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Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on "Black Twitter"

Sarah Florini[1]

Abstract

This article explores the use of the Black American cultural tradition of "signifyin'" as a means of performing racial identity online. In the United States, race is deeply tied to corporeal signifiers. But, in social media, the body can be obscured or even imitated (e.g., by a deceptive avatar). Without reliable corporeal signifiers of racial difference readily apparent, Black users often perform their identities through displays of cultural competence and knowledge. The linguistic practice of "signifyin'," which deploys figurative language, indirectness, doubleness, and wordplay as a means of conveying multiple layers of meaning, serves as a powerful resource for the performance of Black cultural identity on Twitter.

Keywords

digital media, social media, Twitter, race, Black American culture

At South by Southwest (SXSW) 2010, commentator, comedian, and political blogger Baratunde Thurston (2010) gave a presentation titled "How to Be Black (Online)." Thurston discussed the sizable Black presence on Twitter and astutely highlighted several exchanges between Black Twitter users that reflected the Black oral tradition of playing the dozens.[1] Notable about Thurston's talk was its grounding in an underlying assumption that Blackness is a practice; it is something you *do*. In discussing

[1]University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sarah Florini, Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 7 Sherman Terrace #5, Madison, WI 53704, USA.
Email: florini@wisc.edu

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"How to *Be* Black (Online)," he offered a number of communicative behaviors and practices through which users perform their racial identity in their online interactions. It is this intersection of cultural identity, social media, and performance that I seek to explore here.

Digital media studies often erase users of color, and the dynamics of race and racial identity online. When users of color do receive scholarly attention, most often they are cast as victims with limited technological access and resources (Nelson et al. 2001). The consistent scholarly focus on the "digital divide" all too often frames people of color as technological outsiders and has served to obscure the many people of color who *are* online (Everett 2008). The inattention to Black users is conspicuous, given that it is now widely accepted in the field that the online and offline are, far from being distinct spheres, deeply imbricated (Carey 2005; Hine 2005; Jones 1997). Race is one of the key organizing concepts that structure our offline worlds (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Omi and Winant 1986) and therefore is also a significant component of users' approaches to technologies (Daniels 2009; Nelson et al. 2001).

Identity, "especially identity as 'difference'," must be marked or performed to be perceived (Taylor 2003, 98). For racial identity to function in social media spaces, racialized users must make those identities visible online. The construction of race in U.S. culture is closely tied to corporeal signifiers. However, in social media, those signifiers can be obscured or even imitated (e.g., by a deceptive avatar). When reliable corporeal signifiers of racial difference are not readily apparent, Black users often perform their identities through displays of "cultural competence" and the use of other noncorporal signifiers that rely on "social and cultural resources" (Brock 2009). Verbal performance, linguistic resources, and modes of interaction are key means through which Black users perform their racial identities on Twitter. One such cultural resource is the practice of "signifyin'."

Signifyin' is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection. It is a longstanding practice in Black American oral traditions, and, as such, serves as a linguistic expression of Black cultural identity on multiple levels. The very act of signifyin' is a powerful performance of Black cultural identity because it indexes the genre's previous instantiations, and the sociocultural contexts in which it was cultivated and practiced. Thus, as a genre, signifyin' invokes a tradition of practice that has deep cultural significance in Black American communities.[2] Generations of Black Americans have used signifyin' as a space for the expression of Black cultural knowledge, as a vehicle for social critique, and as a means of creating group solidarity.

Signifyin' serves as an interactional framework that allows Black Twitter users to align themselves with Black oral traditions, to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experiences. Signifyin' generally involves elements of humor and displays of wit, and at times may seem frivolous to the uninitiated. But, even at its most lighthearted, signifyin' is a powerful resource for signaling racial identity, allowing Black Twitter users to perform their racial identities 140 characters at a time.

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I begin with a brief outline of the phenomenon that many have dubbed "Black Twitter." I then describe the tradition of signifyin' and its importance in Black American traditions. I demonstrate that the practice, which involves a range of cultural competencies, has become a means of performing Black identity on Twitter, and explore how these iterations of signifyin' can be used to engage in social critique and to promote group solidarity. Finally, I examine how users have translated the practices of a primarily oral tradition to a text-based medium.

"Black Twitter"

Twitter is a microblogging site that allows users to send messages of 140 characters or less ("tweets") to people who have chosen to "follow" them, who some users refer to as their "tweeps" (a hybrid of "Twitter" and "peeps," a shortened version of "people"). Users can interact publically with other users by retweeting, as indicated with abbreviation "RT," or by talking directly to another user using the @reply feature, which is done by including that user's username in a tweet. Twitter, like other social media, has developed its own distinct terminology and practices. Chief among these uses is the hashtag, which is created using the symbol "#" followed by a phrase to indicate the topic of the tweet (#hashtag). Some people search for and follow a sequence of specific hashtags or topics, referred to as a timeline.

The substantial Black presence on Twitter is referred to by some as "Black Twitter." In 2009, the Pew Internet and American Life Project released a report showing that, of those surveyed, 26 percent of Black Americans use Twitter or another status update service, compared with 19 percent of whites (Pew 2009). According to a 2010 Edison Research and Arbitron study, although Black Americans make up only 12 to 13 percent of the U.S. population, they comprised 24 percent of the seventeen million Twitter users in the United States (Saint 2010). Black users are most visible in the "trending topics," a real-time list of the most tweeted about subjects. Twitter's trending topics list frequently features topics in which Black users are the majority or that have a direct association with Black American cultures. The activity of Black Twitter users has not been lost on many bloggers and journalists, who have generated much discussion and debate about the existence and nature of "Black Twitter."[3]

It is important to note that I use the term "Black Twitter" as a heuristic. Users of color are often invisible in academic (and popular) considerations of social media. Talking about "Black Twitter" helps guard against subsuming Black users within a generic and generalized user—one generally presumed to be white. However, I should be clear that Black Twitter does not exist in any unified or monolithic sense. Just as there is no "Black America" or single "Black culture," there is no "Black Twitter." What *does* exist are millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices. Black people are not a monolith. But, as Herman Gray (2005, 143) argues, "Blackness as a cultural sign still carries significant political and historical meaning." In a social media context, where race could be hidden if a user so desired, the act of performing race constitutes an important mode of resistance to marginalization and erasure (Nakamura 2008).

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In mid-2009, I began archiving "Black Twitter" timelines. Over a period of a year, I logged onto Twitter periodically throughout the day and observed signifyin' games as they played out in real time. I captured relevant timelines as these interactions unfolded. All of the examples used for this article were taken from the public timeline, which is open to anyone. I used avatars and profile information to ascertain the racial identity of the participants as much as possible. The examples included here were selected because they were the most recent at the time of writing.

My analysis focuses on signifyin' exchanges organized around hashtags. I include hashtags that appeared in the trending topics list as well as less popular hashtags that were brought to my attention by users I followed. Various hashtags I encountered directly indexed Black cultural identities, often because of their use of slang created and popularized by Black American youth. Examples include #howyouballing [how you balling] or #thingsthatareplayedout [things that are played out]. However, not all trending topics or hashtags bear obvious or immediate associations with Black American cultures or communities, such as #InstantTurnoffs or #TShirtSlogans, but I included them for analysis after scrolling through their timelines and finding predominantly Black avatars. Timelines with majority Black users often comprised games or exchanges organized around a general hashtag meme, and these memes often served as vehicles for signifyin'.

Signifyin' and "Black Twitter"

Signifyin' is often used as a catch-all term for various Black American oral traditions such as woofing, marking, playing the dozens, sounding, loud talking, and others. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) has traced signifyin' to West and Central African cultural practices brought by African slaves to the United States, and adapted and/or transformed for the new context. Signifyin' can take many forms and may be embedded in a variety of discourses. At its core, it is "an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit." A key aspect of signifyin' is that much of the meaning resides outside of "lexical items and syntactic rules for their combination" (Mitchell-Kernan 1999, 321).

For generations, as Black Americans navigated an environment of hostile racial oppression, signifyin' offered a site of resistance and allowed for double-voiced and encoded communication. A deeply collaborative practice, signifyin' has traditionally fostered group solidarity in Black American communities. Dexterous use of language and skilled verbal performance are key elements of signifyin', and such performances have historically served important roles in the creation and preservation of Black communities. For many Black Americans, performance constitutes a set of epistemologies in which there is an "imbrication of aesthetics and politics" (Johnson 2006, 458) that allows for the galvanization of the Black community against oppression, making performance a key arena for the individual and collective negotiations and positionings that constitute "Blackness" (hooks 1995; Johnson 2006; Thomas 2004).

Because of the discourses, histories, and contexts invoked by the genre, the act of signifyin' aligns users with Black cultural identities. Furthermore, signifyin' requires

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participants to possess certain forms of cultural knowledge and cultural competencies. Given the extent to which meaning resides beyond lexical and syntactic elements of the message, interpretation relies heavily on cultural competencies and users' ability to "construct additional context from [their] background knowledge of the world" (Mitchell-Kernan 1999, 311). Without this background knowledge, the multiple levels of meaning conveyed in signifyin' will remain opaque. The required knowledge can range from familiarity with Black popular culture and celebrity gossip to the experiential knowledge of navigating U.S. culture as a racialized subject.

On Black Twitter, signifyin' often functions as a marker of Black racial identity by indexing Black popular culture. One example is the popular hashtag game in "Hip hop" circles signifyin' on the R&B singer and rapper Drake. Hashtags such as #DrakePunchlines or #FakeDrakeLyrics mock Drake's lyrical techniques, such as his use of the truncated metaphor (i.e., a phrase immediately followed by an associated word or phrase). This style is sometimes referred to as "hashtag rap" because it mirrors a common use of hashtags on Twitter. Tweets signifyin' on Drake included,

> @FidalCashflow: #Drakepunchlines Yo girlfriend wanna ride . . . taxi . . . so now we headed to my pad . . . maxi. (April 23, 2010)

> @charles_star: I got ride like a bicycle. Huffy. Am I the worlds worst rapper? Puffy. #fakedrakelyrics. (April 23, 2010)

Participation in the #DrakePunchlines hashtag required and displayed multiple forms of Black cultural competencies. Participants needed familiarity with both the rapper and the lyrical constructions common to Hip hop music to effectively mimic Drake's lyrical construction. While Hip hop certainly has fans and artists from all backgrounds, it still occupies a political position in U.S. culture that is generally ascribed to Black Americans (Perry 2004). Hip hop has also become central to the identities of many Black Americans born and raised after the Civil Rights Movement (Rose 2008). With the #FakeDrakeLyrics hashtag, knowledge of "Hip hop" music and culture combine with the communicative tradition of signifyin' to stand in as a signifier of Black racial identity.

Signifyin' as Social Critique

Historically, signifyin' has created a space for social critique in Black communities and frequently serves the same function on Twitter. On Twitter, signifyin' often speaks to the shared experiences of Black Americans as raced subjects and can be a resource for encoding and expressing experiential knowledge about Black identities. Many of the interactions around hashtags that I observed served this function.

Although it never reached the trending topics, the hashtag #BlackNerdsUnite illustrates how signifyin' on particular hashtag memes can be used to critique mainstream constructions of "Blackness." This hashtag addressed the shared frustrations of many Black users with the narrow, monolithic way that "Blackness" is often understood as

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in opposition to all things intellectual or technological. For example, @thefriendraiser challenged mainstream assumptions that conflate Blackness with lack of education, tweeting "visit the library? shoot, I WORK at the library! #blacknerdsunite" (April 14, 2010). In addition to illustrating their general "nerdiness," many of the users highlighted their interest in and proficiency with technology. For example, @marcpolite's tweet—"If you modded your Xbox so you could download episodes of The Wire #blacknerdsunite" (April 14, 2010)—refers to the practice of "modding," a way of hacking a console gaming system to enable it to perform unintended functions, such as downloading a TV series. Although the users participating in the #BlackNerdsUnite hashtag were self-deprecating to some degree, the tweets had a second layer of meaning that targeted mainstream constructions of "Blackness" and those who perpetuate or internalize them.

The hashtag #NextOnNightline spoke to the complex intersection of race and gender experienced by Black American women. #NextOnNightline trended on Twitter on the same evening that the news program *Nightline* (2010, season 31, episode 20) ran a special report on why successful Black women "can't find a man." The show was billed as a "faceoff" between men—represented by actor and writer Hill Harper and blogger Jimi Izrael—and women—represented by Sherri Shepherd of *The View* and journalist Jacqui Reid. ABC News' Vicki Mabrey and comedian Steve Harvey served as moderators. The special spawned a flurry of signifyin' tweets under the #NextOnNightline hashtag, such as @akaziaj's "#NextonNightline: The lonely black vagina monologues" (April 22, 2010). This tweet not only references the title of Eve Ensler's feminist work *The Vagina Monologues* but must also be contextualized within the current moral panic pathologizing educated Black women for their below-average marriage rates (Besharov and West 2000). Journalists' concern about unmarried Black women is an extension of the historical discourses that have vilified and scapegoated Black American women for all ills in Black families. Understood within this sociocultural context, the tweet becomes more than a critique of *Nightline*; it is a commentary on the politics of Black femininity.

Many using the #NextonNightline hashtag also noted the odd choice of panelists on the *Nightline* special, especially moderator Steve Harvey, author of *Straight Talk, No Chaser: How to Find, Keep, and Understand a Man.* Users vented their frustration with Harvey's exploitation of the moral panic surrounding Black women and marriage. They offered other incongruous combinations of speakers and topics. These included,

> @TheOneBMiller: #NextOnNightline Marion Barry discusses a drug-free DC. (April 22, 2010)

> @CeeTheTruthy: #NextonNightline Tyler Perry discusses black feminist theory. (April 22, 2010)

These tweets speak to the absurdity of panelists such as Harvey. The second example invokes Black filmmaker Tyler Perry and his problematic portrayals of women, including an array of abused Black women who find healing in the love of a "good man."[4]

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Participation, Performance, and Games of Ritual Insult

To closely examine the collaborative and participatory aspects of signifyin' on Twitter, it is useful to focus on dissing as one specific subgenre. To "dis" someone is to "disrespect" or "discredit" that person, but in Black American oral traditions, dissing also "constitutes a verbal game" (Smitherman 2000, 26). Smitherman (2000, 26) explains this form of signifyin' as,

> a ritualized kind of put-down, an insult, a way of talking about, needling, or *signifyin on* someone else [emphasis original]. Sometimes it's done just for fun, in conversations with friends and close associates. Other times, the put-down is used for a more serious purpose. . . . It is often used to send a message of social critique, a bit of social commentary on the actions or statements of someone who is in need of a wake-up call.

Like other types of signifyin', dissing prioritizes verbal dexterity, wit, and wordplay. While participation and interaction are important to all forms of signfyin', dissing emphasizes verbal performance as a mode of competition. The generic conventions of dissing facilitate participation by creating participant structures that mitigate interpersonal conflict or hostility and encourage participants to insult and attempt to outperform each other.

Dissing on Twitter often mirrors the offline use of the practice for creating and maintaining group solidarity. Black American cultures tend to place high value on social participation, conceptualizing individuals' participation as "necessary for community survival" (Appiah 1992; Caponi 1999; Smitherman 2000). Verbal performances of signifyin' are not only *for* others but also *with* them. As with the previous Drake examples, what on the surface seems to be a personal attack is actually a creative performance that invites others into the game. Cornell West (1993, 105) has argued that the virtuosic performance of the individual works to increase the "creative tension" of the group and encourage higher levels of performance within group, strengthening the group as a whole. For Black users within this tradition, their performances are not only about them as individuals but also about encouraging others to participate, thereby generating a sense of solidarity.

Often, games of insult played by Black users on Twitter are directed at a nonexistent hypothetical person. For example, the trending topic #howyouballing dissed people who pretend to be wealthy (i.e., to be "balling"). Users' responses included,

> @iamkhiry: #howyouballing goin to the club makin it rain wit quarters. (April 28, 2010)

> @KaHinton89: #howyouballing with a platinum ebt card.[5] (April 28, 2010)

Not directed at anyone specifically, the participants competed for the most clever and creative tweet. Like previous examples, this hashtag required specific cultural competencies, including an understanding of forms of Black American slang, such as "balling" and "making it rain" (i.e., to throw dollar bills up into the air so they "rain" down on a crowd). Each tweet invites other users to join the timeline with their own contributions.

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Even when Twitter users direct their disses at one another, the generic framework of dissing creates a space where users can insult one another without generating animosity. For example, while participating in the hashtag #DumbRoastJokes, many users directed their disses at another specifically named user. In such cases, the parties clearly understood the norms and conventions of dissing and, therefore, responded with another dis rather than with anger. Two participants, @JayStupendous and @infin1te dissed one another repeatedly. The arrows in their tweets below indicate the target of the dis.

> @JayStupendous: #DumbRoastJokes You ole angry & militant ass nigga. Tweetin about the revolution will not be hashtagged lookin ass ----> @infin1te. (April 16, 2010)

> @infin1te: #DumbRoastJokes look at this Sugar Smacks lookin ass nigga talkin about "Livin my life like its Golden" --> @JayStupendous. (April 16, 2010)

In an attempt to outperform each other, the two users crafted tweets using intertextualities to create meaning. First, @JayStupendous characterizes @infin1te as an "angry" and "militant" Black Power caricature. He references Gil Scott-Heron's (1970) famous spoken word piece "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," an iconic work of the Black Power Era. The phrase "lookin' ass" is added at the end to describe the target of the insult. @infin1te responds, taking the Scott-Heron reference and shifting it to the phonetically similar Jill Scott, a neo-soul singer who goes unnamed but is referenced though the lyrics to her hit song "Golden" (2004). The word "golden" connects the song title to Sugar Smacks, a sugary cereal sold with a marketing campaign that emphasized its golden color. In short, one user calls the other a Black Power Movement "wannabe" and the other retorts by comparing him with the appealing-yet-nutritionally-empty breakfast cereal. The complexity of their tweets heightens competition and serves as a mechanism to encourage others to join the game.

Some users participated in the #DumbRoastJokes hashtag by directly inviting others to dis him or her. A user going by the name @DrChoc0late sent out the following invitation to roast his avatar (which is presumably a picture of him, although we cannot be sure).

> @DrChoc0late: Re-Tweet If wanna see my twicon get roasted? #DumbRoastJokes. (April 15, 2010)

This was a clear invitation for anyone, friend or stranger, to roast him (or at least his picture). As per his instruction, his tweet was retweeted multiple times by other users, and then the game began. Users joined in with disses such as,

> @lilmamabhaddd: @Drchoc0late lookin like a black mr clean wida dirt mark on his chest #DumbRoastJokes. (April 15, 2010)

> @Adeff: #DumbRoastJokes Yo chest hairs remind me of Jamaican pot-holes @DrChoc0late. (April 15, 2010)

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Functioning within the ritualized social space of dissing, @DrChoc0late signaled he was in on the joke and showed his approval by retweeting several of the disses, sometimes adding "lmao" ("laughing my ass off") or other commentary.

> @DrChoc0late: RT @Adri_Mane #DumbRoastJokes Ol this is what happens when you let uncle Leroy get the camera #lookinass @DrChoc0late <-lmao! (April 15, 2010)

> @DrChoc0late: RT @SafinaJay: @DrChoc0late ol terry crews old spice commercial lookin ass. #dumbroastjokes. (April 15, 2010)

This example highlights the multiple modes of participation enabled by signifyin'. Even serving as the target of a dis can function as a viable means of inclusion.

Celebrities and public figures are often dis targets, providing safe topics to critique. The hashtag #lilmamasweave [Lil' Mama's weave] illustrates all of the aspects of signifyin' and dissing discussed above—the importance of cultural knowledge, the possibilities for social critique, and the role of competition in encouraging participation. Lil' Mama is a young rapper best known for her single "Lip Gloss" and as a judge on MTV's *America's Best Dance Crew.* Due to her propensity for donning unfortunate hairdos, Lil' Mama's weave became a target on Twitter. #lilmamasweave made an appearance in the trending topics, as users competed to create the funniest and most clever ways of dissing Lil' Mama's hair. For example,

> @ILLWILL2FR3SH: in Da Bible #lilmamasweave was Da FiRE buSH dAt sp0kE 2 M0SES. (April 15, 2010)

> @MyzFabbCookie: #LilMamasWeave use to gang bang wid the Flintstones. (April 15, 2010)

Users retweeted insults they found funny and played off of and added to one another's comments. In the example below, one user tweeted that Lil' Mama's weave "convinced her to get on the stage w/Alicia Keys and Jay-Z," and the comment was retweeted by another user who added, "I also heard her weave had a rap battle w/minaj."

> @btsquared2: I also heard her weave had a rap battle w/minaj RT @con_SKEE_ted: #LilMamasWeave convinced her to get on the stage w/Alicia Keys and Jay-Z. (April 15, 2010)

One participant even set up a Twitter account *as* Lil' Mama's weave. The account (@LilMamasWeave) retweeted clever disses, responded to comments, and began following other users participating in the #lilmamasweave timeline (meaning that those participants received an automated email from Twitter saying, "You are now being followed by Lil' Mama's Weave").

The Lil' Mama's weave hashtag indexed a range of Black popular culture events. The examples above reference an incident at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards where Lil' Mama unexpectedly ran on stage near the end of a performance by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. "Minaj" refers to popular female rapper Nicki Minaj, currently the

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only female hip hop superstar and with whom Lil' Mama has allegedly had conflict.

When contextualized by an understanding of the political position of hair in Black American communities, the #lilmamasweave hashtag takes on additional social and cultural meanings. Because U.S. ideologies of beauty have stigmatized physical characteristics that are markers of race, in Black American cultures, hair has become imbricated with sensitive issues of identity (Mercer 1987). The curly and course hair of many people of African decent has been derided as "nappy," while straight smooth hair has been deemed "good hair." Techniques for achieving long straight hair—from chemical relaxers to weaves—have long been part of Black American women's beauty routines, and how a Black woman chooses to wear her hair is implicated in a range of political issues. Thus, the choice to dis Lil' Mama's weave in not merely a critique of her appearance but reflects the level of scrutiny Black women's hair routinely receives.

Signifyin' As Oral Performance via Text-Based Social Media

Signifyin' has traditionally been part of Black oral culture. Oral skill and performance, "particularly those couched in interactive . . . frameworks" (Hecht et al. 1993, 156), have long been important components of Black cultures (Edwards and Seinkewicz 1990). Smitherman points to the importance of language use in Black American cultures, arguing, "Both in slavery times and now, the black community places high value on the spoken word." She asserts that in Black communities, "verbal skills expressed orally rank in high esteem" (Smitherman 2000, 202). While some characteristics of Twitter facilitate signifyin' as it is practiced offline, other aspects of the medium require users to find work-arounds. Twitter's text-based format limits many aspects of oral performance such as pronunciation, delivery, and nonverbal cues. Nancy Baym (2010, 63) argues that social media users draw on an "existing repertoire of skills" to make a medium "do what [they] want it to do as best [they] can." Many Black users have found ways to use Twitter to satisfy their communicative goals.

It is preferable to signify and play games of insult with an audience, who function as "secondary participants" who comment, cheer, laugh, and interject, ultimately pushing the game to "greater and greater heights of oratorical fantasy" (Smitherman 2000, 224). Twitter's architecture creates participant structures that accommodate the crucial function of the audience during signifyin'. A user who uses Twitter as a vehicle for signifyin' has a built-in audience comprising her followers. However, unless that user chooses to keep her tweets private, all tweets are available for public consumption via the public timeline. Should a hashtag become popular or trend, tweets in that timeline will gain significantly greater visibility, meaning that there is always a potential for an audience of thousands.

On Twitter, retweeting is the primary strategy though which the audience performs its function as secondary participants. Audience members show their approval of tweets by retweeting them, often with adding their own commentary. A particularly

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clever tweet can be retweeted multiple times to tens of thousands of people, opening the game to ever more participants. While audience members can't literally laugh or cheer on Twitter, they often translate their laughter into text using variations of "lmao" and "hahaha," which they add to a tweet before forwarding it. Retweeting also accommodates the kinds of comments and interjections that are central to the audience's participation. Audience members who wish to indicate their evaluations of the overall timeline can use the timeline's hashtag to ensure that their contribution is seen by other participants, as in the examples below:

> @lemitefi: honestly . . . this #DumbRoastJokes topic is possibly the best one in recent weeks . . . too fun. (April 16, 2010)

> @lakai143: lol suppose to b dumb #nshit but we rofl lol RT @brent_diaz: damn these #dumbroastjokes got me dyinnn. (April 15, 2010)

These tweets indicate approval not for individual performers signifyin', but instead praise the skill of the collective as demonstrated in the overall timeline.

Twitter mimics another key aspect of how signifyin' games are traditionally played—speed. Smitherman (2000) argues that timing is key to signifyin'. When playing in person, this means giving quick responses. However, on Twitter, one can take as long as she likes to compose a tweet. But, Twitter moves at an extremely rapid pace with hundreds of thousands of tweets being posted every minute. With many users tweeting simultaneously, there is always activity in the timeline, making the overall pace of the competition move quite quickly.

Signifyin' is often, though not always, done using Black Vernacular English, and many Black Twitter users tweet using Black Vernacular English and/or in ways that indicate an intended oral delivery. Nonstandard spellings are used by most Twitter users of all backgrounds as a strategy to cope with Twitter's 140 character limit. However, many Black users seem to use preexisting grammatical constructions derived from Black Vernacular English and phonetic spellings that convey specific pronunciations. Often, this is a relatively minor modification like "wit" (with), "tryna" (trying to), or "you" instead of "your." There is also the use of slang terms like "ish" (shit) or the addition of "ass" to an adjectival (e.g., "stupid ass," "fake ass," or "phony ass"). Some users employ phonetic spellings in their tweets to convey an elaborate oral delivery style. For example,

> @MrSoloDolo9: Instead of worryn bout who dat bish fuckin why dontchu getchu some money #YouBigDummy. (April 15, 2010)

There is a growing standardization of Black Vernacular English inflected spellings on Twitter. Common examples include, "talmbout" (talking about), "doe" (though), and the spelling of "goddamn" substituting a "t" for the letter "d" (e.g., gottam or gotdam). The frequency of these spellings indicates that users employing them are not just displaying individual variation, but are working within a community of practice.

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Signifyin' also relies heavily on context embeddedness to convey meaning, and nonverbal aspects of signifyin' performances constitute important elements of meaning. This often involves "the hands or eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures" (Mitchell-Kernan 1999, 310). Many Black users have negotiated the absence of these elements in Twitter exchanges. Often, users will simply type the desired gesture or facial expression bookended with asterisks to indicate nonverbal behavior. Common gestures conveyed this way are *blank stare* and *side eye*. Both of which are often also conveyed through the use of emoticons: o___o (blank stare) and < _< (side eye). As with spellings that depart form standardized English, these gesture and the modes in which they are conveyed in text occur with remarkable regularity, indicating that users are drawing on a shared set of communication strategies.

Conclusion

While users from a variety of backgrounds joke and play games on Twitter, many Black users engage in these activities in ways that closely mirror longstanding traditions in Black American communities. Signifyin', as a historically significant Black cultural practice, serves as a resource through which Black users can "be Black online." Racial identity is a performance that ultimately has "more to do with social and cultural resources than with skin color" (Brock 2009, 32). When the body and the corporeal signifiers of race can be obscured, the social and cultural markers of race take on great importance. Verbal performance, linguistic resources, and modes of interaction are key ways that Black users perform their racial identities, individually and collectively, on Twitter. Signifyin' requires that participants at all levels, whether active performers or audience members, possess specific forms of cultural knowledge—including not only the norms of signifyin' but also knowledge of Black popular culture, media, and politics. In addition to being a tool for the performance of individual identity, signifyin' also generates a sense of collective identity and group solidarity.

Given the extent to which the ideologies of colorblindness are championed and identity politics are vilified in the dominant discourses of race in the United States, it is significant that many Black users not only mark themselves as "raced" individuals but also choose to engage in a communicative practice that has traditionally served to create and strengthen a sense of collective racial identity. In a medium such as Twitter, where users could "pass," many Black users seem to be prioritizing the performance of their racial identity, and doing so by using mechanisms that have historically created and maintained group solidarity in Black American communities.

Americans often assert that combating racism means "not seeing race" and, instead, judging each individual by "the content of her character" (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 23–4). By asserting the merits of colorblindness and focusing on the individual, contemporary U.S. racial discourses obscure the function of race in U.S. culture and cripple our ability to discuss and challenge racial inequality. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

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asserts, "in order for people to struggle along an axis of social division, that axis must be visible and real to them" (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 181). Resistance and oppositional identities require conceptual and discursive "space" (Omi and Winant 1986, 181). Signifyin' on Twitter allows Black users not only to reject colorblindness by actively performing their racial identities but also to connect with other Black users to create and reify a social space for their "Blackness." This has the potential to sustain the visibility of race as an important social axis in U.S. culture and carve out social space for collective Black racial identities.

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Notes

1. The dozens is a game of insult that specifically targets participants' mothers. It generally uses the ritualized formula: "Yo' momma so X that Y." For example: Yo' momma so old, she went to middle school with Jesus.
2. I use the term genre here in the Bakhtinian sense—not as a set of formal features of a text, but as an orienting framework for a given interaction (Bakhtin 1986; Briggs and Bauman 1992). The use of a genre links an utterance to the discourses, speakers/authors, and contexts of the previous iterations of that genre. Genres create indexical connections that serve to orient discourse historically and socially, and allow for the encoding of particular orders of knowledge and experience (Bauman 2004; Briggs and Bauman 1992).
3. Byron Crawford, "I Missed the Best Black People Twitter Evar [*sic*]" [weblog], accessed August 11, 2011, http://www.byroncrawford.com/2010/04/i-missed-the-best-black-people-twitter-evar.html; Farhad Manjoo, "How Black People Use Twitter," in *Slate*, accessed August 11, 2011, http://www.slate.com/id/2263462/; Hamilton Nolan, "White Guy Explains Black People Twitter," in *The Gawker* [weblog], accessed August 11, 2011, http://gawker.com/5468632/white-guy-explains-black-people-twitter; Second Thoughts, "Black People on Twitter" [weblog], accessed May 25, 2010, http://secondthoughts.typepad.com/second_thoughts/2009/11/black-people-on-twitter.html; Choire Sicha, "What Were Black People Talking about on Twitter Last Night?" in *The Awl* [weblog], accessed May 25, 2010, http://www.theawl.com/2009/11/what-were-black-people-talking-about-on-twitter-last-night; Alan Wolk, "What 'Thuglife' Can Teach Us about Twitter," *Advertising Age*, accessed February 25, 2010, http://adage.com/digitalnext/post?article_id=141994.
4. Many of Perry's films, such as *Dairy of a Mad Black Woman* and *Madea's Family Reunion*, feature Black women who are either abused or abandoned, and who grow and heal emotionally through their relationships with "good" men.
5. EBT stands for "electronic benefits card." EBT cards are the primary means of distributing food stamps and cash assistance to low-income people in the United States.

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Author Biography

Sarah Florini is an A.W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Communication Arts and the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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