LGBTQ People of Color and Digital Spaces of Empowerment

By Eden Bonjo

ABSTRACT. In recent history, the internet has been considered a place where disembodied users can escape the limitations of their corporeal bodies. But in the contemporary moment, the digital and the physical worlds have become mutually constitutive. What happens when a politics of race, sexuality, and gender is centered in an analysis of digital activity? LGBTQ people of color use strategies to navigate marginalizing social dynamics of power both offline and online. This negotiation is important because of how integral the internet has become to everyday life. In the age of social media, cultural production has become the business of the masses. Digital democracy decentralizes the production of media that helps us to define ourselves. By participating in this process, LGBTQ people of color self-empower by promoting visibility among both themselves and other communities.

Introduction: Theoretical Groundwork

This essay is derived from the literature review of a community-based research project in which I worked with members of an LGBTQ support group located in a culturally Latinx nonprofit space. The young adults who participated in this study displayed engagement with social media throughout processes of identity development and community organization. This project intervenes in the digital humanities discourse which talks about digital interaction as though it is separable from corporeal bodies. Rather than perpetuating the tendency to pose politics of race, gender, and sexuality as inconsequential to the digital realm, I intend to center these structures in my analysis to
champion the navigational strategies employed by queer people of color in online sociality. Here, an analytical lens grounded in queer of color theorizing will guide an investigation of the internet as a space of empowerment for LGBTQ people of color. As will be explored later, “Latinx” is used here as a gender-inclusive term to refer to people of Latin American heritage (in place of “Latino” or “Latina”).

Queer of color critique will be the primary method of analysis here because it responds to social and national investments in normative subjects and exposes the harms that they inflict on marginalized groups. It historically launches from Black feminist thought to define a body of theoretical work that looks to cultural texts to expose the manifold embodiments of gender and sexuality that circulate within communities of color. These, in turn, reveal the limitations and restrictions of the normative subject. In an analysis of the writings of Cherrí Moraga and women of color feminist theorizing at large, Grace Hong (2006) defines culture as encompassing “a system of meaning-making, a system ordered by relations of power... as itself a material and social practice.” (p. xii). Thus, queer of color critique examines culture as a highly politicized arena, as the formational site of social power dynamics.

Roderick A. Ferguson, a foregrounding thinker in queer of color analysis, introduced the notion that the universalization of a white heteropatriarchal norm directly functions to produce the queer of color “other.” He articulates race as a project of national formation that forces the question “are you with us, or against us?” on those subjected to it. Put differently, the hegemonic norm allows sociopolitical institutions to selectively convey a sense of national belonging to people according to racial identity. Ferguson (2004) argues, “revolutionary and cultural nationalisms waxed empiricist as they measured the authenticity of subjects of color and defined the reality of minority cultures in terms of heteropatriarchy” (p. 140). Accordingly, I argue that white heteropatriarchy must be dismantled through strategies that work to uplift LGBTQ
people of color and give stage to their voices, actions, and experiences.

Of course, groundwork based in queer of color critique must begin with a discussion of the eternal paradox of identity politics. Specifically, there is a need for unifying identities which signal collective experiences of marginalization at the hands of the normative regime in order to launch resistance efforts (Crenshaw, 1991). Yet, at the same time, these categories often result in racial and sexual essentialisms which exclude certain people from belonging even as they share experiences of marginalization. Given this conundrum, what is the appropriate metric for inclusivity in categories of racial identity? Or is there a better way to frame the question of racial belonging?

The answer to these questions lies within the concept of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues that an identity politics which positions sexism and racism as mutually exclusive experiences necessarily fails to account for the experiences of women of color. She therefore advocates for a levying of identity politics according to “the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (p. 1242). In other words, the language of race, class, gender, and sexuality should not aim to divide people up and parse out their experiences of oppression as isolated from each other; instead, the unique nature of identity-specific marginalizations must be implemented in the pursuit of collective social change. Indeed, the boundaries between identity-based discourses must be made permeable in order to open the field to the voicing of those experiences which occur where they overlap. A politics of resistance is useless if it does not account for these intersections and employ them in the work of displacing white heteronormative hegemony. It is following this line of thought that the project at hand deliberately analyzes the manifestations of queer of color identity in digital space and investigates how LGBTQ people of color are using the internet in revolutionary ways.
**Latinidad: Complicating the Monolith of Racial Identity**

This project specifically investigates the role of online interaction for a Latinx community. Therefore, given a general queer of color critique framework, it is important to establish the particular complexities of Latinx racial identity. In *Queer Latinidad*, Juana María Rodríguez (2003) discusses identity politics specifically in light of *latinidad*, which she describes as something that serves “to define a particular geopolitical experience but it also contains within it the complexities and contradictions of immigration, (post)(neo)colonialism, race, color, legal status, class, nation, language, and the politics of location” (2003, p. 10). For Rodríguez, Latinx identity is the product of national and cultural foundations tied together by the shared experience of oppression under colonial projects. However, this commonality is threaded with the legacies of colonial oppression insofar as Latinx communities are parsed up according to how *latinidad* is recognized. Latin American communities are stratified along the lines of cultural, social, and economic factors in ways that are not all captured by “Latino” or “Latina” as catch-all panethnic identifiers. Therefore, shared racial and ethnic heritage alone is not sufficiently descriptive of the multidimensionality of embodied experience among individuals tied to *latinidad*.

Marginalization is interwoven with Latinx identity in the United States, but Rodríguez asserts that it cannot be taken for granted that those who identify with *latinidad* be regarded as simply powerless subjects molded by the circumstance of disenfranchisement; instead, LGBTQ Latinx subjects must be seen as engaging with their constructed realities in such a way as to cause rupture to the normative script. For example, a person of Latin American heritage may identify as Puerto Rican, Boricua, and Latino, and use these identifiers differentially according to social context. In Rodríguez’s words, “understanding the relationship between social context and social agents, socially constructed categories and lived realities, is crucial if we want to impact society and its (non)citizens” (2003, p. 21). Therefore, it is
crucial that normative social scripts of race and gender be continually interrogated by insisting on the plasticity of Latinx LGBTQ identity. It then becomes possible to investigate how LGBTQ Latinx people use digital space to navigate racial identity and the power structures woven therein.

**Disidentificatory Practice: Rethinking the Identity Crisis**

LGBTQ people of color engage in strategies of identity management that both resist and disidentify with power structures in the process of negotiating multiple marginalized identities. What is meant by disidentification? José Muñoz (1999) writes that it constitutes a social practice which uses “the code [of the majority] as raw material for representing a disempowered politics of positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (p. 4). Because society does not offer LGBTQ people of color any representational templates for a sanctioned way of being, it becomes necessary to read between the lines of the normative mainstream cultural narrative to infer a sense of self and assert a social presence.

Carlos Ulises Decena (2008) points to tacit subjectivity as a disidentificatory strategy practiced by minority groups to negotiate nonnormative identities. He discusses the way in which Latino men who have sex with men may not necessarily be explicitly ‘out’ with their families and frames it instead as what is often a tacit understanding which cannot be verbally breached because of the need to preserve community ties integral to survival. According to Decena, “individual self-realization through speech has been severed from collective social change. Today, one comes out not to be radical or change the world but to be a ‘normal’ gay subject” (p. 339). In this way, coming out is reframed not as liberating, but as a socially constructed trap. People of color experience the vision of a uniformly “out and proud” LGBTQ community as null and void because it fails to account for the complexities of racial oppression. For the subjects of Decena’s study, it does not make sense to explicitly self-
describe as homosexual, or bisexual, or as a member of the LGBTQ community. Instead, disidentificatory tactics are employed to reach an understanding. What are some other ways in which LGBTQ communities of color might disidentify with the normative model of sexual and gender identity?

### The Revolution Will Not Be Digitized... Or Will It?

The digital medium is rife with the same social contradictions and constraints that characterize the offline world. What are the ways in which digital spaces can work to either reinforce hierarchies of representation, or provide a launching point for politics of resistance? It has been established that race, gender, and sexuality function to mediate the relationship between social subjects and their enfranchisement. In the contemporary post-industrial, tech-based U.S. economy, technology then comes to serve as the means by which enfranchisement is expressed and asserted. The digital world is a space of both social interaction and cultural representation. In *Digital Dead End*, Virginia Eubanks (2011) argues that “technology embodies human relationships, legislates behavior, and shapes citizenship” (p. 21). If race, gender, and sexuality configure types of social membership with associated capacities to access resources, then digital space is a location in which these citizenships can be enacted, contested, and mobilized. How does this understanding of contemporary digital spaces signal movement towards digital space as a site of identity formation and contestation?

Recent years in the digital age have witnessed a shift in online sociality, such that the online and offline worlds have become mutually constitutive. Lisa Nakamura (2008) accounts for the way in which the digital landscape is shaped by race, gender, and sexuality by asserting that “there has come into being a new emphasis on the Internet’s promise as a place of radical production or intervention rather than as merely a space of anonymous consumption” (p. 51). The web viewer is not a passive and invisible subject willingly erased from physical space, but rather an agent that actively
engages society through the production of media cultures. For example, a Facebook user might signal Latinx identity with the use of Spanish language in status updates. The internet functions as an arena in which to assert the presence of marginalized racial, sexual, and gender identities. It is a potentially empowering space for LGBTQ people of color to proliferate and disseminate myriad representations of identity embodiment.

How might online connectedness contribute to an upheaval of normative power dynamics? Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (2003) theorize the democratic potential of web-based media. They argue that the revolution will indeed be digitized; however, it has not (and will not) taken on a single recognizable form. Rather, “digital democracy will be decentralized, unevenly dispersed, even profoundly contradictory... [and is] likely to appear first... in cultural forms: a changed sense of community, for example, or in a citizenry less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority” (p. 2). They call for an understanding of new media on democratic processes that attends to both its potential for liberation as well as the socio-cultural and political-economic factors that influence its mobilization. The trajectory of digitized democracy depends on whether barriers of access for the full participation of all political subjects can be overcome. These barriers constrain LGBTQ users of color online, even while digital activity itself may be used for empowerment.

Ultimately, while Jenkins and Thorburn argue that the response to the question of whether the revolution will be digitized is undoubtedly “yes,” they caution against overambitious conceptualizations of web-based participatory politics as able to instantaneously topple the regimes of contemporary governmental and corporate institutions. Nevertheless, they note that “the Web’s low barriers to entry ensure greater access than ever before to innovative, even revolutionary ideas” (p. 12). Ironically, Jenkins and Thorburn skirt around direct acknowledgement of race, gender, and sexuality as constructs that structure and
limit cultural representation for marginalized internet users. However, I point to their notion of participatory politics to argue that the digital world may provide a space for the demands of marginalized users to be voiced and prioritized through the decentralization of cultural production. The power to produce state-sanctioned knowledge is no longer a privilege afforded only to news corporations and media conglomerates.

The structures that define knowledge production are changing; the question of “whose knowledge” is less easy to define. What is lauded as legitimate cultural information about “who we are” is being taken back into the hands of the people in the circulation of narratives that tell society about itself. Jenkins (2010) writes, “A participatory culture is one where they are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement … the borders between reader and writer, consumer and producer, are starting to blur” (p. 48). Cultural production is no longer monopolized by the entertainment industry. Therefore, the proliferation of cultural representation is no longer limited to these institutions. Marginalized users are becoming empowered to circulate their narratives in the public sphere for purposes of not only public presence but also community connection and social support.

Vikki Fraser (2010) engages with the epistemology of the closet in the interaction of queer subjectivities within online arenas. In her assessment, “coming out” online doesn’t necessarily constitute a step towards realizing an “out” identity in the offline world; it may just as aptly be explored without necessarily being a means to an end. To overvalue the emergence of the queer subject from the closet limits us to an understanding of it as transitional, rather than as a space to be occupied and critically interrogated. According to Fraser, “by removing to a periphery space and acting within the stages and scripts set by that space, queer young people are able to use the online closet as both a separating and a unifying strategy” (p. 32). Truly, the compulsion to “come out,” to disclose a sexual identity, is omnipresent in both the
online and offline worlds. And yet the concept of disidentificatory practice encourages us to consider the ways in which tacit resistance may take an even greater stake in the subversion of marginality. For example, National Coming Out Day has become a Facebook “event” now regularly lauded with an onslaught of status updates declarative of personal truths of gender and sexuality. But it may be worthwhile to reflect for a moment on the implications of this proverbial bandwagon and who is permitted the access to ride. If nothing else, the question of how the internet mediates subjectivity (whether tacit or not) may be a useful stepping stone in thinking about possibilities for online collectivity among the LGBTQ of color community.

In Conclusion: The Possibility of Digital Community
Thus far, it has been established that the internet may serve as an arena for identity negotiation among LGBTQ of color individuals to disidentify with marginalizing structures of social power. A queer of color theoretical lens has been used to expose normative subjectivity as a hierarchical paradigm that depends on the disenfranchisement of LGBTQ people of color (Ferguson, 2004, p. 40). Identity politics has been investigated as a framework through which to understand social hierarchies and the violences of marginalization that they incur. While identity politics has been deemed necessary, it must also necessarily be continually interrogated; essentialist notions of identity may be counteracted with a metric of inclusivity based on shared experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). How might this knowledge of identity politics be applied to digital spaces? How do the strategies that LGBTQ young adults of color use to engage with the digital world translate into empowerment and visibility?

Digital space may play an important role in facilitating the embodiment of marginalized racial and/or sexual identities. The notion of participatory politics gestures to a shifting cultural terrain in which the business of cultural production is being delivered from the possession
of corporate entertainment oligarchs (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003, p. 4). While these entities indubitably still exist, widespread cultural production has been returned to the hands of the bloggers, webcammers, amateur filmmakers, Snapchatters, Facebookers, Instagramers, and all the other producers of the digital masses. The line between the digital and the physical worlds has been blurred such that they are mutually constitutive; the same goes for the line between producer and consumer. How, then, might web-mediated sociality also provide a tool for communicating and organizing among LGBTQ people of color? In the words of Silvio Torres-Saillant (2010), “when it comes to the race question... personal experience can adequately compete with other forms of knowledge in the power to lay out the issue under discussion” (p. 453). Personal experience is an important element in cultural representation which, in turn, can influence social power. If the production of cultural representation has truly undergone a shift toward digital democratization, LGBTQ people of color may be able to use online spaces as launching points for a politics of resistance against regimes of normative subjectivity. By documenting their own lives, asserting digital presences, and wielding the internet as a tool of social connectedness and community support, LGBTQ people of color become agents of digital cultural productions that destabilize and dismantle dynamics of power that structure marginality as a necessary condition of their identities.

References


Eden Bonjo is a recent graduate of Smith College (‘16) where they received highest honors for their award-winning thesis research project entitled “We post to give inspiration to other people’: LGBTQ Young Adults of Color and Digital Spaces of Empowerment.” Eden is passionate about advocacy and organizing in the transgender community and particularly enjoys thinking about the ways in which cultural representation presents opportunities to analyze shifting dynamics of social power. They are currently considering graduate programs in Education and Psychology. In their spare time, Eden enjoys bike rides, art projects, and petting cats.