunity for a personal narrative that was connected to the focus of the story. So in that way it differentiated from *Salon* in that it took a personal approach to the media triggered event. Four of the ten articles analyzed in *The Atlantic* were prompted by media events, but it

was most apparent that *The Atlantic* used individuals who received media attention about a personal narrative story, which made it similar to Slate. This is to say that the media attention given was driven by an individual's story that captured the public, and oftentimes through the speed of digital media. So it was also not initially clear-cut deciphering differences between media-triggered events and otherwise, as there was overlap. However, the deciding factor became how the story began, and if the media event was consistently referenced in the piece. *Salon's* articles did this more consistently than both *Slate* and *The Atlantic*.

Article used confessional or personal narrative

Four articles in *Salon* took a more personal or confessional storytelling approach, which separates them from being triggered by a particular news event. The articles were very individual-centered even when they had contained some discussion of institutional aspects of racism.

These four *Slate* articles tended to have macro discussions about the production and consequences of race rhetoric and talk. The writers were expressing personal convictions on particular subject matters that are always present in the political and societal space. *The Atlantic* had six articles that were invested in a personal story narrative (rather than a media event). But again, *The Atlantic* often closely represented both media events and personal narratives in a way that was intertwined.

Article supported by academic references

Almost all the articles from *Slate* cited academic research to support their claims - which were all critiques of how we discuss race and racism in the public sphere. It was unique in this way from the other two magazines. Notably, *Slate* and *The Atlantic* referred to academic or scholarly work more often than *Salon* - serving to strengthen their arguments, even when the arguments were focused on personal narrative perspectives. In fact, one clear observation was that irrespective of what triggered the media event - a news event or a personal narrative, or whether racism was being discussed at a systematic or individual level, academic citations did not follow a specific pattern and were used across the spectrum of themes and perspectives.

Addressed White privilege

One clear theme throughout all three magazines was White privilege. Interestingly however, the concept was taken for granted in that it related to almost every facet of racism that was discussed throughout many of the articles in each magazine. But there was no article focused solely on White-privilege in all thirty reviewed, even when articles discussed it to an extent. However, half or over half of all the articles in all three magazines discussed it as a cause or an effect of the central theme of a story. When it was discussed, both *Salon* and *The Atlantic* tended to critique how White privilege presented itself in a modern day experience, often in less overt ways than the pre civil-rights era.

The Atlantic in more than one article contended that understanding White privilege became more difficult in an era of color blindness where people do not want to see color, and, therefore, do not want to make references involving color.

Articles mentioned non-Black POCs in discussion of racism with respect to the treatment of Blacks.

Given that I was looking for Blackness and African-American experiences with race and racism, it was unsurprising that the articles reviewed had limited perspectives on non-Black experiences with racism. However, the theme did emerge throughout the review of the articles in a way that revealed the binary perspective of racism. In *Salon*, all the articles but one, which mentioned Latinos, generally discussed racism as a Black-White problem, thus keeping with America's racial Black-White binary lens of race. Notably in discussing race, even where the Black-White binary tended to dominate the authors' analysis, there was at least some minimal discussion in *Slate* that went beyond solely discussing Blackness and Whiteness, but were inclusive of other minority groups' issues and experiences. *The Atlantic*, on the other hand, had almost no mention of non-Black POC experiences in any of its articles reviewed. It is likely that the searching specific POC groups might have made a difference in the result, but it is also telling that even without specifically searching for "Black" or "African-American" in the three publications, when searching for "race" or "racism," the discussion throughout all magazines is mostly centered on Blackness.

Article discussed code words or euphemism for racist talk/rhetoric

Five articles in *Salon* cited racial coding and code words in the context of how Black people are discussed and issues facing Black communities and cultures. It was noted by these articles that there is often a hidden racism in coded language that, when

deconstructed, is still embedded in White American's "othering" Black Americans and viewing Black American culture as inferior. In particular, one of the ways this manifests itself, as one article suggests, is blaming Black poverty on Black culture rather than on the history of Black oppression in the United States. Another article showed how words such as "thug" become euphemisms for more derogatory words that codify the Black body. *The Atlantic* also made the latter reference, while drawing attention to how media and social media culture makes the reproduction of certain words ubiquitous. Moreover, *The Atlantic* discussed the particular instances in which such words were used, noting that Black people were both demonized because of being in a lower social class, and they were perceived as "uppity" if they were in a considerably higher social class. Thus code words existed for Black people at various class levels. *Slate* acknowledged the existence of coded words but did not develop or exemplify their claims.

Article discussed differences in racial politics between Conservatives and Liberals

The ways in which each magazine analyzed ideological political differences was often similar, in that the analysis was intertwined with other themes but political ideological differences were explicit. It is worth noting too that at least half of all the articles in each magazine discussed these ideological differences.

All three magazines critiqued the political right for its avoidance of race discussion in general. A notable article in *Slate* used historical examination to discuss how the political left fails at discussions of racism, which was a critique that was consistent in all three magazines but especially in *Slate* and *The Atlantic*. Unlike many articles in all the analysis however, one *Slate* article took a prescriptive tone in this theme and offered

potential solutions for how to promote better dialogue about race that could potentially also aid in the reduction of racism in general. Six articles in *Salon* discussed ideological political differences between parties and political viewpoints, and *Salon* was the only magazine reviewed that discussed the racial politics and perspectives of society under Obama's government. The author examines how conservatives in particular have responded both in rhetoric and political participation and action to Obama's time in office. The author contends that there is resentment in the treatment of this Democratic president by Republicans that hasn't been witnessed before and has much to do with race.

The five *Atlantic* articles that discussed political ideological differences between Conservatives and Liberals tended to focus on how each side would view a particular aspect of racism such as poverty, for example. The critiques were then made on White Conservatives for seemingly being unable to understand the problem from a Black perspective. But the articles also critiqued White Liberals for hasty assumptions on Black experiences, or being unable to fully comprehend the complexity of Black experiences.

Article explored differences in perspective between people of different race/ethnicities

Throughout all the articles in *Slate*, there was a discussion of how perceptions of race differences cause racial discrimination, although the ways in which this discrimination manifested itself was constructed largely by the theme of each specific article. Throughout the articles, the rhetoric seemed to insinuate that the burden of how we discuss race didn't just fall on one group but all groups in society, and that the racial identity of a person significantly influences which aspects of race they are likely to focus on in the public space.

Many authors in *Salon* believed there was a disparity between how Whites viewed racism versus how Blacks viewed racism. The same is true for *The Atlantic* where four articles discussed the differences between Black and White perspectives did so in quite blatant ways that often amounted to suggesting that White people had blinders on in discussions about racism, particularly in seeing the complexities of Black experiences.

The consensus of the articles in *Salon* seems to be that racism is a very real problem in the country, but one in which the social locations of two groups - Whites and Blacks - often result in different perceptions of what constitutes racism and what does not. The authors argue that race is a political issue and one in which both White conservatives and White liberals are at fault in terms of how the politics of the issues are addressed. Moreover, *Salon* articles stated that Whites often compare today's racism with racism of the past, and thus believe things to be better. While Black Americans acknowledge improvement in racial equality, but the role of race still adversely affects them in ways that make it difficult to claim that race is insignificant to their lived experiences. The language that is used to address these disparities includes "white temper tantrums" and "hyperemotional white men" on one hand, and "black's expectation of racism" on the other. The lasting sense in the *Salon* articles is that race and racism manifest themselves in the culture and politics of American life in a way that White people often overlook, and Black people are hyperconscious of because of their experience in a system that they are a part of but in which they exist as outsiders, which is a manifestation of DuBois's double consciousness.

Articles discussed race in terms of gender and/or class

In *Slate*, there was a general critique that people *hoped* for racial equality without understanding the persistence of racial injustice, and its ability to be intersectional with other factors such as class, which work together to discriminate against individuals. In fact, one article discussed the relationship between class and race by citing that even when class is highlighted in social politics and injustice, class and race are inseparable. The article ultimately conveys that class structures are built into the institutions of racism, and therefore cannot be discussed in a colorblind context.

In *Salon*, gender and race were discussed in at least six of the ten articles in a way that integrates the latter as an inevitable part of the conversation. Black women were often written into the conversation as an expected victim of racial conversations, and also as people whose intersectionality would mean they would face a different racism from men. One article that discussed the military's decision to have new expectations for how Black women were to keep their hair, used words such as "policing" to describe the historical relationship between the Black body in the American imagination. Two articles also focused on the racism that Black men face - one juxtaposing the perception of Black men's demeanor and actions against that of White men. They concluded that there is a double standard because there is a confined space in which Black men can be seen as good citizens, while those restrictions do not apply to White men. The other article focused on the criminalization of Black men that White men do not face under the legal system, as well as the racism within America's prison system.

In *The Atlantic*, there was not only discussion of race and class in at least half the articles, but one article specifically discussed intersectionality in racism talk. The article

was focused on race and gender in terms of the technology gap but it did reiterate that positions of disadvantage should be considered in multiple contexts together and not just in individual contexts. In another article, intersectionality involved race and class in terms of narrative, and how these social locations of an individual will affect how they perceive their future. *The Atlantic* also made commentary that oftentimes, Black people, particularly those without class power, preferred to withdraw from public conversations entirely because their concerns fell on deaf ears. The perspective *The Atlantic's* discussion took often related back to White privilege as well.

Article discussed colorblindness

In five of ten articles in *Slate*, there is a strong critique of colorblindness, its political consequences, and how this phenomenon clouds White people's understanding of People of Color's lived experiences, the racism they encounter, and cultural moments and events that involve race as a whole. *The Atlantic* appears to rhetorically "call-out" colorblindness or ignorance of racism in less obvious ways, using synonyms or paraphrasing in such a way that uses less strong language than *Slate*, with the synonyms and phrases dependent on the article's particular focus. In this theme, *The Atlantic* is especially useful for showing the general pattern of all of the race articles studied, where there is a focus of comparing and contrasting issues concerning race, as well as racism, by looking at past times and arguing for how they have created the attitudes and perspectives in the present. But they also reiterate that these current articles are still situated in problematic rhetoric, as far as "progress" is concerned, and ultimately showcase how modern racism is notably covert through the adherence to colorblind

ideology. The five *Salon* articles that discussed colorblindness did so mostly in the context of White privilege, implying that the political system functions to hide White privilege through enforcing and reinforcing colorblindness with the use of coded words. One article, for example, discussed this relationship with the use of “inner city problems” by politicians, and demonstrated how colorblindness ultimately harms the public dialogue on race. In fact, the summary of all three magazines in the area of colorblindness was that it was, by and large, a negative ideology.

Particular sociopolitical and/or economic features of racism are discussed

In *Salon*'s articles that involved sociopolitical or economic discussions in particular, the central features involved racism in the areas of employment and achievement. The same was true for *The Atlantic* except that *The Atlantic* also referenced poverty and class as economic features that contribute to racism. That is to say, that *The Atlantic* discussed economic features and class as both a cause and consequence of racism. *Slate* had limited discussions on specific sociopolitical or economic features of racism, which was surprising considering its use of academic references. Many of the references were generalizations about class, or consisted of claims that were loosely tied to class, and were used to support an overall argument. But many of the references lacked specific examples to demonstrate this discrepancy in economic class, especially with respect to showing the relationship between class and race.

Racism discussed in individual or micro contexts

For over half of the articles reviewed (16), there was a close tie between the personal narratives being told about race and the discussion of individual interactions with *racism*. *Salon* and *The Atlantic* were particularly insistent on not ignoring individual instances of racism, a way of making “the personal, the political.” *Slate* discussed racism at the individual or micro context less than both *Salon* and *The Atlantic*, and *Slate’s* discussion often centered on where the responsibility lies for resolving racism in these contexts.

Racism discussed in systematic or institutional contexts

In *Slate*, the general tone of many articles critiqued society in particular areas of race and racism - in dating, economics, parenting, political participation, affirmative action, race dialogue, and media representation of Black people and other people of color. The articles reviewed discussed how there seemed to be disagreements with regard to whether societal structures were the cause, and therefore the solution, or whether it is the responsibility of individuals or small groups to equalize racial inequalities. One article for instance, suggested that an increase in Black politicians - as opposed to “Black personalities” - in the Republican Party, could potentially attract Black voters. While the discussion seemed to claim that there was a lack of diversity in the party and stated that the [Black] politicians tell the base of the party what it wants to hear when it concerns race, it was discussed as an isolated group problem that is limited to the Republican Party. This negated the potential of it being an institutional problem in which such racial inequalities and discrepancy in political participation could be solved at a larger, systematic level.

While there were articles in *The Atlantic* that discussed the importance of recognizing institutional racism, they also insisted on not negating individual examples. One article in particular discussed the need to recognize the system of racism alongside individual racists - that racism, the institution, cannot exist without racists. Given the focus on the theme of personal narratives, and how racism affects particular people in their lived experiences, it becomes plausible to view almost all *The Atlantic's* articles as deconstructing ideas about race that plague the popular cultural, social, and political sphere through the power of anecdotes and narrative. Anecdotes provide a way to lead the reader to understanding macro implications of racism through specific examples, which is something that neither *Slate* nor *Salon* did in the explicit way *The Atlantic* did. Again, this particular strategy reveals a different way the writers write from positions of resistance, as well as how they try to reveal insidious ways in which racism tends to manifest itself in everyday life in modern American culture. This is particularly evident when an article in *The Atlantic* discusses how a (rich) Black man was profiled in his own driveway because he “looked” like he didn’t belong. The officer in the interaction commits microaggressions such as assuming that he is trying to make extra money by clearing out the snow, rather than assuming that he owns the home. This microaggression or individual act of racism is then contextualized in the institutional problem of the assumptions made about Black people who may find themselves in wealthy spaces. *Salon* oftentimes provided legal contexts for its discussion on racism at an institutional level, and in so doing, had more complex discussions on this theme than both *Slate* and *The Atlantic*. One article for example, discussed the consequences of Michigan’s decision to ban affirmative action, and the Supreme Court’s handling of the decision, showed the

different ways in which systems either support or perpetuate racism for historically disadvantaged groups.

Discussion of the idea or existence of a post-racial America

While there was a critique in at least half the articles of the idea of a post-racial America in *Salon*, one article specifically discusses the seeming post-racial diversity taking place in media and popular culture, particularly with the advent of new TV shows and movies that showcase Black people, communities, and interests. The author, however, dismisses this phenomenon as not accurately representative of diversity but rather a case of cultural gentrification and argues that a post-racial lens of culture is not favorable.

Using historical examination, one article showed how, not only the political right, but also the political left fail at discussions of racism too. Unlike many articles in this analysis, this article takes a prescriptive tone and offers potential solutions for how to promote better dialogue about race that could aid in the reduction of racism in general.

The Atlantic often mentioned the idea of a post-race or post-racism era, but always as a pejorative. *The Atlantic*'s articles mainly discussed how the insistence on this era actually made race dialogue more difficult, especially for those whose lived experiences were anything but post-racial. *The Atlantic* in one article also related this ideology to White privilege explicitly, which was unique in the thirty articles reviewed. Although *Slate* only had three articles that discussed the ideology of post-racial America, they were in depth and provided arguments with examples, such as the economic status of Black people, as to why post-racial America doesn't exist. Most memorably, one article also suggested

that while post-racism is desirable; a post-race America shouldn't necessarily be a goal for the country.

Upon review, the most noticeable observation was that *Salon* and *The Atlantic* were more similar in themes than *Slate*, if only by a small margin. In examining all the themes and understanding the differences among the magazines, some important observations are possible. Like *Slate* and *Salon*, *The Atlantic* had a wealth of themes, but unlike them, it focused on the subtleties of racism in the twenty-first century in the context of a history that was blatantly racist. While some of the articles were contextualized in particular media events, such as films concerned with slavery, or public personnel being condemned for their outright racism, there are also personal stories that record a lived experience of racism.

The theme that stands out most in the collection of the ten articles reviewed from *The Atlantic* was the writers' willingness to confront outright racism, especially in situations where the public is largely aware of the racist incidences. Additionally, they identify and challenge a certain ignorance in the public discourse of race in terms of how prevalent it is in everyday situations in subtle ways. The rhetoric the writers used in discussing these observations is one that is critical and shows rhetorical resistance. How can rhetorical resistance be determined? In the context of this work, the literature reviewed in Zappen (2005) and Coleman (2010) offer critique on the historical understanding of racism by explaining how traditional media portrays race or racism, and then challenging these representations through argument. Based on the examination in the aforementioned literature, rhetorical resistance in this body of work can be described as rhetoric that

displays an interest in nuanced critique, as well as exposes elements of race dialogue that offer new descriptive and prescriptive narratives on racism. The latter in particular is important: That racism isn't just something that the author writes about. But rather from the context and words they choose, their tone and examples, the authors determine a need for a change. Altogether, this is writing for resistance.

The diversity of the themes in the articles in *Slate* made comparing the rhetoric for resistance and reproducing language quite difficult. *Slate* tended to offer more generalized rather than specific critique in the use of resistance language, even though it had the only article that had an objectively prescriptive and well-argued solution to ending racism in one context. Although many of the authors were coming from positions of resistance, there were examples of language and rhetoric that reproduced particular mainstream power structures. For example, one article discussed how White parents should raise their kids to think about race, and suggested that although both Black and White people shared in the discomfort, it was more understandable why White people wouldn't explain race to their children. From this claim, it can be inferred that White privilege in this area afforded them the liberties to not do so without it being seen as bad, whereas Black people were not afforded the same "understanding."

Salon did not take the resistance tone of *The Atlantic*, but it also was not as generally critical as *Slate*. It was somewhere in the middle in the context of rhetorical resistance but its personal narratives in particular provided some powerful aspects of resistance that were also visible in *The Atlantic*.

It was also clear throughout all the articles that race is something that both dominant groups and minority groups would rather ignore in terms of dialogue in the public sphere,

but for different reasons. What became a recurring theme in the articles is critique of how society defines racism itself, and the subsequent discussions that ensues because of that definition, and not just experiences or facets or factors of racism.

In terms of the rhetorical similarities among the articles, the writers insist that society/readers are often ignorant of these common racial or racist subtleties. This is helpful in determining whether the discourse is perpetuating or resisting traditional ways in which racism is discussed. Because the rhetoric appears to be pointing out the ignorance - such as when one article claims that the country denounces blatant racism but participates in “elegant racism” - it would appear that there is a hyperawareness about some of the language use. This reveals that the writer or publication is attempting to resist the “mainstream racism talk” in order to change or shape racism rhetoric to reflect a perspective of resistance.

The differences in the magazines sometimes occur arguably because of editorial expectations. Although all the sites are similar in readership, *Salon* was more likely than both *The Atlantic* and *Slate* to produce writing in the first person narrative. However, in the particular case of Blackness and racism, it seems that many of the articles, regardless of the magazine, had some level of personal narrative. Noticeably, *Slate* and *The Atlantic* referred to academic or scholarly work more often than *Salon*. This is consistent with *Salon*'s noticeable use of narrative in the subject matter, but perhaps also its editorial standard. Blackness cannot be discussed without references to injustices in society at any level. Perhaps it is telling of the construction within the society that Blackness “naturally” implies some level of suffering or what Piper (1992) once referred to as the “suffering test”. The suffering test argues that one is not “truly” Black unless they have encountered

pain or suffering because of their Blackness. Or perhaps, it can be argued that resistance work needs to take into consideration re-framing Blackness in a way that defines it by what it is, rather than by how it suffers or what it is not.

Without conducting comparative analysis to traditional media, it is difficult to assess how these findings thus far are unique to digital media. What is clear especially in consideration of Coleman (2010) and Pole (2005) is that there is clearly some shift, some transformation in the expression of inequalities experienced. The use of personal narratives depicts a way to center racial perspectives on the experiences and observations of ordinary individuals as opposed to public figures – which may be unique to digital media just by the sheer number of people with the capacity to express themselves or their observations.

One of the factors and features omitted from the articles' discussion of Blackness is the true diversity of Black experiences. Although the lack of complexity and diversity is critiqued at least once in all three magazines, and most consistently in *The Atlantic*, all three magazines fail to provide adequate or in-depth viewpoints that would complicate and improve the discussion of Blackness in its entirety. That is to say, Blackness is still simplified to experiences that are already relatively known within the American imagination. The articles also provided a pattern of discussing Blackness constructs from male perspectives unless female perspectives could provide support for an argument. Unless Black women were the subject or focus, the articles tended to use more male examples and were likely to discuss racism through the experiences of men in particular. This is consistent with Meyers (2004), which discusses the narrowed coverage of Black women and Black women's narratives in media. There was also almost no discussion on

Blackness and LGBTQ. But in thirty articles, the omission of any mention of LGBTQ issues shows that Blackness constructs are still being primarily viewed from straight or heterosexual perspectives. There was also a lack of personal narratives from poor Black Americans. Aside from race, privileged identities prevailed in the narratives throughout the articles.

How these popular media magazines write about racism, however, almost always links the impact of history to present day events. The themes in each magazine paid a great deal of attention to “what” we talk about when the public discourse is about racism and “how” racism is talked about whether or not particular events lead to discussions on race. In the next chapter, insights into the specific language used in articles that are representative of the general analysis provide further understanding of the social implications of the rhetoric of race dialogue in popular digital magazines.

Findings II: Social Linguistic Analysis for Representative Articles

An in-depth social linguistic approach to discourse analysis of particular articles was conducted. The following articles were selected for further analysis because they were representative examples from the thirty articles reviewed, and allowed a more in depth analysis of the most central findings from the first level analysis.

Article I: Barnes, B. (2014, January 24) *America's racial double standard: White Celebs are excused but blacks stars are thugs*. Retrieved from <http://www.salon.com>.

The article compares the treatment of famous Black people to famous White people in the face of social or legal misconduct. The article centered on Richard Sherman, a Seattle football player who gave an impassioned interview in an NFC Championship game proclaiming that he was the best and consequently received widespread backlash that included accusations of being a “thug.”

The author makes the claim that the portrayal of Black Americans is narrow in the imagination of the country, and that Black Americans must walk a fine line in which there is little room to be able to engage in negative actions without it being seen as “innate”. In particular, the author gives a series of examples that compares and contrasts the media and audience reaction when Black celebrities and non-celebrities do something that can be perceived as socially unacceptable versus when White celebrities and non-celebrities conduct themselves similarly. The article concludes that Black people, and most visibly, Black celebrities are not given the same depth and space in their performance of self, as White people, and in particular White celebrities.

“He yelled to millions watching in their living rooms about being the best and shutting down opposing receiver Michael Crabtree. However, following his interview, he somehow morphed from a football player who had just reached the pinnacle of sports achievement into a racial stereotype.

Suddenly he was “classless,” a “thug” from Compton, and any manner of other negative terms that one can substitute for the N-word. Sherman was no longer human, but a racist caricature.”

In these two paragraphs, the author is referring to Sherman’s performance in front of the cameras, and how his performance was received by the (White) American audience as being representative of Black behavior, as suggested by the use of the term “stereotype.” The author’s use, understanding, and critique of words such as *classless* and *thug* suggest that it is obvious words that may have otherwise been used to refer to a particular set of behaviors conducted by anybody, are being referenced in a way that is racialized, derogatory, and in the context, anti-Black. Taking note of that, the author is portraying an awareness of how ordinary language - words that are not specifically located in historically racialized contexts - can become so, given the transformative ways in which those words become associated with particular bodies. In this case, “thug” in particular, which the author makes reference to throughout the article, becomes synonymous with “non-respectable” Black bodies, or Black bodies performing “non-respectable” acts. In so doing, the critique shows awareness of nuanced ways in which language is used in racist talk, even when the language itself is not new.

“On the flip side, if a black person achieves something positive, the positive achievement is often dismissed as either underserved or the result of an innate gift the achiever can’t take credit for. Many people believe President Obama only got into Harvard because of affirmative action, and just as many believe he was only elected into office (twice, no less) because he is black. In sports, the success of white athletes is most often attributed to “smarts” and “hard work,” but the success of black athletes is often attributed to “natural ability” or “God-given” talent.”

This paragraph in particular deals with the opposite side of the small space Black representations are allowed under the limited constructions of a certain White gaze. Negative actions by Black people are considered innate. (And in the same vein because Whiteness is what Blackness isn't, White is assumed as innately "good.") But positive actions by Black people or particularly actions that might require particular characteristics of "good" (White) American citizenship - hard work, for example, are not seen as the reasons for achievement. Instead as the author's examples depict, there are always reasons provided for why a Black person may succeed that are not the result of facets of American citizenship, most notably, hard work.

That the author critiques this particular aspect of racism showcases racism as something that doesn't only exist in overtly negative portrayals. But rather it can also exist in "positive" portrayals that are manipulated in such a way that Black people are not necessarily responsible for those positive actions, but rather forces such as *nature* and *God are seen as the "cause."* The use of such language is important in unpacking the extent to which racism and anti-Blackness in American culture takes different forms.

"And Richard Sherman, the high school salutatorian who graduated from Stanford with a 3.9 GPA, has now been reduced to an uneducated unsportsmanlike "thug" in the American lexicon for giving a passionate interview that some people didn't like. Black hockey player Ray Emery was subjected to similar dismissiveness. When he was involved in a fight with fellow goalie Braden Holtby, he was widely called a "thug," a moniker never attributed to any of the dozens of white players who fight at nearly every hockey game."

Making direct comparisons between the actions of Black and White people, the description further shows that the standard set for behavior of Black people is not only narrow, but also again set at high standards that are not required of White people. In this

case, the “super person” racist expectations of Blackness are also raised in the piece, where the opposite side of Black people being inferior, is that they are superhuman and capable of particular tasks or performances that are extraordinary. However, the mention of Sherman’s scholastic achievements portrays more than just background information that contradicts the claims that he might be a “thug.” One interpretation and indeed one critique of this particular sentence in the way it is constructed within the article is that Sherman is being portrayed as the “respectable Black person,” and based on that, should be distanced from such negative portrayals. Because intentions are unknown even when they might be deduced, one interpretation of stating Sherman’s achievements in this way may be the author giving in to a so-called respectability politics of Blackness.

Respectability politics refers to those whose class, educational background, and perhaps conformity to a particular set of attitudes, performances, and behaviors are deemed acceptable by White constructions of People of Color, particularly Black people. Without these scholastic achievements, would Sherman be unable to truly distance himself from the word “thug” and its cultural implications? By that token, it is entirely possible that the critique in this particular instance is problematic if the interpretation holds that Black people are only deemed worthy of being distanced from derogatory portrayals when they have proved, earned, or shown that they are “respectable” in the first place.

Particularly concerned with how Black people’s actions compare to White people’s, the author gives extreme examples of White people acting outside of the accepted cultural norms that already favor them because of White privilege. But even when acting outside of these norms, White people are given the benefit of the doubt. In one example, the author particularly refers to White Canadian artist Justin Bieber’s actions of

committing assault and drunk driving, yet he and the White, male identity is still protected from an entirely negative portrayal. In other words, other young White men will not inherit the same stereotype because of his actions. Unlike Richard Sherman, they will not become a caricature in a moment deemed unacceptable by Whiteness. White males are deemed individuals who do not wholly and entirely represent their race. In another example, the author cites the following:

*One example I like to point out is the MySpace post of a 17-year-old boy in 2008: I'm a f****n' redneck, but I live to play hockey. I like to go camping and hang out with the boys, do some fishing, shoot some s**t and just f****n' chillin' I guess. Ya f**k with me I'll kick ass.*

This boy had run-ins with the law when he was 16 and got his girlfriend pregnant by 17. Yet, just three weeks after posting this on his MySpace page, he walked out onto the national stage, was applauded at the Republican convention, and was held out to be an "All-American" role model (his name was Levi Johnston, by the way). He was on the cover of People and even got his own show. [Levi Johnston was engaged to Sarah Palin's daughter twice before they eventually broke it off.]

The author cites this particular example in order to showcase an instant of white privilege for ordinary White people - people who are not celebrities (at least initially in their own right) - who may engage in otherwise socially undesirable opinions or ideologies. This example contains swearing and the use of the term, *redneck*, a term that is at, least not favorable among middle-class, White Americans as a self-descriptor. But despite this lack of respectable behavior as determined by middle-class White America, the adverse effects of not behaving respectably do not affect White people in the way it does Black people.

The author then makes the argument that a Black teen could not write a similar post about his personal experience in such a manner without being called a "thug." Using the example of Trayvon Martin, who was killed by George Zimmerman, the author points

out that ordinarily Black people are not allowed to be complex, and certainly not “bad,” without consequences, some of which may result in death, as in Martin’s case, with little empathy from circles where the Black body has been deemed dangerous based on deemed past transgressions in the social imagination. The implications of this argument suggest that White Americans in their language use and self-description are also given more liberties than Black Americans, and with different social consequences.

The lasting critique in the piece is that America’s falsely claimed post-racial society gets caught in hypocrisy when “other” bodies and White bodies have to be discussed and compared, and in particular when Black bodies are the focus of discussion. The refusal to accept that race is the difference that makes a distinction in how some people are treated is essentially what the author is critiquing. Specifically, Black bodies are not looked upon with the same sympathies, on one hand, and the same dignities, on the other. The critiques of American society in its views on Blackness show in particular how the use of words becomes a sort of rhetorical violence that can be inflicted on the representations of Black Americans, as well as Black Americans themselves. In a sense then, the underlying implication of this piece is that the Black body becomes policed by the words and the portrayal produced by White American society and thoroughly steeped in the White gaze. The White gaze, refers to how Blackness is seen through the eyes of Whiteness that deems Blackness different, separate from, and less than Whiteness.

The author however, does not suggest systemic changes as a solution but rather believes that “hearts and minds” need to be changed. Perhaps in the individual sense, if the author is appealing to the emotions of individuals, then that solution makes sense. But

such an appeal then returns racism to being an individual problem, which contradicts much of her argument that reinforces that racism is a societal and systemic issue.

Overall, there is a lot of resistance language throughout the piece. There is also clearly a critique of the representation of Blackness, even if some of the language use and implications may be contrary to exposing the systemic negative constructions of Blackness.

Article II: Lithwick, D. (2014, April 24) *What We Talk About When We Talk About Talking About Race*. Retrieved from <http://www.slate.com>.

The initial question by the author implies immediately that race is something that is not comfortable enough a topic to simply discuss, without first seeking “permission.” Although appearing innocuous, like a rhetorical question, because the reader can only say yes or no by choosing to read article, it is telling of the social and cultural climate that the reader, the audience, and the citizen lives in - a climate in which talking about race is uncomfortable.

In the article, the political event that leads to the discussion of race is the Supreme Court decision in *Shuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*, in which the Supreme Court decided that the state of Michigan could ban affirmative action. While briefly addressing the problem of legalese in deconstructing actions that have racial consequences, the author believes that there is an underlying discussion at the heart of the question. A question that has to do with the dialogue of race and who is at liberty to

participate in such a dialogue that has an effect on millions of people's lives directly, and numerous more in more indirect social and cultural ways.

It's about a far bigger exchange, one that's been going on for centuries: a knotty, crucial conversation about how justices tasked with making decisions about equality and political processes can talk to each other about race, history, privilege, and life experience.

In her critique, the author deals directly with the reality that those in the highest American court - Supreme Court justices - are made to discuss race in a way that isn't just about social interactions like ordinarily people often do, but in ways that have easily observable and direct social consequences in the real world - such as in the case of affirmative action. She explains that some people who have a great deal of power are involved in public conversations that have a meaningful impact on people. And in the case of the justices, these conversations can create, negate, or destroy particular policies and the ways in which such policies are implemented. She points out that elite circles and power holders in society have conversations that are of a different nature than the general public. These conversations are arguably of greater importance in so far as they affect communities directly because of the potential consequences of policy decisions derived from these conversations.

The author uses Chief Justice Roberts' words prior to the case to depict his stance in that the Constitution in the modern world must be color-blind, and that race-based policy must be a thing of the past. The author juxtaposes this attitude against Justice Sonia Sotomayor who thinks of this approach as *regrettable*.

Then she goes on to poke at Roberts with a sharp stick: “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the Constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination.”

The author goes on to explain that such strong language by Sotomayor towards her colleague then results in a response that indicates that Roberts and colleagues on his side disagree with not only Sotomayor’s words but also the tone, the manner, and the attitude that she adopts while responding to this question of policy and race.

The author uses this strategy to highlight the theme of differences in political ideology about how Americans discuss race. Justice Roberts, who is White and male, is represented as the conservative in the article. (This is important even if the reader were not to know about his prior ideological political stance as a conservative.) Roberts is positioned by the author as conservative and wanting to adopt colorblindness as a means of dealing with race and policy. Justice Sotomayor, who is a Woman of Color, is positioned as taking on the attitude that history cannot be ignored and that there needs to be an open debate on race. On the one hand, the author uses Roberts’s position to show colorblindness as a way to deal with America’s racial past. And on the other hand, she uses Sotomayor’s view to show that the need to focus on race as part of experience and life in America is unavoidable for many.

Going into detail about Sotomayor’s viewpoint, the author reinforces that for those who see race as part of the experience, who cannot or will not leave it behind, race is a personal subject that simply can’t be rendered un-political just because it is personal.

Race matters,” she writes, “Race matters in part because of the long history of racial minorities being denied access to the political process. ... Race also matters because of

persistent racial inequality in society—inequality that cannot be ignored and that has produced stark socioeconomic disparities. And race matters for reasons that really are only skin deep, that cannot be discussed any other way, and that cannot be wished away. Race matters to a young man's view of society when he spends his teenage years watching others tense up as he passes, no matter the neighborhood where he grew up.

It is notable here that what the author captures in Sotomayor's piece is not only her experience of race but others' experience of race as well. And while the text of the author's piece goes on to give other examples, it is notable that the first example Sotomayor gives, as captured by the author, is one from the perspective of Black people, specifically Black men, referring to how people may subconsciously assume the potential to commit violence from the Black body. The author frames Robert's problem with race-based policy and his response to this narrative by Sotomayor negatively by highlighting that in Robert's perspective, race-based policy ultimately focuses on race so much that it actually might result in People of Color feeling more shame. Considering this in light of Sotomayor's claims for the need for race discussion, the author then critiques Roberts by suggesting that he is defensive towards her claims.

His defensiveness at having someone explaining the limits of his own understanding of racism is palpable. He feels that he has been called out, shamed, and silenced. It is not clear whether or not he understands that his horror at being condescended to, his opinion disregarded, is among the very experiences of racial injustice that Sotomayor is describing.

This paragraph makes clear that the author not only sides with Sotomayor's line of thinking, but perhaps from the overall example, is critiquing Robert's line of thinking and the thinking of those he represents – namely conservatives. Use of the words such as *called out, shamed, and silenced* are particularly important here because those are the

descriptions of those who often find themselves on the margins of society. So the author perhaps ironically uses these words to describe Robert's experience when Sotomayor responds to what is portrayed as his lack of knowledge of those who ordinarily experience these emotions regularly by virtue of their racially "othered" existence in the society. But perhaps most interestingly, the author uses Roberts and Sotomayor to showcase what happens when in public conversation, a political ideology of colorblindness interacts with an ideology of confronting race and racism, and how essentially the existence of one - colorblindness - becomes yet another example of racial inequalities that needs to be overcome. Because colorblindness ultimately limits and dismisses the understanding of race as an experience for non-Whites, it also reduces positive outcomes in racial dialogue (Simpson, 2008).

However, the author also notes the potential problems of Sotomayor's arguments by saying that they can be perceived as personal narratives, and, therefore, it would be unfair to demand that policy be based solely on personal experiences. In this way, the author rightly implies that race and the consequences of race including racism cannot just be understood from personal experiences, and therefore, do not just exist solely in individual interactions. But the author still forms a defense of Sotomayor and her position by making a comparison between the reception that she faces due to her positions on race versus Thurgood Marshall, who received a much more generous understanding in which race was allowed to shape his view. The author argues that in the case of Sotomayor, her experience and perspective have become a detriment. She provides possible explanations: That it might be the way Sotomayor specifically discusses race, that gender

may play a role here, or that a different time and a different mood in the court may be the reason Sotomayor and the political position she takes on race is challenged.

Or maybe, and I suspect this is it, they could hear him because he was a part of the era that the majority of the current court wants to relegate to history: Marshall argued Brown. But Brown solved racism! Maybe Marshall was allowed to talk about race because Marshall lived in a time the current justices still acknowledge was an era of “real” racism. Which in their view ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

In this paragraph, the author gets to the heart of the problem in racial dialogues in America and exposes multiple major themes uncovered in earlier content analysis of research: That in the first place, notions of racism are misunderstood, and depending on your political leanings, one might have a different understanding of what “actually constitutes racism.” Dialogue about race often seems to fail because of the different ways those political leanings address racism and decide what constitutes racism. In this paragraph, the author is identifying the tendency for conservatives to deem racism a thing of the past - which is why Marshall is heralded and Sotomayor is not. The idea that racism is over, versus the idea that it is something that has evolved, is brought to light in this particular analysis as a matter of political ideological differences. The problem of perspective is then transferred to the problem of legally defining what the “right” thing to do is when it comes to reading constitutional provisions of correcting or not correcting institutional mistakes.

But the fight over affirmative action is one thing. The fight over how the court gets to talk about race—who gets to announce that the time for open talk is over, and who gets to decide that a call for honesty is “shameful?”—well, that fissure may endure at the court for a very long time.

The crux of the analyses of this article's themes is summed up particularly well here. It also shows how the author takes an individual theme of affirmative action and implicates multiple themes in its discussion. The article shows how even in discussions of one aspect of race and racial policy, the entire system can be implicated. That is to say, institutional racism is just that – a system in which the facets of the system work together, not separately.

Overall, the social implications the author discusses are a systematic critique of racism, of the political differences that ultimately make discussions of race and racism a matter of ideology, and about why it matters *who* is talking about race and racism, and who gets to decide *what* is important in those discussions.

Article III: Barnes, B. (2014, April 14) *I Was Racially Profiled In My Own Driveway*
Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com>

The third article is called *I Was Profiled In My Own Driveway* and is from *The Atlantic*. It is a personal narrative from the author's experience with racism that began with a specific incident. The author is notable, in particular, because he is a former Major League Baseball player. He tells his experience of being racially profiled in his own home or rather, driveway, and the ensuing implications of race and racial politics that lead him to want to comment about race. From his encounter with the policeman who mistakes him for someone who does not belong in the neighborhood, the author begins to deconstruct his formations and ideologies about race, from his childhood, to his identity as a parent.

A police officer from West Hartford had pulled up across the street, exited his vehicle, and begun walking in my direction. I noted the strangeness of his being in Hartford—an entirely separate town with its own police force—so I thought he needed help. He approached me with purpose, and then, without any introduction or explanation he asked, “So, you trying to make a few extra bucks, shoveling people’s driveways around here?” All of my homeowner confidence suddenly seemed like an illusion.

The author describes that the neighborhood and areas where he lives are rarely policed. This fact is relevant to set the scene for what kind of neighborhood it is, or perhaps the kinds of people who live there: Well-to do people who do not need “policing.” Furthermore, the manner in which the police officer is described is notable because the officer clearly assumes that the person in question, in this case the author, is most likely up to no good. The question the police officer asks about the situation that he sees is also relevant because he does not ask an open-ended question, does not try to find out a possibility of events that may have resulted in a Black person shoveling snow in a driveway. What he does is make presuppositions in the question that he asks, and these presuppositions have arguably existed, prior to the encounter with the author. The presuppositions include: This (Black) man does not live here; this (Black) man is shoveling snow as a job for the true owner of the house; this (Black) man probably is doing this to make extra money because he is probably poor, etc. The presuppositions that he makes have to do with which bodies or what color of bodies belong in particular spaces - in this case Black bodies in upper-class, overtly White spaces that don’t need policing. This results in the author’s negative emotions about something that he ordinarily would have been proud of, something that contains with it a marker of success in the American imagination - ownership of a home in a nice neighborhood.

The author goes on to explain that being forthcoming about who he was - both his background as someone who came from a somewhat comfortable middle-class upbringing, a son of educated parents, educated himself in engineering, to being a formerly known athlete, and a best-selling author, would have been too easy a “card” to play. And it would also justify the police officer’s racist assumptions – that to be in such a space, he must “qualify.” The author consciously refuses to mention any of these things as he converses with the police officer, and informs him that he is in his own home. He notes that the police officer does leave after the interaction but without an apology. In the way the author describes the particular event, it can be argued that the author intentionally does not play the “respectability politics card” even when he had many accolades and aspects to his identity that could have countered the officer’s notions and constructions of him as a Black man shoveling snow off a driveway. The decision not to play respectability politics can be considered as an act of resistance because it reflects the author’s sensibilities of his right to be in any space as a Black person, and notably a space for rich (White) people, without having to explain himself.

The author then goes on to explain the decision to live in the particular part of town he chose:

But we settled on the capital city of Hartford for the cultural experience. Connecticut is one of the most polarized states in the country—as people simplistically put it, “poor black and brown cities surrounded by wealthy white suburbs.” Our decision was not based on the features advisors kept mentioning—shopping centers and malls, or nice homes and “good schools.” It was about a certain kind of civic responsibility and, quite frankly, about making sure our kids saw other people who looked like them.

Even though the author clearly is more concerned with race by use of the phrase, “saw people who looks like them,” in the description of the city, the author notes a particular

awareness of class and race intersecting in the manner consistent with the racial and class make-up of many American cities. But this paragraph gives insight into the particular politics and interests that the author holds in his decision to live in a place that is notable for being wealthy and White, but still close enough to those who are Black (and Brown) and poor, capturing a shared experience of race for his children. The concern for the kids is interesting given that his children, and the children “who look like them,” encountered in the city might share a racial identity, but will not necessarily share the same class experience. This brings into question to what extent class affects particular constructions of Blackness. The author seems to indicate that by his decision to live where he does, that in spite of class, there will be a shared experience that his kids would likely benefit from by being in close proximity to people who have a shared racial identity. (The author does not state if his children will attend the same school as “those who look like them” from the inner city, but given the description of his class, one can deduce that it is unlikely.) But this mention of a shared racial identity indicates that even when class may complicate constructions of Blackness, especially if one is in the middle or upper class economically and socially, class does not “protect” one from potential negative experiences and consequences of Blackness.

After his encounter with the police officer, the author’s wife sends an email to the governor, and several staff and officials of the city followed up on the interaction. The author explains the incident to all the people that he had at his disposal, who were willing to help, willing to ensure that the wrong that was done to him was made right. But then having evaluated the scenario, the author also realizes that there are deeper dynamics at work that went beyond the incident.

If I hadn't been careful and deferential—if I'd expressed any kind of justifiable outrage—I couldn't have been sure of the officer's next question, or his next move. But the problem went even deeper than that. I found myself thinking of the many times I had hired a man who looked like me to shovel my driveway. Would the officer have been any more justified in questioning that man without offering an explanation?

Interestingly, the author shows that his restraint had been calculated in the particular context of a Black man dealing with a White police officer. He had chosen to take a certain kind of high road, if you will, or at least the road that had the least likelihood of physical threat to him. Perhaps it was out of awareness of the implications of someone like himself reacting “badly” to such an incident or perhaps out of experience of living in a Black male body in America, the author is aware that he chose his words and actions and lack of action carefully. The author doesn't explain *why*, but given his awareness of the constructions of his racial identity, the prior mentioned reasons might offer some insights. Consider also the example the author puts forth of whether or not the police officer would have been more justified in asking another Black person who might not have been the owner of the house in this particular scenario. The use of this example adds a layer of complexity to the author's overall narrative on the experience, as well as to the complicated ways in which racism manifests in the Black experience. But the example is important because the layer shows the unceasing reality of the double consciousness of being Black in the United States, where a race lens cannot be avoided; and where the reasons for a particular action may or may not be racism. But the author positions the hypothetical example not to claim that it would or would not have been racist, but rather to demonstrate that for many Black people, that is something they *might* have to consider.

The author goes on to explain that despite not having the (White) privilege that would allow him to not experience incidents such as the one he faced, he acknowledges that his

experiences are not the worst. Beyond that, he recognizes that his class does protect him from some of the more harsh experiences of racism that Black people face at lower income levels. He also explains the conclusion that he reaches about what motivates incidences such as his:

In reaching out for understanding, I learned that there is a monumental wall separating these towns. It is built with the bricks of policy, barbed by racially charged anecdotes, and cemented by a fierce suburban protectionism that works to safeguard a certain way of life.

What the author does here in his choice of words and their social implications, is use his individual story of racism to make a larger claim about how his story fits into the larger discussion of institutional racism. Particularly referring to policy, the author showcases how the socially constructed differences of race and class have resulted in differences in perspectives and experiences that poor and Black people have, in comparison to rich and White people, and how these differences are reinforced by policy. He argues that this policy more than likely comes from a place of White perceptions and fear – an irrational fear of what would happen if Black people, especially poor Black people, were to “endanger” rich White communities by entering them. The argument the author makes also shows an understanding of the racism that is constituted in the very existence of suburbs in American cities. The individual narrative of the author’s home ownership and racial experience as a Black person in the United States who encounters racism in a “nice” neighborhood exemplifies that certain spaces – suburbs in this case – are White in the American imagination. His Blackness in such a space, despite class, excludes him from being normal in that space. This narrative is not unique to him and is relatable to a communal narrative.

The major synthesis of this piece is that racial profiling, while an individual experience, is not limited to one individual's experience but rather it can serve to highlight the problems that occur from an institutionally racist society, in which the police as an institution in and of itself reinforce racist practices. The author's experience in the encounter and subsequent thoughts after the encounter occur largely because he is aware of the system. But so does the police officer's experience, according to the author, and in a way that is different from the author who is the victim of racial profiling. This is to say, according to the author, that the police officer's assumptions and actions do not exist in a vacuum. The police officer's assumptions and actions are not separate from the racist preconceptions he grows up with, but rather they are born of a system that he grew up in, and are certainly part and parcel of the institution that he works in, which reinforces White supremacy in its treatment of Black bodies. This is not to give the police officer a "pass" on racism, but rather to show how his individual act is also an institutional act.

In discussing themes of privilege, differences in perspectives, the difference between micro and macro interactions of racism, the author presents the argument for a potential change in policy. In the description of the incident and through the use of particular rhetoric, the author shows how such changes are needed because of the personal consequences and social consequences that persist without change. The critique of this narrative, however, would be whether policy changes could reconstruct or reframe Blackness if there is policy change without societal reflection - personally and communally.

Discussion and Conclusion

In analyzing how Blackness is discussed in popular media online, both noteworthy observations and unique inferences can be made when contextualized in the cultural discussion and understanding of Blackness overall. Van Cuilenburg (1999) discussed whether and how minority voices are present. The current analysis of the digital media sites finds that Blackness is discussed in ways that often involve personal narrative or commentary on individual narratives that have to do with shared experiences that are unique to what is culturally known as “the Black experience.” Representations of Blackness in this body of work are very much situated in the lived experiences of individuals as well as African-American communities in ways that are not necessarily limited to digital media, however. The experiences being discussed or how “we” are talking about Blackness in digital media transcends the medium. Stories of Blackness are similar in these online magazines to the depiction of white privilege in Simpson (2008) and the discussions in McPherson and Shelby (2004) of how Blackness still undergoes a social suffering both in terms of how people live in Black bodies and how it is still defined, though perhaps more accessible to larger audiences in the digital age. Consider the issues that were discussed in-depth in the three representative articles: racial profiling, affirmative action policy and the language surrounding it, how Black people are judged harsher for the same things that White people might do that might not be considered “respectable,” etc. Not only do these transcend the medium, they reinforce that conversations about Blackness entail suffering.

The most notable observation in this research is the centrality of the narrative in digital media. Ryan (2002) observes that whether narrative is affected by medium is a matter of interpretation – that some stories are fluid throughout all mediums while other stories are best told in specific media. The social linguistic analysis of the three articles illustrated that every article provided some personal narrative either by the author telling of their own personal experience or re-telling another’s personal experience. Consider, for example, the use of Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s reasoning in opposing Justice John Robert’s reasoning in a Michigan affirmative action ban. The author’s discussion noted that as a Woman of Color, she could attest to these things *personally – that is to say, her personal narrative was important according to the author - even when affirmative action is an institutional concern*. But it’s not just that narrative is being utilized in talking about Blackness or race and racism, the research shows a pattern in which the use of personal narrative is offered to make arguments about institutional and systemic racism. Perhaps then the digital space, despite all critiques about whether it equalizes and how it equalizes voice and representation, proves to be a place where the personal narrative becomes the instrument of systematic arguments against racism in a way that is easier for the average citizen to grasp. Using an example from one article that underwent an in-depth analysis, while the average citizen might not grasp how the police work to protect white supremacy through their policing of particular neighborhoods and particular bodies; the average citizen might understand that the example of a Black man being racially profiled in his driveway in a neighborhood that doesn’t otherwise get policed, is an act of racism. And that if this occurs not just to one, but to many persons of particular bodies, then there exists a pattern that is part of an unequal system. This doesn’t necessarily mean that

conversations about Blackness in digital media are better than elsewhere. But it does show attentiveness to the audience who may not be attune to complex understandings of racism, and, therefore, meaningful, relatable everyday examples are being used to explain everyday racism – individually and institutionally. The personal is not just becoming the political, but also the relatable, in these digital public commentaries.

Another clear finding in this research is the hyperawareness of language use by many of the authors who are writing about Blackness and race. The discussions that center Blackness in these popular digital media sites were not only paying attention to issues concerned with Blackness – such as inequality and representation, but there is also clear attentiveness to what people are saying, and how people are talking about Blackness. It attests to the claim by Guerrin (2003) that language use can get people to believe in racism. One of the articles further analyzed the use of coded language – pointing to how “thug” becomes a substitute for the “n” word. So digital commentaries about Blackness are carefully considering the consequences of not just what is discussed but how the language itself both perpetuates stereotypes and racism, and they are offering critique of that language.

Colorblindness is very much critiqued in these digital magazines overall. Throughout the articles where it was mentioned, it was seen as a way to negate conversations about Blackness and to perpetuate both racism and White supremacy. This finding directly correlates with the understanding of colorblindness in Simpson (2008), Neville et al. (2008), and Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, (2011) in which colorblindness is perceived as being harmful to racial equality and conversations about race. Notably, the digital magazine writers take the same stance as the scholars, but the scholars use much stronger

language in their critique of colorism. The language reviewed centers on how colorism entirely negates People of Color's experience and the like, whereas the scholars center their discussion on the ideology of colorblindness as mainly protecting White people from having to confront racism. Consequently, it can be argued that softer language may not communicate the true detriment of colorblind ideology.

While some of the articles do reproduce language that is problematic in terms of its portrayal of Blackness – as is the case with respectability politics for example - it is notable that much of the discussion on Blackness in digital media exemplifies resistance work, and not just reflections or discussions about issues that affect Black communities. This is especially visible in observing how many of the articles conclude. Despite few prescriptive suggestions for how to practically go about ending racism, there is still a call to put an end to racist systems or for personal and communal reflections that can contribute to ending racism.

Because Blackness cannot be discussed without mentioning Whiteness, it was significant that these articles take White privilege for granted, as a given. Although it was discussed in the articles, it was rarely at the center of conversation. It was either mentioned alongside a central theme or it was implied in the discussion. It can be argued that this may be because it is an already accepted part of race and Blackness conversations, and therefore it needn't be reiterated over and over again. Conversely, the failure to mention White privilege and the assumption that it already exists in race conversations *ipso facto*, may actually result in silence about White privilege and Whiteness – which is a tool of white supremacy. Shome (1996) argues that one of the tools of Whiteness is its subtleties and invisibilities. So a question that is not answered

but that is worth asking is whether avoiding talking about Whiteness when one discusses Blackness and race, amount to participating in constructs of Whiteness, and in particular its invisibility? Or does the lack of discussion in such cases reflect a choice to de-center Whiteness and focus on Blackness?

Several omissions are apparent from this analysis. First, discussions of Blackness are still focused on masculinity and men's experiences, particularly straight men's experiences. Women are specifically referenced in examples concerning women but not in examples of Blackness concerning people. This needs to be addressed promptly, and future research could look exclusively at how Black women's issues are discussed or compare how Black women's constructs of Blackness fit into Blackness narratives that are centered on men in the digital media space. Meyers (2004) was particularly concerned with the narrow narratives available for Black women's experiences and Baker (2008) feared that the lack of diversity in media at high level decision makers would result in inadequate representations. LGBTQ issues are also excluded from conversations in Blackness. Not one article mentioned sexual orientation and Blackness in the research. Arguably, Blackness and LGBTQ was not the focus of the topics, but that no LGBTQ issues were discussed in the articles reviewed shows that conversations of Blackness are failing in intersectionality by not discussing diversity within Blackness. Future research should study how LGBTQ and Blackness interact together in public conversations to address this omission.

It was also clear from the research that racism and race are centered on Blackness and Black people – in comparison to all People of Color. The digital media space has not transcended the Black-White dichotomy. Again, because the research was centered on

Blackness, this may not be a justifiable claim. But in the original content analysis, searching for “race” led to articles that centered on Blackness. Another area of future research would be to conduct comparative research on articles on racism that center on Blackness versus non-Black People of Color to observe what exactly is happening, and whether the Black-White dichotomy has shifted, and if so, how it has shifted.

A limitation of the research was that it used 30 articles from three digital magazines with similar political leanings and audience. This may limit the findings in making the generalizations on how we’re talking about Blackness in progressive popular digital media sites targeted to a certain audience within the American public. For future research, it would be good to compare how different audiences are having conversations about Blackness, perhaps by looking at magazines with different political leanings and audiences. Another limitation of the research is that articles selected occurred within a five-month period, so the time frame was limited. A much larger time frame with more media events and occurrences might generate a different picture from these discussions overall. Similarly, a data set gathered overtime would also allow us to see if conversations about race are shifting. One possible suggestion is to make a comparison between traditional media of a particular time frame in the past, and digital media currently. For example, looking at traditional media during a period of time in the 1960’s civil rights movement and comparing it to digital media during “Black Lives Matter,” which is current, but can also be analyzed during a specific period of time.

Overall, discussions in digital media about Blackness are forcing us to re-think how to talk about Blackness in an age of a desire for post-racism. The problem, of course, is

that racial inequality still exists, and attentiveness to differences and the language being used to describe these differences, depend heavily on narratives of the individual.

Scholarship in race, in multiculturalism, and beyond, needs to examine the difference the digital medium has made in comparison to traditional media, but also ones it has failed to transcend such as the Black/White dichotomy and the focus on male and straight narratives in studying Blackness. The recognition that this problem persists in the digital space is a step in advocating for change and eventually equalizing the Internet as a space for equal voice and representation.

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Table 1: Race-related themes in Digital Magazines

| Theme | <i>Slate</i> | <i>Salon</i> | <i>The Atlantic</i> | Total |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Media event trigger | 6 | 6 | 4 | 14 |
| Confessional or personal narrative | 4 | 6 | 6 | 14 |
| Use of academic references. | 8 | 3 | 6 | 17 |
| White privilege | 4 | 6 | 6 | 18 |
| Non-Black Person of Color commentary on Blackness. | 4 | 2 | 0 | 6 |
| Code words/ euphemism for racist rhetoric | 2 | 5 | 5 | 12 |
| Conservatives and Liberals | 5 | 6 | 5 | 16 |
| Perspective differences between people of different race/ethnicities | 2 | 4 | 5 | 11 |
| Race in terms of gender and/or class | 6 | 3 | 4 | 13 |
| Colorblindness | 5 | 5 | 6 | 16 |
| Racism - specific socio-political and/or economic features | 2 | 4 | 4 | 10 |
| Racism - individual contexts. | 5 | 5 | 6 | 16 |
| Racism - institutional contexts. | 6 | 7 | 7 | 20 |
| Post-racial America | 3 | 5 | 6 | 14 |

Appendix A

Articles from The Atlantic:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/race-culture-and-poverty-the-path-forward/360081/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/unspoken-racial-tensions/362023/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/04/i-was-racially-profiled-in-my-own-driveway/360615/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/what-movies-about-slavery-teach-us-about-race-relations-today/282734/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/02/the-incoherent-backlashes-to-black-actors-playing-white-superheroes/283979/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/01/techs-gender-and-race-gap-starts-in-high-school/282966/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/unspoken-racial-tensions/362023/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/03/can-an-honest-conversation-about-race-be-inoffensive/274098/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/03/the-hazing-problem-at-black-fraternities/284452/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/black-pathology-and-the-closing-of-the-progressive-mind/284523/>

Articles from Salon:

[http://www.salon.com/2014/05/13/%E2%80%9Ci was hurt%E2%80%9D how white elite racism invaded a college debate championship/](http://www.salon.com/2014/05/13/%E2%80%9Ci%20was%20hurt%E2%80%9D%20how%20white%20elite%20racism%20invaded%20a%20college%20debate%20championship/)

http://www.salon.com/2014/05/09/white_privilege_101_heres_the_basic_lesson_paul_ryan_tal_fortgang_and_donald_sterling/

http://www.salon.com/2014/05/03/why_whites_dont_see_racism_reagan_democrats_are_stephen_colbert_democrats_now/

http://www.salon.com/2014/04/22/poor_black_people_dont_work_lessons_of_a_former_dope_dealer/

http://www.salon.com/2014/04/22/the_politics_of_my_black_hair_why_its_seen_with_skepticism_and_a_need_to_discipline/

http://www.salon.com/2014/01/24/americas_racial_double_standard_white_celebs_are_excused_but_black_stars_are_thugs/

http://www.salon.com/2014/03/14/legal_weeds_race_problem_white_men_get_rich_black_men_stay_in_prison_partner/

http://www.salon.com/2014/03/17/paul_ryans_race_flap_even_worse_than_it_looks/

http://www.salon.com/2014/04/01/the_despicable_rise_of_conservative_pranksters_race_baiting_conspiracy_theories_in_the_age_of_obama/

http://www.salon.com/2014/03/25/hollywoods_post_racial_mirage_how_pop_culture_got_gentrified/

Articles from Slate:

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/05/millennials_racism_and_mtv_poll_young_people_are_confused_about_bias_prejudice.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/the_kids/2014/03/teaching_tolerance_how_white_parents_should_talk_to_their_kids_about_race.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2014/05/troublesome_inheritance_critique_nicholas_wade_s_dated_assumptions_about.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/04/okcupid_and_race_is_it_racist_to_date_only_people_of_your_own_race.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/05/t_w_shannon_tim_scott_and_the_republican_party_s_black_politicians_the_gop.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2014/04/race_and_the_supreme_court_what_the_schuetz_decision_reveals_about_how.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/04/david_frum_conor_friedersdorf_and_class_based_affirmative_action_why_race.html

http://www.slate.com/articles/life/history/features/2014/the_liberal_failure_on_race/how_the_left_s_embrace_of_busing_hurt_the_cause_of_integration.html

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