

From Barbershop to BlackPlanet: The Construction of *Hush Harbors* in Cyberspace

John Edward Campbell

God damn America, for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America, as long as she tries to act like she is God, and she is supreme. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent.

Reverend Jeremiah Wright

“Confusing God and Government,” April 13, 2003

In March of 2008 a media furor arose when excerpts from sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright were telecast to the general public by ABC News. Reverend Wright was the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, a historically black congregation to which then presidential-candidate Barack Obama belonged. The two most controversial sermons – “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall” delivered on September 16, 2001 and “Confusing God and Government” delivered on April 13, 2003 – expressed an anger towards the hypocrisies, injustices and betrayals of the American government seldom encountered in mainstream discussions; an anger that made many white audiences uncomfortable.

This media controversy first led Obama to deliver a speech entitled “A More Perfect Union” on March 18, 2008 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. In the speech, Obama sought to explain his relationship to Reverend Wright and contextualize the pastor’s words. However, when the media controversy again arose in

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late April of 2008, Obama ultimately repudiated himself from Wright and resigned his membership in Trinity United Church. What this media controversy clearly demonstrated was that the viability of Obama's candidacy for president was jeopardized by any public association of himself and this form of discourse which some conservative journalists characterized as "appeals to racial bitterness" (Steyn 2008).

However, Vorris Nunley, a scholar of African American studies, suggests there was much more going on here than simple "appeals to racial bitterness." For Nunley, what really sparked this media uproar which ultimately led Obama to disavow Reverend Wright was a form of culturally-specific discourse particular to the African-American community being presented out of context to mainstream audiences (Miller, 2009). Nunley identifies this discourse as "hush harbor rhetoric" and argues that this form of discourse was never intended to be introduced into the public sphere. Rather, this form of discussion was expected to be confined to the space of the hush harbor; a space, Nunley explains, that is not only "important to have a sense of the world that is grounded in your own communal histories," but also where "[w]hat is unsayable in the public sphere gets said" (as quoted in Miller, 2009, p. 30).

What is a hush harbor? According to Dara Byrne, the term *hush harbor* traditionally refers "the places where slaves gathered to participate in various aspects of public life, hidden, unnoticed, and especially inaudible to their white masters" (2008, p. 17). As Nunley explains, historically "African Americans have utilized camouflaged locations, hidden sites, and enclosed places as emancipatory cells where they can come in from the wilderness, untie their tongues, speak the unspoken, and sing their won songs to their own selves in their own communities" (2004, p. 223). Even in the new millennium,

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Nunley carefully points out, “quasi-public spaces such as beauty shops and barbershops provide safe spaces where Black folks affirm, share, and negotiate African American epistemologies and resist and subvert hegemonic Whiteness” (p. 222). As the controversy over Reverend Wright’s words demonstrates, the discourse particular to the space of the hush harbor is still not acceptable in the larger public sphere of the United States.

Clearly, the social and cultural need for spaces like the hush harbor and for the discourse endemic to those spaces continues. Historically these homes of emancipatory politics have been associated with physical spaces – woods, plantation borders, kitchens, and more recently beauty shops and barbershops. To this, Dara Byrne (2008) adds the possibility that certain online spaces may now be fulfilling the social role hush harbors conventionally played in the physical world. Indeed, it is not difficult to draw cultural parallels between hush harbors and racially-dedicated community sites such as BlackPlanet.com where members perceive social interaction to be “relatively free of mass participation by ethnic outsiders” (Byrne, p. 17).

However, BlackPlanet.com is not only an online space lacking in the tangibility of the physical spaces that historically served as hush harbors, it is also a commercial endeavor that must meet the imperatives of the marketplace. BlackPlanet is operated by Community Connect Inc., a company specializing in racially or ethnically-specific commercial community sites. Currently, Community Connect Inc. (henceforth CCI) operates three such sites: AsianAve.com with approximately 88 thousand members, BlackPlanet.com with 18 million members, and MiGente.com with 3.2 million members (*Crain’s New York Business*, 2008). Although the number of subscribers to CCI’s sites

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seems insignificant when compared the multitude of people joining social-networking sites MySpace, Facebook, and newcomer Bebo, as community sites, AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente have demonstrated a certain longevity often escaping those social-networking sites in vogue.

Operating the most financially successful sites targeted at racial and ethnic minorities, CCI generated approximately \$20 million in revenue from the three sites in 2006 (Byrne 2008). The majority of revenue is made from advertising on the sites (approximately 50%), with the remainder coming from online dating services (approximately 15%) and a job posting service operated in conjunction with Monster.com (approximately 35%) (Gangemi 2006).

The fact that the most popular online site dedicated to the African American community is predicated on advertising complicates the question of its potentiality as a hush harbor. Keeping in mind that hush harbors are, as Nunley points out, “public spheres with a distinctive relationship to spatiality (material and discursive), audience, African American *nomoi* (social conventions and beliefs that constitute a worldview or knowledge), and epistemology” (p. 222), this study closes examines the discourse generated by patrons of BlackPlanet for forms of civic engagement on issues of particular salience to the African American community. Issues of audience and spatiality (which here may be understood as site architecture or code) play a significant role in determining viability of member discourse for constituting a Black public sphere. This study will start by examining the evolution of BlackPlanet as a commercial venture. It will then examine the reasons members patronize the site and what uses they make of the resources made available to them. Finally, it will explore the potential of the site’s forums to constitute

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viable Black public spheres, and the ways in which this is facilitated or hindered by the architecture or code of the site. Throughout this examination, BlackPlanet's commercial orientation will factor into the discussion is assessing the dynamic between the political and cultural needs of community and the market imperatives of commerce.

The Formation of a (Black)Planet in (Cyber)Space

Community Connect Inc. (CCI) came into existence on October 31, 1996 when a group of friends living in New York City – Benjamin Sun, Peter Chen, Grace Chang, Michael Montero, and Calvin Wong – started designing an online destination that would emulate the minority communities they had grown up in. Sun, with his background in finance and experience working for Merrill Lynch's Technology Investment Banking Group, assumed the position of President and CEO of this new company operating out of a loft between Chinatown and Silicon Alley.¹

The online destination they envisioned became known as AsianAvenue.com and was launched on July 21, 1997. A key aspect that made this site unique at the time was that it was owned and operated by members of the racial community it represented. McLean Greaves, CEO of Virtual Melanin and founder of Café Los Negroes (New York's first online bulletin-board service for the African-American community), notes how the handful of online endeavors reaching out to communities of color in the 1990s were "either owned or heavily financed by large, white-owned media corporations" (*Village Voice*, 1999a, p. 3). For instance, Black Voices was owned by the Tribune, a

¹ According to the history published on CCI's corporate homepage the staff went without pay for much of the first year of operation and largely subsisted on Kentucky Fried Chicken: <http://www.communityconnect.com/timeline.html>.

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Chicago-based newspaper publishing company, Black Families was financed by Cox Media in Atlanta, and even NetNoir took on financing from AOL (*Village Voice* 1999a). Unfortunately, Café Los Negros – the only black-owned site serving the African-American community online – failed to generate sufficient advertising revenue and was forced to discontinue operations in 1998.

In keeping with its plan to expand its online audience, CCI launched BlackPlanet.com on September 1, 1999. It's not surprising the company decided on developing a site targeted at African Americans given that by the mid-1990s marketers identified African Americans as largest racial minority in the United States with an estimated 33 million people by 1994 (Schreiber 2001). By the end of the 20th century, the buying power of the African-American community was estimated by those within the advertising industry to be \$460 billion annually with the number of affluent black households tripling between 1994 and 1997 (Schreiber 2001). Schreiber reflects the general consensus in the industry when commenting that “the African-American market is the fastest-growing economic segment in the U.S. economy” with a “staggering annual buying power” (p. 34).

During the development of the BlackPlanet site, CCI brought onboard Omar Wasow, a charismatic African-American technology advisor with an undergraduate degree in race and ethnic relations from Stanford University, to oversee the operation of the site and serve as the company's public face. Having a black man as the executive director of the site was an important public-relations move given the troubling history of white-owned corporations marketing to African Americans. As Robert Weems Jr. (1998) documents in his historical survey of African-American marketing, the relationship

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between corporate America and black consumers transformed from one of dismissal and contempt in the opening decades of the 20th century to one of exploitation and condescension during much of the latter part of the century.

Wasow's joining of the company in 1999 was more than a public relations maneuver. Wasow had run an online community site with a multicultural focus, NewYorkOnline.com, which gave him valuable experience with both the African-American and Latino communities online – experience CCI would need as it started reaching out to these markets. Having in house someone with Wasow's understanding of and credibility with the African-American community was essential to the success of the BlackPlanet portal. Given his past experience working in a young start-up company with an ethnic focus, Wasow meshed well with CCI's internal culture, commenting in a later interview that he and CCI had “a shared vision of the future of online communities.”² In this same interview, Wasow discussed his deep appreciation for the challenges CCI faced, noting that it would take the “advertising industry several years after the launch of these sites to realize the potential of ethnic communities online.”³ Such challenges only intensified Wasow's excitement to be a part of a venture he saw as “representing the next generation of online community tools.”⁴

A key aspect of Wasow's role within CCI was convincing corporate clients that people of color – in particular, African Americans – were using the Internet in substantial numbers. Thus, Wasow was both the face of CCI to the black community, but equally the face of the company and of the African-American community to corporate America. In interviews in both the trade and popular press, Wasow would counter the image of

² Phone interview conducted with Omar Wasow on June 7, 2006.

³ Phone interview conducted with Omar Wasow on June 7, 2006.

⁴ Phone interview conducted with Omar Wasow on June 7, 2006.

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digital divide with one of a growing online population of eager consumers. For instance, in a 2000 interview for *The Industry Standard*, Wasow commented: “Whenever you talk about black people on the Net, the digital divide is the story. It’s going to change. As the next wave of sites go live, it will shift from the digital divide to the digital opportunity” (Li, p. 2). Wasow made similar claims in the popular press: “While the digital divide has been the dominant story about black people and the Web, there’s another important story which is that African-Americans have been early adopters and innovators with these technologies as well” (quoted in *Newsday*, 2000, p. 1).

Wasow’s efforts proved successful when BlackPlanet surpassed AsianAvenue in popularity amongst users and advertisers. Within a month of its launch, BlackPlanet registered approximately 10,000 members and had over 2 million page views (Li, 2000). By the end of the year, the site had more than 100,000 registered members (Li, 2000). The high amount of online traffic generated by CCI’s new site quickly attracted the interest of major corporate clients causing the company’s advertising revenue to increase by an impressive 68% between 1999 and 2000. By 2000, CCI had acquired 20 corporate sponsorships averaging \$100,000 each, including General Motors and Hewlett-Packard. Wasow effectively convinced major corporations that CCI could deliver their appeals to lucrative markets as reflected in the comments of Art Price, manager of multicultural marketing for HP: “AsianAvenue and BlackPlanet’s audiences are a perfect match for the demographics that we’re going after” (quoted in Vargas, 2000, p. 1). Likewise, Miramax was attracted to the company’s ability to “deliver really specific promotions for specific movies” according to Arul Sundaram, direct of business development for CCI (quoted in Elkin, 2000, p. 68). Miramax sponsored microsites and integrated content on both sites,

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which a particular focus on BlackPlanet given that, as Sundaram points out, “African-Americans tend to go to the box office on opening weekend more than anyone else” (quoted in Elkin, 2000, p. 68).

Although AsianAvenue had been CCI’s initial venture into the realm of online communities and ethnic marketing, BlackPlanet had become the company’s largest and most profitable site, attracting such major advertisers as Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart, McDonalds, Verizon, Seagrams, Toyota, Ford, Jeep, HBO, and Gillette. Recognizing the political potential of the site, Senator Barack Obama created a profile on BlackPlanet in October of 2007 which attracted nearly 450,000 “friends” by February of 2008 (Fung 2008).

It was the popularity of the BlackPlanet site that attracted the interest of Radio One, the largest black-owned radio company with 53 radio stations in 17 urban markets (Frazier 2008). Following the trend impacting numerous other online properties, including iVillage.com and MySpace.com, CCI was acquired by offline media corporation Radio One for approximately \$38 million dollars on April 10, 2008. The acquisition was a key part of Radio One’s corporate strategy to diversify its holdings outside of radio broadcasting in an effort to be more attractive to advertisers looking to target the African-American community. In a later interview, the President and CEO of Radio One, Alfred Liggins III, noted the importance of BlackPlanet in a long-term plan “to build a company where we can compete for \$28 billion in Web revenues by providing content for African Americans and build scale for advertisers,” adding that advertisers “will do business with us because we reach 82 percent of African American households in this country” (Huslin, 2008, p. D01). With Radio One’s historical focus on African-

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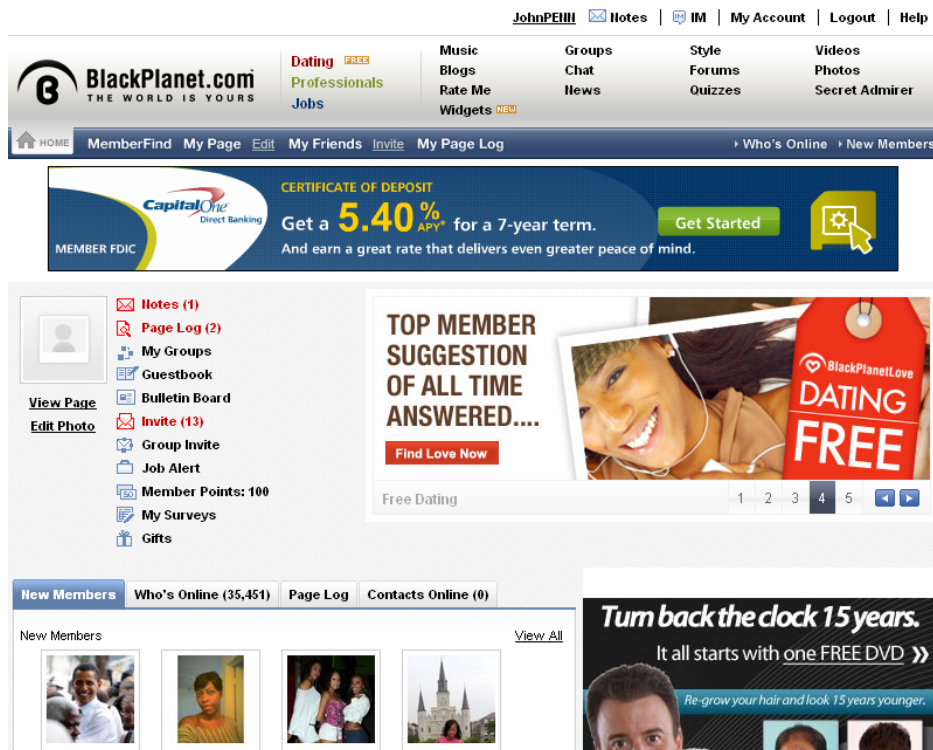
American audiences, it remains to be seen how it will handle the operation of CCI's diverse collection of sites. Although Sun will continue to run CCI's day-to-day operations, reporting to Thomas Newman, president of Radio One's Interactive division, Radio One's primary interest is undeniably in BlackPlanet, and not in those sites targeting other racial or ethnic minorities – groups outside of Radio One's corporate purview.

Patrons of a Commercial Black (Cyber)Space

The sites themselves have a look and feel that is in many respects similar to MySpace. On all three sites – AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente – members can create personal profiles, participate in online chats, post to electronic forums or message boards, and search job listings and personal ads. Although the format and features are essentially identical, the visual elements of each site correspond to the racial or ethnic group they purportedly serve. However, what does represent an important departure from social networking sites are the forums found on these sites.

On the home page of all the sites operated by Community Connect Inc., including BlackPlanet, members are presented with a variety of “channels” or areas with different features, including Music, Blogs, Groups, News, Videos, Photos, and Forums. (More recent additions to these channels are Rate Me, Secret Admirer, and Widgets, reflecting the shift towards a more social-networking orientation in the site design.) Of course, only those registered with the site can access the home page and therefore the forums.

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BlackPlanet.com home page on August 2, 2008

Under the Forum channel are a variety of electronic message boards or forums – most created by members – organized under fixed “categories,” which included at the time data was gathered for this study: Automobiles, Campus Life, Career, Current Events, Families & Home, Finance, Food, Health & Identity, Movies & TV, Music, Relationships, Religion & Spirituality, Small Business, Sports & Fitness, Technology, and Women. Forums also accompany the stories appearing under the News channel which are largely posted by members using the “share news” function (a feature that allows members to post links to news stories they believe are relevant to the site along with their comments). These forums constitute the key loci for community discussions on the sites as opposed to the quasi-private conversations that take place on members’ profiles pages. It is only in the forums where a sense of the voice of the community is heard, even if those voices are discussing non-political topics. The importance of such

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non-political talk should not be underestimated, for as Wasow points out, a “pre-cursor to political talk is a forum for social talk in general amongst people with shared interests.” These sites do provide ready forums for social talk, and on BlackPlanet, these forums have become vibrant loci for community discussion, debate, and even deliberation on matters of cultural and political significance to the African-American community.

In fact, a comparison of the political activeness of the forums found on the three sites operated by Community Connect Inc. demonstrates the heightened engagement on BlackPlanet.com. Comparing responses to featured stories posted to the sites by members and the CCI editorial staff between January 13, 2006 and May 19, 2006 revealed that out of 20 featured articles on AsianAvenue that could be characterized as explicitly political, 18 generated responses in the forums (90%) and 14 had more than one response (70%), with the mean number of responses being five per political story. Within the same time period, only two featured articles were published on MiGente which could be characterized as explicitly political. Neither of these stories generated any responses in the accompanying forums.

However, during this same time period two stories did receive a significant number of comments: a story entitled “The Champ is Here” (a story on 24-year-old WBA welterweight champion Luis Collazo) posted on May 17, 2006 generated 20 comments by users and a story entitled “Love Trips: Magnetic Attraction” posted on May 10, 2006 generated 16 comments by users. In general, only 16% of all stories during that time period generated any response, and only 8% of stories received more than one response. Based on observations of the site’s forums, MiGente was the most non-political of the sites and its forums had the lowest overall level of activity. Wasow did acknowledge that

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although CCI works to put powerful tools for communication in the hands of members, “simply because members have access to these tools doesn’t mean they will use them to gain political power.”

This certainly seems to be the case with those frequenting MiGente during this time frame, supporting Wasow’s contention that most users come to these sites simply to “flirt and make friends.”⁵ However, BlackPlanet represents an important contrast to MiGente. On this particular site, the forums were significantly more active, and of the 20 featured news articles that could be characterized as political in nature published during this period, 100% generated responses in the accompanying forums, and all received more than one response. In fact, the mean number of responses for an explicitly political story was 55 comments. The data collected suggests that on BlackPlanet a significant portion of the membership take advantage of the tools provided by CCI for forms of political talk.

During an interview,⁶ Wasow offered the supposition that the heightened political activity of members on BlackPlanet in comparison to CCI’s other sites is reflective of the distinct characteristics of the site, the most obvious being that the site has a appreciably greater number of users than either AsianAvenue or MiGente (both AsianAvenue and MiGente had approximately 2 million registered users during this time period while BlackPlanet had an estimated 14 million registered users). Wasow also postulated that the vibrancy of the forums on BlackPlanet reflected cultural aspects of the African-American community, including a long history of political activism and a cultural disposition that invites active engagement with media.

⁵ Telephone interview conducted on June 7, 2006.

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However, to truly appreciate what these forums mean to members and the role they play in their respective communities, it is necessary to speak directly to the users of BlackPlanet. To this end, I created a forum under the Heritage & Identity category – a particularly active category of forums – on May 10, 2006 introducing myself and asking simply why people came to this site and what they get out of it. By the following day, I had responses from 7 regular contributors to BlackPlanet forums. Unfortunately, the prolific production of new forums under Heritage & Identity category caused the one I had created to be quickly lost amongst the older discussion threads.

Of those responses received, the motivations of members varied tremendously from one individual to the next. Darreg, a married woman from New York, indicated that she frequented the site primarily for the forums appearing under the Relationship category: “Besides having some great laughs, I learn some interesting things about myself, relationships and what other people are doing behind closed doors...And I adore my BP relationship forum family, so I would have to say, that yes, I consider Black Planet to be my real online community.”

For some a sense of community seemed to be a strong motivation for patronizing the site. For others, socializing and information gathering were of central importance, as indicated in comments by LightAndShadow, a married women from California: “What do I get out of it? Entertainment, information, and most importantly conversation with people I would otherwise not have the opportunity to interact with.” Learning seemed to be important to other members, including Below_Radar2, a 50-year-old woman from Arizona: “I came to respect the opinions of quite a few of the old system posters, and occasionally, actually LEARNED from them all kinds of things not covered in narrow,

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formal, skill-set driven educations – and sort of became friends with them, I guess you could say.”

However, Below_Radar2 also noted how the commercial nature of the site seems less applicable to members such as her: “For me, this is not a commercial site (sorry BP) ...at least, they’ve not advertised anything that I’ve been interested in (or sometimes ‘able’) to take advantage of. Likely a different story, though – ads – for the younger set.” Others expressed more cynical views of BlackPlanet, including The_Scorpio_X, a male from Georgia (“Well, I don’t have cable so I don’t get the comedy channel and thus BP.com is an excellent substitute!!!”) and coolchef, a 43-year-old male from New Jersey (“We’re here for the entertainment! Besides! These sites are created for direct marketing!”).

Some of the member responses suggest that some find the site empowering both as a means for self-expression and resources for gathering information relevant to the experiences of African Americans. Below_Radar2 also commented on the diverse spectrum of voices BlackPlanet makes possible: “I was fascinated by the great diversity of opinions about nearly every topic of interest to Black people ‘under the sun’ – all centrally located ‘here, in BP’ and being expressed from Black folks (?) of all ages, nationalities and backgrounds.” Below_Radar2’s comments have direct relevance to those scholarly discussions on the potential of the Internet to enhance democratic communication.

One of the greatest concerns raised by critics of the viability of an online public sphere, as articulated by Dahlberg (2001), is that instead of engaging in public deliberation and critical discussion of important issues, “participants simply seek out

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groups of like-minded others where member's interests, values and prejudices are reinforced rather than challenged" (p. 618). Given the potentially infinite multiplicity of sites in cyberspace, the motivation to seek out like-minded others results in the development of a profusion of "ideologically homogeneous 'communities of interest'" (p. 618). However, the affinity members share on BlackPlanet is one of race, and race intersects with all other axis of identity, including gender, sexuality, class, religion, and region. It would be deeply problematic to suggest that the African-American community is an ideologically homogeneous community of interest as made evident in the words of Below_Radar2. Although perhaps falling short of Habermas's idealized 18th century public sphere where civil society would be enacted through enlightened dialogue amongst the citizenry, these forums do appear to constitute *locus in quo* diverse political positions are expression and explored. In this sense, they could be characterized as nascent online public spheres within their respective racial or ethnic community.

An instance illustrating potential of these forums to serve as *loci* for vibrant political discussion and critical deliberation was a topic introduced by Sweetnsuga (a 26-year-old woman from Newmarket, Ontario) on May 6, 2006 under the Heritage & Identity category with the title: "Economics or Racism, which came first?" Sweetnsuga opened the forum with the following post:

Based off the little discussion that actually resulted under the forum of blacks in Russia in News&Politics, I'm curious to know what out ppl's impression of Europeans are. Do you feel slavery was a result of the desire for Europeans to profit and expand their merchant skills as is projected by many scholars? Or, do you regard slavery as coming out of ignorance and racism on their behalf?

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Within the first day the forum appeared on the site posts were made by 12 members. The shortest of the posts came from d1blackmogul, who commented simply: “slave labor = profits.” However, some of the other posts constituted significant contributions to the discussion, such as a post by Queen Bolingo entitled “The roots of racism,” in which she contends that slavery was an institution predicated on greed and still effectively continues today in the form of the economic exploitation of the African-American community. The key lesson to be discerned from this particular discussion is that members routinely use these forums as spaces in which to discuss, debate, and critique issues of political, economic, and cultural importance to African Americans. Indeed, some of the most active categories of forums (based on the numbers of individual forums found under that category) on BlackPlanet are “current events”, “heritage & identity,” and “religion & spirituality.”

On May 20, 2006, I followed up my initial forum with one asking members to comment on the noticeable difference in activity levels between the forums on the different CCI sites. Essentially, I asked members why they thought BlackPlanet’s forums were so much more dynamic than those found on AsianAvenue and MiGente. A 25-year-old female member from Maryland, akeknowlege, provided the most compelling response:

I think that we respond to this site better because we as Blacks have a lot more issues within our culture. We have so many problems with violence, police brutality, racism, and teen pregnancy. Talking about some of these issues is very therapeutic for us. If we go onto other sites (MySpace, AOL, etc.) lots of other races will not be able to connect with us because they haven’t been through some of the things that we have gone through. I have tired websites such as MySpace and didn’t find it interesting because there were not issues that I could relate to culturally.

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The post made by akeknowledge suggests two vital aspects of the relationship members have with BlackPlanet: First, the ability to express one's perspectives and beliefs in online discussions – particular discussions occurring within a community that is central to one's offline identity – constitutes an important social resource for some users of this site. This is not merely talk for talk's sake. Rather, such talk helps members come to terms with the overwhelming social, political, and economic issues confronting the African-American community. As akeknowledge indicated, for some such online discussions have a “therapeutic” function. The second aspect regarding the relational dynamic between the site and its users revealed in akeknowledge's comments is that BlackPlanet does indeed hold greater importance in the lives of members than those sites targeted at a general online audience, such as MySpace. The words of akeknowledge support the position of Byrne (2008) that “the CCI sites have become established pillars of their respective communities rather than the latest fads with unpredictable futures” (p. 17). This lends credence to McLaine's position that of all online commercial communities, those based on race and ethnicity have a greater responsibility for honoring the voices of their members “because the stakes are that much higher” (2003, p. 237).

Undeniably, the tools CCI provides on their sites allow members to exchange knowledge of relevance to the community. Although not necessarily produced by experts, the knowledge users generate is of value to racial and ethnic minorities in providing a deeper appreciation of the experiences and perspectives of other members of their community – experiences and perspectives liable to be absent from the mainstream media.

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Through these interactive features members are also able to police what constitutes “authentic” cultural expressions on the site, something of great concern to marketers. Maria Weaver Watson, director of marketing at Radio One, has discussed the importance of “authenticity” in marketing to any minority community, commenting: “What everyone has found over the years is that successful sites are content-rich and have authentic content that resonates with the consumer, whether it be on the African-American or the Hispanic side” (quoted in Washkuch, 2008, p. 10). One way of guaranteeing this sense of authenticity is allowing members of the targeted community to generate their own content, which ultimately benefits both members of the community and marketers, although the forms of benefit may not be comparable or equitable.

However, the discussions appearing on these forums do not always serve to empower members or disrupt offline racist practices. In fact, some of these discussions can be seen as serving the interests of corporate marketers. For instance, Art Price, manager of multicultural marketing for Hewlett-Packard, one of CCI’s first major corporate clients, had a particular interest in these sites because of the high level of activity found in the online forums, commenting: “The winning formula for BlackPlanet and AsianAvenue is to get people to rally around and talk about issues and opportunities” (quoted in Tran, 2000, p. R53). Needless to say, the “opportunities” Price has in mind are the personal computer deals offered to users of BlackPlanet in their marketing campaign. There’s no indication Price or his colleagues at HP were interested in the political or cultural issues confronting the African American community. In this situation, it remains unclear who is the ultimate beneficiary of Price’s “winning formula.”

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Indeed, the very tools providing members a means for self-expression also provide CCI with a platform for viral marketing practices. This was discovered when I approached a member – Jade-eyez⁷ – who routinely posted news stories on AsianAvenue about doing an online interview for this study. As a frequent contributor to the site, I was interested in her perspectives regarding the importance of these online communities in the offline lives of members. Her response on May 25, 2006 proved enlightening:

I think your study is very interesting. However, I do not think that I would be a good candidate to interview because I am an employee of CCI. I am a developer/administrator/moderator of blackplanet, migente, and asianavenue. I know how we gather the information submitted at registration to classify people into consumer groups and use it for our own marketing purposes. We have an entire department that collects data. Everytime someone clicks on anything on our site you better believe its being documented. ANYWAY, sounds like a good study. I wish you much luck with it.

Returning to Art Price’s comments that the “winning formula” is to get members of these sites talking about “issues and opportunities,” one means of ensuring that this happens is planting employees amongst the membership to incite desired discussions (i.e. buzz) if they don’t develop organically. As indicated in chapter 3, this practice is commonly known as “astroturf marketing.” Not only does such discussion manipulation have questionable ethicality and run the risk of member resentment should it be exposed,⁸ but it arguably advantages commerce to the detriment of community. It is difficult to deny that this seems to be an instance of profit taking precedence over purpose.

It is an unsettling example of irony that the same tools argued to be empowering members also allow marketers to gather comprehensive information about members in an effort to manipulate their behavior in the marketplace. Providing information for

⁷ To protect her anonymity, I have substituted a pseudonym for her actual screen name on the site.

⁸ See the experience of Sony Corporation discussed in chapter 3.

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purposes of self-expression serves very different ends than providing information for purpose of corporate surveillance. These marketing practices predicated on consumer surveillance create an uneven playing field where uninformed users remain at a disadvantage and information technologies may do more to empower corporate marketers than community members. This constitutes one threat to BlackPlanet's viability as a hush harbor.

However, the efforts of marketers do not preclude the possibility that very important forms of civic engagement on issues of salience to the African American community occur on BlackPlanet. Rather, the potentiality of BlackPlanet as a distinctly African American public sphere depends in large part on the nature of the discussions occurring in its forums. Thus the forums on BlackPlanet merit closer examination, with a focus on what forms of interaction are fostered by the code of site..

The Code and Forums of BlackPlanet

In his book, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into Category of Bourgeois Society, 1989)*, Habermas articulates his conceptualization of *Öffentlichkeit*, or, the "public sphere." Habermas contends that as the development of capitalism took hold in Western Europe, a new form of political forum emerged outside the domains of the aristocracy and clergy: the bourgeois public sphere. Supported by 18th century liberal democracy and innovations in mass communication technology, notably publishing, this forum was able to free itself from the influences of both the church and state, thereby opening a space for rational-

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critical dialogue amongst the citizenry.⁹ However, Habermas fears that the commodification of mass media institutions is undermining the rational-critical dialogue essential to maintaining this vibrant public sphere as the interests of large corporations increasingly overwhelm the interests of individual citizens.

Dahlberg (2005) shares Habermas's concerns, pointing out that critical theorists and political economists have shown how the mass media "have been captured by powerful conservative interests, leading to the marginalization of critical and less powerful voices in the central discursive arenas of liberal-capitalist societies" (p. 161). However, Dahlberg notes the "recent excitement among advocates of democratic communication about the possibility of the Internet's radically enhancing the public sphere" (2005, p. 161). For these pundits and scholars, the "Internet is seen as subverting state and corporate power, offering a space to voice otherwise marginalized positions" (p. 161). In this vision of the Internet, online forums present citizens with similar opportunities to engage in political discussion as those found in the ancient Greek agora, the colonial New England town hall, and the pre-revolutionary Parisian salon. This raises an important question: Can even those online forums found on commercial sites serve as loci for enlightened dialogue amongst the citizenry essential to enacting civic society?

To address this question, this study takes a closer look on the discursive activity occurring in the forums on BlackPlanet. In doing so, this study draws heavily from the work of Byrne (2007, 2008) who has conducted extensive studies of the site over the last several years. Byrne's interest in BlackPlanet is partially based on the site's significance in the online experiences of the African-American community: "As a relatively long-running diasporic site, BlackPlanet is an established pillar in the black online

⁹ Important critiques of Habermas's model of the public sphere are discussed in Chapter 2.

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community” (2007, p. 5). Byrne also points out that as the African-American community has an extensive history of political activism, it is reasonable to expect an online site dedicated to African Americans to yield evidence of civic engagement and “coalitional thinking across age, culture, gender, class, and geographic lines” (2007, p. 2). In examining “the production of public discourse, conversations about the ‘common good,’ such as those taking place on the site’s community forms” (p. 2), Byrne seeks substantiation of an emerging computer-mediated public sphere.

Between September 2006 and February 2007, Byrne monitored the 18 discussion forums on BlackPlanet to determine which forums were the most popular amongst patrons and which tended to focus on issues of common concern to the African-American community. Byrne found that amongst the most popular forums on the site – Relationships, Heritage & Identity, Current Events, Religion & Spirituality, and Women – issues of common concern to the community were frequently topics of discussion, including education, slavery, racism, AIDS, voting, and social justice. Based on analysis of key words used in the postings of users, Byrne identified 9,258 threads as touching on or dedicated to issues of political, social, or economic importance to the community (2007). Given the high level of user activity on these forums as well as the abundance of political talk, Byrne concludes that “much of the public life on BlackPlanet centers on daily discussions of larger community concerns” (2007, p. 17).

In a later study, Byrne (2008) employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in examining the content of the discussions taking place in the forums on BlackPlanet, noting the ways social knowledge about race and ethnicity is reproduced in these online conversations. Focusing on those discussions occurring in the Heritage & Identity

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forums on BlackPlanet, MiGente, and AsianAvenue, Byrne argues that these forums constitute a “specialized public sphere where racial identity serves as common ground for participants and as primary determinant of one’s right to participate” (p. 18). His analysis reveals users share an underlying assumption that all participants are members of the community and community membership is based on an individual’s racial and ethnic heritage. As in his earlier study, Byrne found that discussions often centered on issues of common concern to the community, including education, racism, and social justice. For Byrne, these forums function as “loci of public life . . . where ideologies are likely to be developed, promoted, contested, and institutionalized” (p. 31).

Byrne’s observations were supported by primary data gathered for this study. In one case study of the BlackPlanet forums, a news story from the *Dayton Daily News* was posted under the News channel by the operators of BlackPlanet on May 3, 2006. Entitled, “Conference to Look at Getting Inmates Back into Society,” the story discussed the efforts of civil rights activists, professionals in the criminal justice field, and representatives of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction to develop more effective programs in helping former inmates transition back into their communities. Within seven hours of the story’s posting, 64 responses were made to the accompanying forum by BlackPlanet members. These responses came from a diverse spectrum of users, both male and female, with ages ranging from 19 to 48, and representing diverse regions of the United States. The opinions expressed varied dramatically from Rodin517 (37-year-old male from North Carolina) wanting to “expose alot of the problems w/ the system and open the eyes of many ‘black’ americans” to DivineWomb (26-year-old woman from Michigan) arguing for “a program that actually rehabilitates them while

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they are incarcerated.” Several participants discussed the challenges ex-felons have in finding employment upon their release, leading bsfinmixedboy (24-year-old male from Texas) to argue that “Legislation is definitely the right path to go...If you can’t get a job you have no choice but to sell drugs.” Several individuals used the forum as an opportunity to critique the criminal justice system, pointing out troubling inconsistencies in sentencing guidelines as well as the commercial imperatives of the prison industry. A compelling example of such critique is a post made by brownjesus27, a 26 year-old male from Virginia:

How are you going to rehabilitate being broke? The jails aren’t packed with violent offenders they are packed with poor people who tried to get money selling drugs. They need to keep the jails packed so they will never let you off that leash. Prison is a 4 billion dollar a year business somebody has to sit in those jails. If people really wanted to take the bad people off the street than the laws would reflect that, but the laws don’t reflect that. Rape = 6 years. Assault = 1-7 years. Conspiracy to sell/use crack cocaine = 20 years.

One participant, ASH23WB, a 23-year-old woman from Louisiana, even urged participants to “state your opinions, comments, demands directly to the president himself” and provided the URL for the Whitehouse. What this particular case study helps to demonstrate is how significantly the code of a site informs the vibrancy of these online forums. On social-networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, such deliberations are not possible because the architecture of the site does not provide space for such communal discussions. Rather, discussions are limited to largely private exchanges or quasi-private commenting on another’s profile. In contrast, the forums on BlackPlanet are centrally featured in the site layout, readily visible to all of the site’s

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users. As a result, these forums demonstrate a high level of user activity, with large numbers of the community contributing to the exchanges.

Byrne (2008) notes how these forums serve as vital public venues for marginalized racial or ethnic communities: “For those who may not yet be granted full access to the public sphere offline (if ever), participants have the opportunity to speak and be heard on what they see as more equal ground” (p. 31). Through engaging in such community dialogue, members learn the importance of building consensus in public engagement: “In learning how to speak about, listen to, and repress certain ideas about race and ethnicity, participants also forge a much deeper understanding of the connection between online politicking and offline social structures” (p. 32). It would not be unreasonable to expect that these online experiences would help members become more adept at coalitional political organizing offline.

Unfortunately, despite the abundance of political talk surrounding issues of concern to the community found on these forums, Byrne discovered no compelling evidence that civic engagement went beyond the “discursive level.” That is, online political discussions did not appear to lead to offline political action. Even though, as indicated in the last chapter, appeals in the forums on AsianAvenue have led to some offline community activity, such activities do not correspond to the multitude of online calls for radical political and social change. As Byrne observes:

Although examples can be called upon where communities of color have deliberately used online networking to impact offline conditions...public life for the more than 16 million participants on CCI’s sites has yet to produce the kind of action consistent with the level of discourse about racism and social justice taking place. My most recent work on BlackPlanet has shown that, while youth are clearly engaged in

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conversations about issues of common concern to the larger black community, these discussions never moved beyond a discursive level of civic engagement. In fact, when I analyzed postings about Hurricane Katrina and genocide in Darfur, participants who suggested that the group should “do something” were either summarily dismissed, called “irrational,” or placated with polite acknowledgements. (2008, p. 32)

From this observation Byrne concludes that “collection action will not be the inevitable outcome of ongoing interaction in such environments, in spite of the black community’s longstanding history of promoting social networking for this purpose” (2007, p. 18).

Byrne suggests one of the reasons for this lack of offline engagement is the “absence of ‘known’ community figures or leaders on online social networks” (2007, p. 18). Another potential factor is BlackPlanet’s orientation as a commercial site, not a political site; a site primarily designed for advertisers, not activists. Although the commercial orientation of the site does not necessarily negate the possibility of offline action or the site’s efficacy as a public sphere, it does suggest the disposition of patrons may be more one of consumption than civic engagement. The discussions occurring in the site’s forums may function primarily as a mode of personal expression rather than as a prelude to political organizing.

Building upon the work of Habermas, Dahlberg (2001) holds that democracy “requires political information flows and public debates autonomous from *both* corporate and administrative power” (p. 619, emphasis original). In one sense, much of the information appearing on BlackPlanet does originate outside of conventional authoritative channels. In addition to participating in existing forums, the code of the site allows patrons to post their own news stories and create their own forums. Of course, these forums are not entirely outside the control of corporate authorities. As Jeff Car,

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Vice President of Marketing for CCI, pointed out in an interview, the company employs a team of full-time dedicated moderators to approve all the posts made to the site.

Officially, the function of these moderators operating under the division of “Member Services” is to ensure no offensive or lewd material is published on any of CCI’s sites. The code of these sites grants the corporate moderators the power to delete individual posts or entire forums and censure or ban users for posting inappropriate content. Carr suggests this team is analogous to “the policeman in a Norman Rockwell painting,” a benevolent force working in the “best interests of the community.”¹⁰ However, this is the best interests of the community as understood by the corporate management of CCI, not by members themselves. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear if Carr’s use of the word “community” refers to the social formation emerging from the interactions of members or to the commercial site itself.

An equally significant threat to the BlackPlanet’s ability to constitute a truly democratic space is the issue of access. Accessibility is not a problem unique to online forums. Even in Habermas’s idealized bourgeois public sphere certain groups were denied access. Although this space represented a “public” forum in which citizens gathered for rational-critical dialogue, not all members of the public were included, most notably women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the poor. Thus, the voices heard in this public sphere represented those occupying a certain privileged positions in society. In this respect, Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere fails to constitute a truly democratic forum, for, as Dahlberg contends, in democratic forums every “participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever” (2001, p. 623). Therefore, inclusion of all members of the

¹⁰ Telephone interview conducted on May 26, 2006.

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community in relevant political discussions is foundational to the viability of any public sphere, online or offline.

Often those groups historically denied access to the public sphere are only granted entry if they conform to the norms of the dominant group. As feminist scholar, Jane Ward points out: “What you find in public isn’t the raw expression of what people feel,” it is generally “what elites in that community, people who have access to the public stage, have decided is strategic to share” (as quoted in Miller, p. 31). This has led some scholars to reject the pursuit of a universal public sphere in favor of a multiplicity of heterogenous public spheres (Negt and Kluge 1993).

However, the forums on BlackPlanet are discussions one cannot view, let alone participate in, without first registering with the site. In this respect, BlackPlanet functions much like an online gated community where only those submitting themselves to the inspection process of registration can participate in community discussions. In his study of postings on an Usenet newsgroup dedicated to the interests of the diasporic Indian community, Mitra discusses the fluidity of movement in virtual space, commenting that there “are no ‘Internet police’ who determine who can go where” (1997, p. 62). This observation no longer necessarily holds true as commercial sites increasingly regulate entrée through registration processes and membership fees. In this sense, the code of cyberspace is shifting from one of fluid movement to one of restricted entry.

Although Byrne holds that these “dedicated Web sites can be thought of as imaginary public spheres that overcome the complexities of real-world distancing by using computer-mediated technologies to cultivate critical spaces for discursive exchange” (2008, p. 18), limitations in access constitute a significant threat to the

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political viability of these forums. We may find discussions of a democratic character occurring on these commercial sites, but only under conditions that could hardly be characterized as democratic. Of course lack of accessibility to online public spheres reflects more than the restrictions of an individual site's code; it also reflects profound "inequalities in the distribution of social resources, including telecommunications infrastructures, money to pay Internet costs, computing skills, cultural expectations, free time and community support" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 628).

Dahlberg (2005) warns that the commercialization of cyberspace reinforces the "discourses and practices of consumer capitalism" while "marginalizing critical communication central to strong democratic culture" (p. 162). Certainly the issues of accessibility and surveillance raise substantial doubts about the architecture of these commercial community sites facilitating truly democratic modes of online communication. Compounding these doubts are concerns over powerful trends in the commercial media – most notably the trend of media consolidation – which appear to be adversely influencing participatory democracy in the United States.¹¹ Arguably, the detrimental impact of media consolidation on democratic discussions in cyberspace is becoming evident on commercial community sites. For instance, when iVillage was absorbed by NBC Universal, the number of avenues for member participation dramatically decreased and the once centrally-featured forums were displaced to the margins of the site. At this time it remains unclear if the forums on BlackPlanet will follow a similar trajectory now that CCI has been acquired by the large media corporation, Radio One. What is clear is that the evolving design of CCI's sites

¹¹ For a more extensive discussion of the impact of corporate media consolidation on participatory democracy and civic engagement, see Robert W. McChesney's 1999 book, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*.

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increasingly favors a social-networking model where semi-private conversations amongst individual members *a la* Facebook and MySpace take primacy over community discussions.

Although the code of the site has a significant influence over the use members make of BlackPlanet's forums, cultural and social forces continue to play a pivotal role in the forms of offline activism resulting from these online discussions. This invites questions as to the ways different architectures and different cultural and social contexts inform civic community online. Clearly one cannot easily dismiss the political nature of the discussions occurring in the forums on the site, and the clear presumption that the audience for these discussions is other members of the African American community (or, at the very least, those sympathetic to the lived realities of the African American community).

Untying Tongues: Concluding Thoughts...

McLaine makes a poignant observation in regard to online social interactions, noting that when race does not have to be seen it can be effectively "brushed under the mousepad" (p. 235). This was largely what happened in cyberspace until the mid-1990s when a handful of sites specifically oriented to the interests of racial and ethnic minorities appeared. Some of these sites were ad hoc communal creations such as NetNoir.com, which started as an independent online bulletin board covering issues of relevance to the African-American community.¹² However, other sites were launched as commercial

¹² NetNoir.com, one of the oldest African-American identified websites, started as an independent online bulletin board service in 1995, only accepting corporate backing years after its inception. As Nakamura

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ventures operated by corporations eager to tap into the precise targeting potential of a new media. This was certainly the case with those sites created by Community Connect Inc. including BlackPlanet.

However, BlackPlanet is by no means a virtual space where race is being brushed under the mousepad. Indeed, race is central to the discussions on the site. The initial data gathered for this study certainly suggests that BlackPlanet offers an online space where Black patrons can “untie their tongues, speak the unspoken, and sing their own songs to their own selves in their own communities” (Nunley, p. 223). At least in this respect, this site meets Nunley’s characterization of hush harbors as “spatialites where Black folks go to affirm, negotiate, and reproduce culture, epistemology, and resistance” (p. 229). Undeniably the conversations taking place in BlackPlanet’s forums are unapologetic and sincere, not tempered by thoughts of what is acceptable to utter in the mainstream (read white) public sphere.

However, BlackPlanet’s primary function as a commercial space should not be ignored. The fact that these conversations are privy to the eyes of marketers seeking to segment, evaluate, and target the African American community raises potentially troubling implications. As Radio One’s recent acquisition of Community Connect Inc. for a reported \$38 million attests, race in cyberspace has become big business. The question that will continue to gain salience is how will these commercial endeavors purporting to serve African Americans balances the political needs of community with the profit imperatives of commerce.

indicates, sites like NetNoir are vital because they “foreground racial identity in ways that the vast majority of other commercial websites neglect altogether” (p. 116). In recent years, the site was acquired by a larger online marketing organization, Netvibes.com, and can no longer be characterized as independent of commercial interests.

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Clearly, much more investigation is warranted as this study has only scratched the surface of role these dedicated community sites are playing in the negotiation of Black folk's political and cultural identities. None of this is to suggest that these specialized public spheres are unique to the experiences of the African American community. Undoubtedly, dedicated online and offline spaces play a critical role in the negotiation of identity of other historically marginalized groups, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities.¹³ Indeed, all people need a space where they feel safe untying their tongues and singing their songs.

¹³ For an example of an online gay public sphere see Campbell 2007.

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