


Digital Black Voices: Podcasting and the Black Public Sphere

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Abstract

Podcasts exist as new form of digital media that is quickly growing in popularity but remains understudied. This study explores Black podcasts' contributions to the Black public sphere. The study found that Black podcasts are a space in which Black people participate in discourse that seeks to build community and resist against hegemonic structures. This study contributes to Black public sphere research and the digital humanities field by positioning Black podcasts as a counter-public for Black people.

This study builds on the work of scholars – most notably, Dr. Sarah Florini and Dr. Catherine Knight Steele — who critically examine Black voices in digital spaces in order to understand how both networked and independent Black podcasts, a successor of Black radio, shape discourse around a range of issues and events salient to the Black diaspora. Berry describes podcasts as a “horizontal media form...producers are consumers, consumers may become producers, and both can engage in conversations with each other” [Berry 2006, 144]. Berry argues that podcasts are not merely a converged medium which incorporates audio, web, and portable media devices, but podcasts are also a disruptive technology displacing established assumptions about audience consumption and media production and distribution.

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Using Black public sphere as an analytical tool, this study explores how podcasting contributes to the Black digital public sphere by answering questions related to how Black podcasters build community, perpetuate resistance, and contribute to Black critical debate. The Black Public Sphere is a significant analytical framework used to identify varying political positions and interrogate Black voices in digital spaces because it is a critical site where democratic discourse takes place and emerging diasporic social movements are envisioned [Black Public Sphere Collective 1995]. Black podcasts symbolize a digital space “in which intellectuals join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States” [Black Public Sphere Collective 1995, 2–3]. Analyzing podcasting as a critical media technology that fosters democratic debate creates an opportunity to observe the importance of Black podcasts to the field of digital humanities.

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Why is podcasting a critical medium? Podcasting is significant to Black content creators because it is a relatively cost-effective, user-generated medium with far reaching implications for education, information gathering, and community building, especially around topics that are salient to Black communities across the diaspora. Podcasts also serve as a critical archive for digital humanists because podcasts have the potential to become primary source documentation that centers the experiences and voices of a range of Black people – Black podcasters are collectively memorializing significant moments in Black culture. Historically, Black media have always been crucial for memorializing and publicizing the Black experience in America – Black print news, Black magazines, Black radio, and Black television have been critical in anchoring and fostering support for a range of social justice movements and for telling stories where Black people and their lives are centered [Bacon 2003]; [Dankey 2009]; [Fraser 2016]; [Payton and Kvensy 2012].

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Therefore, the purpose of this research is to demonstrate the significance of Black podcasting to both the Black

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diaspora and the digital humanities field. Attempting to narrowly define what denotes a Black podcast, and therefore Blackness, could prove to essentialize a vast and diverse group of people. In an effort not to do so, this study only seeks to define what was deemed as a Black podcast for the purposes of this research as opposed to providing a definitive definition for Black podcasts. For this study, a Black podcast is one that features a Black host or majority of Black hosts and centers Black people in the content it produces. Black podcasts have the potential to disrupt the ways in which mainstream media set the agenda for the salience of political topics.

This study places Black podcasting within the context of more traditional forms of Black media. This literature will reveal that key to Black media are themes of community-building, resistance, and voice. The analysis conducted on the podcasts included in this study identified topics prevalent across the podcasts that indicate the different ways in which these podcasts express the aforementioned themes, adding to the legacy of Black media in their own unique ways.

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Black Media and Representation

In hegemonic societies, the dominant group's privilege also includes the advantage of controlling the presentation and dissemination of information [Squires 2002]. Although access to public arenas is technically guaranteed to all, "all will not necessarily be equal within those spaces" [Squires 2002, 450]. Unfortunately, groups oppressed by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, disability, and class are not able to enjoy the same access to media resources, and their views and voices are not given the same legitimacy and presence in discursive activities [Squires 2002, 450]. More specifically, the oppression of Black people created an economic disparity and historically, this has impacted Black people's access to the necessary capital needed to create and maintain their own media [Johnson 1993-1994]; [Selman-Earnest 1985]. Squires supports the need for marginalized groups to have separate spaces to discuss the specific interests of the cultural in-group without intrusion of the dominant group [Squires 2002].

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Though mainstream media are instrumental in communicating ideas, news, and the prevailing viewpoint, it has not been as dedicated to providing nuanced analyses of the issues related to marginalized groups. For marginalized groups, alternative media spaces are part of a historical tradition that has been important to counterbalancing the overwhelming silencing of Black voices and life experiences in traditional media formats [Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2013]. The cultural impact of Black mediated spaces, spaces that are occupied and organized by Black people and support Black centered discourse, draws its historical connection to *Freedom's Journal*, the first Black newspaper developed in 1827 in New York City [Bacon 2003]. According to Bacon, this publication was created as a means to amplify a wider range of Black voices within public discourse about the positioning and future of Black people, not only in the United States, but also around the world. The *Freedom Journal* proved to be an important space for Black content creators to publicize the plight of Black people globally and encourage radical, emancipatory movements [Bacon 2003]; [Fraser 2016]. This set the stage for Black people to envision themselves as members of a larger intra-racial community, which would later be solidified through technological advances that resulted in Black radio and Black entertainment television.

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Black radio, like its press predecessor, provided a space for Black people to participate in discourse about their experiences with oppression, and it created a means for community building around a shared desire to mitigate their marginalization. Black radio proved to be integral during the Civil Rights Movement as it was a space where Black people were able to discuss their discrimination, and sometimes through coded messaging, Black broadcasters were able to communicate meeting locations for political demonstrations to their audience [Johnson 1993-1994]; [Williams 2005]. Beyond the Civil Rights era, Black radio continued to exist as a space to discuss issues pertaining to Black communities as well as organize and promote various community events such as panel discussions, debates and protests held within Black communities [Squires 2002].

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Black television stations and programs, while not as abundant as press and radio largely due to financial constraints, also proved to serve a similar purpose [Selman-Earnest 1985]. Black TV provided platforms to hold discourse on race relations and issues within Black communities. There was an emphasis advocating for the Black communities they served and promoting various initiatives intended to empower these communities [Blevins 2020]; [Heitner 2013].

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This suggests that Black media is critical for dismantling the privileging of dominant groups in mainstream media, and

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this is what makes Black podcasting a critical medium. Compared to radio^[1], an antecedent of the podcast, podcast listening is typically very intense and interactive [Newman and Gallo 2019]. Podcasts are participatory culture in that podcast hosts and listeners actively engage in sharing ideas and knowledge with one another [Yee 2019]. There is radical potential for Black podcasts to be the idealized communication space of the Black diaspora – a space meant for democratic debate to contest the marginalization of Black people globally and share visionary political ideas that have emancipatory potential [Black Public Sphere Collective 1995]; [Florini 2015]. In this context, Black public sphere is an ideal analytical tool in which to guide the examination of Black podcasts.

The Black Public Sphere

Theorist Jürgen Habermas argues that in the late 18th and 19th centuries, people gathered in what he coined as public spheres, or places frequented by the bourgeois (pubs, restaurants, opera halls, etc.) to debate and come to a consensus about political issues of the day [Calhoun 1992]. According to Fraser, the concept of the bourgeois public sphere is important to the development of theory because it is a place designed to be critical of the dominant, controlling group [Fraser 1992]. However, Habermas' original work did not account for the varied voices within society [Squires 2002]. Though Habermas did attempt to rearticulate his original concept and eventually posed the idea of multiple public spheres, he fell short of examining other “nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres” [Fraser 1992, 115]. To address this gap, a group of Black scholars – The Black Public Sphere Collective – began conceptualizing a Black public sphere in the mid-1990s. Based on the work of the Black Public Sphere Collective, this research aims to identify Black Podcasts as a counter public sphere whose significance lies in its potential to help construct or disrupt narratives about the Black experience in America.

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While Habermas envisions the public sphere as highbrow, culturally significant, exclusionary spaces for elites, historically, the Black public sphere has included such spaces as the Black church, hair salons, barber shops, community corner stores, and Black-owned and operated publications [Black Public Sphere Collective 1995]. Advances in technology created the means for people to connect across the nation and the globe so that the Black public sphere is no longer confined geographically; instead, Black people throughout the diaspora across class lines, gender identities, and age groups have the opportunity to participate in discourse about the past, present, and future of the diaspora [Collins 2010]; [Squires 2002]. Studies that examine Black-centered public discourse find that participants feel free to express themselves without fear of alienating the dominant group. Within these spaces, Black people, people of color, and allies debate and commiserate about a range of topics from microaggressions within the work place; police-involved shootings of unarmed Black people; shared cultural and regional language; and in some instances, they use these spaces to reclaim and rearticulate Black collective memories of historical protest groups (such as The Black Panthers) as a way to create counter-memories that disrupt the dominant media's narrative of a post-racial society [Florini 2014a]; [Payton and Kvensy 2012].

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Despite the potential of the Black public sphere to be a significant site of Black discourse, limitations do exist. This is especially true considering that worldviews and perspectives are also shaped, to some extent, by one's experiences related to gender expression, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual identity [Hopkinson and Myers 2018]. As Dill and Zambrana point out, many people within a marginalized group are also situated in multiple and competing systems of social stratification based on class, ethnicity, geographic location, and even skin color [Dill and Zambrana 2009]. While The Collective examined physical spaces (barber shops and churches) and cultural spaces (Hip-Hop music and movies) to examine Black-centered discourse, since then, other scholars have acknowledged online spaces as sites of critical Black-centered discourse [Brock 2012]; [Florini 2014b]. The combination of the educational nature of podcasts along with its capability to foster resistance raises questions about the medium's potential to serve as a critical site of discourse to develop new pathways to Black liberation; therefore, this study limits its analysis to the following broad themes: community-building, resistance, and voice.

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Background on Podcasting

A podcast is defined as an episodic digital audio file that is consumed from either streaming on or downloading from a computer, mobile phone, or other digital device [Newman and Gallo 2019]. Although the term was coined by Ben

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Hammersley in 2004, as an amalgamation of Apple's "iPod" and "broadcast", the creation of podcast technology can be traced to Dave Winer's development of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) software in 2000 that allowed for the creation of digital feeds that could push audio content to subscribers [Bottomley 2015]. Podcasting was largely considered to be niche until 2014 when what is referred to as the "boom" occurred. This boom is largely credited to the success of the podcast *Serial*, which received millions of downloads in a short period of time and became the first podcast to win a Peabody award [Berry 2016]; [Bottomley 2015]; [Newman and Gallo 2019]. Yee notes that since 2014, podcasts have grown from more of a niche hobby for what could be considered the "average" person to becoming a platform leveraged by media personalities in order to strengthen their personal brand [Yee 2019]. Podcasts are usually free to listeners and available for download from a variety of Internet hosting sites [Berry 2006]. Based upon Apple's listings alone, there are approximately 770,000 existing podcasts as of 2019 [Newman and Gallo 2019].

Additionally, the ubiquity of podcasts makes it an ideal medium to reach mass audiences. In 2013, Apple announced its one-billionth podcast subscription [Zickuhr 2013]. According to research conducted by Edison Research and Triton Digital survey data, as of 2018, more than half of Americans over the age of 12 have listened to a podcast at some point, which is up from 9% in 2008 [Audio and Podcasting Fact Sheet 2019]. Some of the most popular mainstream podcasts, such as those hosted by National Public Radio (NPR), boasted more than seven million listeners in 2018 [Audio and Podcasting Fact Sheet 2019]. Podcasting has also become quite lucrative. A yearly study conducted by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) predicts that podcast advertising revenue will reach over one billion dollars by the year 2021 [Audio and Podcasting Fact Sheet 2019]. Unfortunately, it is not clear what percentage of these advertising dollars will be used to support Black podcasts because there is still very little data and research available that centers Black podcasts.

Similar to other popular user-generated media such as blogging, podcasts challenge barriers that limit media ownership and provide a space for marginalized voices to have a platform. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways marginalized groups leverage podcasts for social justice, resistance, education, community, and more. This research is concerned with the ways Black podcasters use podcasting as a medium to create a counter-public and the resulting implications for the future of Black-centered public discourse.

Black Podcasting

Danielle "Berry" Sykes, a Black woman and self-proclaimed lover of podcasts, launched her website PodcastsInColor.com in March 2015 as a means to catalogue and memorialize Black and other people of color (POC)-centered podcasts [Berry Syk n.d.]. Sykes recognized the lack of visibility for marginalized groups' podcasts on major podcasts lists; leveraging the power of Black Twitter, Sykes put out a call for Black podcasters to send her links to their podcasts. What started as a simple database of Black podcasts has since developed into the most comprehensive list of Black and other POC podcasts available on the Internet. Though PodcastsInColor.com does not purport to have a complete list of Black podcasts, it is significant for demonstrating the breadth of Black podcasts.

According to Florini, Black people use the medium of podcasting as a counter-public in much the same way that Black people have used public spaces such as Black barbershops and beauty salons to engage in Black-centered discourse and to organize and promote social justice movements [Florini 2015]. In the analysis of the Black online media network, *This Week in Blackness* or *TWiB!*, Florini notes that Black podcasters use their shows in addition to other platforms like Twitter to organize and mobilize political action [Florini 2017]. Apiyo's [2019] thesis research related to Black podcasting also supports the significance of Black podcasts in reinforcing cultural identity by producing specific, targeted content that centers the experiences, perceptions, and worldviews of the racial in-group [Apiyo 2019].

One important aspect of Black podcasts is the ways in which language serves as a significant cultural marker. Black podcasters use the medium to talk about news and information that is not typically covered on mainstream media, and they do so in a style not used in mainstream media — Black podcasters tend to embrace the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) [Florini 2015]. "Signifyin'", another sociolinguistic marker of the Black racial identity as described by Florini, is a popular style of banter used by several Black podcasters [Florini 2014b]. Signifyin' describes the use of humor and sarcasm within cultural context, and it requires the listener to possess certain cultural, historical,

and political knowledge to understand the resistance and double-consciousness embedded within the communication style. The practice of signifying, historically, was used by Black communities as a form of critique against the dominant group. Though Florini is specifically analyzing communication practices of Black Twitter users, this sociolinguistic feature can also be applied to Black podcasters, and this is demonstrated in the way many Black hosts name their podcasts [Florini 2014b]. As an example, the podcast, *The Black Guy Who Tips*, is sarcastically named as a means to resist the stereotype that Black people do not tip their wait staff in restaurants.

Podcasting, a convergent medium, has served as an important outlet for Black creatives and content creators — Black podcasters have been able to use relatively inexpensive digital technologies to build mediated communities, contest their marginalization, provide a counter-narrative to stereotypes, and assert a more nuanced perspective on current issues facing Black communities globally. Similar to social media, podcasts allow for the masses to navigate around more traditional media gatekeepers to produce their own content. Also, like social media, podcasts have been proven to operate as sites of resistance for marginalized groups especially as it relates to issues with media representation.

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Methodology

Podcasts in Color serves as the primary source of data because it is the largest comprehensive directory of podcasts by people of color [Berry Syk n.d.]. The website lists hundreds of Black podcasts on a broad range of topics with hosts from a broad range of backgrounds. The data set was collected from *Podcasts in Color's* “2018 Top Podcasts” list which was compiled by Sykes, the website administrator, and based on host and listener feedback. The “2018 Top Podcasts” list contains a range of podcast categories that include comedy, women-hosted, LGBTQIA-hosted, art and culture, and business. This list yielded an initial population of 100 podcasts. From this list, 20 podcasts were randomly selected to be examined by both researchers. This meant that each podcast had an equal chance of being selected for analysis. Random sampling was selected as a means to generate an unbiased sample of the data population. The appendix contains a full list of the podcasts included in this study.

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Podcasts included within the sample met the following criteria: (1) the podcast had at least one Black-identified host; (2) the podcast was included on the *Podcasts in Color* “2018 Top Podcasts” list; (3) the podcast produced an episode within the timeframe of April 1, 2019 to April 1, 2020; and (4) the podcast was accessible via the Apple podcast application. The researchers acknowledge that podcasts are accessible through a number of applications such as Stitcher, SoundCloud, Spotify, and Podmatic; however, the Apple podcast application tends to be the most widely used to access podcasts.

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After the sample list of Black podcasts was developed, the researchers selected the most popular episode within the specified timeframe for each podcast according to ratings available through Apple iTunes as of April 3, 2020. Each researcher independently listened to each of the selected episodes and identified the most prevalent topics covered on each episode, along with a short summary of the key points covered under each topic. While listening to the episodes, the researchers incorporated an audio analyzing methodology utilized by Lindgren that “involves stopping frequently to take notes about the content” [Lindgren 2021, 7], and wrote down the timestamps of quotes that they believed best represented the identified topics. After independently identifying key topics and points for each episode, the researchers reconvened to compare observations, organize notes, and synthesize findings. Show topics included mainstream news stories; pop culture stories; and personal narratives related to sexism, Black women’s participation in motor sports, people-pleasing, fashion, community-building, graphic design, self-care, the 2020 pandemic related to COVID-19, health, women’s empowerment, entrepreneurship, religion, race, music, and travel. Through discussion, the researchers synthesized reoccurring, underlying topics which apply to the broad themes of community-building, resistance, and voice. The most prevalent topics among the podcasts selected for analysis were identity, self-definition, Black visibility, community, and resistance. Specific examples to illustrate the significance of each topic are analyzed in the following section.

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Analysis

In popular Black podcast style, the five topics analyzed are aptly renamed: We are not a Monolith (identity); I Looked at

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Myself, and I said, “Self” (self-definition); Everywhere You Think We Ain’t (Black visibility); U-N-I-T-Y (community); and Going Against the Grain (resistance). Keeping in line with the signifyin’ that occurs within Black podcasts, both in the language used in conversations and the show titles, the researchers embrace the practice of signifyin’ through the naming of each topic to emphasize the double-consciousness embedded in Black discourse.

The first topic, identity, which represents the range of diverse identities in Black podcasting and summarized in the “We Are Not a Monolith” section, focuses on the breadth of perspectives based on varying life experiences related to region, ethnicity, gender expression, sexual identity and more. The title of the section is significant as, in recent years, it has become a popular phrase used to recognize the diversity of Black people. The second topic self-definition, represented by the “I Look at Myself and said, Self” section describes different podcasters’ means of self-exploration. The section title is a paraphrase of a quote from the 2008 Tyler Perry movie *Meet the Browns*. Although delivered as a comedic line, the phrase represents the current push for self-reflection and growth.

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The third topic Black visibility or “Everywhere You Think We Ain’t” addresses the issue of representation, or rather a lack thereof, for Black people, and this topic highlights the stories and experiences of those who occupy spaces (hobbies, regions, jobs) where Black people are under-represented. The fourth topic of community, which represents the community building that occurs within Black podcasts in the “U-N-I-T-Y” section, concentrates on the ways that Black podcasters use their platform as a means to connect with and address issues within their communities. The section title derives its name from the 1993 Grammy award-winning rap song by mogul Queen Latifah, and this classic rap song is about creating unity and strengthening the Black community. The final topic – resistance – is summarized in the “Going Against the Grain” section. “Going against the grain” is a popular colloquialism, and within the context of this study, its meaning is more straightforward as this section describes how Black podcasters debate and discuss resistance to invisibility and marginalization.

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We Are Not a Monolith

The podcasts selected for analysis highlighted a wide variety of perspectives based on a variety of identities related to gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. This first topic refers to the intersecting identities embraced by the podcasts’ hosts rather than the specific content produced in that there was such a broad range of Black identities represented and acknowledged. As an example, *Jesus and Jollof* is hosted by two Nigerian-American women who incorporate their experiences of being the children of immigrants into their conversations. One co-host, Yvonne Orji stated:

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If you’re listening and you are a child of immigrants, this is how we adopt people pleasing. We’ve all been there when your mom is like, “ahh. I have to make a pot of stew for the meeting. I’m so tired I just worked 40 hours. Oh, but if I don’t, if I don’t do it then they’ll say I’m a bad person” [Orji and Ajayi 2020, 8:50].

Within this conversation, the hosts are stating that there are some experiences and sentiments that are distinct to Black immigrants that influence their actions and feelings. Orji’s comments suggest that an urge to please others at the detriment to oneself might be one result of those experiences.

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Florini’s work acknowledged that Black podcasters, likely due to a sense of comfort stemming from being in a Black mediated space, tend to embrace the use of AAVE [Florini 2015]. This was found to be the case for many of the podcasts in this study, however, shows such as *Jesus and Jollof*, *Black Gals Livin Podcast* and *I Said What I Said* expand that notion as all of the hosts of the included podcasts are not African American. The latter two podcasts have hosts that reside in the United Kingdom and Nigeria, respectively. It would be more appropriate to say that Black podcasters embrace their own regional dialects and accents while speaking English that incorporates their varied identities whether it consists of being American, British, Nigerian, etc. or a combination of multiple identities.

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Podcasts such as *Whoreible Decisions*, *Keep It, HIM.* and *Strange Fruit* are ones in which the hosts identify as members of the LGBTQIA community and their content reflects that experience. On these shows, the hosts often insert perspectives and experiences that those who are not members of the LGBTQIA community would likely not share. For example, *Strange Fruit* contained a conversation with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi that spoke to how society views Black LGBTQIA people as inferior to Black, cisgender, heterosexual people, which impacts their lived experiences. The show,

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by discussing a court case in which an employee's pay was allegedly cut once their employer found out he was gay, exemplified that some of these different experiences could manifest as workplace discrimination.

Although one's identity as a marginalized person influences one's experience and will often be reflected in conversations, it is important that Black people are not confined to this narrative. For example, a large part of *HIM*'s episode was a conversation on dating and the five love languages. It is important that the hosts were free to have a general conversation on dating without it having to be specifically about dating as a gay Black man.

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These diverse identities are important in that they help to showcase there are multiple perspectives and experiences that encompass the Black experience, giving even more credence to the adage that "we are not a monolith." These podcasts prove that the Black experience is not just limited to straight, cisgender, American men. These podcasts highlight the differing experiences inherent in the Black identity, and this is an important factor to highlight in Black media. Black podcasts make it much easier to expose these varied Black experiences to help combat the few and often negative depictions of Black people in mainstream media [Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2013].

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I Looked at Myself, and I said, "Self"

Common across all the podcasts was a focus on "self" – self-healing, self-motivation, self-acceptance, self-love, self-employment, and self-care. Although these can all have very different meanings and applications, a common topic of the podcasts revolved around motivating listeners to look inward, reflect and become attuned with one's needs. Much of the focus on self was in response to the trauma that structural oppression places upon Black people. This is especially true for the messages of self-care, self-love and self-healing. The podcast hosts and guests recognized that oppression inflicts a severe amount of trauma, both mental and physical, upon Black people; Black podcasters advocate for their listeners to take the time to care for themselves. Shelah Marie, the guest on *Dreams in Drive*, a podcast focused on entrepreneurship and hosted by Rana Campbell, provided insights on what led her to creating a healing space and stated that "women of color, and especially Black women, are tired of being told about themselves by people who are not Black. We're tired of being told how to heal by people who are not sharing our same journey" [Campbell 2019, 38:13].

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Similarly, the podcasts also recognized that society's negative depictions of Black people can sometimes influence one's own ideas about their Blackness, which is why self-acceptance was also present. In relation to this, Bose Ogulu, the guest on *I Said What I Said*, a podcast hosted by FK and Jolz, two Black millennial women living in Lagos, spoke about being fortunate to grow up in a household that taught her about the harm to global Black populations resulting from apartheid and colonization. As a result of gaining this understanding at an early age, she "grew with the realization that I was Black. African. Umm, that wouldn't change. So part of being comfortable in your own skin is accepting and embracing yourself" [Abudu and Adeyeye 2019, 1:03:03]. The guest goes on to speak about how part of being able to embrace her Blackness is also tied to her ability to travel and engage with Black people in different countries and recognize similarities in culture while understanding that the perceived divisions among Black people were created by colonizers [Abudu and Adeyeye 2019, 1:03:20].

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In addition, some podcasts also pushed forth the idea of self-employment as a way for Black people to take more control of their own lives and careers. Both the hosts, Nubia Younge and Frantzces Lys, and guest, Sha'Cannon, on *Chronicles Abroad*, a podcast dedicated to Black women living as expatriates, spoke at length about the need to move away from working in the traditional corporate America structure because of the stress it caused. Sha'Cannon spoke about having to deal with poor leadership, office politics, working extra hours, and various other hurdles that prevent one being able to enjoy their work. She proclaimed:

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You're just not happy. And then when you finally get a chance to get vacations approved. Did you hear that? You know, I have to ask for what is supposed to be a benefit to me. You know. "Can I go away? Because you're draining the shit out of me. Can I go recharge?" You know, once you get it approved and you go, you almost can't enjoy the vacation, because it's short lived you know... by the time you really are into the vacation it's over and you're damn near depressed because you have to do what? Go back to the traffic and corporate America [Younge 2020, 04:16].

In this statement, there is an expression of the levels of stress that can come along with working for someone else, especially under the corporate America structure, thus positioning self-employment as a more freeing option. 36

Something of importance to note in these examples is that Black podcasts often encourage Black people to reach out across the diaspora in order to gain a greater sense of self. This is especially so for the concepts of self-healing and self-acceptance. Several of these podcasts seem to recognize the damage that White supremacy has done to Black people and view the Black diaspora as a restorative resource. 37

Everywhere You Think We Ain't

Several of the podcasts focused on increasing visibility of Black, and sometimes other marginalized groups, in areas that they are normally not represented. This includes traveling abroad, certain pop culture spaces, and the graphic designing world. As an example, on the episode of *Chronicles Abroad*, Nubia exclaimed that: 38

Chronicles Abroad started because when we were, you know researching, or when I was researching, I didn't find people that look like us. You know. Or in our age bracket. So that's how it got started. And then I was so surprised that once I moved abroad, there were so many of us out here [Younge 2020, 02:38].

Nubia's comments speak to her podcast having an explicit intent to fill a void in the lack of representation of Black people as international travelers. 39

Revision Path is a podcast dedicated to highlighting Black digital creatives, artists, designers and developers who normally go unnoticed within mainstream design industries. During the introduction, the show's creator explains that the podcast is a, "weekly showcase of the world's Black graphic designers, web designers and web developers. Through in-depth interviews you learn about their work, their goals and what inspires them as creative individuals" [Cherry 2020, 00:45]. Although much of the interview focused on gaining insights on the guest's experiences and career in graphic design, it was clear that race was a significant factor in the guest's career trajectory — the guest often mentioned the issues he faced being one of the few Black graphic designers in the industry. 40

The focus on featuring Black people in spaces where Black people are not typically visible in mainstream media is evident in a number of other podcasts. For example, the analyzed episode of *Strange Fruit* included a segment that focused on Black women motorcycle clubs, and the guest on *Dreams in Drive* discussed the impetus for launching her self-care business, noting that there were very few visible women in this space. 41

U-N-I-T-Y

While the concept of community-building was a broad theme examined in this study, topics related to community gatherings, community development, and grassroots organization tended to be a significant topic in most of the podcasts analyzed. Some of the podcasts focused on discussing different ways that the Black community could be uplifted; some podcasts commented on national Black liberation, and others commented on strategies for freedom specific to Black women and queer communities. *Tea with Queen and J.* exemplify this with their "Pay Black Women Segment" in which they promote the financial support of Black and Indigenous women, cisgender women and transwomen, as well as non-gender conforming Black and Indigenous people, by highlighting a person or persons who the listeners should support. By doing this, the hosts acknowledge that Black people who are not straight, cisgender men face many more obstacles and forms of oppression and are often overlooked in society. 42

Similarly, Malik Little, one of the hosts of *HIM.*, spoke about the efforts he makes to support the Black queer community by providing food, shelter and funds if needed. The host voiced: 43

You know me bitch. If anyone of y'all talm'bout some y'all need a haircut, y'all need food. There have been people who have hit me up through the podcast who've asked for food, and bitch their refrigerators have been full. And y'all know how I feel about that, and that's just because of the things that I've been through here [Little et al. 2019, 28:45].

What is of importance here is that the host is connecting how the podcast itself plays a role in supporting their community. He is not only exemplifying how he supports those who he personally knows in need, but also those who solicit help via the podcast.

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Additionally, Alex Elle, the host of the *hey, girl* podcast, which espouses sisterhood among Black women, spoke about the importance of building community for self-care. She stated that, “For me, building community is important for my self-care, accountability and just for having a support system” [Elle 2019, 03:10]. This sentiment was also shared on other podcasts, especially in reference to maintaining one’s sense of self in quarantine during the coronavirus pandemic. Podcast hosts also spoke of building a stronger podcast community by promoting stronger engagement with their listeners or other Black podcasts. Many of the podcasts have segments where they read listener emails or encourage the continuation of the conversation on social media with the hosts and other listeners.

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Going Against the Grain

Ever present within many of the podcasts was a sense of resistance, both directly and indirectly. All of the prior topics can be viewed as acts of resistance in their own way and all of the observed episodes held some resistance to structural oppression to varying degrees. Some shows such as *Tea with Queen and J* are direct about it; in their introduction, they state their intent to dismantle “White supremacist patriarchal capitalism” [Muhammad and Francis 2020]. While some of the other podcasts might not state it as blatantly, their actions push against the status quo. For example, the guest on *Chronicles Abroad* spoke at length about self-employment and moving further away from the stress and constraints that corporate America creates [Younge 2020, 03:15]. Myliek Teele, founder and owner of a popular subscription service that features Black beauty products, encourages her show’s listeners to “make sure that you’re putting the same energy and effort into your personal life as you are into your professional life” [Teele 2019, 19:16]. For Black women, who are often taught to put everyone before their own needs, this serves as a means of resistance.

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As most of the podcast hosts identify as women and/or queer, much of the conversations also included resistance against sexism, transphobia, homophobia and other intersecting points of oppression. For example, on *Strange Fruit* the hosts’ conversation with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi discussed how cisgendered, heterosexual Black men do not make up the entirety of the Black population and to defend Black people, you must also defend Black women and LGBTQ people. Furthermore, it was also acknowledged that even though Black women and LGBTQ people often face the most vitriol within the community, they are also the ones who are most prominent in organizing for Black liberation. The Black Lives Matter movement, which is largely led by Black women and LGBTQ people, was cited as a significant example [Story and Gardner 2019, 07:00].

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Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to identify the significance of Black podcasts as a counter public sphere meant to construct or disrupt narratives about the Black experience in America. Using the Black public sphere as a guide and placing Black podcasting within the context of more traditional forms of Black media, this research primarily focused on three broad themes of community-building, resistance, and voice. To distinguish these themes from the aforementioned topics, the five topics identified in the analysis represent the most prevalent discussion points covered in the podcasts. These topics were then used to help explain Black podcasts’ unique contributions to the overarching themes of community-building, resistance, and voice that are present in the Black media landscape at large.

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Community

Community-building among Black podcasters is a significant theme within this study, made most evident by the “U-N-I-T-Y” topic. This is not surprising considering, historically, Black media such as print news, has been a unifying force for Black communities. This study demonstrates that podcasters utilize their platforms as a beacon to attract and engage community members and provide links to resources. In some respects, some podcasts, such as *hey, girl* and *Black Gals Livin’*, promoted the importance of community building, often discussing how it is important for one’s own self-care. In

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this way, the podcasts are essentially stressing the importance of having a support system, which is something that many marginalized people might feel they need living in a society founded on systemic inequality.

Some of the podcasts also promoted engagement with their own listeners, creating space for feedback through email and social media. Taking into account that podcasting is considered to be an intimate medium, one could view this as a way that the hosts are ensuring that their listeners feel even more included in the conversation. Although the scope of this study does not include an examination of the podcasts' social media engagements, the promotion of continuing the conversation on different platforms allows for listeners of the show to connect with other listeners, potentially building a digital community around the podcast. Some of the shows also mentioned and promoted other Black podcasts and social media accounts, implying that the hosts recognize the importance of promoting other marginalized voices. This ideally creates a loose network that helps to link listeners to other Black resources and communities.

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Some of the podcasts also use their platform to support the Black community outside of the digital space. This is perhaps best noted in *Tea with Queen and J.* and *HIM*. In the former, the hosts have a segment dedicated to financially supporting Black people who do not identify as cisgender males because they recognize how they are disproportionately disparaged in society and may be in need of extra financial assistance. The requests made in this segment can range from asking for support of a business, organization or initiative to sending money so that a particular individual can buy food. Although it is not an official segment of *HIM*., one of the hosts did speak about how he responds to requests made by the podcast listeners for food or financial assistance. In these varying ways, Black podcasts have a tendency to be community-oriented and are using their platforms to support the Black community, especially those whose life experiences are negatively impacted by multiple and intersecting systems of oppression. Black podcasters may also view their podcasts as a way to digitally connect different parts of the community that may be geographically separated.

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Resistant

Historically, traditional forms of media have not been representative of Black people both in terms of quantity and quality, which results in the perpetuation of Black stereotypes. Black media have been critical for resisting these stereotypes by providing counter-narratives of the Black experience. The second theme, resistance, shows up in a number of ways in Black discourse via Black podcasting, and this is primarily done by the increased representation of diverse Black voices and worldviews.

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The topics "We Are Not a Monolith" and "Everywhere You Think We Ain't" demonstrate that Black podcasts are pushing against dominant narratives of Black people, which limits them to being categorized as one of a few different stereotypes, by showcasing just how varied our voices are. The hosts were experienced and engaged in a range of different topics and areas including, but not limited to sex, pop culture, graphic design, nutrition, traveling abroad, entrepreneurship, and the music industry. Simply placing Black voices in these spaces is an act of resistance against the false perception that Black people are not present there or capable of holding knowledge on a multitude of topics.

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Furthermore, most of the hosts did not identify as straight, cisgender men, who are the dominant group within a patriarchal society. To the same effect that increasing the visibility of Black voices in media is a form of resistance against racial oppression, incorporating the voices, perspectives and lived experiences of people with intersecting, marginalized identities is an act of resistance against misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. Oppression in the form of racism has severely narrowed the representation of the Black experience in media, and Black podcasts are contributing to broadening that perspective.

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The poor representations of Black people in media can have a negative effect on how Black people view themselves. Therefore, ideas of self-love and self-acceptance as described in the "I Look at Myself and Said, Self" section suggests that self-reflection and self-definition can also be considered a radical form of resistance. Accepting and loving one's own Blackness leads to accepting others' definition of Blackness and has the potential to promote community building.

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Aside from self-definition as a form of resistance, some of the podcasts were much more straightforward in their notion of resistance and used their platform to lambaste White supremacist patriarchal capitalism. While the hosts of *Tea with Queen and J.* are the only Black podcasters (within this study) to explicitly state this as the purpose of their podcast,

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many others shared similar sentiments. At various points during the episodes analyzed, the hosts would critique capitalism, racism, sexism and homophobia. Sometimes the criticism was indirect, as was the case in *Chronicles Abroad* where the hosts and guest made several comments speaking to how flawed and stressful the structure of corporate America is. Other times it might present as a blatant statement such as the one made by one host of the *HIM* podcast, “We’re all living in this capitalist bullshit society” [Little et al. 2019, 27:55]. In *Jesus and Jollof*, one of the hosts made a reference to how men often use the term “crazy” to reduce and define women who make demands that the man is incapable of fulfilling [Orji and Ajayi 2020, 13:48]. As this analysis suggests, resistance for Black podcasters has different meanings and different potentiality; however, it is clear that for Black podcasters, the concept of resistance is both meaningful and significant, which historically, has always been a primary mission of Black media.

Voice

The third theme examined in this study focused on the diversity of voice within the Black public sphere. For this study, voice describes more than just the sonic representation of Blackness (though that is significant as well); voice also describes the perspective, attitude, and opinion of different Black people whose life experiences have been shaped by the region where they live or grew up, their socioeconomic class, their sexual identity, their gender, and to some extent a shared history of slavery. Black podcasts expand the Black public sphere, increasing the number of voices that participate in it, therefore making it more representative of the diversity of Black communities globally.

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Perhaps, what is the most unique about Black podcasts is the medium itself. As the literature uncovered, podcasting as a digital medium is widely accessible and creates an avenue for individuals to navigate around traditional media gatekeepers [Florini 2015]; [Steele 2018]. This generates an opportunity for more Black people to build an online platform and share it widely; including those who might not have access to own and/or participate in more traditional media formats as a result of barriers related to class, gender, sexual identity, disability, and various other factors.

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Beyond helping to remove media gatekeepers and financial barriers, Black podcasting as a digital medium also help to remove geographical barriers, which adds to the diversity of voice. With the help of digital technology, listeners can access shows hosted by Black people throughout the diaspora. While Black newspapers and Black radio were often limited in their reach, Black podcasts can attract Black listeners from nearly anywhere in the world. Nigerian podcast shows such as *I Said What I Said* have the potential to expand their listener base to Americans; conversely, Nigerian listeners can also access Black American podcasts such as *Dreams in Drive* – this is how cross-cultural interactions happen. Therefore, public discourse that may once have been locally confined can now invite a wider range of voices and people to participate globally. Whether physical or intangible, the barriers that podcasts remove allow for more Black people of varying identities and experiences to participate in public discourse with each other.

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While scholars such as Thakur argue that the digital landscape creates too many voices, making it difficult to have one single agenda, it is important that Black people are recognized as a diverse group [Thakur 2020]. As a diverse group of people, Black communities will have different interests and needs. The “We Are Not a Monolith” and “Everywhere You Think We Ain’t” topics provide examples of the variety of Blackness from identities to geographic locations to hobbies and career interests. Furthermore, the “U-N-I-T-Y” topic shows that, even among all of these varying voices, there still exists a unifying desire to uplift all Black people. Black podcasts recognize that efforts aimed at supporting the unique needs of different Black communities do not have to be at odds with each other and can serve to uplift Black people as a whole. Black podcasting highlights the diversity of Black critical debate and it offers a space for the development of cross-cultural interactions.

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Conclusion

Using a sample of 20 podcasts, this study demonstrates the significant contributions Black podcasts have made to the Black public sphere. Despite podcasting’s major contributions to Black representation, Black media production, Black resistance, and Black community building, this study focuses on a small sample of Black podcasts, therefore, some limitations do exist. Considering the breadth of platforms available to create and listen to podcasts and the fact that there is not an all-inclusive database, several podcasts were not included in the data population. Future research should

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compile a more comprehensive list of Black podcasts and analyze a larger sample. Additionally, this research explores Black podcast commentary but does not focus on audience engagement. Future research should also consider examining audience engagement to determine how Black podcasting shapes audience perceptions about topics salient to the Black community. Finally, research demonstrates that not all Black voices and experiences are represented equally within the Black public sphere, therefore, future research should take a more intentionally intersectional approach to exploring Black podcasts to ensure that women, LGBTQIA, disabled and other marginalized voices across the Black diaspora are included.

Appendix

Podcasts included in the study

Podcast	Episode Title	Episode Date	Number of Hosts	Guests	Apple Category
Time Well Spent	Episode 22 - The Appeal	02/28/2020	1	1	Society and Culture
Network and Spill	#The Spill Speaking Up + Using Your Voice w/ Speech Pathologist Corinne Zmoos	03/19/2020	1	1	Entrepreneurship
Black Gals Livin Podcast	79 I got the Coronavirus	03/29/2020	2	0	Society and Culture
Hey, Girl	Mini Update: Alex's Personal Self-Care Tips	05/31/2019	1	0	Personal Journals
HIM.	Episode 086: Give + Take	11/27/2019	4	0	Relationships
Keep It	Queenpin	04/01/2020	3	2	Society and Culture
Jesus and Jollof	People Pleasing	03/20/2020	2	0	Society and Culture
Unofficial Expert	"The Hoodrat Expert" with Alex English	12/06/2019	2	1	Comedy
Strange Fruit	You Might not be Racist, But Are You Anti Racist?	11/26/2019	2	2	Philosophy
Purple Panties	She Keeps Me Warm	04/17/2019	8	0	Performing Arts
Tea With Queen and J	#245 Maybe Just Log Off	03/31/2020	2	0	Society and Culture
Whoreible Decisions	Ep 160: Boundaries and Virtual Sex Orgies Feat Miss Cory B	03/30/2020	2	1	Comedy
I Said What I Said	ISWIS S2EP01	11/05/2019	2	1	Society and Culture
Chronicles Abroad	Episode 144	01/01/2020	2	1	Places and Travel
Dreams in Drive	223: How to Accept Yourself	10/28/2019	1	1	Entrepreneurship
Revision Path	Anthony Harrison	01/06/2020	1	1	Design
Myleik Teele's Podcast	Lessons from the Last Decade	12/12/2019	1	0	Careers
The Come Up Show	The Future of Sharing and Discovery	06/05/2019	1	4	Music
Food Heaven (Show) Podcast	How to Stay Nourished in Times of Chaos	03/25/2020	2	0	Nutrition
The Right Time with Bomani Jones	Pass the Sticks	03/31/2020	1	1	Sports

Table 1.

Notes

[1] In a 1956 article published by *Harper's Bazaar*, Alex Haley and Albert Abarbenel attempt to demonstrate the significance of Black consumers by focusing on "Negro" radio which served a critical function in the Black community by featuring a range of topics including the achievements of local prominent Blacks and alerting listeners who lived in violently segregated communities where it was safe to shop [Newman 2000]. Black radio drew particular interest at this time because advertisers were beginning to understand the economic significance of targeting Black audiences, and this opened the door for increased advertising and revenue for Black radio [Chambers 2008]. However, with the passing

of ownership deregulations sponsored by Reagan and Bush administrations, Black radio, especially in smaller markets, suffered dramatically as demonstrated by decreasing advertising revenue and Black radio ownership [Scott 1993].

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