



Article

Black Twitter: A Response to Bias in Mainstream Media

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Academic Editors: Jenny L. Davis and David A. Banks

Received: 1 October 2016; Accepted: 2 March 2017; Published: 5 March 2017

Abstract: This paper seeks to shed light on the ways people of color, in the United States, are using social media to challenge racial bias. As part of this investigation, this paper draws on Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, and Digital New Media studies to examine the extent to which social media, while seen as a place for ‘play’ can also operate as a digital homespace, a space used as a tool for black women and men to (re)construct their bodies and identities, challenging the “controlling images” widespread in mainstream media and society at large. This paper employs the methods of content analysis and participant observation and find that these social media forums are not transformative by themselves but instead have little moments that make for resistance and a digital homespace.

Keywords: battleground; black Twitter; digital homespace; playground; textual poaching

1. Introduction

In the past couple of years, the United States has experienced an intense level of social unrest, mass protest, and riots partly due to the war on black bodies by police and state officials. On 17 July 2014, Eric Garner, a 40-year old father of six was choked to death by a New York City police officer attempting to subdue him. As Garner laid on the sidewalk with officers’ knees in his back and a chokehold around his neck he gasped for air and repeated, “I can’t breathe”. Although the tactic of using a chokehold is illegal, a Staten Island grand jury voted not to indict the officer responsible for Garner’s death.

Less than thirty days later, on 9 August 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a police officer in Ferguson. Brown’s death incited many protests in the immediate and surrounding areas. Local people in the neighborhood were upset with the strong-arm tactics of the police and the state geared towards people of color in that neighborhood. After months of police investigation, the grand jury voted not to indict Darren Wilson. Thousands of people flooded the streets, in New York City, Ferguson, and around the country, for days of protests, blocking bridges and highways in anger at the verdicts.

Days following the deaths of Garner and Brown, news reports of the incidents characterized Brown as a thug, gang member, and lawbreaker. Garner was characterized as a repeat offender with news reports discussing his criminal history. News reports also made reference to the height and body size of both Brown and Garner, using fear-mongering labels such as “giant” and “huge” to make Brown and Garner seem super-human, dangerous, and therefore needing to be tamed. What are we to make of these cases? What are we to make of the grand jury verdicts? More importantly, what are we to make of the news reports that seem to justify the murder of these black men, through the labels of criminal and deviant?

To engage these questions, this research builds on an analysis of textual poaching and social media. Textual poaching explores how fans purposefully create their own communities to express

adoration or fascination, but also antagonism and frustrations with their favorite media content, including movies and television shows, such as Star Trek, and The Walking Dead, to name a few [1]. Building on this concept, this article is interested in the textual poaching that occurs in social media, specifically black Twitter, for purposes of challenging and resisting dominant degrading narratives placed on black and brown bodies through mainstream news coverage. Through an investigation of black Twitter, studies show that a disproportionately large number of young African Americans use twitter: 40% of 18–29 year olds are active on the site compared to 28% of whites [2]. Black Twitter, a subculture within the Twitter platform, materializes through the creation of hashtags. These hashtags or “blacktags” tend to comment on black culture and society-at-large [3]. Meredith Clark, a scholar researching black Twitter, and Kimberly Elise, author of *The Bombastic Brilliance of Black Twitter*, argue that black Twitter can be a space for jokes, for social viewing of a television series, and as a space where people can voice anger and frustration [4]. According to Elise, black Twitter is one of the most largely interconnected and tightly interwoven subcultures, more so than any other subculture on Twitter. She argues that black Twitter’s power comes from its participatory democratic nature—the idea that users, through the creation of ironic, yet cutting-edge hashtags, create a space to address social issues of racial bias and discrimination. Indeed, this forum allows for textual poaching as resistance, where the user produces content that challenges dominant (oppressive) cultural ideologies and norms, including racial bias [1,5]. For instance, the popular black Twitter hashtag #APHeadlines is a great example of textual poaching as resistance. This hashtag was created in response to the Associated Press’ tweet of the conviction of the Detroit man who shot Renisha McBride. McBride was a young woman of color who was looking for help after a car accident. However, McBride’s life was cut short when a homeowner, behind the screen door of his home, shot her in the head because he “feared for his safety”. The tweet, “Suburban Detroit homeowner convicted of second-degree murder for killing woman who showed up drunk on porch” seem to place the blame on McBride for her murder. Black Twitter users quickly responded with “AP headlines” of their own [6]. For example, one user with the twitter handle, @Phil_Lewis_ tweeted,

#APHeadlines millions of Africans complain after free cruise to the Americas; slave traders find them ‘ungrateful’ [7].

Another user with the handle, @LaToubabNoire tweeted,

Homeless blasphemer from low-income Nazarene family, low on stamina, fails to survive crucifixion. #APHeadlines [8].

Another user with the handle @CmartinezClass tweeted,

Children flee tourist locations in Latin America in hunt for government handouts and comfy beds in deportation centers. #APHeadlines [9].

This hashtag is a demonstration of textual poaching as resistance; through facetious comedy and jokes Twitter users were able to create a space that allowed them to voice their anger about the lack of consideration and concern black bodies receive by mainstream news press and coverage, even after someone’s demise. Soon after the hashtag “#APHeadlines” went viral, the Associated Press changed the caption of the McBride story and tweeted, “Jury convicts Michigan man in killing of unarmed woman on his porch”, rewording the language from the previous tweet three hours after the original twitter message was posted. Consequently, the hashtag #APHeadlines also demonstrates the power of Twitter, particularly black Twitter, in exposing implicit bias and changing the narrative. It is important to note that one does not need to be black to participate in black Twitter. In this digital space, black men and women include those who self-describe/identify. Therefore, those who engage in black twitter also engage in what Gayatri Spivak calls strategic essentialism [10]. Strategic essentialism can be useful for building coalitions and organizing; the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter serves as a key example of essentializing for purposes of creating awareness and coalition building. Consequently, throughout this article, the term “black” is used strategically without ignoring the multiplicity of “black” people in the United States and abroad. Ultimately, it is through the exploration of social media and textual poaching as resistance that this paper seeks to explore the

possibilities black Twitter provides in challenging racial bias portrayed in mainstream mass media and systemic violence and oppression that places black and brown bodies at the margins.

2. Background

There are many contemporary examples of news bias in the United States when reporting on black and brown bodies, the examples of Michael Brown and Eric Garner included. However, these contemporary examples have a long history stemming back to the surveillance of enslaved populations in the United States and early media representations of black bodies. To understand the need and purpose of these resistant spaces, we first have to explore the formation of the dominant and often unconscious rhetoric of the black body, and thus black people, as delinquent and criminal.

2.1. Perceptions of Blackness and Criminality

According to Christian Parenti (2003) the construction of the black body being labeled as criminal and classified as problematic harks back to the 18th century with the fear of social insubordination and the disruption of capitalist norms and accumulation. Specifically, ethno-racial populations, including laborers, slaves, and to some extent indentured servants (folks who could disrupt the operations of capitalist businesses), were the targets of surveillance throughout the United States. Since mobility was a crucial source of power for slaves, knowing where enslaved persons were, what they were doing, as well as being able to identify persons, was of the utmost importance for better control of these populations. Slave passes, manumission papers, and slave hire badges, a form of identification for enslaved and “free” black men and women located in the South and North of the United States, are classic examples of how these populations were controlled and identified. Another classic form of surveillance during this time were the runaway notices that were posted in the local newspapers. However, more importantly, the slave patrols or “patrollers”, working in conjunction with/reinforcing the slave passes and manumission papers, played a paramount role in the surveillance and identification of enslaved populations. The patrollers were often paid by slave owners to be bounty hunters for runaway slaves as well as to “be in the know” of the plantation activities of those enslaved [11].

The surveillance of these populations continued with the scientific construction of “criminals” and “problem populations” in the 18th and 19th centuries [12]. These scientific constructions of inferior, superior, and biological notions of criminals were based on older (racist) notions of differences between white and black races [13]. However, this explicitly biased pseudo-science was used to justify and give credence to the continued need to control and surveil this “problematic” population by law enforcement [14]. This rendering of the black body as problematic is important in understanding how our institutions were constructed to respond to black bodies. For instance, our law enforcement agents were directed to surveil and “patrol” this racialized group that was deemed prone to criminality. The local newspapers often reinforced these notions of criminality and inferiority with the “For Sale” and “Wanted” advertisements and posters displayed in the paper [15]. In addition, the blackface [minstrel] performances during this time were also manifestations of the explicit belief that black people were associated with inferiority and negative attributes. Blackface, usually performed by white actors, represented and constructed blackness through the white gaze and act of performance. These blackface actors constructed blackness, in performance, as “childish, primitive, contented and endowed with great mimetic capacities” [16]. The explicit bias portrayed in minstrel and blackface performance continued in the 20th century, in mainstream media with the popular and long-running radio program, Amos and Andy. This radio program, written and performed by two white men, is an example of aural blackface and relied heavily on racist stereotypes [17]. This popular radio broadcast, later becoming a popular television sitcom with a black cast, was a staple in black households as well as white households. This reinforcement of black identity as foolish, imbecile, and primitive, propagated through mainstream media in the early 20th century, continues in the 21st century with the limited and stereotypical roles for black actors and actresses in Hollywood. Furthermore, the construction of blackness through the practices of enslavement, scientific racism, and blackface performances (historically and present-day) work to naturalize race

(along with these stereotypical beliefs) and make it appear as if it has always existed; making race an absolute marker of status or condition, with blackness coming to be identified with enslavement and inferiority and whiteness coming to be identified with having rights and privilege.

The Moynihan report on black poverty and the so-called “black matriarchy” or households headed by black women (1965) is another example of the naturalization of racial bias in the late-20th century [18]. The report entitled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* criminalized and demonized the black [matriarchal] family because it was deemed the opposite of the “thriving” white [patriarchal] family. Daniel Moynihan, the Assistant Secretary of Labor for President Lyndon B. Johnson (at the time of writing this report) explored the “tangle of pathology” within the black family and community(ies), arguing the black family was in a state of disarray due to centuries of white supremacy, including institutional racism and inequality. However, President Lyndon B. Johnson and the mass media, highlighting Moynihan’s section on the disruptive black matriarchal family and culture of poverty, used the report to cite the high crime rates and imprisonment rates and consequently justify state violence against black bodies.

The Moynihan report (1965) is important because it is yet another moment (building on the rhetoric of blackness as inferior, primitive, and needing to be surveilled) where the black family and black community(ies) were being constructed in mainstream media as a problem due to the “culture” in these communities. While this report dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, we can see evidence of this bias towards black bodies in the present moment with the acute criminalizing and victimization of young men and women of color without addressing the structural problems, shaped by the history of slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the naturalization of racial bias, which are embedded in the fabric of society [13,19]. Take for example, the murder of Trayvon Martin that became more of a discussion about “urban” culture (code word for black) than it was about his murder in the mainstream media. Consequently, it became an alibi where the adolescent essentially was blamed for his own death because he was a youth of color wearing a hoodie. More importantly, this long-standing bias towards black bodies and blackness justified for George Zimmerman, a local auxiliary officer, as well as to the jury (who did not indict Zimmerman for Trayvon Martin’s murder) the need for the “patrol” of black bodies. Another example is Mike Brown who was criminalized by the media and local police because he lived in an impoverished and drug-infested area of St. Louis [20]. Therefore, we see in the present moment this continued need to redefine blackness outside of the familiar social scripts and (un)conscious attitudes and beliefs about race and otherness.

Much of how people come to understand what it means to be a man, woman, black, white, Asian, Latina, masculine, feminine, rural, and urban is shaped and produced by mainstream media [21–23]. Ultimately, the media is central to what comes to represent many people’s social realities and also central to the spread of ideas worldwide. Most importantly, the media that comes to represent social realities are shaped by histories of colonization, slavery, and imperialism; histories that were shaped by and have shaped white supremacy, racism, and sexism in our society today. Consider for example, the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, the tropical storm that hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005, causing levees to break, mass flooding, and the displacement of many residents in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, but, in particular, New Orleans, a predominantly black parish of Louisiana. Sommers et al. (2006), exploring the way news coverage of the displaced residents in New Orleans shaped public perceptions of the survivors and the crisis, argue that racial bias played a role in media depictions [24]. Using an example from Hurricane Katrina let us explore a picture taken of a black man in floodwater carrying food and drinks in comparison to a white couple carrying food and drinks. The picture with the black man had the caption “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store...” [25]. Whereas, the caption for the white couple reads, “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store...” [26]. What are we to make of this discrepancy in captions for two similar images? Why does the black youth get the unspoken and spoken labels of deviant, criminal, and “looter”, while the white couple gets the unspoken and spoken labels of survivors, resilient, and “finders”? This example demonstrates how the mainstream media can and have shaped representations and perceptions of black bodies. Even when there is no crime committed, the black body gets criminalized by default.

Another example of mainstream media reinforcing perceptions of blackness and criminality can be seen in the 2015 news coverage of three white men and four black men who were arrested for committing the same crime of burglary. The ABC Iowa news station used the mug shots of the four black men with the headline, “Coralville police arrest four in burglary investigation” [27]. Whereas, for the three white men, a school picture was used with the headline, “Three University of Iowa wrestlers arrested; burglary charges pending” [28]. Both of these stories were reported on the same day, by the same news station and written by the same journalist. The choice of pictures used by the journalists and broadcast by the news station speak for itself; the black men in the mugshot appear disheveled and unhappy, while the school picture of the three white men display them in uniformed dark-colored jackets, white collared shirts, with yellow ties. The picture of the three white men not only shows them smiling but it also displays some sort of wealth and class, as they would only be wearing that type of uniform at a private or preparatory school. This is another example of the black body getting the label of criminal and deviant, while the white men who were arrested for the same crime get the unspoken label of smart and good. The news reports of the Hurricane Katrina survivors and the men arrested for burglary are ten years apart, yet both reports expose the problem of bias in mainstream news media, while also indicating the need for spaces that can challenge these biased narratives.

2.2. Constructing an Alternative Theory

In an effort to explore the racial bias in news coverage as systemic, covertly integrated into societal institutions, this paper seeks to explore alternative spaces and textual poachers that attempt to expose these patterns. Susan Bordo’s (1993) [29] concept of battleground/playground and bell hooks’ (1990) [30] concept of homeplace is useful in analyzing the digital space of black Twitter and textual poaching. By placing these scholarships in dialogue with each other, this article will be able to (1) move away from the idea that oppressive conceptions of the body have to overdetermine our relationship to it (specifically, women and men who do not let the attempt to oppress and regulate their body be more significant than the counter-disciplinary possibilities); and (2) explore [digital] spaces, purposefully created for collective action and resistance, that often get overlooked.

For Bordo, the metaphor of the body as a “battleground” ([29], p. 263), borrowed from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, captures how the body is directly involved in a political field with power relations having an immediate hold on it, creating a “perpetual battle” for self-determination ([14], p. 26). In other words, Bordo argues that the body is never void of history, politics, or culture, and therefore the body is an important site that is constantly under attack for control, whether it be by institutions, technology, doctors, and/or the media. For Bordo, the “perpetual battle” is marked by the individual’s or communities’ struggle to fight for the control of their own body(ies).

Bordo’s (1993) metaphor of “playground” is quite the opposite of the “battleground”. If the “battleground” is where resistance takes place, then the “playground” logic works to destabilize the resistance struggles of the “battleground”. Bordo argues that the playground emerges within postmodern conversation or technological advances and is ahistorical, apolitical, acultural, and a space “where anything goes” ([29], p. 258). Therefore, this article seeks to reclaim the “playground logic”, arguing that while the playground may be a space for play and “where anything goes” it is not always void of culture, history, and politics. Rather, this article embraces Fanon’s analysis that “black subjects”, understanding their body as a battleground and the ways racism works, will *adopt* and *alter* dominant ideologies for their own needs and purposes [31,32]. Consequently, this article considers the ways social media, often operating as a playground, can transform into a battleground. However, the question becomes, what conditions allow for such a transformation? To engage this question, this research builds on bell hooks’ concept of homeplace.

In *Homeplace*, bell hooks explores a place where one can seek shelter, comfort, and nurture for their soul; a place where one learns dignity and integrity, along with faith ([30], p. 41). When hooks discuss homeplace, she is talking about a specific location, a home, which is run by women and usually a site for family and close friends to seek safe harbor. However, although hooks is thinking about it within the context of a physical home, it does not have to be restricted to that. While hooks

is primarily concerned with black women's senses of home and safety, homeplace can broadly be considered as any "place" that provides shelter, etc., for black women. The concept of digital homespace, put forth in this article, brings together the concepts of battleground, playground, and textual poaching, thus becoming a space created by marginalized and oppressed persons of color, on the World Wide Web that serves to (re)shape and (re)create individuals' sense of self through redefinition, sharing of testimonials, collective action, and building communities. Since marginalized and oppressed groups often face oppression on a daily basis through dominant mainstream media, which often portray stereotypical and degrading images and roles of these groups, spaces that celebrate and embrace these marginalized groups become necessary. The hashtag #APHeadlines, explored in the first section of this paper, is a good example of the creation of a digital homespace through the playground and battleground logic and textual poaching, an exercise where users create their own communities to express adoration or frustration with specific media content, exposing racial bias in mainstream news coverage. Therefore, digital homespaces serve to (re)create and (re)define individuals' sense of self by exposing bias news coverage, and through the sharing of testimonies, obstacles, struggles, and triumphs that oppressed folks on the margins face on a day-to-day basis, while building coalitions and communities. These spaces seem to be on-going, with no finite end or beginning date or time. Also, while these spaces may begin on the internet, they are not limited to that space, and can move beyond the digital sphere. Accordingly, for this article, the black body is read as a battleground site where there is a "perpetual battle" for control, specifically combatting dominant ideologies of racial bias around blackness. The battlefield is social media, and textual poaching in black Twitter is the main weapon/tool used to confront and challenge both implicit and explicit bias, thus creating a digital homespace for marginalized groups/persons.

3. Methods

For this research, a content analysis of the corporate news media and black Twitter was performed; this analysis spans from 2014 to early 2016. A Lexis Nexis search was performed on the most trusted news stations and newspapers, which in a recent study by the Pew Research Center were named as CNN, ABC News, NBC News, CBS News, Fox News, The New York Times, USA Today, and The Wall Street Journal [33]. The analysis specifically focused on the news and black Twitter content surrounding the murders of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Jordan Davis, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Renisha McBride. The Lexis Nexis search consisted of published news reports from the date of the incident to a month after the incident, and reports after any legal action took place (such as an arrest, grand jury decision, or trial). There were a total of 433 news articles populated for the six murder victims; out of the 433 news articles, a total of 79 articles were from the top-trusted news sources. Each news report was hand-coded, by one person, and scrutinized for similarities and differences in reporting, including biased key words, phrases, content, and headlines. For the purpose of this study, much attention was paid to the descriptions and characterizations of the victims in the news reports. The analysis of black Twitter consisted of an archived content search, performed through the Twitter platform, on six popular hashtags that emerged after news broke of the deaths of the six murder victims and jury verdicts. The hashtags included #APHeadlines, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #DangerousBlackKids, #ICantBreathe, #CrimingWhileWhite, and #AliveWhileBlack. These hashtags are important to this research because they began to "trend" on Twitter within hours of an incident and often shaped the popular online attitudes about said incident. The analysis of these hashtags was shaped by participant observation and mainstream news reports, therefore, the hashtags under investigation were tracked in real-time. Furthermore, an archived search was performed on all of the mentioned hashtags using the advanced search tab on the Twitter platform. The advanced search tab on Twitter allows for a search of specific hashtags and keywords within certain parameters; search filters included specific dates, twitter accounts, and location. In addition, news coverage of the hashtags is also included in this research. News coverage usually appeared the same day or within a day or two of the emergence of the trending hashtag. Due to the transient nature of these digital spaces, a 24-h snap-shot was performed (beginning from the creation of the hashtag), which highlighted the most popular/retweeted messages. While Twitter is a public

space, it is important to acknowledge the prevalence of surveillance in these digital spaces (by the state and by other local actors) for purposes of intimidation and/or to silence dissent. It is for this reason that the popular hashtag messages shared in this research fall into one or more of the following categories: (1) they were the most retweeted messages; (2) they were tweeted by popular twitter users (including social/political activist) and (3) they were tweets that have been publicized in mainstream media; these tactics were used in an effort to reduce harm to users. This analysis is qualitative; however, quantitative statistical data is used to illustrate the impact of the hashtags under investigation. Foucault's (1984) understanding of genealogy as a method was helpful for the analysis of black Twitter [34]. Genealogy is a method that records singular events that seem to have no history because the events are often understood as unrelated and not linear. Therefore, genealogy allows for discoveries of events masked as other or different, events that are often silenced by history because they are not linear and differ from traditional historical studies, to be brought to the surface for investigation. This methodology is extremely useful in this investigation of user responses on black Twitter, which due to the medium, can oftentimes be regarded as ahistorical or unrelated to social and political events in the mainstream news or society at-large. While recognizing that no single approach is sufficient in exploring the complexities of the internet, Everett's (2002) methodology allows for the framing of the findings on blackness in social media as a "snapshot or moment-in-time approach." This method allows for some useful information about this topic to be ascertained, while also appreciating the fluidity and the ephemeral nature of these spaces ([35], p. 128). Therefore, the analysis of black Twitter includes 24-h snap shots of the most retweeted hashtags, along with heavily circulated memes, photo statements, and videos. Notably, these methods expose the challenges of exploring online environments and the limitations of traditional methods of conducting research due to the fleeting nature of the information found in these online forums.

4. Findings

The questions that emerge through the investigation of Twitter and black Twitter are: what are the spaces and activities on black Twitter that challenge dominant, oppressive, and biased narratives of the black body found in mainstream news reporting? What do these spaces look like, and are they always present? In the cases of Garner, Brown, Davis, Martin, and Rice, the findings demonstrate that social media users have created digital homespaces through textual poaching as resistance, aimed to "define and encourage a new consciousness among black people" ([36], p. xvi). This consciousness encourages pride in blackness and stimulates communal responsibility among all people of color for one another and for the purpose of challenging implicit and explicit racial bias. Reviewing the case studies, there are three specific ways that black Twitter has behaved as a digital homespace for black bodies: (1) redefinition; (2) enforcing counter-narratives, testimonials; and (3) organizing and building communities.

4.1. Redefinition

The act of redefinition is important, as the constantly reinforced and constructed definitions of inferior, animalistic, brute, and thug continue to be used to justify the oppression and war on black bodies [36]. Therefore, in an attempt to recover/redefine and love Blackness, after the murder of Mike Brown in St. Louis, the hashtag "IfTheyGunnedMeDown" emerged on black Twitter. This hashtag marked the way mainstream news sources were portraying Mike Brown, as a gang member, and had previously criminalized other black victims of police murder and violence [37–47]. The #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag was an effort for people to voice their discontent with the media's portrayal and stereotyping of victims who had been killed or injured at the hands of the police and vigilantes. Consider, for example, after Michael Brown's murder, news stations searched Brown's Facebook for photos and used images of Brown wearing a red jersey and holding up a peace sign, which was later construed as a gang symbol by news reporters [48–50]. Another photo that surfaced in news outlets was of Brown staring menacingly into the camera while wearing headphones. These pictures were used to assault Brown's character, along with news reports about Brown being in a gang and living in a neighborhood that was ridden with poverty and high drug usage [20]. Little or

no attention was given to the fact that Brown had recently graduated from high school and was about to begin college in a couple of days. Black Twitter users tweeted and retweeted the picture of Mike Brown in his high school graduation cap and gown, the photo his family publicized after his death, instead of the photos the mainstream media were circulating. Similarly, in the case of Trayvon Martin, the news media searched his Facebook account and circulated a photo of Martin glaring into the camera, wearing a baseball cap, and sticking up his middle finger, which blocks the bottom half of his face. However, the Martin family circulated a photo of Martin smiling without a hat or anything else blocking his face. In both cases, the photo circulated by the news was used to characterize both Brown and Martin as trouble-makers needing to be surveilled or “patrolled”, and in many ways justifying the violence and murder of Brown and Martin.

Consequently, the “blacktag” “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown” asked the question, ‘what picture from my social media account would the news use to portray me if I were gunned down?’ Through textual poaching as resistance, users posted pictures they thought framed them in a compromising light for mainstream viewers and then juxtaposed this with pictures from their daily life. This hashtag was named one of the most trending hashtags for 2014, signifying the conscious effort black Twitter users put forth to expose the bias in mainstream media in addressing the issue of violence against black bodies [51]. For example, one user with the handle @tydrizzzy posted two photos, one photo of a young guy sitting across a bed wearing all black with pants sagging, and another photo of the same young guy from the previous picture, in a classroom, wearing a military uniform, reading a storybook to young children [52]. There were many pictures of this nature posted on twitter and other social media forums. Another tweeter with the handle @RevrendDoctor posted two photos, one photo with a friend and @RevrendDoctor doing a hand sign for his fraternity. The other photo is of @RevrendDoctor behind a podium, wearing a cap and gown, at a Morehouse College graduation ceremony [53]. This hashtag was powerful because not only did it start a national conversation about racial bias in mainstream news media, but it also forced many news media outlets to respond, similar to the hashtag “APHeadlines”. The hashtag “IfTheyGunnedMeDown”, challenging the narrative put forth in news outlets, was reported in four of the eight trusted news sources explored in this research, including USA Today, NY Times, ABC News, and The Washington Post, demonstrating its significance [54–58].

Similarly, the “blacktag” #DangerousBlackKids also emerged after a judge declared a mistrial in the case of Jordan Davis, a 17-year old, who was shot and killed at a gas station by Michael Dunn, a white patron, who objected to the loud music coming from the vehicle Davis and his friends were driving and “feared” for his life. This hashtag also emerged as a way to shed light on the murder of Tamir Rice, a 12-year old boy who was shot by Ohio police while playing with a toy gun in a community park. This hashtag challenged the way mainstream news sources were portraying young black children as dangerous and deviants [59]. For instance, one user with the handle @AntoineJLowery posted a picture of a boy smiling and riding piggy-back on a man’s back with the caption, “Practicing his choke-hold #DangerousBlackKids” [60]. Another user with the handle, @OdotJdot tweeted a picture of two small children in a red wagon with the caption, “Young black criminals in their getaway car. Careful! #DangerousBlackKids” [61]. These examples demonstrate the playground and battleground aspects of black Twitter. Although the users are being flippant, they are responding to a very real concern, the criminalization and demonization of black bodies. Ultimately, through textual poaching, black Twitter users took to the battlefield and created a digital homespace to fight for the control to define their own bodies by being very critical of mass media’s representations of black bodies. In many of these cases, the news media responded by changing headlines and reporting on the hashtag response. However, redefining the black body is only one step in challenging racial bias and oppression; changing the narrative is also very important in this process.

4.2. Power of Testimonials—Enforcing Counter-Narratives

Activists and protestors made it their task to challenge the mainstream narrative of Ferguson and Mike Brown by tweeting and re-tweeting counter-narratives of the events taking place in

Ferguson. This is another method of reclaiming the body/fighting for self-determination and creating a digital homespace.

In the case of Michael Brown, twitter users pre-supposed the narrative of Michael Brown's friend, Dorian Johnson, who was an eyewitness over the police's take of events. The police and news media were trying to undermine Johnson's account of events [62]. Take for example, when reports came out that Michael Brown did not have his hands up when he was shot; however, black Twitter continued to side with Dorian Johnson's account of the events leading to the death of Michael Brown, creating the hashtag, "#HandsUpDontShoot," which also became a popular chant with protesters. The use of this hashtag in protests is an example of textual poaching moving beyond the space of social media.

In the case of Eric Garner, social media users shared the video of Garner being placed in a chokehold by police with the hashtag, #ICantBreathe. As such, while the police and mainstream news sources attempted to posit a narrative of a "big" guy who refused to listen to the police, black Twitter responded by reinforcing a counter-narrative of abusive police tactics with the hashtag and popular protest chant, "I Can't Breathe". The hashtag "#ICantBreathe" was also named one of the most trending hashtags on Twitter for the year 2014, as well as the hashtag "#IAmMikeBrown" [51]. Take for example, one user with the handle @sweetannie158 who retweeted,

MASSIVE SIT-IN TAKES OVER TIMES SQUARE #HandsUpDontShoot #ICantBreathe [63].

Another user with the handle @CharinaNadura tweeted,

In front of #NYPD station in times square yelling #HandsUpDontShoot & #ICantBreathe [64].

A user with the twitter handle @Sifill_LDF tweeted,

Black men do not have to perfect for their lives to have value [sic]. #EricGarner is not on trial. He is a homicide victim. #Icantbreathe [65].

In addition, there were more than 18 million tweets about the hashtag, "#Ferguson", in August of 2014 [66]. According to a Twitter analysis of the hashtag "#Ferguson", these Twitter posts surrounded the events of the Mike Brown case, the ensuing protests, and cases of police brutality [67]. According to that same report, the hashtag "#BlackLivesMatter", which is used to create awareness and share cases of police violence, was tweeted more than 9 million times in 2015 [68]. These popular hashtags affirm the power of black Twitter in sparking [national] conversations of racial bias and systemic violence against black bodies. Prior to these hashtags, conversations of police violence and systemic racism often occurred on a local level. The response from the public, with the help of citizen journalists, is another demonstration of the power of black Twitter. Citizen journalists are the people on the ground filming and sharing cell-phone recordings of the protests, police violence, and citizen-police interactions. Consider, for example, the Ferguson protestors who were live-streaming (sending out the link via Twitter), sharing on Vine, and tweeting their first-hand accounts with the militarized St. Louis Police officers and the national guard that were attempting to control the protest and enforce a curfew. One video, in particular, that was circulated on Twitter and Vine, a social media platform that allows you to share ten seconds of video, was of an officer yelling at protestors saying he was going to "shoot" if the protestors did not back up. This video was picked up by mainstream news outlets, which resulted in the removal of this officer from the Ferguson detail (as reported on Twitter). However, for protestors, this officer was just one in many that abused their powers and faced little to no punishment. However, more importantly, the world was seeing first-hand what was taking place in Ferguson, with the help of citizen journalists, through a different perspective. Images of police with body shields and body armor throwing smoke grenades at protestors, emptying cans of mace in protestors' eyes, and the huge armored military tanks with loud-speakers driving down the streets flooded Twitter and other social media platforms during the Ferguson protests.

Lastly, the sharing of personal testimonies was also a powerful tool used on social media. Users sharing their own experiences with local police in their respective locations, across the country, validated the counter-narratives being shared of the Mike Brown and Eric Garner case. Take, for example, the twitter hashtag #CrimingWhileWhite, which sparked the black Twitter hashtag #AliveWhileBlack. The “criming while white” hashtag was created by Jason Ross, a writer for the tonight show starring Jimmy Fallon, after the grand jury decided not to indict the New York City police officer responsible for Eric Garner’s death. Ross shared his own story of ‘criming while white’ to mark the racialized double-standard of our criminal justice system, and encouraged other white folks to share their stories of “under-punished f-ups” [69]. This hashtag, which was named one of the most trending hashtags for 2014, demonstrated an unequal justice system and a racial double standard [51]. For instance, one user with the handle @skalakattack tweeted,

Got pulled over for a brake light out. Underage and drinking and blew over the limit.
Cop let me walk to my friend’s apt. #CrimingWhileWhite [70].

Another tweet by a user with the handle @cardsgirl1972 stated,

When I was 20, I stole a pack of cigs, cop prayed with me and made me promise I wouldn’t do it again. #CrimingWhileWhite [71].

Another user with the handle @oceana_roll stated,

In high school I got in a 3 car wreck that might have been my fault. The cop told me it was ‘illegal alien’s fault’. #CrimingWhileWhite [72].

These examples demonstrate the power of testimony in highlighting discrepancies between police interaction and race and violence. However, while the #CrimingWhileWhite hashtag may have been a way to mark these disparities with counter-narratives, many people thought these narratives were glorifying white privilege; consequently, a twitter user, Jamilah Lemieux, a senior digital editor for Ebony.com, started what became the popular black Twitter hashtag #AliveWhileBlack [73]. Lemieux tweeted,

Got raped+robbed. Police took forever to interview me, mentioned that women sometimes lie to hide “gambling, overspending” #AliveWhileBlack [74].

Another example of the #AliveWhileBlack hashtag included a tweet by user Francesca Ramsey with the handle @chescaleigh,

I was mugged after dropping a friend off late at night after work. The cops harassed me & asked why I was “really there” #alivewhileblack [75].

Another tweeter with the handle @AkilahObviously stated,

17 y/o—Drove to Kroger to get my mom Nyquil. Pulled over unexplained. Asked why I was in my neighborhood. 4 backup cop cars. #AliveWhileBlack [76].

The purpose of this hashtag was not to glorify “under-punished f-ups”, but instead to highlight the ways people of color have a difficult time just staying alive in regular day-to-day activities, such as driving to work. Here, Patricia Turner’s analysis of rumors is relevant. Turner argues that rumor in African-American communities operate as a tool of resistance, a vital mechanism, in which one uses to protect oneself from continued harm and degradation [77]. This analysis of rumors helps to explain how and why the testimonials and counter-narratives spread so quickly and became popular on black Twitter (regardless of whether the testimonies were true or not). These testimonies and counter-narratives, all examples of textual poaching as resistance, shared different experiences and stories while shedding a light on the disparities of race and inequality across the United States, and giving a voice to the often voiceless; but more importantly, they began a national and global conversation about institutionalized racial inequalities in America.

4.3. Healing through Organizing and Building Community

Continuing the work of redefinition and enforcing counter narratives, this section explores the ways Twitter organizers used their forum to take the next step to challenge and reduce bias, racism, and oppression towards black bodies and other oppressed groups. The organizations explored in this section have gained popularity through social media. These organizations stand out because they embrace tactics from the non-violent civil rights struggle and also tactics from the more-militant black power struggles, they also have an active presence both online and offline and have created a list of demands for change on the state and federal level. In addition, these organizations created many of the textual poaching hashtags on black Twitter. These groups, Black Lives Matter, Ferguson Action, This Stops Today, Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, Hands Up United, Black Youth Project 100 in Chicago, Leaders of the Beautiful Struggle in Baltimore, and We Charge Genocide in Chicago, are all a part of *The Movement for Black Lives*, and are similar in that they explore the problem of police officers acting without impunity as a systemic issue rooted within a long history of systematic racism. These groups are also very influential through their use of social media. Social media forums, such as black Twitter, Facebook, and blogs were instrumental tools in organizing beyond the space of social media. These groups using these tools spread the word of meet-up times and dates of demonstrations, publicized demands of elected officials, and provided updates to the general public.

One example of these organizations challenging systemic injustice through social media was the organized mass boycott of Black Friday. Similar to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the objective of the boycott and mass protest of Black Friday, one of the biggest shopping days of the year in the United States, was a way of hitting the state and nation, where it hurts, their pockets. The intention was to show that if the state continued to demonstrate that black lives do not matter by the continual systemic oppression and abuse of black people then they will not support the economic structure of this racist state. The movement of “Black Out Black Friday” emerged with people sharing meet up times and boycott locations across the nation through Twitter. The blacktags “#BlackOutBlackFriday” and “#NotOneDime” were also named the most trending/popular Twitter hashtags in 2014 [51]. This hashtag sent protestors out in droves to boycott Black Friday shopping across the United States. Many stores in various cities cited the loss of sales due to the protestors who occupied malls, forcing them to close [78–80]. For instance, in downtown Seattle, protestors disrupted the tree lighting ceremony causing the Westlake Center mall to close three hours early on one of the busiest shopping days of the year [81].

Another example of these organizations challenging systemic injustice through social media was the protestors shutting down highways and bridges. This demonstration addressed who has access to walk on the streets (think about Mike Brown being stopped because he was walking in the street or Eric Garner who was harassed because he was standing on the street corner or Jordan Davis who was at the convenience store or Trayvon Martin who was walking home from the store). The protestors performed die-ins (having historical ties to sit-ins), however, die-ins took place in main intersections and on bridges, demonstrating the loss of Mike Brown’s life and how he was left to lay in the middle of the street for four hours before his body was taken to the coroner’s office. Many of these protests were organized in-person, but spread through Twitter and other social media outlets. An example of the power of black Twitter, during many of the protests, as events changed (such as police arrests or blockades), protestors were able to stay in the loop with each other by sending out a tweet and reconvening at another location within minutes. This caused an increase in surveillance of Twitter. Some Twitter users even tweeted photos of an unmarked van they believed was scrambling their network, making them unable to make calls and access social media. More recently, it has been exposed that the Department of Homeland Security used social media to gather intelligence on the social justice protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and also in Baltimore. Researchers have warned activists using Twitter and other social media platforms that the Department of Homeland Security has stated that social media ‘is a constant provider [of intelligence] and is fairly reliable’ [82]. Continuing this argument, a former Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] agent of the United States, John Kiriakou, who was charged and imprisoned for sharing classified information with a reporter (who never reported on the information shared), told *The Real News Network* that the government collects emails, phone

calls, and Facebook and Twitter posts on every American citizen [83]. This speaks to the very real threat that surveillance poses to social actors who challenge the system through social media.

While the groups may differ on a few demands, what remain consistent are the real-life consequences and results of these movements. First, with the flourish of trending hashtags circulating around Twitter, including but not limited to #BlackLivesMatter, #HandsUpDontShoot, #ThisEndsNow, #ShutItDown, and #ICantBreathe, they were able to (1) create coalitional spaces through social media; (2) expose racial bias, spread awareness, and spark national conversations of the issues at hand through blacktags and textual poaching; (3) allow people to voice concerns of police brutality; (4) reclaim control over defining the black body; (5) assist in the organizing of demonstrations nationwide; and (6) slow down commerce, by disrupting Black Friday shopping across the country. However, these organizations have not stopped there; instead, organizers have continued building coalitions both locally and globally—another example of textual poaching and the creation of digital homespases moving beyond social media.

Organizers in Black Lives Matter, Dream Defenders, and various Ferguson anti-police brutality protestors took a solidarity trip to Palestine. The purpose of the ten-day trip was to connect with activists living under Israeli occupation, show a link between oppressions, and build relationships. This was a powerful trip, with one activist stating,

In the spirit of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael and many others, we thought the connections between the African American leadership of the movement in the US and those on the ground in Palestine needed to be reestablished and fortified.

~Ahmad Abuznaid, the legal and policy director of the Dream Defenders.

There were also tweets from people in other countries supporting and assisting protestors who were in Ferguson, by providing pictures and videos of how to defend oneself against tear gas, as well as photos of people marching in the streets holding posters that read “Brazilian people in solidarity with #Ferguson #BlackLivesMatter” and “Tokyo stands with Ferguson”.

Lastly, what was most interesting about the digital spaces and movements was the creation of a digital homespace through textual poaching, which reaffirmed humane notions of blackness, undermined implicit and explicit racial bias in mainstream news reports through testimonials and counter-narratives, and lastly the built coalitions which grew beyond the internet. Most importantly, these digital spaces became sites for the spread of knowledge and history, a particular history usually located in academic spaces.

5. Discussion

As laid out in this paper, we see a clear need for spaces of encouragement and upliftment within black communities. Social media forums, while often understood as a playground, can also operate as a battleground—a space that actively undermines the attempts to oppress black bodies. Twitter and black Twitter are crucial in the awareness it provides to people around the nation. It was through these forums that many protests were organized and that information was spread. Social media is most useful for the tools it provides to organizers. The idea that one can send out a tweet or a post and share it with millions of people within seconds is an easy way to recruit and disseminate. Similar to mainstream mass media, social media also has the power to shape attitudes and beliefs of the masses. In this case, black Twitter worked to undermine implicit and explicit bias in mainstream news, while also uniting folks in these spaces through self-identification and a redefining/reclaiming of blackness.

While these spaces are useful, it can also be determined from this research that these spaces are not transformative by themselves. In other words, these spaces provide little moments that make for resistance. For example, while observing black Twitter, there were some cases of police harassment/abuse that did not receive a popular hashtag or receive the same public attention as other cases. Take for example, the lack of attention the Marissa Alexander case received on black Twitter versus the Trayvon Martin case. Marissa Alexander is an African American woman who was arrested for shooting a warning shot in the air to protect herself from her abusive husband. Alexander used

the same “Stand your ground” defense as Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman, and while her warning shot did not result in a murder, she was originally sentenced to 100 years in prison. This case did not receive the same amount of attention on black Twitter as the Trayvon Martin case, which was interesting, since both cases represented a national fear of black bodies. Alexander’s case speaks to a number of limitations with black Twitter: (1) it marks the types of bodies that are believed to be at risk for violence; (2) it signifies which black lives matter; and (3) it marks the tensions and limitations of essentializing.

Consequently, while there are some cases that people can easily rally around, there are other cases that do not receive as much attention. This leads to the investigation of “accepted truths”. For example, in society we easily accept the idea that black men are constantly under attack, therefore, people can easily rally around those bodies in question. However, black women, queer, transgender, and immigrant bodies, to name a few, do not seem to receive the same attention. As such, it is quite ironic that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, created by queer black women, is not often used to bring attention to violence against queer black women. The power of accepted truths seems to be at play in these cases. Consequently, Kimberly Crenshaw and other activists/scholars deemed it necessary to publish a study on the institutional discrimination and oppression against black women, while also creating the hashtag #SayHerName [84]. The hashtag #SayHerName emerged as a response to the lack of attention being paid to black women (including queer and transgender folks) who face similar oppressions as black men. Therefore, while these spaces are useful when they operate as tools to challenge oppression, spread awareness, and assist in organizing counter-actions, they also tend to be short-lived and sparked by the power of accepted truths.

Acknowledgments: I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the following people whose critical questions and engaged dialogue made these reflections possible: Gladys Jiménez-Muñoz, Kelvin Santiago-Valles, Bill Martin, Anna Everett, Xhercis Méndez, and Zhana Kurti.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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