

## Black Online Discourse, Part 2

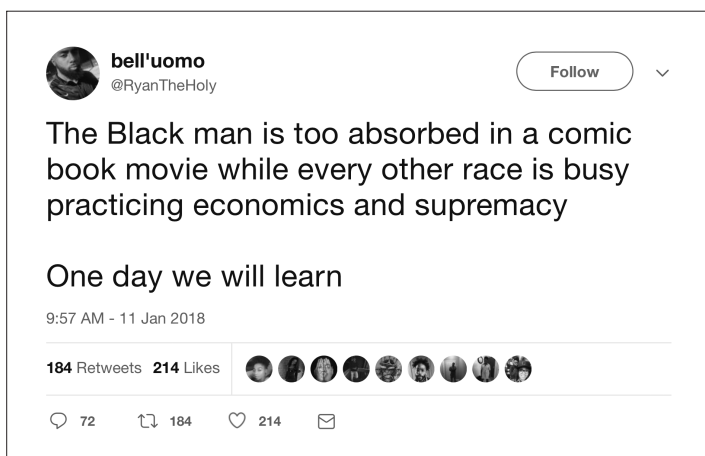
### *Respectability*

It is an error to think that being negro existentially (i.e., being a Black human) results from a particular set of morally determined social decisions and acts.

—Ronald Judy (1994, p. 230)

Who's more racist? Black people or white people? Black people. . . . You know why? Cause we hate Black people too! Everything white people don't like about Black people, Black people really don't like about Black people.

—Chris Rock



**Figure 5.1.** “Too absorbed.” Tweet by @RyanTheHoly, January 11, 2018. Screenshot by author.

## Despair and Dogma

In the previous chapter, I argued for ratchetry and racism as competing, carceral libidinal tensions overdetermining discourses of Black respectability. Racism coerces the expression of Black life by demanding the expenditure of libidinal energies to avoid danger or manage stress. Ratchetry is agentic and cathartic in practice, but many Black folk demur from ratchet practices because they wish to avoid reinforcing stereotypes of Black deviance held by the mainstream as well as by members of their own community. Higginbotham (1992) describes it better: “An enormous division between black people and white people on the ‘scale of humanity’; carnality as opposed to intellect and/or spirit; savagery as opposed to civilization; deviance as opposed to normality; promiscuity as opposed to [sexual] purity; passion as opposed to passionlessness” (p. 263).

Historically, respectability politics has sought to modify embodied, sensual, and “deviant” Black behaviors toward standards of middle-class whiteness, rendering it curiously racist in both its depictions of Black female deviance and its valorization of whiteness for political gain. It is worth considering that much of the libidinal energy powering respectability politics originates from denial: denial of prevailing stereotypes of Black women, denial of the libidinal energies of Black folk culture, and a curiously aware denial of the consequences of assimilating to white middle-class standards. From this perspective, what happens when respectability is performed in digital milieus?

The libidinal tensions powering Black online respectability can be understood as *despair*—despair over the perceived pathologies of Black morality intertwined with fears of being left behind in Western technoculture through “inappropriate” digital practice. It is difficult to argue against respectability politics as a positive ideology given the legal and economic gains that its storied proponents have fought for and won, but one must acknowledge how certain Black folk are “thrown under the bus” to achieve respectability’s gains. Like others (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1993; Hine, 1989; White, 2001; Morris, 2014), I consider Black respectability a carceral ideology, but I am reluctant to label its libidinal energy as such. Instead, I consider Black respectability to be *dogmatic*, legislating

the behavior of Black folk in the hopes of creating a “good,”<sup>1</sup> moral person who is subject to a “governmental habit of thought” (Judy, 1994).

Thus *dogmatic digital practice* describes Black online discourses that promote a specific set of moral virtues that are enacted in and around digital practice. These practices take place in digital spaces and across social media, couched in terms of “uplift” or, in more extreme variations, as “hotep” or “ashy.” They pathologize ratchet activity and unproductive digital behavior, with the goal of getting Black folk to assimilate to white Western technocultural norms and aesthetics. While dogmatic digital practice powers online Black respectability, its digital nature actually alienates respectability’s potential for social change.

### Black Respectability Politics: An Overview

To buttress these claims, I must first offer a criminally brief overview of respectability, which is here presented as shorthand for “Black respectability politics.” This section pulls from W. E. B. Du Bois’s work; I also draw on the writings of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Darlene Clark Hine, and Farah Jasmine Griffin. In writing about Black women’s struggle to garner and retain political and economic agency in the face of a “clearly hostile white, patriarchal, middle class America” (Hine, 1989, p. 916), these Black feminist scholars offer an intersectional perspective on gender, race, and respectability through their critiques of white supremacy and Black men’s misogyny, economic exploitation, and sexism.

Du Bois (1940) writes that the Black community is ever vigilant in policing itself, voicing in private spheres a “bitter inner criticism of Negroes directed in upon themselves” (p. 91) while remaining critical of the context in which such policing is necessary. From this perspective, drawing as it does on Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, Black respectability politics is the performance of a specific version of Black culture for two audiences: Blacks who should be “respectable” and whites who needed to be shown that Blacks could be respectable (Harris, 2003). Cohen (2004) argues that Black respectability politics polices, sanitizes, and hides nonconformist behaviors of certain members of African American communities and individuals, but Higginbotham

contests that even in doing so, it assumes a “fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance” (1997, p. 187).

Sanitation and hygiene, as markers of modern society, represented two of the most visceral sources of respectability’s technocultural libidinal tensions—especially for Black women. Educated, professional women expected that they (and other women) would have to renounce sexual expression to gain economic, reproductive, and sexual autonomy (Hine, 1989, p. 919) with the hope that their sacrifice would lead to increased social capital in Black and white communities. While these beliefs seemed to reinforce the civil ideal of marriage as the appropriate vessel for sexuality and reproduction, Morris (2014) notes that Black women found ways to subvert the carcerality of marriage. Similarly, Higginbotham, referencing Darlene Clark Hine’s work, mentions Black women’s “culture of dissemblance.” Referring to Black middle-class women’s intent to protect a sexual identity from the vicissitudes of white racial ideology, dissemblance was the practice of “reconstructing and representing their sexuality thru its absence—through silence, secrecy, and invisibility. In so doing, they sought to combat the pervasive negative images and stereotypes” (1992, p. 266).

Higginbotham draws a clear link between dissemblance and ongoing Black political movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., “race work”), which equate Black normality, individual success, and group progress with conformity to white middle-class models of gender roles and sexuality. She notes that reformers worry about the decreasing influence of the Black church as well as the rise of urban cosmopolitanism and consumer capitalism. Respectability politics emphasizes the reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as goals in themselves and as strategies for the betterment of American race relations (Higginbotham, 1997). These reforms include, but are not limited to, changes in dress codes, expressive culture, music, speech patterns, and public etiquette. Failure to conform to these politics of “respectability” was equated with deviance or pathology and correlated by Blacks and whites alike as the rationale for racial inequality and injustice.

## Respectability as Authority to Speak

Such a discursive rendering of race counters images of physical and psychological rupture with images of wholeness.

—Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992, p. 270)

To clarify the connection between respectability and digital practice, I would like to redirect this analysis toward respectability as the quest for authority to speak to the white American public sphere (Ward, 2004). Ward makes this argument with respect to the then burgeoning growth of radio as a broadcast medium, but it transfers well to the internet as a space for public discourse. Where once social movements appealed to sentiments of equality and human dignity, Black respectability's embrace of modernity—including the use of print, broadcast, and now digital media—offers “technical” fixes to gaining the franchise and economic parity. This strategy is undergirded by the proven path to gaining access to American social acceptance, identity, and enfranchisement: the deployment of antiblackness. This strategy works well for native-born poor whites and immigrant groups (Black and non-Black). In using radio, periodicals, newspapers, and now social media, Black respectability movements reinvented Blackness for the technical manifestations and representations needed for those media.

Unlike European and white American respectability movements, the Black community could not rely on the use of state power to enforce their norms (White, 2001). Thus Black respectability proponents warily employed private media resources—Black newspapers, periodicals, and radio—to promote their goals. Rhodes (2016) adds that after World War II, Black cinema “race movies” also provided representations of respectability to coerce Black folk into modernity as it was depicted on the silver screen. Discourses about Black respectability privatized the practice as individual behaviors in the service of a Black ideal. Even when they intersected with capitalism, respectability proponents were much more likely to acquiesce to capital's need for labor and service, policing Black bodies into becoming durable and servile workers. In this manner, Black respectability created a counterhegemonic discourse that reproduced white racial ideology's representations of Black culture (Griffin, 2000; Higginbotham, 1993).

## Assimilation, Abnegation, and Information

Suffrage, civil rights, and labor movements altered (but did not eliminate) racial and gender roles. Early modernity reified and commodified the “private sphere” introduced by bourgeois nationalism (White, 1990) while creating institutions that identified and controlled people. The introduction of information technologies expanded these institutional capacities, leading to “social reflexivity” (Giddens & Pierson, 1998, p. 115), or reflexive modernity, where the world is increasingly constituted by information rather than “pre-given modes of conduct,” and one must constantly reassess one’s relationship to and information about reality. When evaluating the role radio and televisual media played in airing Black political grievances against governmental, civil, and individual transgressions during the civil rights era, we can understand the reflexivity that was demanded by these new media as another way to enact Black culture: informational Blackness. That is, in the absence of physical bodies, this combination of information technologies and cultural content made possible the distribution and reception of Black culture in ways that were previously only possible in face-to-face settings, which were often clandestine in response to white domestic terrorism. I highlight the influence of radio, television, and film on the display and performance of Blackness during this era to excavate their technical and technocultural effects on the enactment and transmission of cultural identity and as a hermeneutic for understanding the influence of digital and networked technologies on Blackness in the present day.

In the enactment of informational Blackness, Black radio and television often reified the aims of respectability proponents. Middle-class Black professionals and elites invoked antiblackness to distance themselves from Black culture’s reputation as a “low-class undifferentiated mass” (Du Bois, 1940), distinguishing themselves as able interlocutors with modernity and with white American culture. Antiblackness takes on multiple aspects for Black elites; their political goal of Black community uplift ameliorates to an extent the two facets of antiblackness that I apply to informational Blackness here. The first aspect to consider is assimilation. By conforming to a specific set of white cultural norms, Black respectability proponents felt that an emphasis on “home training” and service-sector employment would demonstrate the capacity to

rationally address whites regarding the inequities confronting the Black community. To this end, they put into action assimilation discourses of technology as modernity, social control, and domination—surveillance, near-eugenic reproductive control, disparagement of libidinal folk culture, and techniques of personal and environmental hygiene to achieve their ends—ensuring that “formal technical rationality [turned] into material political rationality” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 10).

A second aspect of respectability’s antiblackness is abnegation—that is, the denial and disparagement of Black folk culture. Abnegationist beliefs were initially directed toward minstrelsy, popular culture artifacts, and media depicting stereotypes of lazy, immoral Blacks. But abnegation can also be understood as encompassing emergent Black cultural forms of jazz, ragtime, slang, dance halls, and other urban entertainments. Black respectability equated nonconformity and Black popular culture with the enablement of racist behavior *against* Blacks, in the process suturing the modern quality of “rationality” to race through privatized racist discourses (Higginbotham, 1993). Griffin (2000) cogently notes that respectability politics “fails to recognize the power of racism to enforce itself upon even the most respectable and well-behaved Black people” (p. 34). Thus middle-class Blacks measured their “modern” national identity in a similar way to whites: by deploying negative images of Black others to induce social control over Black culture.

Assimilation and abnegation undergirded performances of Black respectability on the radio in the first half of the twentieth century, pre-saging arguments made here about the internet and dogmatic digital practice. Spinelli (1996) argues that radio and the internet share some compelling characteristics, noting the transcendent, utopian early rhetorics promoting radio’s ability to shift the consideration of life possibilities from an everyday physical space to an “ethereal, magical one” (p. 3). The possibilities of advocating embodied concerns from a disembodied space held great appeal to institutions such as the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Johnson Publishing Company (i.e., *Ebony*, *Jet*). Many felt they could use radio’s virtual assembly and geographic reach to espouse assimilationist strategies for Black education and cultural aspirations.

Many historically Black colleges and universities used radio in its early days to promote assimilationist aims. Moreover, many Black

churches (particularly in the South) saw radio as an opportunity to minister to Black (and white) churchgoers (Ward, 2004, p. 92), deploying a “militant gradualism” to cautiously advance progressive aims. Ward notes that many of the programs developed under this rubric prized the Black exhibitions of standard American diction—and classical oratory, long a prerequisite of American education through the Second World War—over a distinctively Black vernacular style (p. 81). Black radio personalities who could speak standard English had greater opportunities in the segregated world of radio, where audiences couldn’t see their faces. Ward argues that this technocultural capacity reinforced the sense that assimilation and respectability were linked to upward social and economic mobility (p. 82).

From an abnegationist perspective, radio announcers and programs using a distinctively Black vernacular style—such as the hugely popular Amos ’n’ Andy and the breakthrough Black deejay Al Benson, who creatively manipulated and disassembled standard speech—were troublesome. Respectability proponents associated Benson’s verbal gymnastics (and the deejays who continued this new pattern of technocultural engagement) and Amos ’n’ Andy’s performance of rural, premodern, folk discourses as racial problematics that displayed the community’s inability to conform to modern standards of civil discourse and communicative practice. These attitudes flourished even as these vernacularly gifted radio personalities demonstrated qualities that were understood as status markers and social skills in Black communities—linguistic fluidity, sharp wordplay, and communal, sensual discourses—in the course of demonstrating mastery over a modern communication service, medium, and form. Moreover, Black radio broadcasts led by these performers promoted the breakout of jazz, blues, and even gospel music as popular forms of American culture to white audiences. At one point, one educator even complained that political discussions of “Negro Rights” were subsumed by entertainment shows (Ward, 2004, p. 110).

### Digital Assimilation and Abnegation

Returning to the digital: online media provides a useful (if not powerful by conventional metrics) venue for Blacks to contest their exclusion



from the public sphere. For example, consider Black online responses to media representations of “looters” and “refugees” during the disastrous relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina. Concurrently, high rates of smartphone adoption and corresponding broadband access have led to greater visibility of the Black public sphere alongside a greater awareness of Black digital expertise in enacting online cultural and political activity. Thus information and communication technologies have aided in revealing the “appropriate” humanity of Black folk across electrical, electronic, and digital information networks, eschewing embodiment for distributed discourses about Black bodies. Moreover, these cases are considered the “best” Black cultural uses for information and computer technologies, as they align with the political and cultural goal of achieving recognition in American national culture.

While the assimilationist educational and political aims of respectability radio make for a compelling narrative of Black resistance using technology, it is just as important to consider the failure of abnegation strategies. Despite exhortations to “do better,” many more Black (and white) radio listeners tuned in to hear the Black music and entertainment that reformers felt demeaned Black culture by playing into stereotypes. Livingstone (2005) notes, “Private leisure is scrutinised and judged . . . for its potential or actual contribution to the public sphere” (p. 31). She questions whether audiences have a moral responsibility to critique and resist the problematic yet taken-for-granted assumptions of media messages (p. 30). Similarly, while the internet allows respectability proponents to disseminate their ideas to like-minded folk, it provides many more opportunities to experience, create, and enjoy content that rebels against the patriarchal, assimilationist aims of respectability politics. Thus even as communication technologies were harnessed by respectability proponents to promote hegemony and modernity, they had to also contend with communication technologies affording libidinal energies of pleasure, joy, pain, and catharsis for their audiences.

### Dogmatic Digital Practice

The Black community becomes the police in order to not give the police [state] any reason or cause to violate it.

—Ronald Judy (1994, p. 221)

Digital and social media exacerbate respectability's libidinal tendencies toward ideological control (Douglas, 2006) of information about Black aesthetics and culture while diminishing control over the culture itself. *Dogmatic* digital practice can be understood as coercive online discourses and practices (posting, publishing, etc.) that draw on concerns about inappropriate bodies. These discourses are occasionally also imbricated with concerns about inappropriate digital practices. From this perspective, one can argue that online respectability may be informationally fruitful and sometimes provocative in its exhortations for moral improvement and technocultural assimilation. However, its carceral and abnegationist perspectives are undermined by digital and social media, precipitating a loss of engagement with many of the people for whom respectability proponents ostensibly speak.

Despite the fervid attention dogmatic digital practice receives from Black media, which leads to high levels of engagement for their websites, its content rarely achieves the virality of ratchet or reflexive digital practice. This can be attributed to a number of factors, one being that dogmas of Black respectability are often invoked by Black cult figures (Warner, forthcoming) with whom mainstream audiences have little or no familiarity (e.g., Michael Baisden, Tariq Nasheed).<sup>2</sup> In addition, dogmatic digital practitioners operate in an infosphere that is saturated with white racial ideologies of Black pathology; their only value to the twenty-four-hour information cycle is their use of racial affinity to warrant the white coercion of Black bodies. While some dogmatic digital content is picked up and amplified by white conservative and alt-right personalities, pundits, and internet and social media commenters, these contexts and personalities reify white supremacy instead of Black communal unity.

Where ratchetry and reflexivity are dialectical alternatives to white racial imaginaries of Blackness, respectability can be understood as an inability to perceive Blackness outside of the confines of modernity, whiteness, and capitalism—that is, as a failure of imagination. It is the ratification of Black life as social death spoken from Black faces. From this perspective, it is easy to see why dogmatic digital practice does not directly respond to white racism online; its preferred discourse is antiblackness, or the chastisement and discipline of Black bodies and

Black digital practices. Moreover, given that mainstream online milieus had little need for additional antiblack content during and after Barack Obama's presidency, the memetic dogmas of respectability do not cause the same stir as the other Black libidinal digital practices.

### Inappropriate Tech and Respectability

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, appropriate digital practice involves information and interface design, which must be efficient and productive. The information created and transmitted should be devoid of opinion (or rather, in alignment with a specific political-economic one) and easily digestible to audiences and users of a particular culture. For example, my line brother once confided that he allows his children to use their smartphones to send text messages *if and only if* they compose their messages using complete sentences, correct punctuation and capitalization, and no slang. He was apprehensive that the brevity and informality of short-message services (SMS) would corrupt his children's ability to write term papers, essays, and other necessary productive texts.<sup>3</sup> His fears for his children's economic prospects coupled with his assimilation to white perceptions of Black technological deviance can be understood as dogmatic digital practice.

Assimilation and abnegation are present in dogmatic digital practice in forms that speak to the cultural mediation of information and communication technologies. For example, mobile technologies are often depicted as inappropriate digital artifacts, services, and content, providing warrants for online respectability discourses. Respectability discourses about mobile device use are abnegationist—that is, proponents argue against the smartphone's affordances of social connectivity, playful information use, and nonproductive communication because they see smartphones as encouraging the libidinal articulation of Black folk culture, intimacy, and embodiment. Thus dogmatic digital practice can be understood as a rebuke of ratchet digital practice, since ratchetry transgresses the norms of respectable behavior *and* appropriate digital practice. Dogmatic digital practice expresses anxieties about Black folks' morality; it sees the expression of inappropriate Blackness as evidence of an inability to assimilate to the modern, rationalist, capitalist desires of Western technoculture.

From an assimilationist perspective, digital divide discourse provides signposts toward a digital route to respectability. The 1996 Telecommunications Act's definition of *universal service* reshaped beliefs about information and communication service by legislating remedies for inequalities in telephone service, which was necessary at the time to access the nascent internet and World Wide Web. Cognizant of antiblackness as a rationale for telecommunication companies not fully deploying "plain old telephone service"<sup>4</sup> to Black communities, Black technologists, academics, and politicians were at the forefront of calls to "transcend" the digital divide. They argued that a lack of access to the burgeoning information society signaled a loss of economic opportunity for Black communities even as the digital divide traded on images of poor illiterate Blacks. Thus Black respectability politics is often driven by the desire to make Black folk *modern* despite (or perhaps because of) the assimilationist equivalence of modernity with white middle-class norms. Giddens and Pierson (1998) argue that modernity is often invoked to discipline folkways, embodiment, and sensual aesthetics. Although Black activists and elites did not have control of mainstream institutions, communication technologies, or popular culture, they used the available discourses and technologies—the church, the Black press, Black cinema, and Black radio—to articulate modernity as encapsulated by the cultural and social ideologies of that era.

Similarly, dogmatic digital practitioners do not have control of modern "technologies of power" (i.e., twenty-four-hour cable news networks, telecom providers, and technology companies). As digital practitioners, they use the subversive technologies at hand—social networks, memetic content—to enact and perform modernity. By comparison, Black Lives Matter's online activism draws energy from Black Twitter's reflexive and ratchet digital practices. Even (or perhaps because) while doing so, these activists are accused of not practicing embodied politics—Gladwell's (2010) critique of them "not having boots on the ground" comes to mind—at the same time garnering accusations of slacktivism (Christensen, 2011). Still, Black Lives Matter is more evocative of political resistance than dogmatic digital practice simply based on online metrics of participation. Dogmatic digital practice will *never* be understood as liberatory online activism; its antiblack exhortations and patriarchal

misogyny reduce its libidinal power over those who are already empowered by the medium.

To its credit, Black respectability politics is ethically and politically subversive in its discursive reclamation of Black bodies from the violence of the white racial frame, using social-scientific discourses to chivvy Black folk along. Unfortunately, dogmatic digital practice lacks the subversive nature and stature of historical respectability politics due to the digital's means of media production and dissemination. Instead of relying on historically significant Black institutions (e.g., the church and education) and their means of coercing moral behavior, dogmatic digital practice trades on social network visibility, affinity networks, performance, and memes. Whereas historical respectability depended on the ethos of Black excellence (for good or for ill) as a warrant for cultural change, dogmatic digital practice is handicapped by Black folks' expanded access to and individualization of social media.

While social media can augment and amplify the pillars of Black respectability—celebrity and professional accomplishment (e.g., the Beyhive and Ta-Nehisi Coates)—its two-way performative nature abridges the moral *private* space that Black respectability once laid claim to. Where peccadilloes and misdeeds of Black icons were once only whispered about or discussed in local third places, social media and entertainment blogs encourage Black folk to comment openly about the behaviors of the Black elite using the same affordances, memes, and affinity networks used by dogmatic digital practitioners. Moreover, through this two-way performative discourse, dogmatic digital practice becomes nearly indistinguishable from color-blind and racist technological rhetorics in its embrace of embodied propriety *and* neoliberal notions of digital practice. This marks dogmatic digital practice—and modern respectability with it—as different from previous incarnations of respectability politics. The petit bourgeois, youth, queer folk, and other Black subcultures can speak back—publicly and vituperatively—to respectability proponents in ways that were unavailable to them even twenty years ago.

## Dogmatic Digital Practice: Slut Shaming versus Callout Culture

In the guise of respectability, Black pathos, or the epistemological standpoint of Black culture, is often framed as Black excellence but conflicting internal libidinal tensions can derail its engagement with issues that affect the community. An example of dogmatic digital practice in this vein can be found in the discourses of race, colorism, sexuality, and class generated by a social media post by a wealthy Black woman and the reactions it engendered around the Blackosphere. Let me introduce you to Ayesha Curry—professional chef, lifestyle blogger, television personality, and wife of two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Stephen Curry:

The Currys are the NBA's royal family. If I had to compare them to a real royal family, it would probably be The Royal Family, the Middletons. Just look at the parallels: royal dad (Steph); two cute, highly photogenic kids (Riley and Ryan); and the wife-mother-future queen, who keeps the photo firmly in place in the family scrapbook. Much like Kate Middleton's, Ayesha's job, at least according to a certain strain of people, is to excel at *wifedom*: look beautiful, produce heirs, be relatable in a basic sort of way while remaining engaging enough, especially on social media, to help support the narrative. That story is that Steph is rewriting the basketball rule book; he is a golden boy and a family man with a perfect wife and adorable kids. Ayesha was very good at that job, the best, probably. (Davis, 2016, para 11)

This description appeared on The Ringer, a sports culture website led by veteran sportswriter and ESPN personality Bill Simmons. It is unmistakably a puff piece—but not in the service of enhancing the reader's understanding of an elite athlete's excellence or training regime. Instead, the superlatives fashion Curry's spouse as a "perfect wife" and are firmly rooted in American cultural beliefs of modern womanhood, focusing on a heteropatriarchal role for women and the nuclear family. The piece is also curiously absent of racial modifiers.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to this glowing description, on December 7, 2015, Ayesha Curry posted this tweet in figure 5.2:



**Figure 5.2.** “The good stuff.” Tweet by @ayeshacurry, December 5, 2015. Screen-shot by author.

Curry’s motherhood, her cooking show, and her low-profile demeanor encouraged Black men (and women!) to associate her with purity and faithfulness. Her public profile, reified by her social media postings, is a sterling enactment of the modern Black wife, mother, and entrepreneur. However, with this tweet, she became an avatar of Black respectability, a tool for pitting women against one another, and a shibboleth to chastise Black women to be used by more extreme respectability proponents (e.g., the hotepts).

This tweet is clearly Curry’s opinion, which she has every right to express. But it is also an encapsulation of Black respectability politics, and given the medium, it should be understood as dogmatic digital practice. In conversation with her followers, Curry promotes a personal style decision while subtly criticizing those who do not subscribe to her aesthetics. Earlier I argued that dogmatic digital practice is the libidinal expression of despair over the plight of the “unenlightened.” However, there are a number of considerations associated with this tweet that elevate Curry’s offhand musing to the level of respectability politics. For one, Curry has a public persona: her widely publicized “appropriate” relationship with an extremely popular and talented athlete as well as

her growing reputation as a lifestyle social media personality has led to a large following on Twitter and Instagram. Thus any social media utterance she makes will be publicly scrutinized and interpreted as an indicator of her ethos, regardless of her initial intent. Her contribution serves as a dog whistle for the tenets of respectability politics: sexual agency only for those with the appropriate partner and control over Black women's embodiment warranted by her marriage, her wealth, and her religious beliefs.

*Ebony* (Pickens, 2015) reported that Curry's post went viral over the next twenty-four hours as overlapping circles of Black Twitter users retweeted and liked to their affiliative networks. While Curry's social media following would ordinarily seem to be women of color and lifestyle aficionados, I believe the tweet's virality is due also the reception by the overlapping audiences of Black men, sports fandom, and sports websites covering NBA culture. Curry, who has 375,000 followers, even briefly became a national trending topic, with the post garnering approximately 72,000 retweets and nearly 100,000 likes. There are three types of responses (out of dozens) to be discussed here: those of Curry's supporters, those of Curry's detractors (both categories include Black online media outlets and social media commentators), and those of white mainstream media outlets. I begin with the mainstream media outlets, as they directly critique Black digital practice in ways that the Black-authored tweets and responses do not.

### *Sports and Black Culture*

I examined two types of media websites: sports culture websites and general interest websites. The sports culture sites are relevant to this inquiry because apart from their interest in the Currys, their commentary touches on appropriate social media use and Black digital practice. For example, Micah Peters (2015), writing for *USA Today's* sports subsite For the Win (FTW), considered Curry's tweet a "harmless, if unsolicited opinion." In response to the social media reaction Curry received, Peters suggested the "rules of Twitter":

- don't react
- never tweet (para. 3)



These anodynes were offered as counteractants to the reactions of “half of Twitter,” though Peters never mentions Black Twitter by name.<sup>6</sup> He does, however, implicitly recognize Black Twitter users’ command of the service’s affordances of attention and visibility. In turn, this admission plays into the long-standing American conception of Black hypervisibility-as-threat (Mowatt, French, & Malebranche, 2013), where more than three Black folk in any environment renders that setting as “overrun.” It also recalls an old chestnut my sociology professor offered about Black bodies in a formerly white space: “more than three is a crowd.” By this, my professor meant that the Black body is often hyper-visible when it is seen as impinging on a protected space or resource. While he was referring to housing desegregation, I believe this aphorism also applies to mainstream perceptions of Black Twitter (and Myspace before this; see also boyd, 2011). Despite composing only a small percentage of all online users, Black digital practices can signal certain previously “unmarked” spaces as Black due to digital and cultural signifiers of race.

Peters also references an internet phenomenon called the think piece. The term refers to long-form online writings that purport to be critical, intellectual responses to events; however, it is deployed in Peters’s article as a pejorative. Peters’s mention of think pieces highlights a number of considerations for this text:

- the distributed nature of Black digital practice
- the limitations of Twitter as a place for lengthy, nuanced conversations
- the perceived irrationality of utilizing the productive capacity and resources of information technology for a conversation about aesthetics and moral propriety

By *distributed*, I mean that people responded to Curry’s tweet in situ—online—in volume and intensity. The post was also embedded and discussed across a spectrum of Black-authored media, from media websites, to personal blogs, to Tumblr sites. Although I will not cover these additional spaces here, I mention them to highlight the multimodality and distribution of digital practices that Black folk engage in to articulate Black identity. The second point speaks to Twitter as a space where conversations are kindled but rarely explored in depth; this is simultaneously a strength and a weakness.

Respectability proponents' critique of information technology is illustrated through the third point: Twitter (more so than other social network services [SNS]) has long been considered as an irrational technology because it does not fit neatly into technoculture's productivity paradigms. Twitter's brevity and network affiliations strongly favor expressions of pathos, leading to charges that Twitter encourages a "mob mentality" among irrationally emotional users. When combined with racial beliefs about technology users, Black Twitter discourse becomes recast as a "mob mentality"; this concern is augmented by the perceived irrationality of Black embodied existence. While think pieces are often produced outside of Twitter, Peters's critique can be understood as a dismissal of Black rejections of dogmatic digital practice.

Over on another sports culture website, SportsGrid (part of the *Complex Magazine* web portal), Tanya Ray Fox (2015) discusses the cultural and gendered contributions of Twitter, offering additional examples of technically oriented dogmatic digital practice. Fox, who is white, begins her coverage of the internet's response to Ayesha Curry's tweet by praising Curry's marriage, financial stability, and children. She argues that Curry's post is "completely acceptable" and that the response to it is only "manufactured Twitter 'outrage.'" Fox further characterizes the response as originating from "a bunch of women [who] got their panties in a twist trying to defend something that wasn't under attack." Similar to Peters, Fox never explicitly references Black Twitter, but she links women, feminism, and "outraged Twitter" together.

Fox highlights a few of the more passionate rebuttals to Curry's tweet but dismisses them by saying, "Mrs. Curry is living the high-life right now and shes [*sic*] feeling herself." Of particular note for this analysis, Fox turns to "sensible Twitter" and features responses that she feels reflect appropriate internet usage. See figure 5.3 for one such embedded tweet:

This post ends by obliquely referencing the "keyboard warrior" (KW). An insult that is older than the World Wide Web, KWs are defined by their tendency to get involved in emotional, irrational online arguments; their addiction to being online; and their inappropriate use of technology (Brock, forthcoming). If this sounds familiar, that is because these charges have been leveled at "social justice warriors" as well. Moreover, both internet archetypes are considered to be insincere and attention-seeking. Thus we can understand Fox's embed of JayJazzi's



**Figure 5.3.** “She already sleep.” Tweet by @JayJazzi, December 5, 2015. Screenshot by author.

post (figure 5.3) as offering a double dose of social status checking, disciplining technical behavior, and dogmatic digital practice.

Social media represents a new, more immediate way for sports fans to engage with multimillionaire athletes and declare fandom. That sports websites would report on the social media activities of a player’s wife is reflective of ESPN’s influence and the demands of a twenty-four-hour news cycle, but there’s another aspect to this. Despite not being exclusively dedicated to reporting on Black celebrity culture, sports websites depict Black athletes as examples of American excellence and of Black deviance. Since Jack Johnson, Black sports figures have simultaneously represented the best of Black culture and the problematics of being Black in American culture. This can be seen in the deification of many such athletes in Black cultural outlets throughout the last century—some for their breaking of segregated color lines, some for their physical prowess, and some for their domination of their chosen sport. Black athleticism, then, has always involved an element of modernity and, because of their success in sport as a triumph over structural white racial ideology, of respectability.

Even still, some might see reporting on the social media activity of an athlete’s wife—even if the wife of a reigning NBA MVP—as a

diminishment of sports journalism in particular and journalistic credibility in general. Ayesha Curry's tweet was a banal moment involving someone who is arguably peripheral to the activities on the court. However, the involvement of Black Twitter—its networked, visible, cultural reproach *and* support—is the exigency that elevates Curry's tweets to reportable events for these sports websites.

This exigency allowed sportswriters to critique Black culture—in its guise as a social media public—rather than American sports culture, supporting my claim for respectability as a dogmatic digital practice. Black Twitter fails the respectability test, as it is critiqued for both its rambunctious digital practice as well as its reproach of Curry.

### *Black News and Entertainment*

When I looked to Black media websites to address the complexities of Black respectability in Ayesha Curry's tweet and in the online responses to it, I found both supportive and critical posts. I selected The Root, a Black cultural and news website owned by the Spanish-language media conglomerate Univision, as the exemplar for Black media, although other hybrid Black-owned media (*Ebony*, *Essence*) and online-only Black media (Hello Beautiful, Madame Noire, This Week in Blackness) also addressed the controversial tweet. My choice of the site is not accidental: The Root is currently the closest thing to a mainstream media Black-interest news outlet as is possible in today's media climate.

I mentioned the Black press as a disseminator of respectability politics through the “modernization” of Black folk earlier in this chapter. While outlets like the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *New York Amsterdam News* flourished throughout the twentieth century (Gallon, 2009), few Black newspapers were able to make the jump to the emerging World Wide Web. This was not necessarily a technical problem; many smaller news organizations struggled in the 1980s and 1990s as advertising and subscription revenues dried up. In my dissertation on Black online identity in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I found that online Black press coverage of the disaster was largely provided by radio personality Tom Joyner's BlackAmericaWeb. Black culture periodicals and newspapers had little to no online content at the time, largely because many still treated the web as a place that would

cannibalize existing audiences and thus reserved their news content for print editions.

The Root, originally founded in 2008 as a partnership between Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the *Washington Post*, neatly fits into my arguments for modernization and respectability in online spaces. It was initially pitched as a “Slate [online magazine] for Black readers” (Romanesko, 2008), or as the *New York Times* reported, “a more highbrow, political alternative to established magazines like *Ebony* and sites like BlackAmericaWeb.com and BlackVoices.com” (Pérez-Peña, 2008). The Root’s managing editor added that articles posted to the site would “not have an explicitly Black angle.” This informational and cultural positioning is significant; Gates’s previous online endeavor, *Africana.com*, grew out of his *Encyclopedia Africana* project as a respectable academic and cultural portal for Black folk. In keeping with Gates’s background and interests, at the time of its launch, The Root featured a genealogy section, which was intended to highlight its “serious” nature compared to other Black entertainment or cultural websites. This genealogy section in particular should be understood as a Black technocultural artifact, as the DNA testing provided by a Gates-owned company enacts race-as-technology (Chun, 2013) as an additional warrant for modern Blackness and identity (Nelson, 2016).

In the late 2000s, there were few online spaces in which Black internet users could find news speaking to their perspective. Gates’s previous online cultural venture, the web portal *Africana.com*, was sold to Time Warner in 2000 and incorporated into America Online (AOL). Joyner’s BlackAmericaWeb was still extant, as was radio personality Lee Bailey’s EURWeb<sup>7</sup> (both sites still operate as of this writing). BlackVoices, which at one point was funded by the Chicago-based *Tribune* company and operated as a Black news and entertainment portal, was sold back<sup>8</sup> to AOL in 2004 and subsequently deprecated. BlackVoices was resurrected in 2011 as part of the AOL-owned *Huffington Post*’s ethnic vertical, Voices. Despite Black Entertainment Television’s (BET’s) long history of web initiatives—who can forget MSBET?<sup>9</sup>—the network primarily used the internet as a second screen for its entertainment programming even during their brief heyday in the early 2000s as a news network featuring Tavis Smiley and Ed Gordon. The Grio, originally launched by NBC News in 2009, was purchased by an entertainment studio in

2016. BlackWeb 2.0, founded in 2007, is largely restricted to technology-industry news and web trends that are pertinent to Black culture.

The Root, meanwhile, following its purchase by Univision in 2016, now operates as a weblog presenting information on Black news and culture. This move, which entailed adding the site to the Gawker Media properties as well as the Kinja publishing platform, reshaped The Root into a space for long-form commentary and opinion pieces rather than news reporting. This restructuring also added an ethical journalistic dimension to the site's content, given Univision's purchase of Gawker Media following the troubling demise of that company at the hands of Peter Thiel and the subsequent removal of articles that could be considered offensive (or libelous). Thus The Root cannot engage in the aggressive journalistic style that Gawker was once known for; the critiques read as personal evocations rather than as articles from a Black journalism institution operating on the principles of the fourth estate. The website trades on an ethos of affront and upright cultural critique as a warrant for its content, recasting The Root's response to Ayesha Curry's tweet as an online invocation of Black individualism and respectability.<sup>10</sup>

Let me provide an example of The Root's shift from Black fourth-estate journalism to lifestyle and cultural-critique reporting. Since its genesis at the *Washington Post*, The Root sought to tap into and report on the growing Black presence in the STEM disciplines, in the tech industry, and on social media and the influence of Black social networks. This includes efforts like the feature "The Chatterati," which lists trending topics across various social networking services. They also publish The Root 100, an annual list of Black influencers between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five who "excel across multiple disciplines." The criteria considered for the award include celebrity, political or cultural achievements, media mentions, social media metrics, internet mentions, contributions to the Black community over the last twelve months, and a "mathematical formula to determine the substance of their work" (The Root, 2018). The list, as expected, is top heavy with celebrities, politicians, activists, and entrepreneurs. Respectability, by this assessment, becomes about putting on an appropriate performance of Black modernity that must be ratified by the instrumental measures of social media. I must, however, give The Root 100's list credit where credit is due: much of the lower half of the list is dominated by Black folk in various information

and new media industries. There the measure is not overdetermined by social media reach—many of the tech honorees have relatively low Twitter follower counts.<sup>11</sup> Instead, technical savvy and mastery of social media are the qualifying factors for their inclusion.

## Black Websites and Respectability

The Root articles examined for this chapter appear to fit the definition of think pieces. Earlier I noted that think pieces

- display the distributed nature of Black digital practice;
- highlight the limitations of Twitter as a place for lengthy, nuanced conversations; and
- demonstrate the perceived irrationality of utilizing the productive capacity and resources of information technology for a conversation about aesthetics and moral propriety.

Contributor Demetria Lucas D'Oyley (2015) voices support for Ayesha Curry's social media posts, arguing that those who were responding negatively were "adding in layers that weren't in Curry's original tweets." She continues, "There are no Hotep respectability politics telling women that if they cover up, they'll get what she has" (p. 2), which refers to an online faction of Black Twitter notorious for its misogynistic and patriarchal version of Black respectability. Arguing from an individualist perspective, D'Oyley glosses over Curry's digital practice. She asks, "Why are so many people acting as it's wrong for a woman *not* to put her whole body on display . . . are we really trying to argue that dressing with your ass and breasts out should be called 'classy,' too? Really?" (emphasis original).

D'Oyley continues by contextualizing Curry's tweet through Curry's conformity to respectability and dogmatic digital practice norms, arguing that her marriage gives her the right to opine about women's fashion ("what her husband likes") and that people on Twitter have no right to "twist her words"—here a vague reference to Twitter's potential for miscommunication through misinterpretation. She closes by wondering "if the real issue [is] . . . what Curry represents in our culture" (p. 2). This last point is key. D'Oyley writes,

[Ayesha Curry is] a young, black, happily married mom of two. She and her media-friendly, Christian husband project what some might think of as the perfect relationship. They're always posting goofy family videos of them loving on each other and the kids. She has something that a lot of people wish they had, and for that, some people have been looking for a reason not to like her. In some baffling way, they think that her recent set of tweets are a solid reason to rally against her and that doing so will hide their envy of her life. (p. 3)

Unmentioned is Curry's hustle as a media influencer, which is built on the digestible, respectable aspects of her personal life that D'Oyley valorizes. As an influencer, Curry's follower counts across her social media presence recursively serve as a validation of her ethos while also demonstrating her technical expertise. To a lesser extent, these social media metrics also serve as indicators of *Black digital virtue*—that is, an implicit marker of esteem, credibility, and ethos. D'Oyley neglected this aspect of Curry's digital practice in her argument for those critiquing Curry as envious and as without having those aspects of respectability in their own lives.

D'Oyley's colleague at The Root, Diana Ozemebhoya Eromosele (2015), provides a counterpoint to the Curry tweet and Twitter responses. She begins by referencing an earlier social media incident involving respectability politics. Black cult figure Tamera Mowry, a former child star and current respectability advocate, posted to Twitter about her desire to dress modestly while simultaneously criticizing rapper Nicki Minaj for her often revealing fashion choices. Eromosele also references Black digital virtue, implying that while social media users can own and express opinions, once they become influential, their engagement measures—follower counts and platform visibility—warrant a higher standard of discourse. She notes that Curry's tweet encouraged misogynistic and patriarchal elements of Black Twitter to rationalize Black woman bashing, particularly with respect to enforcing control over Black female sexuality and eroticism. Eromosele addresses Black digital practice by noting Twitter's affordance for distributive discourse, grounding her critique by embedding tweets that support her arguments. She highlights three feminist-leaning tweets to support



her argument about Curry's misplaced critique, closing the article with an admonition to Curry to refrain from passing judgment on others.

Both D'Oyley's and Eromosele's articles provide paratexts from which to examine dogmatic digital practice. Their presence on *The Root* constrains discursive possibilities for both authors. Given *The Root*'s position as an "appropriate" space for Black news and entertainment, it is not surprising that Eromosele and D'Oyley focus on moral propriety, female aesthetics, and social media etiquette. Both expand on the possible connotations and interpretations of Curry's tweet, lending an additional discursive layer to the original exigency. Finally, both articles practice dogmatic digital practice by chastising digital practitioners for their social media use.

I earlier categorized both articles as think pieces. As such, they are valuable examples of Black digital practice, offering insight into the influence of Black culture on Black online content. Institutional long-form analyses of Black culture from a Black cultural perspective are rare in mainstream media, so their publication on *The Root* signals a validation—at least for the purposes of abnegation—of Black social media activity. Moreover, posting these critiques of digital practice on a website that is more technically and culturally accessible to a wider audience is valuable for understanding the heterogeneity of Black digital literacies and Black online culture. This assertion is based on the premise that these digital pieces extend Twitter conversations to those who might not be as invested in the Twitter ecosystem, allowing non-Twitter users to also participate in the conversation. Indeed, Eromosele's article attracted more than one hundred comments, which further extended, interpreted, and deconstructed the author's points as well as Ayesha Curry's tweet. Thus despite the disdain Peters expresses for think pieces, I find that they are valuable elements of Black digital practice.

Finally, this approach shows that online cultural exigencies are not limited to the originating platform; in many ways, filter sites like *The Root*, *Madame Noir*, and the *Huffington Post* are the first spaces where the broader public can engage in the discourse. I mentioned in the previous section that expanding Black cultural conversations outside of the insular engagement of social media highlights the heterogeneity of the Black community, but simply publishing Black content to a Black

media site doesn't guarantee a robust conversation. Conversation and dialogue are touted as important features of the internet; pundits and academics argue that interactivity is key to information access and a robust public sphere. However, the comment sections where those dialogues could happen are a fraught endeavor in today's media environments; many large sites have disabled their comments thanks to inappropriate community behavior or pernicious bots and spamming by bad actors. Meanwhile, smaller sites face long-standing issues of discovery due to the massive amount of information available online, so the initial task of building a commentariat is difficult, and conversations are hard to sustain. The Root enjoyed—but never actually cultivated—a modest online commentariat while it was a standalone site. The site's move to Gawker's Kinja publishing platform, however, both removed comments that were posted prior to the move and introduced the authors to a more racially diverse setting.

*Meanwhile, over on Twitter . . .*

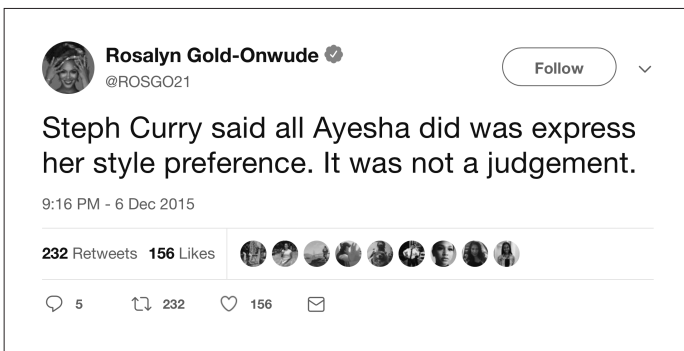
I mentioned earlier that Ayesha Curry is a social media influencer; as of this writing, her Twitter account has 765,000 followers, her Instagram account has 4,800,000 followers, and her official YouTube channel has 470,000 subscribers. Moreover, the tweet sparking this discussion of respectability politics and Black digital practice had 70,000 retweets and 93,000 favorites—a considerable body of data by any measure. While these numbers can be argued for as a measure of popularity, I argue that Curry's "influence" across these networks and platforms draws on her performance and evocation of respectability politics for Black audiences, which translates as civility, modesty, and adherence to patriarchal definitions of gender and sexuality—or appropriate behavior—for more mainstream viewers.

However, this chapter doesn't directly examine Curry's Twitter (or any other of the social networks she inhabits) posts or interviews. Instead, I've spent some time exploring how her discursive performance was received *outside* of the social networks she posts to. This is a methodological move; this text employs critical discourse analysis, where *discourse* includes utterances from multiple actors across various platforms,

apps, and networks. Method can also be seen as a discursive move: by focusing on reception rather than the original utterance, I show that the post's uptake by other Twitter users decenters Curry's authorial intent and vivifies alternative libidinal readings.

That said, Twitter provides its own discursive mediation of Black discourse, and this section addresses how Twitter illustrates and extends dogmatic digital practice. I am not examining seventy thousand retweets, though! In keeping with my framing of this exigency as a discourse operating across multiple media, I instead examine the tweets that were selected by FTW, SportsGrid, and The Root to illustrate the debate about aesthetics and sexuality. Twitter's mediation of dogmatic digital practice became clearer as I recovered the original tweets for archival purposes. The mainstream and Black cultural websites all made reference to the impassioned Twitter responses sparked by Curry's posts but did not have the capacity to provide examples. Here I begin with the tweets published by the Black writers on the sports-oriented websites.

For example, Peters's (2015) article on FTW embeds three decidedly banal tweets (figures 5.4–5.6) from a California Sports Network reporter recounting Steph Curry's opinion about his wife's Twitter activity: These tweets are not in and of themselves products of Black Twitter, however nebulously organized it may be. Properly considered, they are the responses that a famous Black athlete gave to a Black reporter—who may occasionally participate in Black Twitter practice—from a regional



**Figure 5.4.** “Steph said.” Tweet by @ROSGO21, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.



**Figure 5.5.** “Steph’s proud.” Tweet by @ROSGO21, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.



**Figure 5.6.** “Ayesha carries herself well.” Tweet by @ROSGO21, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.

sports network. These embedded tweets are completely in keeping with the purpose and ethos of “For the Win,” a *USA Today* online vertical focusing on sports entertainment; they are simultaneously news and culture artifacts that are relevant to the social domain of sport. They also illustrate that while Black Twitter may be the most visible Black community online, there are multiple Black subcommunities on Twitter that also draw on Black culture and commonplaces. This seems like a banal pronouncement, but in an era when Black Twitter has become nearly synonymous with Black digital practice, it is worth pointing out that Black digital practice on Twitter happens in multiple ways (see also Freelon, McIlwaine, & Clark, 2016).

Finally, even though these tweets are not content issued by a “certified” Black Twitter user,<sup>12</sup> they represent an evocation of dogmatic digital practice on Twitter. In particular, the third tweet quoting Steph Curry on the “negativity” of Black Twitter’s responses reads as a coercive move to silence online dissents rather than a husband’s defense of his spouse’s social media activity. Peters published this tweet to buttress his argument that one should avoid engaging with Black Twitter, which is an odd statement to issue from a sports website catering to sports fans—but not strange at all when viewed through the lens of Black respectability.

On SportsGrid, Tanya Ray Fox embedded a number of tweets punting to Ayesha Curry’s original post. Fox correctly categorizes these responses as “backlash” and adds that it was “predictably louder and more abundant” (para. 7). This implicit jab at Twitter’s facility for fostering unproductive, contentious conversations is in line with popular conceptions about Twitter’s role in diminishing online civility. I should point out that Fox never explicitly refers to Black Twitter; nevertheless, I consider her critiques of Twitter practice as a critique of Black Twitter digital practice. Her observations speak to my arguments for dogmatic digital practice as a strategy designed to discipline inappropriate interlocutors attempting to critique respectability. Fox embedded the tweets below (see figure 5.7) and characterized them as “women . . . using feminisim [*sic*] to back up their various gripes” (para. 8).

To reference more appropriate Twitter behavior, Fox also posts tweets originating from “sensible Twitter.” Earlier, I referenced the tweet she posted chastising those responding to Curry for spending too much time on the internet—a common technorational retort for those seeking to delegitimize emotional responses to online content. Twitter offers a unique context for the long-running archetype of the keyboard warrior (KW) / social justice warrior (SJW), which was also mentioned earlier. “Appropriate” digital discourse valorizes dispassionate, rational dialogue as the standard for online discussions of any sort. Dogmatic digital practice, as used by Fox, levies an intersectional critique against Black Twitter. By this I mean that the capacities of Twitter for immediate, dialogic interactivity are inveighed against as stifling reflexive, unemotional discourse. The false objectivism of normative internet discourse is tied to norms of whiteness, masculinity, and patriarchy and warranted by claims that “everyone knows” or “it’s common knowledge.”



**Figure 5.7.** “Don’t shame others.” Tweet by @KiranOpal, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.



**Figure 5.8.** “Better than?” Tweet by @felicianista, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.



**Figure 5.9.** “Consumer goods.” Tweet by @felicianista, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.

Moreover, Blackness is associated with a surfeit of passion and sexuality. Thus when nonwhites, women, queer folk, or other subcultures employ Twitter to dispute Curry’s respectability—often in detail with evidence, citations, and anecdotal experience—they are labeled as SJWs or, in this case, as making inappropriate Black responses.

Their arguments are rejected as being too emotional or, in an inversion of technical expertise, as a product of them spending too much time on the internet. It’s interesting to see this rationalist, technocultural

insult being levied at Curry's detractors, as it unintentionally ratifies the sentiments—rather than the practice—behind Curry's statement to normalize an elite opinion while delegitimizing responses using the same medium.

### *Black on Both Sides: Rebukes to Respectability*

As I wrote previously, social media's two-way discourse—not quite democratic but closer to the flat hierarchy that is common to third places as defined in Oldenburg's (1999) *The Great Good Place*—affords discursive agency to the targets of respectability's coercion. Contra Oldenburg, however, these discourses are not playful; instead, the libidinal tension that is most visible is reproach. I argue for *reproach* rather than *rebuttal* because these rebuttals of respectability ideology still seek to maintain Black community membership with respectability proponents. These reproaches expand the discourse space within which respectability proponents claim authority by recognizing the intersectionality and heterogeneity of Blackness. Moreover, they “pull the card” of respectability proponents by highlighting both problematic takes and the antiblackness of the proponents' discourse. Occasionally, online reproach blossoms into “cancel-culture initiatives,” where social media influencers and the like loudly proclaim their refusal to recognize folk promoting coercive respectability takes (e.g., Erykah Badu's argument that young women should dress modestly to avoid sexual harassment led many folk to argue she should be canceled). Cancel-culture initiatives could properly be considered a rebuke, but recent events on Twitter indicate that canceling folk on social media is ineffective (again referencing social media's two-way nature) and, in the end, just as carceral as respectability initiatives.

All social media, by definition, allows for direct and indirect interaction between interlocutors, but Twitter in particular lends itself best to both the promotion and diminution of respectability ideals. Unlike Facebook, where respectability posts like Curry's ferment in shared circles of subscribers, Twitter's public broadcast model allows unaffiliated others to chime in. These users can interject themselves into conversations by directly addressing the content (quote retweet) and the original poster (reply), offering skilled practitioners (and bad actors)



multiple opportunities to reauthor, divert, and reinvent topics and arguments. While Instagram's changes to its discourse mechanisms (e.g., expanded sharing mechanics and increased commenting space) have increased discursive space, its image-centric format tends to sharply delineate possibilities for wide-ranging conversations. Moreover, hashtags and trending topics accelerate conversational expansion—as well as the derailment or distillation of dialogue—by encouraging weak-tie engagement through likes, follows, and in- and out-platform sharing. Twitter's attention economy exposes a much wider audience to respectability posts than other social networking services in part because of these weak-tie affordances increasing the visibility—but importantly, not the reception—of respectability content. The same weak-tie connections also increase the vulnerability of respectability ideology by exposing it to possible dispute—if not outright antagonism.

To support these claims, I turn to the only examples of Twitter discourse that were offered by the Black cultural websites I investigated, as neither of The Root's think pieces included actual tweets. The first article examined, by Demetria Lucas D'Oyley, only summarizes Twitter users' reactions to Curry's tweets. Her interlocutor, Diana Ozemebhoya Eromosele, chooses a different route by embedding tweets by Twitter user felicianista to illustrate the problematics of Ayesha Curry's tweets (figures 5.8 and 5.9).

Both tweets highlight how informational Blackness deprecates respectability's command over media representations of appropriate Blackness. Felicianista contests Curry's moral and discursive authority to dictate “appropriate” Blackness, feminism, and sexuality. While it is entirely possible that Curry never saw her responses, the uptake by sites outside the Twittersphere indicates that felicianista's retorts made cogent points. Her measured responses are certainly more civil than other retorts to Curry's sentiments, which probably determined the inclusion of these tweets in Eromosele's piece.

### Black Memetic Subculture: Man Crush Monday and Woman Crush Wednesday

In the process of analyzing Curry's tweets, Fox also criticizes Black digital practice indirectly by embedding an additional set of tweets calling out

Black Twitter memetic subgroups. Internet memes have been an object of academic study for some time (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016), but there is surprisingly little research on race and internet memes. Fox calls out hashtag memes that are heavily employed by Black Twitter, such as Man Crush Monday (#MCM) and Woman Crush Wednesday (#WCW), among others, to critique the Black cultural impulses behind them. Fox's critique of this aspect of Black digital practice is of interest because of its deployment within a respectability—cultural and digital—context.

As digital practices, #MCM and #WCW can be understood as gendered displays of unrequited attraction and affection that are often but not always sexualized.<sup>13</sup> Florini (2019) notes that these hashtags “mark a space of play where heteronormative rules don't apply,” arguing that the practice allows many users to express same-sex affection without being seen as queer. The meme consists of an image paired with either a hashtag or a descriptive caption; posting the acronym provides practitioners an opportunity to share or reveal a person, personality, or celebrity that they find attractive. These memes are part of a larger digital cultural practice: Twitter users developed alliterative day references (e.g., #FollowFridays and #ThrowbackThursdays) to share something of interest with their followers and to the public. These references are *not* exclusive to Black Twitter or indeed to Twitter itself; they have also found purchase on Instagram and Pinterest.

Shifman (2013) describes internet memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (p. 367), but this definition lacks cultural specificity. When it comes to Black memetic culture, I propose that Black memetic digital practice invents, transforms, and signifies upon units of Black and mainstream culture to create a shared social and cultural experience.

This definition draws on Blackness as informational identity, sharing a number of commonalities with signifyin' discourse. Signifyin' practitioners have always taken great pride in using language for invention, transformation, and sharing of cultural phenomena and objects, a practice that predates internet culture. More specifically, signifyin', like Black life, is exquisitely social (Moten, 2013) and requires a participatory audience; these qualities transfer easily to social media sharing. While an astonishing number of internet memes originate from the

anonymous inventive chaos that is 4chan, Black memetic culture is often nearly as popular (e.g., the “Kermit sipping tea” image macro). In addition to being hilarious or pointed, it can be purposive, reflexive, and coercive, which reads differently from the “just for the lulz” of 4chan (Phillips, 2015; Milner, 2016).

Shifman proposes an analytic framework to evaluate the instigating phenomena of meme culture based on a schema of content, form, and stance—which also deserve some unpacking. She argues for *content* as “the ideas and ideologies” contained within the memetic text, whereas *form* is the “physical formulation of the message perceived through our senses” (p. 367). This arrangement doesn’t go far enough to emphasize *where* memes happen. Drawing on critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), I argue that the social, networked, and technical capacities of the platform on which a user chooses to display a meme should feature in any analysis of that meme. Moreover, technocultural belief is applicable to memes in both form and content, particularly with regard to the perceived utility of the content’s dissemination. Some online spaces are more conducive to the interplay and invention necessary for memetic culture by allowing participants to play with meaning, form, and reception of their memes.

Furthermore, Shifman urges researchers to consider imitation as the primary element to be observed, but this only makes sense if one gives primacy to the authorial intent of the original post. If we are to understand memes from the Black cultural signifyin’ tradition, I argue that the audience’s *reinterpretation* of the original content is the initial force driving memetic transmission. Invention is necessary to repurpose the meme-as-boundary object, referencing the original signification while repurposing it to fit into the kairotic moment. In an information landscape where sensemaking pulls from the encoding strategies one uses every day, one’s libidinal (re)imagining (Ott, 2004) of the possible meanings of online content will bring greater attention and appreciation than mere imitation. Thus invention should be prominent in meme analysis, rather than deducing what the original content might have been trying to promote.

Given the reproductive capacity of the digital, where multimedia content is constantly re-created in exact form across multiple platforms, the question for meme (and new media) researchers should be “Why

here?” While an exegesis of the original content is necessary, the analytic focus of memes should be on how they are repurposed—rather than simply imitated—to suit a different rhetorical exigency proposed by the interlocutor.

Shifman’s (2013) third framework dimension is *stance*, which she defines as the “information memes convey about their own communication,” focusing on how “addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers” (p. 367). This definition includes three additional aspects: participation structures, keying, and communicative function. Shifman’s conception of stance addresses a small part of my concerns about the technical dimensions of memetic content by ostensibly addressing who can participate and the tone and style of the address. These linguistic and communicative dimensions are important, but they do not address the social and cultural constraints on and affordances of discourse that stem from the online venue in which the meme is posted. This can be particularly important when the meme leaves behind the platform in which it is originally posted, bringing us back to the question “Why here?”

With all of the above in mind, figures 5.10 through 5.12 are screenshots of the tweets Fox posted. These tweets are signifyin’ upon memetic Twitter subcultures, and their indirect approach is part of the critique here. In my discussion of subcultures, I refer to Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark’s (2016) multimodal study of Black Twitter, in which they identify several “community hubs” of Twitter users that power Black Lives Matters’s information machine. One such was Young Black Twitter (YBT), whose practitioners often post about “topics and communication styles that appeal to Black youth: hip hop music, culturally relevant jokes, fashion, sex and relationship advice, and Black celebrities.” I bring this up because some of the subgroups identified by Fox overlap and expand on the interests expressed by Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark’s YBT community.

The tweets I selected reference the following:

- Black women promoting their pride in their male offspring and Black masculinity

- Black women pledging New Year's resolutions for affirmation
- Black women who have not been validated by social media attention but don't need it for self-affirmation

I link them to Black Twitter, Black culture, and to practices of targeting Black women because of the subject matter of the post in which they are embedded but more specifically because of how Black femininity



**Figure 5.10.** "My son is my MCM." Tweet by @spikereed, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.



**Figure 5.11.** "Got them heated." Tweet by @RedNationBlogga, December 6, 2015. Screenshot by author.



**Figure 5.12.** “Nobody’s WCW.” Tweet by @spikereed, December 6, 2015. Screen-shot by author.

is imbricated in Fox’s critique of digital practice. Despite their lack of African American vernacular, I am marking them as Black Twitter discourse (Brock, 2012) and as a variant of dogmatic digital practice because of their subject matter, their signifyin’ discourse style, the poster profiles, and their inclusion in the Ayesha Curry debate.

In addition to the “crush” callouts, the tweets Fox selected include mocking references to female self-help and self-affirmation devotees. These posts are examples of dogmatic digital practice because they rebuke certain Black digital practices—particularly, those of Black women. While these tweets do not reach the extremism of “Hotep Twitter,”<sup>14</sup> their masculinist and technorationalist perspectives are nonetheless dismissive of various digital feminist and womanist digital discourses, ostensibly in support of a Black woman. That they are being cited as examples of “sensible Twitter” offers additional support for my argument for the dogma of “appropriate” digital and cultural practice.

### Must Be Two Sides: Respectable Blacks as and versus Informational Blacks

Twitter and other social networking services enable Black community members to articulate a modern politics of respectability, utilizing digital means to police the on- and offline behaviors of Black folk. Not quite

cyberbullying, occasionally humorous, but in its fashion evocative of the statement the “personal is political,” Black Twitter’s dogmatic digital practice simultaneously illustrates, incites, and performs coercive behaviors. Although there has been little research on the actual effects of Black Twitter’s policing, I optimistically argue that it is a communitarian action rather than solely a punitive one. As such, Black Twitter’s policing is emblematic of a satellite public sphere. A growing number of researchers are now interested in examining Twitter’s surveillance capabilities and arguing for the platform as a coercive, invasive space, but I ask you to consider Twitter’s cultural capacity as a coercive force as well, mediated by Twitter’s specific affordances.