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Reinventing Black Womanhood: Alternative Media and Identity Discourse in the 2019 Chicago Mayoral Race

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This paper examines how a Chicago-based alternative medium covered the 2019 Chicago’s mayoral race. The study uses critical discourse analysis and the theory of Black feminism to argue for the need to examine the multiple identities of Black women and how such identities determine their representation in socio-cultural and political spaces. The findings from this study show that agency is a major part of media coverage and that the identities of Black women are better represented when the women are portrayed as agents in their own stories. These findings provide an alternative narrative to the discourse of Black womanhood which has been racialized and perverted.

Keywords: Black women, Chicago, alternative media, critical discourse analysis, Black feminism.

The 2019 Chicago mayoral race was historic. It was the first time a Black woman claimed the mayoral seat of the metropolitan city. The election took place on February 26, 2019, with a run-off on April 2, 2019, which produced the city’s first female Black mayor. The run-off election was held because none of the 14 candidates had the majority vote, and candidates Lori Lightfoot and Toni Periwinckle, both Black women, had the highest votes of 17% and 16%, respectively (Bosman et al., 2019). Lightfoot eventually emerged as the winner. Lori Lightfoot’s Black woman identity sets a new tone for the city’s political climate as well as the Black community. It showed a vigorous attempt to reposition Black women and the Black community as a whole in the city’s politics and counter the narratives of crime, poverty, unemployment, etc. that have been used to describe Black people (Dixon, 2015; Doorn, 2015). The election race featured 14 candidates including 10 men and four women among which three of them were Black. Lori Lightfoot, Toni Periwinckle, and

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Amara Enyia were vying to make history as the first Black woman Chicago mayor. What seems not to be historic about the Black women candidates is the way that they were covered in the mainstream media. Karbal (2019) discussed how the election coverage of the Black women candidates was reflective of the racial injustice and imbalances in many of the Chicago newsrooms. Not only are Chicago newsrooms lacking good representation of journalists of color, but this shortage reflects the altered and inaccurate perspective in which Black people have been covered in the city’s media.

According to a 2017 survey by the Women’s Media Center (2018), women of color only occupy 7.95% of U.S. print newsroom staff, 6.2% of local radio staff, and 12.6% of TV staff. Similarly, a 2018 survey by American Society of News Editors (ASNE) (2018) uncovered that journalists of color occupy 15.38% of the newsroom staff at the Chicago Sun-Times, 20.15% at the Chicago Tribune, and 39.34% at Chicago Public Media.

Consequently, poor representation tends towards misrepresentation. More recently, many Black writers are emerging from within Chicago who have taken on the responsibility to deconstruct and reconstruct the savage and criminal imagery of Black people and their community that have dominated mainstream media. This has led to the birth of “over 200 alternative media outlets” in digital, print, and audio form to challenge the conventional ideologies against Black identity in the city (Karbal, 2019). When people are not given agency in their stories, there is a higher tendency towards bias that would be reflected in the stories about such people.

**Alternative Media and Triibe**

Alternative media can be defined as the media owned and produced by people who are outside the ownership and control of mainstream media and who aim to produce content that empower local communities or demographics that have been systematically excluded from mainstream media production (Atton, 2009). Fuchs (2010) defines alternative media by situating it within a critical media discourse that challenges the ideologies of the dominant group, upends “the standpoint of the oppressed,” and “argues for the advancement of a co-operative society” (p. 173). He argues that to conceive of alternative media in a way that is social-change oriented, it must be placed within a broader spectrum of social theory and in a way that offers a counter-narrative to the bourgeois discourse by pulling down the capitalist structures of public communication. Similarly, Downing (2008) demonstrates how social movement theories need to be co-studied with alternative media in order to produce fruitful conversation on “media and social change, political mobilization, framing, networks and audiences, and transnational movements” (p.43). This collaboration, he argues, can help to strengthen social movements in an unprecedented way.

The question of accessibility is a major issue that scholars have discussed as an important element for alternative media to flourish. In discussing how
people of color have been excluded from the dominant public sphere, the feminist critic Fraser (1990) discusses an alternative public sphere where women and other excluded minorities can converge to discuss without any intrusion by the dominant group. Haas (2004) focuses on the democratic power of alternative media. He mentions that alternative media should not just create an alternative public sphere but must also be able to reach “alternative publics” (p.117). That is, it must break through geographical barriers and enjoy rich financial support that will facilitate accessibility to those who have been socially excluded. This, he argues, can lend a functionary approach to mainstream media and help to break or minimize the traditional power-structured monolith of mainstream media production.

Thus, to extend this scholarship on how alternative media can help to counter the hegemonic rhythm of conventional media in the representation of Black women and continue to create a safer public space for people of common ancestry, social values, communication views, and shared communal interests, the author examines how a Chicago alternative media outlet, The Triibe, covered the Black women candidates during the 2019 Chicago mayoral race. The study aims to contribute to the scholarship of critical cultural studies and Black feminist research by deconstructing the ideology of sexuality, neighborhood crimes, heteropatriarchy, poverty, and anger that have been promulgated in mainstream media about Black women (Griffin, 2012; Tynes, et al., 2016; Wright 2005). The author argues that alternative media can create agency for a marginalized community when such media are owned and controlled by the marginalized themselves. It can help to uncover information that is relevant for breaking through long-standing stereotypes and push the discourse for positive representation in other media platforms.

The author does not in any way assert that ownership can provide a utopian space for Black people’s voices to be mainstreamed. Instead, the author sheds light on a possible path in which Black people, and especially women in this case, can explore to challenge dominant discourses against their identities. In fact, it is important to note that getting full agency in a very racist and sexist society goes beyond operating an alternative media platform. It is only a part in the process of challenging both social and political structures that have conditioned Black people’s lives to certain beliefs. Thus, the word agency as explained below is subtly used to show how ownership plays a part in providing safe space for the Black community.

The Triibe is a digital media platform founded in 2017 to produce content that counters the criminal narratives about Black people in Chicago. The platform was founded by two Black women, Tiffany Walden and Morgan Elsie, who mentioned that the platform stems from their frustration that mainstream media coverage did not reflect the Chicago they both knew and grew up in – “a city of young entrepreneurs and music stars, of people whose grief and despair deserved more than the journalistic hit-and-run...
that mainstream news too often delivered from Black neighborhoods in Chicago” (Spinner, 2018). The two co-founders also felt that they were doing something unfulfilling in their careers despite both working in the field of journalism because they were different from others in the newsrooms where they worked (Stevens, 2018). Therefore, they thought they could bring their skills home by rewriting stories of Black people in Chicago.

The Triibe is a relatively small platform with its primary audience being Chicagoans but broadly reaching out to the larger society on how to project a better image of Black people at large. The founders also admit that they used double ‘i’ because the domain was less expensive since they were operating mainly by donations (Stevens, 2018). Thus, newness of the platform and the small scope of its ownership and operations show that it is still a growing platform and that its main purpose is just to counter the negative narrative about Black people in Chicago. Therefore, this study is a small part of a larger work that needs to be done on alternative media in Black communities by focusing not only on big networks but even those that operate on very a small scale like The Triibe. This is because this type of media usually seems to be more in touch with the local happenings that do not usually get talked about.

Black Feminism, Black Women, and Alternative Media

This study is situated within the framework of Black feminism. Black feminism is a feminist approach that explains the complexities and multiplicative identity of Black women. The theory assumes that the experiences of Black women cannot be understood from the perspective of being Black or being woman; rather it comprises intersectional identities of race, class, and color (Crenshaw, 1989). Collins (1990) defines Black feminism as “theoretical interpretations of Black women’s identity by those who live it” (p. 22). It shows a relationship between the Black women’s gender and race and gives them the agency to create knowledge that “defines a standpoint of and for Black women” (p. 22). Collins (2000) offers a more useful argument where she calls on bridging the intellectual divide between Black feminist scholars and Black feminist practitioners. She argues that by separating academic works on Black feminism from those whose works belong to other “institutional locations,” Black women are inevitably creating more division in which some Black women’s experiences would become alienated from the movement.

In other words, there must be a collaboration and connection between Black women who work as feminist scholars and those who practice Black feminism. Thus, examining the election coverage within this framework helps to understand how the identities of the women are worked into their coverage and what this means for the Black women community. In recent times, alternative media has taken the form of digital media platforms such as blogs/vlogs, Twitter, and other social media platforms. While many of these
platforms are already being used by non-marginalized communities, the fact they are largely easily accessible provide ordinary people useful channels to contest their identities compared to traditional media like television, radio, etc. Thus, I discuss below some of the ways in which Black women have taken advantage of these non-traditional platforms to discuss issues that threaten their racial security in the society.

A recent study conducted by Richardson (2019) examined how Black women are turning away from legacy media to non-traditional platforms like Twitter to dismantle gender and racial oppression that have labelled their identity. In her interview with the leaders of the Black women organizations which led to the formation of Black Lives Matter Movement in 2014, Richardson examined how Black women dismantle the “politics of respectability as the paradigmatic frames through which to engage Black women’s ideas and their politics,” (p. 199). The concept of respectability demands that Black women leaders operate behind the camera and make their bodies invisible so as not to fall victim to rape or objectification and commodification of their bodies. Richardson uncovered from the interview that the women display lack of trust in mainstream media because of “chauvinist news portrayals of Black feminist activists” (p. 203) and the need for Black women queers to have the freedom and prominence they need to contribute to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Thus, these women use Twitter and blogs as an alternative form of political communication where they can live pass the hideous narrative that both legacy media and male chauvinism have positioned them and their bodies.

Williams and Gonlin (2016) also found that Black women use Twitter as a platform to stir discourse on racial inclusion and identity. The authors argued that the second screen, such as phone and tablets, allow Black women to interact online while watching the American drama series How to Get Away with Murder and thus facilitate discussion about the representation of Black women identity in the series. Their analysis of Black women’s tweets while watching the series show that the women were navigating and negotiating their Black identity together through the eyes of Annalise Keating’s character who took off her wig and revealed her black kinky hair to the audience. The women exhaled the breath of relief and breakthrough when Keating’s natural black hair was revealed. They saw themselves in her and felt that it was the beginning of the real identity and representation of Black womanhood. They felt well represented in their identity and the use of Twitter space further strengthened that joyful aura in them because they could share their feelings with one another.

Other scholars have noted the importance of how Black women embrace and engage with their identities through other digital platforms. Boylorn (2013), through autoethnographic analysis, explored how blog writing helped her to connect with an inner feminist personality and identify with ‘crunk feminism,’ a kind of feminism that is associated with
hip-hop music (p. 77). The autoethnography details her narratives from growing up learning and identifying feminism through her lived experiences and the experiences of other women like her mother and aunt. Boylorn argued that blogging is a way of reaching beyond the limited space that her autoethnographies have occupied in academia. Not only is she able to enjoy larger readership than in the academic publications but also a “larger public space for the kinds of conversations auto/ethnography should instigate” (p. 80). Also, being a Black girl blogger helps her to live with people beyond her immediate community but extends her thoughts to those far away who share in her values and interests.

Gabriel (2016) further discussed the concept of ‘blogging while Black’ in her study on how Black British women use blogs as a platform for online activism. In her interview with Black women bloggers in Britain, she examined what motivates Black women to disclose their racial identities on blogs and what kind of relationship exists between such acts and their use of blogs for activism. The study showed that Black women disclose their racial identity online first to genuinely associate with Black culture and second to firmly and openly challenge the negative stereotypes associated with Black womanhood. The participants in the study discussed the need for their audience to know that the blog is written by a Black woman and that this helps the audience, often Black women themselves, to trust the writer’s perspectives on the issues being discussed and see themselves as part of such a community. Also, by publicly disclosing their Black identity, the bloggers challenge stereotypes of “internalized racism” (p. 8) and encourage younger Black women to continue to embrace their Black identity.

Lastly, Stokes (2007) examined how Black girls employ online platforms to reconstruct their sexual identities. Through her analysis of sexual scripts found on the NevaEvaLand homepages of Black girls between the ages of 14 and 17 years old, the author argued that the cyberspace allowed Black girls to “create cultural productions, construct sexual self-definitions and negotiate patriarchal cultural scenarios in a naturalistic setting” (p. 172). The study found that some of the girls reinforced the dominant perspective of hypersexuality of Black female identity while some others used the space to try on new identities and resisted stereotypes by “adopting traditionally masculine attitudes” (p.179) and refused any form of sexual persuasion. It is obvious that non-traditional media can be very empowering to marginalized communities. It can help them to breakthrough limiting social factors and afford them the spaces to thrive culturally and ultimately mainstream their identity.

This study, thus, contributes to the freedom-seeking process of Black women especially in the political sector which has been quite understudied. It is a quest to challenge the dominant paradigm of femininity and domesticity that has dominated mainstream media not just about Black women, but women in general, and ultimately re-invent the Black womanhood identity
which has been perverted and racialized. Therefore, the author seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How did *The Triibe* represent the Black women candidates that ran in the 2019 Chicago mayoral race?
2. In what ways were the women provided or denied agency in the stories?

**Method**

This study uses Theo van Leeuwen’s (2008) critical discourse analysis approach to analyze the “Before the Polls: Meet Chicago’s Black Mayoral Candidates” section on *The Triibe* website. Leeuwen (2008) mentioned that discourse is a “recontextualization of social practice” (p. 3). That is, discourse is produced through the way social actions operate in linguistic environments. Thus, language helps social practice to thrive and take different forms in different contexts. One of the ways social practices are recontextualized is how social actors are represented. Leeuwen mentioned that social actors can either be given an “agent” or a “patient” role in texts through linguistic or sociological means (p. 23). The issue of agency in this study does not necessarily signify a conquest, instead it provides perhaps a narrow way to begin thinking of how Black-owned alternative media outlets can reposition Black people and change the discourse surrounding them. So, the *agent* or *patient* role investigates whether the women were given control or not in the way they are covered in the story. Does the coverage show activeness or passivity, and are the women portrayed as objects or subjects in the stories?

This method is very appropriate for this study because it helps to understand how people are represented as social actors that either have power or do not. Leeuwen’s argument is that the way social actors are represented in a discourse reflects how such people are perceived in the society and how such representation is a recontextualization of social discourse. The social actor representation analysis is used to analyze how the three Black women candidates were treated as agent or patients in the website series before the election and how this reinforces Black womanhood identity or weakens it. “Before the Polls: Meet Chicago’s Black Mayoral Candidates” features interviews with the six Black mayoral candidates who contested in the election. This analysis focused on the three Black women, Amara Enyia, Toni Preckwinkle and Lori Lightfoot. The articles appeared under “The Works” section on the website. The keywords “2019 mayoral race” were used to search for the candidates’ coverage after which the three sections on the Black women were selected for analysis.

**Analysis**

The analysis of the stories yielded five main themes. The themes are allocating agency through roles to the women, genericizing the candidates as part of the Black Chicago community, using of parataxis to associate
the women with the larger Black community, using titles to nominate the candidates’ achievements, and using of relational identification to represent the women. These themes show how the women’s stories are co-opted within the larger Black discourse and how The Triibe used different discourse strategies to tell the stories of the women in a way that reflects their social agency. The themes are discussed in detail below.

Leuween (2008) defines role allocation as the way social actors are given agent or patient role in texts. A social actor can be the one who carries out an action or they can be the one on which an action is carried out. The former gives the actor social power to control the action while the latter makes the actor a passive receiver. In the case of the women candidates, The Triibe represented the women as agents:

“Preckwinkle has won the endorsement of Chance the Rapper, who initially put his coins and celebrity behind former mayoral challenger Amara Enyia, and Rep. Bobby Rush… (Walden, 2019c, para 4)

“Lightfoot says she hasn’t forgotten who she is. On Feb. 26, she advanced to an April 2 runoff against Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle to become Chicago’s next mayor.” (Walden, 2019b, para 4).

“Lightfoot touts her work in terminating officers in 72% of bad cop cases as police board president.” (Walden, 2019b, para 8).

In the above examples, the active roles given to the women position them as political powerholders and people who earned the achievements that they have rather than being given. By positioning the women in the subject position, The Triibe accords a higher level of agency to the women as people who fought for the victory they got. The statement about Preckwinkle, for example, would have been different if The Triibe had said “Chance the Rapper has endorsed Preckwinkle….”. By reversing who occupies the subject position, the agency of Preckwinkle would be lessened, thereby making it look like the endorsement was given to her instead of it being earned. By putting Preckwinkle as the subject, the readers can think of her as someone who worked and earned the endorsement and that it was not just a gift given to her.

Genericization and specification is a strategy that allows the social actors to be represented as a group or as an individual. The generic representation places the actor as part of a broader social class and group which according to Leuween (2008) allows the social actor to enjoy a kind of concretization. The generic classification is usually associated with the dominant or bourgeoise whereby they represent themselves as a “conception of reality”
The specific representation individualizes the actor as marginal and separates him/her from the group of the powerful. In the election coverage, the women were represented as a part of the broader “Black Chicago.” In this case, Black Chicago then enjoys the kind of prominence and reality that gives the women concretization. It makes them part of a social class which represents dominance and power. Instances can be seen below:

“She wanted Black Chicagoans to know that she’s no stranger to the struggle. She talked about her family living paycheck-to-paycheck and about having a brother who spent most of his life incarcerated.” (Walden, 2019b, para 3).

“Black Chicagoans, however, took the sugar tax as a personal attack. Condescending radio and TV ads warned Black and Brown people of the dangers of soft drinks in a failed attempt to win their approval.” (Walden, 2019c, para 2).

“Everyone is vying for the Black vote…Our population, especially in Austin, has declined tremendously. What is your plan to retain and rebuild Black Chicago?” (Walden, 2019a, para 15).

By describing the women as a part of the larger Black Chicagoans community, *The Triibe* attributes a kind of concretization to the Black community in Chicago and elevating them to a position that should be conceived as mainstream in the larger community.

Like the genericization, the use of parataxis can allow authors to form an implicit social grouping in which the candidate might belong. By grouping the social actors in this new group, the text provides a socio-cultural identity for the actors to be perceived. Examples of parataxis in the women’s stories can be seen below:

“Amara Enyia…Her stances sound good, and they resonate with the disadvantaged Black and Brown folks on the South and West sides.” (Walden, 2019a, para 1).

“Black Chicagoans, however, took the sugar tax as a personal attack. Condescending radio and TV ads warned Black and Brown people of the dangers of soft drinks in a failed attempt to win their approval.” (Walden, 2019c, para 2).

In the above examples, the parataxis of “Black and Brown”, “South and West sides” connect the women with some groups who are left out of the mainstream politics. Although “South and West sides” do not represent a regularized classification of people, to the Black community, it shows a part...
of the city which is predominantly Black-occupied; thus, associating the women with these parts of the city gives them the benefits of being able to lead the Black populace and the entire city.

Nomination allows social actors to be represented in a way that reflects their individual and unique identities. This way they are not mentioned as just part of a group but gives room to highlight individual ranks and achievement through which the society can perceive such actors. The candidates were qualified with the use of standard and pseudo-titles to show their qualification and expertise in being able to be the city’s next leader. Some of the instances of the nomination in the stories can be seen below:

“On Feb. 26, she advanced to an April 2 runoff against Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle to become Chicago’s next mayor” (Walden, 2019b, para 4).

“Although she’s worked as a federal prosecutor and Chicago Police Board president in the past, Lightfoot says she hasn’t forgotten who she is.” (Walden, 2019b, para 4).

“The thing is, though, it’s hard to unsee Lightfoot as the police. Lightfoot served as the chief administrator at the Office of Professional Standards at the Chicago Police Department from 2002 to 2004. In 2015, she was appointed leader of Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s Police Accountability Task Force, and as Police Board president from 2015 to 2018, where she called out police misconduct and fired officers.” (Walden, 2019b, para 6).

Relational identification is used in the stories to show affinity with the grassroot concerns of the Black people. Although Leuween (2008) mentioned that this strategy might suggest intrusion of private sphere into public sphere which then can be branded as “nepotist” or “corruption,” this author argues that the way relational identification is used in this story creates cultural trust, portrays the candidates as kinswomen with their fellow Black community, and are representative of the main political concerns of the ordinary people. Examples of relational identification in the stories can be seen below:

“She talked about her family living paycheck-to-paycheck and about having a brother who spent most of his life incarcerated.” (Walden, 2019b, para 3).

The above example refers to Lori Lightfoot who discussed her familial background from the lower-class Chicago family. Here, her private identity only reaffirms her commitment to bringing change to the neighborhoods.
Discussion

Representation is an act that transcends the spatial limitation of the media artefact. It can reinforce status quo or challenge it. From the analysis above, we see how ownership and control play a huge role in content production. The stories of the marginalized are better told by people of the same race because it affords them the opportunity to depict accurate situations that are reflective of their daily experiences.

The analysis shows that alternative media allow marginalized people to highlight pains, struggles, and achievements that touch on them personally and collectively which might be omitted from the mainstream media. One way they do this is to see and question their experiences through the eyes of their representatives, in this case the Black women candidates. They examine how the candidates reflect the experiences of the group, and through this way the candidates are branded as their ‘savior.’ But this experience can only be represented, questioned, and detailed by the people who understand those stories.

Actors’ representations are very important to voters’ perspectives in an election race. If the media’s representation of the candidates does not mirror the voters’ concerns, they would likely see them as unfit to meet their social needs, hence, the need for a media culture that resonates with people’s social needs and beliefs. In the election coverage by *The Triibe*, the women were given full agency as potential mayors of the city. They were portrayed experientially capable to contest for the mayoral seat. Their Black and women identities were not downplayed but rather they were highlighted as strong cultural links between the candidates and the Black community. Their race and gender were represented positively as important for their success and became sources of strength and support for the women, thereby, bringing them ‘home’ to a community where they have been alienated.

Conclusion

This author has discussed how an alternative medium represented the Black women in the 2019 Chicago mayoral race. The study shows how alternative media can challenge dominant discourse of racial and gender misrepresentation of marginalized demographics, in this case, Black women. The analysis reflects a new identity for Black womanhood which replaces the stereotype of sexualization and objectification with discourses that highlights the women’s identities as reflective of the Black community’s concerns and representative of a courageous Black womanhood. Therefore, to witness a progressive positioning of Black women and other minorities in areas where they have been historically marginalized such as political offices, there is a need for alternative media production that challenges the conventionality of mainstream media. As mentioned earlier, this study does not show that Black-owned media automatically equals racial justice. More studies would
be needed to justify that assumption. However, what is obvious from this study is how Black women’s positioning in media stories are flipped from the object to the subject and accorded a good level of ability they have been previously denied. Therefore, to continue understanding how alternative media can challenge Black stereotypes, there is need to engage in more studies that focus on this type of media and the communities that operate them.

References


