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*F. Sudweeks, H. Hrachovec and C. Ess (eds). Proceedings Cultural Attitudes Towards Communication and Technology 2008, Murdoch University, Australia, 91-105.*

# RACE MATTERS

## *African Americans on the Web following Hurricane Katrina*

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**Abstract.** The Internet's penetration into everyday life increasingly reveals the ideological and cultural bases of information provided by, for, and about its users. Analyses of Internet use should accordingly include technology analyses, interactional analyses, and the embedded cultural contexts of the users, the technology, and the information artifacts published on the World Wide Web. This paper analyzes African American online responses to racialized depictions of Black culture and American citizenship following Hurricane Katrina, using W.E.B. DuBois' observations of Black identity as a cultural information framework. Findings indicated that American traditions of race relations between Blacks and Whites shaped online interactions and content generation by African American contributors. Additionally, the heterogeneity of African American online identities employed suggests implications for future digital divide research.

**Abstract.** L'entrée de l'Internet dans les habitudes courantes est de plus en plus révélateur des bases idéologiques et culturelles de l'information fournie par, pour et sur ses utilisateurs. Les analyses de l'utilisation de l'Internet devrait de fait inclure des analyses de la technologie, des interactions, des contextes culturels desquels sont issus les utilisateurs, la technologie et les artefacts informationnels en ligne sur la Toile. Cet article analyse les réponses en ligne des Afro-américains aux portraits racistes de la culture noire et de la citoyenneté américaine qui ont fait suite à l'ouragan Katrina, en nous basant sur les observations de Dubois sur l'identité noire comme cadre d'information culturelle. Les résultats ont montré que les conceptions traditionnelles américaines sur les relations interethniques entre les noirs et les blancs (Afro-américains et les Caucasiens) façonnaient les interactions en ligne et les contenus des contributeurs Afro-américains. De plus, l'hétérogénéité des identités Afro-américaines qui a été mise en évidence dans les interactions en ligne aura des retombés pour la recherche à venir sur la fracture digitale.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast and flooded the city of New Orleans. The days immediately following the flood were filled with reports of heroism, perfidy, government malfeasance, civil unrest, and the displacement of thousands along with billions of dollars of damage. The Internet, as supplement to older

forms of media, allowed us to witness the destruction and dislocation of the Crescent City at a remove, dependent upon media coverage of Katrina's aftermath for news. The Internet also enabled public participation in Katrina-as-event; millions of pages of text, images, video and audio files were published in response to the reports filtering out of New Orleans and the accompanying commentary by pundits, politicians, press, and the public. New Orleans' demographics meant that those most affected by the hurricane were poor African Americans[1]. As an American city drowned, the Internet's textual nature recorded, for easy access and interaction, that race and racial attitudes continue to form the sinews of American culture.

This paper details some of the online reactions of African Americans to media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, to the government responses following the hurricane, and to other online commentators discussing the affair, the actors, and the hurricane's victims. In doing so, these online authors employed the Internet to construct, maintain, and repair Black identity online and offline. Using critical discourse analysis, I analyze Black websites engaging in discussion about the portrayals and events affecting Blacks in New Orleans. The purpose of this paper is to open a discussion about the Internet's primary function of transmitting culturally-shaped information. In doing so, this paper responds to Nakamura's (2006) call for the use of critical race theory in cyberculture studies.

## Background

Nakamura (2006) laments the paucity of Internet research implementing critical race theory. Her argument, briefly stated, is that cyberculture studies lacks a usable framework for embedding studies of the Internet into the "contemporary constellation of racism, globalization, and technoculture" (p. 30) within which it exists. There are scattered instances of such research across the breath of cyberculture studies (Nakamura 2002; Miller and Slater 2000; Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000; Ebo 1998; Jones 1997; Mitra 1997). Nakamura's solution is to have future research in cyberculture studies employ critical race theory and theories of cultural difference to analyze popular Internet objects.

Her objection is a valid one; the elision of race as a cultural impetus for technology design and usage contributes to a "color-blind" perspective in Internet studies. Without considerations of cultural forces shaping the design, dissemination, or usage of the Web, Internet research finds itself limited to technophilic studies of new website genres or technologies, a narrow focus on social or civil uses of the technological features of the Web, or at worst research into "other" Web-enabled cultures that either functions as "cyber-tourism" or furthers a "culture of poverty" paradigm. For example, quite a bit of Internet research focuses primarily on technology as progress, as an exemplar of modernity, or as an enabler of democracy, often with the exhortational fervor of a religious sermon. In the anthologies which comprise much of the repositories of Internet

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1 Throughout this paper, I use "African American" to refer to American-born Black people and "Black" to refer to Black cultural artifacts such as language, beliefs, and products.

research, race is given a cursory mention or ignored altogether[2]. There are many studies of the Internet as a culture; many more of the Internet and how it will affect society, but few of the Internet as a cultural artifact which is shaped and maintained by its designers and users.

Dinerstein (2006), in a similar plaint regarding technology scholarship in American Studies, contends that technoculture should be understood as a matrix of "progress, religion, *Whiteness*, modernity, masculinity, and the future "[emphasis mine] (p. 571). These tropes can be seen as a foundation for Nakamura's analytical framework. I emphasize "Whiteness" in Dinerstein's formulation because this is a clearer starting point for a cultural analysis of the Internet than simply incorporating racism per Nakamura's suggestion. This is not because racism has disappeared; far from it! To be truly critical about racism, however, one must acknowledge the impetus for racist behavior (and its lesser siblings, intolerance and bigotry) by articulating how tropes of White privilege and entitlement also shape cultural attitudes.

Analyses of Web content (or any other ICT) should acknowledge cultural dimensions shaping the technology as well as the technological dimensions provided by the interface, client, or network. There are scattered instances of this type of research across the admittedly brief span of cyberculture studies, but typically it is easier to find discussions of gender or sexuality than race or ethnicity. One area of Internet studies where race is a salient category is digital divide studies, but as Selwyn (2003; 2004) clearly points out, the limitation of digital divide studies is that they operate upon the premise of a deficiency in the populations they study (see also Nelson 2002). This is clearly in opposition to Nakamura's proposed approach; so much so that digital divide studies can (fairly or unfairly) be implicated as replicating existing cultural beliefs regarding the ways in which minorities are perceived to be using technology.

Dinerstein and Nakamura echo Carey's (1975, 1992) argument of thirty years earlier - that communication (and communication technologies) should be studied as a representation of shared beliefs that produce, maintain, and transform reality. What Dinerstein and Nakamura add to Carey's argument is a critical approach to the cultural influences shaping the uses of information technologies. A flawed example of "color blind" cultural approaches to Internet research can be seen in Agre's (2002) article on cyberspace as American culture. Agre locates cyberspace as an American cultural artifact, but his analysis falters because he uncritically privileges the activities and ideals of American culture. For example, Agre refers to the European colonies in the New World as "consciously planned attempts to reinstate, by social and architectural design, an idealized European past" (p. 175). He does not, however, follow this passage with an account of the methods and ideologies the colonies used to inscribe Europe on the New World, one of which was the conscious decimation and enslavement of the indigenous populations. Although he does identify some of the same tropes as Dinerstein – progress, modernity, and futurism – Agre's analysis sidesteps the imperialist, racist, and exploitative side of American culture and weakens his analysis of cyberspace as American culture.

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2 There are several well-done studies of gender, and a few less of sexuality, but race is still a largely unaddressed topic for cyberculture studies.

## Critical Race and the Web

Alondra Nelson (2002) wrote that the writings of W.E.B. DuBois – particularly his elucidation of the phenomenon of double consciousness – map very neatly onto ontological discussions of the Internet as a social space. There is an elegance to using DuBois as a framework for understanding the Web as a cultural phenomenon and as a Black cultural phenomenon. Theoretically, DuBois' scholarship undergirds critical race theory and ethnic studies and allows those using his research to engage American cultural objects from a complex philosophical perspective. The strength of DuBois' assessment of American culture lies in his understanding of the hegemonic nature of White/American culture and his analyses of the ways Black people were constructed by, acted upon, and operate within that cultural matrix. Employing DuBois to understand what Blacks use the Internet for also opens understandings of the sociocultural matrix that is the Internet. Thus, using DuBois to understand American culture as it is encapsulated within the Internet works quite well, as long as an accompanying analysis of the Internet's affordances and encumbrances takes place as well. In previous work, I employed principles derived from DuBois' writings on Black identity to conduct a cultural analysis of Web design and content on Yahoo's home page (Brock, 2005).

Using DuBois allows a reframing of Internet use from the information uses and needs of Black culture. Examining information use for a monolithic "American" identity presupposes that all information needs of African Americans are similar to that of mainstream Americans. DuBois' (1903) argument of "double consciousness" can be applied to understand the differences between Black culture and American culture. His argument was that the African American would not "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (1903, p. 4).

Elfreda Chatman (1996) argued that one can only understand the information use and behaviors of outsiders by employing their philosophical outlook on life to interpret their information use. DuBois' work prefigures and supports this perspective. Thus, DuBois can be used to understand *what* African Americans are doing when they use the Internet, and his writings can be used to understand *why* they use it as well.

The "what" and the "why" of Black cultural information on the Internet, however, demands specificity. Accordingly, this paper looks at websites constructed and maintained by African Americans. Weblogs provided much of the material for analysis. The "what" of this paper, or the unit of analysis, consists of dated, topical, posts (or articles) referring to Black identity in response to Hurricane Katrina (see the "Data" section for more detail).

The second part of my analytical toolkit is critical discourse analysis. Classic critical discourse analysis aims to expose and resist the social inequalities expressed in the linguistic and semiotic aspects of social processes (Van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Because DuBois' research agenda was to investigate the ways African Americans were constructed by American culture's ideology of racism and capitalism, DuBois is used in this paper as a theoretical framework for my discourse analysis. His writings (DuBois, 1903; DuBois, 1940) have been employed to highlight categories essential to Black discursive identity and culture as well as to highlight instances of

power and discrimination in the texts that the Black authors are addressing. Elements of computer mediated discourse analysis are employed as well. Structural features of the Web (e.g., tag clouds, hyperlinks, widgets, profile links, or blog rolls) enable and structure the ways Internet discourse can be generated. Thus, a discourse or content analysis of Internet texts should include the affordances and encumbrances offered by the medium in which they reside.

To summarize, the analytical toolkit employed in this paper employs a critical cultural perspective drawn from the writings of W.E.B. DuBois to address issues of race, power, and discrimination both in the texts and in the medium that hosts them. Critical discourse analysis and close reading techniques are used to analyze the data, which was drawn from a popular Internet event/interface. The critical analysis should consider the cultural influences shaping the online content between users, between websites, and the beliefs that power both. A complementary technology analysis serves to identify encumbrances and affordances engendered by using the Internet as a medium of social communication.

For this paper, then, a collection of texts featuring discourse about Black identity was assembled. These texts, generated by African Americans, featured rhetorical markers expressing Black cultural identity in an online context.

## Data

### UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis for this paper was the topical content, in the form of a post or article, generated by a website author. These units were sorted according to the website from which they were drawn, and collectively will be referred to as a corpus (their authors will be referred to from this point as the “corpus authors”). This content was in the form of a chronologically-marked entry on the author’s website and was drawn from websites authored by Black Americans.

The content was retrieved from each website’s content archive and saved in web archive format, which allowed for the preservation of presentation format and style as well as the retention of images or media as they were published by the author. Elements such as navigational links, logos, blogrolls, profile links, and other ancillary information, which are part of each webpage contributed to the identification of each website as being authored by a person claiming Black identity. The contents of 81 websites were collected into a corpus, which contained 731 unique webpages discussing Hurricane Katrina coverage in the media and Black identity. The websites were not anonymized for this paper.

In what follows, each author was identified as a Black American based on a number of interlocking criteria: a) explicit identification through a profile, b) determination of racial identity through an extended reading of the site’s content, and c) an explicit articulation of designing their online presence to reflect their allegiance to and interest in the Black community. Therefore, it was not necessary to continually note the race of the author; everyone is Black “up in this piece”. Where appropriate, the websites where the quotes originate will be described concerning their ethos or

approach to information presentation to give a clearer picture of the diversity of approaches to Black online identity.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: CLOSE READING

The close reading in this paper analyzes the corpus authors' discussion of citizenship and Black identity. The topic at hand is the designation of Black residents of New Orleans as "refugees" and is contextualized in terms of its discursive formation in the media and the web, as well as within a limited discussion of New Orleans history and geography where possible.

*Cultural Framework*

W.E.B. DuBois' sociological observations of the Black community are employed to ground the close readings performed here. DuBois, in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), thoroughly interrogated relationships between Blacks and Whites and the resultant construction of Blackness in the United States. Although his observations took place during the first half of the 20th Century, they remain relevant to the Black experience in America today. They are particularly germane to the constructions of Black identity examined in this study because, as will be seen below, many of the authors in the corpus echo DuBois' writing on the Black experience.

## Black Identity Online: The Refugees

*"I am Black and I live in this country"*
- Ambra Nykol (2005), *nykola.com*

*"Refugees" aka "you people"*
*"Refugees":: New Orleans Katrina victims*
*"You people":: African-Americans*
- Christopher Rabb (2005), *Afro-netizen*

The corpus authors critiqued the media's use of the term "refugee" as a description of the dislocated residents of New Orleans. Their moral, civic, and historical rationales for denying the media the use of the term revealed a deep commitment to the ideals of being American citizens. Even as they claimed the franchise, however, the authors also discussed the difficulties Blacks faced in accessing the ideological, economic, and civil benefits of American citizenship.

Two discursive threads are analyzed in this paper. Some authors constructed the relationship between Blackness and national identity by examining the definition of "refugee" and its attendant political, policy, and civic implications. Other authors were concerned with disparities in the treatment of the refugees based on race. Throughout these threads, Black identity is the framework through which the word "refugee" was evaluated by the authors in the corpus. Semantically, Black identity online is articulated through the reinterpretation of existing materials and augmented by the individual expressions of the online authors claiming allegiance to a collective Black identity.

## REFUGEES ON THE BAYOU, CITIZENS ON THE INTERNET

The media began using the term "refugee" soon after the hurricane's passing. "Refugee" seemed appropriate to many because of the scale of displacements and the backdrop of destruction and chaotic relief efforts. In a press conference on August 31, 2005, however, elected representatives from the Congressional Black Caucus angrily decried the use of the term, contending that American citizens should not be refugees in their own country. They alluded that "refugee" was used to refer solely to African-Americans.

Nunberg (2005) performed an abbreviated analysis of hurricane coverage on LexisNexis to determine word frequency and spatial relationship of "evacuee" and "refugee" and their proximity to mentions of race in wire service articles. Nunberg found that overall, there were slightly more articles mentioning "evacuee" than "refugee" (56% to 44%). However, when either word appeared within ten words of "poor" or "black", "refugee" was the word that was employed the most (68% to 38%). He noted, "Those disparities no doubt reflect the image of refugees as poor, bedraggled, and forlorn, and they suggest that there's a genuine basis for the impression that the word tends to single out one group, even if unwittingly".

The authors in the corpus reached conclusions comparable to Nunberg's. Corpus author "Prometheus6" pointed out, "I can be persuaded that it's only coincidence that in the overwhelming number of news photos, the hurricane refugees are overwhelmingly black, but I suspect that race and class have something to do with it"[3]. Before turning to the authors discussions of refugees and evacuees, it is essential to set the stage for this analysis by briefly describing the hurricane's impact and aftermath.

### *"A Most Powerful Hurricane with Unprecedented Strength…"*

On August 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina was a Category 5 hurricane. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued a bulletin for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast forecasting winds of over 100 miles an hour, flood waters up to 18 feet, and the devastation of roads and drinking water. Mayor Ray Nagin ordered a mandatory evacuation of the New Orleans metropolitan area on August 28.

New Orleans' evacuation procedures were predicated on automobile transportation and assumed that all evacuating residents could secure accommodations once they arrived at their destination. Mayor Nagin urged those without cars to ask family members, co-workers, or even church members to make room for them. Mass transit was a limited option for evacuation; to further complicate matters for those without vehicles, commercial mass transit providers Greyhound and Amtrak suspended operations in New Orleans on the 28th of August.

It is important to note two things: 1) that nearly 30% of New Orleans residents do not own a car, and despite that, 2) the evacuation plan was considered to be largely successful, as nearly 80% of the city's population managed to leave the city before the hurricane hit the coast. The "success" of the evacuation plan left an estimated 100,000 people in the metropolitan area, many of them poor, elderly, sick, or some combination of the three. Given New Orleans' demographics, the vast majority of those remaining in

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[3] http://www.prometheus6.org/node/10829 (23 Sept. 2005).

the city were Black. Those who could not leave the city were directed to the Superdome for shelter from the storm. By the eve of the hurricane's landfall, nearly 26,000 people were huddled inside the stadium. It is against this chaotic background that the corpus authors addressed the association of Black identity and "refugee" status.

## PRIVILEGE, CITIZENSHIP, AND BLACKNESS

The authors in the corpus sought to redefine "refugee" and its disenfranchising affect by reinscribing American identity upon Black bodies. The authors occasionally employed news service photos of distressed African Americans at the Superdome or in flooded areas of New Orleans, but primarily resorted to the textual capacity of their websites to build a discursive representation of people deemed "refugees".

Some authors in the corpus defined "refugee" and then reinterpreted it to make explicit connections between Blackness and American identity. On *Afro-Netizen*, Christopher Rabb cogently argued,

> "It appears that only the more mature readers have understood that the beef with "refugee" is that it deflects from these largely poor and Black victims' American-ness by focusing on their Otherness, a common device in a race-obsessed society where non-Whites -- and Blackfolk in particular -- are demeaned and devalued not just physically, emotionally, culturally and economically -- but linguistically".[4]

Rabb's critical analysis speaks to an often-overlooked component of Black identity; that Blacks must be cognizant of the rhetorical dimensions of racialized discourse. This awareness is necessary to understand possible dissonances between the behavior and discourse proffered by Whites; DuBois (1940) noted, "[White folk] are filled with Good Will for all men, provided these men are in their places and certain of them kept there by severe discountenance" (p. 165). DuBois later offered a more detailed explanation,

> "those [Whites] who most vehemently tell the Negro to develop his own classes and social institutions, have no plan or desire for such help. First of all, and often deliberately, they curtail the education and cultural advantage of black folk and they do this because they are not convinced of the cultural ability or gift of Negroes and have no hope nor wish that the mass of Negroes can be raised even as far as the mass of whites have been". (p. 190)

Black claims to American identity are one of the most recognizable arguments of DuBois' writing; he opens *Souls of Black Folk* with the argument that Black identity is shaped by the struggle to be recognized as both Black and American. He wrote,

> "He [the Negro] simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (1903, p. 4).

DuBois' discussion of the difficulty of reconciling Black and American identities in the same body drew upon ideological considerations extant in American culture. He argued that the ideology of White supremacy, as written into law, custom, and belief, was employed to overwrite Black conceptions of humanity and American identity. These ideologies were inscribed through public and private discourse.

[4] http://www.afro-netizen.com/2005/09/refugees_aka_yo.html (23 Sept. 2005).

On his weblog, *New Black Man*, Associate Professor Mark Anthony Neal wrote,

> "Thousands of *American* citizens became "refugees" in the eyes of the American public and while we understand that a refugee is one who seeks "refuge", let's also be clear that for most Americans that term has been largely applied to "boat people" fleeing the tyranny of their native lands. And in that regard maybe "refugee" is the fitting term. [emphasis Neal]"[5]

Neal's note that the hurricane victims are fleeing the "tyranny of their native land" is a veiled reference to the pernicious effects of White supremacy on Black communities. DuBois' (1940) reflections upon the social construction of race and how racism defines Black identity included a chapter on White supremacist ideology, as codified in the "separate-but-equal" laws of his time, which enabled Whites to discriminate against Blacks on all levels of culture and society. The most egregious example of this, in DuBois' time, was the use of lynching by Whites as a terrorist tactic to control and intimidate Blacks seeking social and civic equality. Returning to the present, Neal's statement is an argument that in this century, the floods caused by the hurricane washed away the pretense that Blacks were entitled to symbolic or political benefits of American citizenship.

Other corpus authors also argued that the use of the term was employed not because of the hurricane's devastation, but that "refugee" was specifically deployed because the victims were Black. Tavaresforsby, in his post titled "Are They Refugees?", defined a refugee as "One who flees in search of refuge, as in times of war, political oppression, or religious persecution"[6]. He adds, "I think this term for them is little harsh. I don't recall any other disasters (i.e. Hurricane Charley, Ivan, and Frances) where the victims were referred to as refugees"[7]. Over at *Afro-Netizen*, Christopher Rabb came to a similar conclusion. He wrote,

> "Hurricane Katrina victims are not "refugees"…Hurricane Katrina victims are Americans! If Mississippians fled to Jamaica, then they would be refugees. I don't recall the media referring to Hurricane Andrew victims in '92 as refugees. Do you?"[8].

Ambra Nykol made a more explicit argument against divorcing Blackness from the privileges of citizenship in her post, "Final Thoughts: Reflections on Race, Class, Poverty and a New Season". She wrote,

> "Last week was a tough week for Americans. Not for "refugees" but for American citizens…At face value, the word is reserved for those "seeking refuge," and easily be appropriated to any displaced citizens of the gulf coast…They are not "Citizens of New Orleans." They are not refugees. They are Americans and they need to be treated, addressed, and valued as such".[9]

Clay Cane, a Black gay male journalist and blogger, "goes off" about how race relations colored the treatment of Black hurricane survivors. In his post, "Yes….Here

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[5] http://newblackman.blogspot.com/ 2005/09/race-ing-katrina.html (23 Sept. 2005).
[6] http://blackpundit.com/ index.php?p=33 (23 Sept. 2005).
[7] Ibid.
[8] http://afronetizen.blogs.com/afronetizen/2005/09/hurricane_katri.html (23 Sept. 2005).
[9] http://www.nykola.com/archives/000711.html (23 Sept. 2005).

Comes the Race Card”, Cane began by paraphrasing a conversation between an unidentified rescuer and a news anchor:

> “Rescue worker: ‘We can only save certain people so if we see someone on a roof it doesn't mean we can save them.’
>
> News anchor: ‘Well, how do you know who those certain people are?’
>
> Rescue worker: ‘Oh, well the elderly and children -- people like that.’”[10]

Cane’s analysis of the conversation above is reasoned and dispassionate:

> “WHAT THE FUCK???????????? So you mean if a 6'2 black male is sitting on his roof screaming for help at the top of his lungs you're going to wave, and fly right past him? I've NEVER heard of such a SELECTIVE rescue system. If you spot someone - they should be rescued! Not decipher at that moment if they are a "certain" person - They could have a child somewhere next to them, or they could have an injury that is not visible. I can't help but wonder if this would happen if these "certain" people weren't black folks. Of course we have all seen footage of black men being rescued, but I wonder how many more are being ignored?”.[11]

It is here that we can see a discursively constructed understanding of the consequences of being Black in America. Cane’s connection of the “privilege” of rescue to considerations of race, gender, and age is warranted; he demonstrated his understanding by constructing a hypothetical situation involving a Black man in need of succor. The above examples make apparent that the race of the corpus authors was an influence on their critiques of media actions and government policy.

On *The Colorblind Society*, a blog about race and its social consequences, keto also connects the use of “refugee” to the devaluation of citizenship for Blacks. He wrote,

> “WHAT IS THE BENEFIT TO THESE PEOPLE OF BEING AMERICAN CITIZENS????? They get criminalized by the media; criticized, blamed and ignored by public officials who should be helping them”.[12]

In the above examples, the authors unequivocally articulated the right of Blacks to claim American citizenship, and their struggle to enjoy all applicable privileges and benefits. Their arguments share a sense of outrage at the dissociative effect of “refugee” upon the hurricane victims’ claims to citizenship. All agreed that the beleaguered New Orleans residents needed succor and shelter, and argued that the relegation to “refugee” status seemed to signify that Blacks were not welcome in their moment of need.

For DuBois, the American conception of Blackness as the nadir of humanity served as symbolic boundaries for White identity. Blacks necessarily existed within the matrix of American culture, so part of Black identity formation required Blacks to reconstitute themselves in opposition to Whiteness. Regardless of the status or treatment forced upon them by Whites, Blacks still aspired to American civic ideals. DuBois (1940) wrote,

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[10] http://claycane.blogspot.com/2005_08_01_archive.html (23 Sept. 2005)
[11] Ibid.
[12] http://colorblind.typepad.com/the_colorblind_society/2005/09/there_is_no_exc.html (23 Sept. 2005)

> "We will not be satisfied to take one jot or title less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil, and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America" (p. 91).

For the authors in the corpus, the media's relegation of Blacks to refugee status within U.S. borders exposed similar patterns of White supremacist thought where Black bodies were dispossessed of citizenship semantically and literally. Hence Christopher Rabb's statement in his post "Hurricane Victims are Not Refugees", "Notice the imagery and language CNN and the rest choose use when identifying looters and such. It's not just Fox News. Remember, while the right-wing is ultra-conservative, what does "the center" represent, if not the mainstream?".[13]

## WHITE FEAR AND WHITE PRIVILEGE

For Blacks, prejudice and bigotry happen in many shapes and forms everyday and is an inextricable part of Blackness, hence a readiness to accept at face value any account of it. As DuBois (1940) noted, "The American Negro...is surrounded and conditioned by the concept which he has of white people and he is treated in accordance with the concept they have of him" (p. 174).

Prejudice and bigotry were evident to some corpus authors as they discussed stories of the differential treatment accorded to hurricane victims of different origins. According to several sources, some tourists and international visitors to New Orleans were evacuated ahead of those housed in the Superdome and the Convention Center. The corpus authors wrote passionately as they compared the treatment accorded to Blacks to the treatment of Whites. Ambra Nykol linked and excerpted a post about foreign tourists in New Orleans post-Katrina by a female blogger of color, Michelle Malkin. She quoted from Malkin's post:

> "John McNeil, 20-year-old university graduate, rang his parents in Brisbane yesterday from payphone in the foyer of the New Orleans Hilton, where about 60 foreign tourists, including 10 Australians, were sheltering under armed guard after they were rescued from the Superdome by US military personnel."[14]

Nykol added a comment of her own, "Did I read that correctly? Foreign tourists are being sheltered at the Hilton? I quit"[15].

Terrance, in a post entitled "Nobody Gets Out of Here Who's Not White", asked, "When the hurricane swept through, who did you have to be to get rescued?"[16]. Later, he added:

> "Nice that they were not only fortunate enough to have menfolk willing to spend the night vigilantly protecting their womanhood from the animals running amok in the Superdome, but also to get better accommodations than the rest of

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[13] http://afronetizen.blogs.com/afronetizen/2005/09/hurricane_katri.html (23 Sept. 2005)
[14] http://www.nykola.com/archives/000703.html (23 Sept. 2005).
[15] Ibid.
[16] http://archives.republicoft.com/index.php/archives/2005/09/06/nobody-gets-out-of-here-whos-not-white/ (23 Sept. 2005).

> the…uh…non-British folks crammed in to the Superdome, and get priority consideration for evacuation"[17].

In his blog post entitled, "Who Are We", Steve Gilliard wrote angrily about the exercise of White privilege. He posted an article excerpt describing the evacuation of New Orleans Hyatt Hotel guests by the National Guard while hurricane victims across the street at the Superdome watched in amazement. Arguing against the clear prejudice exhibited by the local and federal government, Gilliard wrote,

> "When they were deaf for so long to the horrific misery and cries for help of the victims in New Orleans - most of them poor and black, like those stuck at the back of the evacuation line yesterday while 700 guests and employees of the Hyatt Hotel were bused out first - they shook the faith of all Americans in American ideals"[18].

In these posts, the corpus authors return a national identity to the Black victims that was missing in the excerpted articles. The authors annotated articles from the mainstream press that matter-of-factly reported the incidents in question but did not question leaving Blacks behind to continue suffering. Their annotations added a Black perspective to the incidents in question - one that implicitly argues that Blacks have the same rights of rescue as Whites. In Terrance's case, he sarcastically notes that the media took time to note a national identity for the rescued young women. Terrance's argument is that gender, race, and foreign status worked together to assign the young women privileges denied to Blacks of American citizenship of either gender who were suffering in the exact same conditions. Gilliard references American ideals as he questions why Blacks were treated differently. The implication in his post is that Blacks were unable to secure equal privilege (in this case, for rescue) at the time of their greatest need.

## Discussion

The above posts show the corpus authors' explanation of differential treatment based on race, using a historical context to show that these patterns of behavior were not simply located around class status. This context provides an avenue for understanding how the recounting of historical discrimination becomes part of Black identity, as the retelling shaped expectations about race relations between Blacks and Whites based on past patterns of White behavior under duress. DuBois and the online authors point out why American race relations have changed so slowly; both argued that White supremacy arrogates privileges, benefits, and immunities to Whites while denying them to non-Whites.

One of the principal tenets of DuBois' articulation of race relations was that the beliefs of the mainstream (particularly White elites) heavily influence the lives of Blacks. In his time, he saw Whites award citizenship, equality and the franchise to Blacks – and watched claims for Black citizenship get reduced through legal, illegal, and even criminal means. The ideology of White privilege and supremacy forms a clear

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[17] Ibid.

[18] http://stevegilliard.blogspot.com/2005/09/who-are-we.html (3 September 2005).

linkage between DuBois' experiences at the beginning of the twentieth century and the experiences of the corpus authors in the twenty-first century.

The Internet serves as a facilitator for the transmission of cultural attitudes, but it also can be used to publish critiques of cultural ideologies as well. Using the Internet to broadcast their understandings of the interplay between race, citizenship, and the treatment of Blacks during the hurricane, the corpus authors interpreted a number of artifacts regarding the relegation of Blacks as "refugees" to deconstruct how White beliefs can affect the citizenship status, rights, and privileges of Blacks. In doing so, they inscribed an American identity onto Black bodies through an interrogation of White privilege during the hurricane's aftermath. They pointed out that native-born Blacks were denied the relief granted to foreign-born Whites, which highlights the shared Black belief that being Black yields no benefits and only increases the difficulty of navigating American society. Although it is tempting to solely locate Black identity in its African origins, or even as a completely enclosed silo of beliefs and behaviors unrelated to social relations in the United States, DuBois' statements and the work of the corpus authors reveal that Blacks employed the Internet to express their entitlement to citizenship in a country they were born in, worked in, and died for.

The Web elements shaping this discourse were explicitly and implicitly present. The explicit elements include site design and hyperlinked media. Site design elements include the use of URLs incorporating Black cultural elements (www.afronetizen.com, www.newblackman.blogspot.com). Other site design elements include a predominance of artifacts designed to express Black culture - artwork, pictures (of the author, of popular Black entertainers, or other Black folk), culturally coded sayings, and/or links to other websites deemed to be of interest. Hyperlinked media such as music and video, offered additional Black cultural products as a means of identification and of solidarity. Few (if any) of the authors utilized "Web 2.0" features such as Digg buttons or Del.icio.us accounts, but I cannot speculate as to why this is so. Although comments were enabled on most of the sites discussed in this paper, they were not included in the analysis because the Web elements that identified the site authors as African American were not available for commenters, due to the limitations of comment formatting.

Implicit Web elements were primarily related to the web author's understanding and articulation of their chosen site's genre and their own presence on the Web. Blogs represent an electronically-enabled personal *ethos*, as their authors typically use them to publish information and commentary directly drawn from their own interests. Several corpus authors in this paper filtered mainstream media content for a Black (and personal) perspective. Thus, the remediation of links to sites such as the New York Times or CNN was contextualized to reflect the interests of the African American online authors. It was interesting to note that there was a fair amount of diversity in terms of political allegiance, but no matter whether the site author was a Republican or a Democrat, they were clear about their claim to Black identity. Finally, more than a few of the authors were open about their presence on the Web as an informational alternative to the mainstream media.

## Conclusions

Because the Internet is still primarily a textual medium, it can be difficult to distinguish racial identity. Physical cues are unavailable, so identity must be discerned from subject material or contextual clues such as profile links (Burkhalter 1994). Blacks on this corpus defined their racial identity by articulating it in relation to out-group and in-group definitions of Blackness. This formulation drew upon Hughes' ([1971]; 1994) definition of ethnic identity: an ethnic group should be defined by its relations with other groups in its social network; that both in-group and out-group people talk, feel, and act as if the ethnic group is a separate group. The sites in the corpus are not, in and of themselves, a coherent online community with clearly defined boundaries (e.g., a specific gathering place). They do, however, share a common characteristic: they use their stated allegiance to a Black identity to inform their understanding of the world.

The authors in my corpus are responding to American cultural values shaping their existence in a medium which is based and which operates upon a wider set of Western cultural values. Despite the Internet's space and time spanning capabilities, the authors employed their Internet skills to focus on a specific moment in time and space - Hurricane Katrina's devastation of the mostly-Black populated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast - to reify their right to citizenship and humanity. Historically, African Americans have been making arguments for personhood and the franchise since before the inception of the United States; the Internet allows those claims to be articulated publicly, textually, to more people, and across the world.

This is an Internet analysis because the authors in the corpus used Internet features and tools (blogs, URLs, online identities, hyperlinks, comments, and other possibilities available through a browser-based medium) to construct, maintain, and repair their own Black identity. The authors were in dialogue with the Internet's transmission of information encoded for American/Western culture discursively as well as technologically. They responded to the default Internet identity and mindset - that of white, middle-class, middle-aged men - and carved out an online space that is clearly marked by and about Black culture.

Without the critical cultural framework suggested by Nakamura (2006) and employed in this paper, the posts composed by the corpus authors could have been interpreted as simply scattered responses to a calamitous event in American history. Instead, the framework allows the appreciation of these collected writings as a coherent presentation of African American identity, and evidence of how offline identity shapes online identity. Using DuBois as a theoretical mainstay also allows for the understanding that the writings of the African American authors did not occur in a vacuum; that is, they are responses to the culturally-shaped information provided by the Internet and the mainstream media. Hurricane Katrina as a topic makes the presence of race in Internet content blindingly obvious, but the corpus authors work daily to reinterpret representations of Black culture and Black identity online through personal, community, and national contexts. The framework also encourages a redefinition of "online community" similar to that of Miller and Slater (2000), where a group of people dispersed geographically but united culturally and ideologically can use the Internet to create and reserve a culturally-oriented online space. In this, African Americans are not

only demonstrating how the Internet is a product of culture, but repurposing it to serve as an artifact representing the best of African American culture.

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