Black CyberFeminism: Intersectionality, Institutions and Digital Sociology

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This paper considers what intersectionality brings to digital sociology. I will use digital sociology to mean: observing social processes at the micro, meso, and macro level that are transformed or mediated by digital logics, technologies and platforms[1]. The most common application of intersectionality in studies of the Internet or the digital is to social media. Millions of people use social media to navigate identities too complex for single analytical frames like race, class, gender and sexuality to fully capture. We are messy and complicated and we seem to want our digital tools to reflect that. But, intersectionality was never intended to only describe lived experiences. Intersectionality was to be an account of power as much as it was an account of identities (Crenshaw 1991). Here, the potential of intersectionality to understand the reproduction of unequal power relations have not yet been fully realized. This is especially true of macro and meso, or institutional, analyses. Drawing on my research of online and for-profit

education, I argue that black cyberfeminist theory can refine digital sociology's understanding of identities, institutions and political economies in the data age. Additionally, classification situations offers a refinement of black cyberfeminism themes to examine how one mechanism, algorithmic stratification, allocates access to and returns from digitally mediated interactions. Next, I discuss intersectionality broadly, the potential of black cyberfeminism, and present examples of how classification situations complements this theoretical turn in digital sociology.

Intersectionality as Theory, Method and Praxis

To discuss intersecting inequalities and digital platforms, one has to be clear about what intersectionality framework one is adopting. A full treatment of the various debates in and about intersectionality falls beyond the scope of this paper (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Davis 2008; Lewis 2009; McCall 2005). In brief, intersectionality is one of those rare social theories to combine precision of theoretical mechanisms with broadness of method (Lykke 2011). That combination has served intersectionality's diffusion through social sciences and humanities quite well. It has also created tensions about what intersectionality really means and how best to measure it (or, if it should be measured at all!). I most often study digitally-mediated engagements through institutions like education and work (Cottom 2014; Cottom 2014; Neem et al. 2012). And, I understand one dimension of power as the mobilization of capital and politics to the benefit of some at the expense of others. Through that lens, any site of cultural production exists in a hierarchy of groups and resources, with power flowing betwixt the two like the Thames. In the black feminist tradition, examining the points of

various structural processes where they most numerously manifest is a way to isolate the form and function of those processes in ways that can be obscured when we study them up the privilege hierarchy (Hill Collins 2000). Essentially, no one knows best the motion of the ocean than the fish that must fight the current to swim upstream. I study fish that swim upstream. Given all of these attestations to my social location vis-à-vis my intellectual production, I will call on a methodological practice of "contextual and comparative methodology" grounded in the theoretical imperative to center marginalized groups by examining intersectionality in a "process-centered, institutionally complex way" (Choo and Ferree 2010:131). For the purposes of this critical interrogation of intersectionality and digital sociology, that means I will focus on institutions as nadirs of power, the processes by which various intersecting oppressions are enacted, and the means by which groups resist and experience these inter/intra-actions. These levels of analyses are consistent with black cyberfeminism's three themes (Gray 2006). I use examples from the case of financialized higher education institutions and online credentials, to explore black cyberfeminism's utility for understanding intersectionality and digital sociology.

Background and Literature Review

In the spirit of black feminist thought, I begin this inquiry for an intersectionality of institutions and power in digital spaces close to my home turf. In my pre-academia life, I worked for a social service agency that aimed to move people from "welfare to work". One part of that initiative included employment counseling. My job was to match those on welfare with possible job opportunities. In 2000, that meant sending them out

into a labor market where unemployment hovered at around 4 percent [2]. If they could not find a job under those conditions, the next tool in the social services toolkit was to send recipients somewhere for job training. The majority of my clients were women. Over half were black or Hispanic. For them, job training often lent itself to short-term certificate programs in gendered occupations like allied health care and cosmetology [3]. The cosmetology program would take approximately nine months to complete while allied health courses could take up to 12 months or longer. Sensitive to life-time limits on their benefits and pressures to re-enter the labor market quickly to escape social stigma, most of my clients chose the cosmetology program even though it was more expensive and had lower labor market returns. Some area cosmetology schools offered federal student aid programs and others did not. Those that did not were often cheaper but required cash payment. As a result, most of my clients ended up enrolled in the more expensive cosmetology program because they could get a student loan to pay for it. Put another way, the same structural inequalities that made my clients vulnerable to labor market vicissitudes made them more likely to borrow against future earnings that, on average, would pay less than other occupational certifications. These are some of the ways in which social inequalities and intersecting oppressions manifest offline: political power, obscure language like "block grants" transform the welfare state for the most vulnerable in ways they cannot often understand, labor markets that reproduce gender through occupational segregation also reproduces racial inequalities because black and brown women have fewer social safety nets and higher risks for falling down the mobility ladder (Alexandar et al 2014).

Consequently, I understood the notable ascension of for-profit colleges as the number one producer of black bachelor's degree holders in the U.S. (Borden and Brown 2003; Hayes 2010) as a digitally-mediated phenomenon that reproduces intersectional inequalities [4]. That was a marked departure for black degree holders who have, historically, been produced by historically black colleges (HBCUS) and public colleges (Anderson 1988; Cole and Omari 2003). Data suggest that students who go to online for-profit degree granting colleges are likely doing so for reasons manifested by intersections of state power, public policy, historical discrimination, and contemporary disparities. Despite this, there are few models to put the literatures on privatization, online education and intersecting oppressions in conversation with each other.

Digital divides literature (van Dijk 2006; Hassani 2006) provided one way to conceptualize how "offline" inequalities manifest in online platforms but the relationship between digital access and social status stratification complicates its utility. For example, the growth of mobile in the U.S. and the diffusion rates of platform adoption (Pew Internet & American Life 2014; Smith and Brennan 2012) challenged digital divide's focus on Internet access as the primary point axis of stratification. Greater access did not seem to necessarily ameliorate group differences as it relates to the Internet. A way to resolve this apparent paradox of greater access and more inequality is to operationalize how status diffuses and maintains social hierarchies (Ridgeway 2014). Paul DiMaggio and Eszter Hargittai (2001) offer a multi-dimensional framework of how status, both achieved and ascribed, complicate dialectics of the haves and have-nots. Of education and technological access, they "hypothesize that, in the

long run, education will be a strong predictor of the use of the Internet for the enhancement of human capital, the development of social capital, and political participation" (2001:13). If sociology of education has contributed anything at all to how we understand stratification it is that educational institutions reinforce and reproduce inequalities [5]. Historically, as educational access expands and populations became more heterogeneous, educational institutions in the U.S. have differentiated. That differentiation creates stratified access to cultural and material capital. Since higher education participation in the U.S. has reached an historical high (National Center for Education Statistics 2014), we have produced thousands of private sector, unranked for-profit colleges and exactly zero elite colleges and universities. The difference is instructive. Access is easier to produce than is equal access to high status rewards. Similarly, increased Internet access (or "penetration") may be easier to produce than is egalitarian access to skills, know-how, social networks, and capital. For education, greater online participation independent of macro change games access while leaving mobility untouched (if not outright reinforcing structural impediments to mobility). Another weakness of digital divide theories was they mostly theorize structural stratification at points prior to digital access [6]. After achieving digital access, digital divide framings tend towards cultural explanations of difference (Hassani 2006). From the perspective of online students in for-profit degree programs, structural stratification manifested at the point of access and beyond, to include group formation and status maintenance. Digital divides may not go far enough to capture the various intersections

of privilege, access, and power that operate online and offline simultaneously and which can also be mutually constitutive .

By 2013 there was a growing literature about alternative credentialing like badging (Ostashewski and Reid 2015; Schmidt-Crawford, Thompson, and Lindstrom 2014) and Massive Open Online Education (MOOCs) (Daniel 2012; Reich 2012). At best, this literature spoke about heterogeneity as a proxy for numerous intersecting inequalities. At the opposite of "at best", that literature was preoccupied with what I call "roaming autodidacts". A roaming autodidact is a self-motivated, able learner that is simultaneously embedded in technocratic futures and disembedded from place, culture, history, and markets. The roaming autodidact is almost always conceived as western, white, educated and male. As a result of designing for the roaming autodidact, we end up with a platform that understands learners as white and male, measuring learners' task efficiencies against an unarticulated norm of western male whiteness. It is not an affirmative exclusion of poor students or bilingual learners or black students or older students, but it need not be affirmative to be effective. Looking across this literature, our imagined educational futures are a lot like science fiction movies: there's a conspicuous absence of brown people and women. Intersectionality theories or methods have not yet been fully realized in the study of digitality and education, a critical institutional axis of social stratification [7].

Intersectional theory and methods also have not been fully realized in studying for-profit colleges, an exemplar of financialization, institutions, status groups and technological affordances. According to the literature at the time (and still mostly true

today), there was no racial or gender component in for-profit college expansion (Chung 2008a, 2008b; Hentscke, Lechuga, and Tierney 2010; Kinser 2006, 2010; Tierney and Hentschke 2007). Even research that centered racial categories obscured systemic racism and inequalities by using human capital theories and choice models to explain black participation in for-profit colleges as rational given some un-named constraint (Iloh and Tierney 2015). The hegemonic narrative said for-profit credentials were instead growing at a rate of over 200 percent (during the sector's highest point of expansion in the early 2000s) because they enrolled "non-traditional" students. It was difficult to square this with the empirical reality of almost three-fourths of for-profit students being women, 1 in 10 of all black college students and 1 in 15 of all Hispanic students being in a for-profit college, and lists like those from Diverse Issues in Higher Education. It was, for me, a call for critical social science, as well as intersectional theories and methods. In my study of status groups (race, class, gender and their intersections) and for-profit colleges (Cottom, 2016) I faced core challenges for digital sociology. First, because for-profit colleges are private businesses they are not publicly accessible for data collection and observation . For-profit colleges are not obligated to provide access to independent researchers. The privatization of critical institutional arrangements like higher education is a serious challenge for digital sociology's focus on studying inequalities. And, to keep expenditures low and profits high, faculty at for-profit colleges largely do not have a research imperative and physical campuses have few unstructured spaces for observation. Financial imperatives of privatized public goods shifts institutional responsibility from knowledge production to market

penetration, privileging market competition over social inquiry. Despite these severe

limitations, students enrolled in for-profit higher education are creating spaces for peer

interaction and collective meaning making (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). Some

of these spaces are in online social media platforms, such as Facebook where students

exploit the group controls, permissions, and social connections to form informal

learning spaces. Their social media content, comprised of posts and peer interactions,

constitute digitally mediated autoethnographic narratives of their educational milieus.

The digital component is not just for show; it had methodological significance. The

platform affords student-users control of how and with whom they share their narrative

accounts. Those narratives have been produced without an expectation of performing

for the researcher's gaze or approval from important gatekeepers at their institutions.

Participation is entirely voluntary and the exchanges are unstructured, unlike surveys or

interviews. Additionally, the social media context affords analysis of discourses across

time and various interactions. This could reveal patterns harder to identify via survey or

interview methods that offer a snapshot of memory or observation. In the tradition of

intersectional theory and method, this project sought first to "give voice to the

particularity of the perspectives and needs of women of color who often remained

invisible"(Marx Ferree and Choo 2010:132). Social media platforms afforded students

who are rendered invisible in analysis because of privatization and intellectual enclosure

to speak their experiences into legibility.

However, to move beyond giving voice to uncovers the ways in which power and

privilege are often unmarked in social science research (Bonnett 1996; Zuberi 2008)

intersectionality demands that we examine process and power relations. That is part of

intersectionality's political imperative. Essentially, in studying black and Hispanic women

in isolation, I could reinforce hierarchies that reify whiteness, especially middle class

whiteness on whom the higher education norms are predicated. This is a consequence

of what Choo and Ferree discuss as an intellectual blindspot for unmarked categories.

Take for instance, why we think for-profit colleges are a bad choice. They are bad

because rational actors choose a "real" college (i.e. a not-for-profit college) as high up

the institutional prestige hierarchy as one's academic record and finances will allow.

Consequently, research on for-profit using this model of college choice argues that the

demographic characteristics of for-profit college students are evidence of poor decision-

making. I did not want to buy a ticket to that party. Intersectionality theory argues that

narrative methods de-centers privilege in rational actor theories. Therefore, I

conceptualized the social media data I collected as autoethnographies rather than

content. While content can absolutely be analyzed as narratives, they are most often

analyzed as quantitative abstractions or without attention to qualitative differences in

the power that frame content. In contrast, ethnographic data's imperative is to situate

meaning among various relational dynamics like power, privilege and social location

(Ellis and Bochner 2006). Autoethnographies resist hegemonic sensemaking paradigms

by centering self-authored texts and the co-construction of meaning. These theoretical

imperatives, mechanisms and methodological choices are consistent with black

cyberfeminism's focus on intersectionality and unique characteristics of digitized social

processes. Next, I discuss the robust potential of black cyberfeminism for digital sociology.

Black Cyberfeminism

Kishonna Gray's black cyberfeminism offers a framework for understanding how categorical inequalities translate through and in digital spaces (2012, 2016). Black cyberfeminism builds on black feminist thought (Crenshaw, hooks) as well as feminist technology studies (Daniels 2009, Everett 2004, Orgad 2005, Plant 1997). Cyberfeminism articulates a feminist theory of how gendered bodies and relations shape technologies and how we interact with them. Daniels argues that cyberfeminism is a range of theories and methods more than a "clearly articulated political agenda" (2009:102). Despite this, there is a coherent logic to cyberfeminism, namely an interest in how digital technologies "enable women to engage in new forms of contestation and in proactive endeavors in multiple different realms, from political to economic" (Sassens 2002:368). By explicitly theorizing those multiple different realms, black cyberfeminism offers a more cohesive intersectional project than cyberfeminism. Whereas cyberfeminism does not often articulate the relationship between specific mechanisms for the political economies of how different groups engage digital technologies in multiple different realms, black cyberfeminism pays particular attention to precisely that. In this volume, Gray offers three major themes of black cyberfeminism theory:

> "1) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces; 2) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces; and 3) the distinctness of virtual feminism".

<PARACONT>When presented as postulations for a particular case – here, for-profit colleges – black cyberfeminism's potential for digital sociology become more concrete.

The first theme translates a central interest of black feminist studies: how structural oppression operates along multiple planes of social location (Collins 1990). Black cyberfeminism would interrogate how social relations of dominance are translated through digitally-mediated relationships with technology, the interests that produce it and the processes that resist them. This is an inherently political imperative, more clearly articulated as an epistemological project than is currently stated in cyberfeminism studies.

The second theme argues that structural oppression is translated through technologies and reproduces different individual and categorical experiences by race, class, gender. This seems pedantic but it is a critical contribution to how we currently discuss digitality in sociology. Digitization is not a neutral process in social relations, cannot be understand as necessarily democratizing, and should reproduce unequal social relations of the society that produces it. And, digitization does not just happen at the micro level of identity or interactions or the macro level of markets. Digitization is a relationship rationalized through bureaucracies, institutional forms of work and civic participation, and taken up because of the constraints produced by differential institutional access. This is a departure from sociological interest in technology as a tool, whether for markets or innovation or social change. If we accept this premise of black cyberfemism, digital sociology should ask how and under what conditions are intersecting oppressions translated through digitization differently for different groups?

The third theme argues that there is something distinctive about virtual feminism. A way to understand this is that unmarked categories of race, class and gender operate in specific ways. And, the specificity of those categories can be marked, or revealed, theoretically when black cyberfeminism's focus on power relations is centered in analysis. To interrogate how black middle class women pursue credentialing is to understand, theoretically, that those categories are defined in relation to white poor men, for one example. For digital sociology, this presents a challenge that is worth taking: how can we both theorize and operationalize marked and unmarked social categories in a relational way when technology can obscure our usual methods of doing so (e.g. observation, surveying, and bureaucratic records)?

I have argued that black cyberfeminism brings an intersectional theoretical framework to studying digitally-mediated social processes and that it shapes the sociological questions we ask of the Internet. Black cyberfeminism's three themes are an important ideological contribution to sociology's imperative to study groups, processes, power and relations in, on, and through digital transformations. Black cyberfeminism is more assertively political than cyberfeminism, functional theories, and neo-institutional theories of the Internet. Black cyberfeminism offers a cohesive argument for interrogation and resistance. Black cyberfeminism is attentive to the mechanisms of political economy in its attention to power relations that define and constrain social mobility: race, class, gender and sexual orientation. One challenge for black cyberfeminism is an articulation of the mechanisms by which social categories and their attendant inequalities become transformed and reconstituted in virtual spaces?

And, how do those virtual spaces also reconstitute non-virtual categorical inequalities? I argue that emerging work on classification situations contributes a refinement for implementing black cyberfeminism studies of social phenomena.

<1>Classification Situations</1>

Classification situations takes up social theory's interest in how economic classifications stratify group access and mobility. Rooted in classic Weberian models of occupational and social stratification, classification situations refer to the way institutions systematically "sort and slot people into new types of categories with different economic rewards or punishments attached to them" (2013:561). Their focus is on social class and the actuarial process of the new economy's digitized institutions. These means of sorting and stratifying were largely illegible to those who needed the scores to participate under the new rules of financialization but who did not have the wealth to buffer them from its risks. Fourcade and Healy make the analogy to redlining, or the practice of excluding African Americans from living in white neighborhoods. Like redlining, algorithms do not just give us a personal Internet. These algorithms also stratify group-based access to critical institutions like markets, financial institutions, education, and work. Further, I argue that eventually capital is reorganized to correspond with algorithmic efficiencies, reinforcing structural inequalities.

Classification situations is an analytical lens through which to understand how systemic linkages between macro characteristics of markets are translated through institutions to shape the life-chances of social-categorical groups. Fourcade and Healy notably give two illustrations of these trends: credit scoring and higher education. They

expound on credit scoring. I will expound using examples from higher education. Algorithmic sorting of credit-worthiness has shaped how categorical groups access and benefit differently from market relationships. Classification situations offers two critical refinements worth taking up in black cyberfeminism studies in digital sociology. First, classification situations responds to the challenge presented above where it was clear that something about being black, working class and a woman had shaped students' institutional access to digitally-mediated relationships with higher education institutions. These differences were as much about power relationships as about individual identity. Classification situations proposes that categorical groups matter to the study of digitality. Second, classification situations offers algorithmic stratification, or the means by which algorithms differently sort categorical groups access to resources, as a way to understand how digitality transverses the virtual space. What we do online is, in part, about who we are categorically when we do it. And, our returns to what we do online is stratified based on how we are translated by algorithms in accordance with institutional efficiency preferences. This is an important bridge that has eluded dialectical approaches to the Internet (online and offline, real and virtual, space and place). It is an approach that reveals the mechanisms of digitally mediated stratification by adhering to the black feminist tradition of centering marginalized groups to reveal systemic inequalities.

Classification situations offers a mechanism to apply black cyberfeminist themes in analysis. Those themes focus on processes and relations produced by the given conditions of the political economy in which digital platforms are produced and used.

Classification situations clarifies one way that this happens: through categorical relationships with institutional practices rationalized and diffused in a political economy of neo-liberal transformations of society. In this framework, how black women take up higher education choices using digital platforms is shaped by pre-existing categorical constraints produced by markets and States. The choices made given those constraints are conditioned on categorical differences in relationship to civic norms like privacy as well as differentiated higher education systems, where different institutions organize differently to efficiently allocate marginalized groups to different kinds of educational life-chances. Next, I provide examples of how black cyberfeminist theory and classification situations clarifies current tensions in privatized, financialized higher education.

<1>Case Studies of Intersectionality and The Internet </1>

I present two cases of how an a black cyberfeminist analysis refines two emerging debates about the Internet. Both cases emerge from my ongoing research of intersectionality and for-profit credentials in the U.S. between 1994 and present. That period of rapid for-profit college expansion is intertwined with the diffusion of Internet access, technologies, platforms and institutional adoption. The first example considers how privacy as commonly positioned in current scholarly and public debates obscures how marginalized communities use technological affordances to balance anonymity with oppressions stemming from ascribed categorical status groups. The second case considers how an intersectional focus on the processes by which groups interact with

various institutional processes on the Internet are embedded in various structural processes of inequality.

Privacy versus Hypervisibility

This study of black and Hispanic women earning online PhDs in marginalized for-profit colleges problematized the utility of privacy online. There has been a rich conversation about what constitutes privacy in online spaces with concerns about how tracking, cookies, and private data caching constitute a form of surveillance (Barnes 2006; Daries et al. 2014). Often, the most vulnerable are centered in these discussions to draw stark emotional lines around the scope of the problem. For example, privacy debates have frequently centered on youth and teenagers, presumably children and young adults are especially vulnerable (Livingstone 2008; Youn 2005). Most of this literature assumes, if not explicitly argues, that privacy is most fragile for socially vulnerable groups. If I take as a point of departure that black women and Hispanic women constitute a group that are often marginalized by social, economic and cultural processes then it would follow that we should err on the side of more privacy controls for these groups. However, analyses of these students, in this particular institutional context, suggest that privacy can both compound and ameliorate students' marginality depending upon the situation.

Most of the students in my study found the online support group through 1) Facebook ads and 2) secondary ties with group members. Because the group is restricted to women, gendered network ties predisposed members to finding out about the group. And, because three-fourths of the group members are black or Hispanic,

those network ties hinged on shared ascription among group members. The group moderator, Janice, said she used Facebook profile pictures to screen potential new members. Profiles without evidence of gender were denied. From the students' perspective, sharing members' ascribed status in the group increased social trust. That trust is very important when the group is a platform for co-creating meaning around sensitive topics like debt and academic performance. One member, Lisa, says that her online school used to require all of the students to post their real pictures and to engage in online discussion groups. After some students complained that the posting requirement was burdensome, the school dropped the requirement. Lisa says without the user profile images and online group requirement, she did not know how to judge her academic performance (and fears about it) relative to the other students' social location. There was little to be learned from comparing herself to a white male student, for example. She could assume that he did not share similar time constraints because of childcare arrangements [8]. His performance in the class was not meaningful for Lisa because she intuited that his social location afforded him resources that she did not have. In contrast, Lisa said the members of the online Facebook group being all women "mattered" because "I know they know what I go through". She trusts that the group moderator has properly screened members and Facebook profile images reinforces this trust is well placed. For the women in this group the kind of privacy often discussed in among researchers and policymakers would blunt a tool for educational persistence. Not knowing who the group members are would make Lisa less likely to use the online support group, a group she credits for pushing her to degree completion.

This kind of complicated relationship with privacy goes beyond the institutional context of formal education. Take for example recent debates on Twitter about "stealing" tweets (Wong 2014). There is a whole brand of (mostly digital) journalism that culls social media content for stories. Many users have pushed back against this practice, saying that their content is used without their express permission. There is a procedural debate about the chain of ownership given terms and conditions, private ownership, and public diffusions. That is another debate. However, there is something about the difference between privacy and hypervisibility to be learned from these tensions. Context collapse offers some much needed clarity to the debate about media institutions borrowing tweets from marginalized groups who use the platform for consciousness-raising, networking and finding community. A salient aspect of context collapse in this context is about how we switch our performance depending on who is watching [9]. We decide how to act based on who is around because we know that not all people are created equal. And when we might need access to privileged resources like, say, jobs, we act differently around audiences we presume are comprised of people who govern access to jobs.

Context collapse has mostly been about the control tweeters can exert over how and when and where one performs the identity one thinks most appropriate for a situation. But media organizations' "tweet borrowing" strips tweeters of that autonomy. They do this through institutional power to reallocate amplification. By virtue of being media and a company, these institutions are more powerful than most of its users and content producers. They have greater amplification power and more money to spend

drowning out individual resistance and more protection when they make a mistake than do persons. Because they are charged with keeping political power in check, media organizations get more benefit of the doubt than persons. Because of the difference in power, media can force context collapse that may not have happened without its intervention. Thought of another way, I sign up for Twitter assuming the ability to hide in plain sight when my amplification power is roughly equal to a few million other non-descript content producers. Media amplification changes that assumption and can do so without my express permission. Effectively, power can force context collapse [or, produce what Jenny L Davis and Nathan Jurgenson have called "context collision" (2014)], altering the marginalized users' strategic deployment of hypervisibility. Like the students in my study, it appears that marginalized groups find value in hypervisibility precisely because it affords them something blanket privacy may not while preserving the aspects of privacy that work for their purposes. Hypervisibility makes one's social location legible, through images, discourse, language and affective practices. I am a part of "black Twitter" precisely because other users can encode and decode these signals to locate me in shared discursive practices on an open, private media platform. As long as the power to amplify is kept in check, hypervisibility affords me community without the burden of excessive interrogation. It is hiding in plain sight. In contrast, blunt attempts at privacy like those that happened at Lisa's for-profit online college, became a hindrance. Nixing student photos and the discussion board requirement compounded Lisa's feeling of institutional isolation. The difference could impact our objective measures of inequality and mobility, i.e. educational attainment, persistence, and

occupational access. As one student said when friends expressed concern about using her real name in her online educational communities because it would signal to gatekeepers that she is a black woman, "Hell, my name is LaKeisha. Changing that doesn't stop me from being black." Changing the performance of marginality online does not change the offline marginality for people who live in both simultaneously. And, the context of the online use matters. Earning a credential is serious business with serious risks and rewards. For black women who bear the brunt of controlling images (Collins 1996, 2000) that circumscribe their social mobility, educational attainment is an important social signal. These controlling images, or hegemonic tropes, circulate in Internet memes. The controlling image of Sapphire, a fast-talking loud-mouthed and angry black woman, persists in memifications of black women's images with text like "I'm a strong black woman who don't need no man". Those kinds of persistent controlling images are always a specter in the shadow for the students I interviewed.

Credentials were a way of resisting racist sexist tropes of social deviance. When the stakes are that high, the students I interviewed relied on signals of social inclusion like images, moderator screening, and discursive practices. They were trying to minimize their exposure to powerful actors, often understood as the "white gaze" (Bonnett 1996), while navigating institutional contexts where that is impossible. At best, they could use social media platforms to erect porous boundaries to define the composition of their digital student lounges. But to build those boundaries the members had to use the very aspects of identity that many privacy controls would minimize. Facebook's architecture was most amenable to this kind of malleable hypervisibility, affording privacy while also

designing the platform around social signals that made the students feel safe in the online community. What we learn from this intersectional approach to LaKeisha, Lisa and Janice's approach to online privacy is that certain types of privacy are privileges that some groups cannot pretend to have if the Internet is to be useful for their purposes.

<1>Algorithmic Stratification</1>

The study of women in online PhDs was instructive not only because of its findings but for how the group found me: algorithmic sorting of network ties, ads, and content. I am black. I am a woman. I have been a Facebook user for twelve years. My educational affiliations are listed in my biography. Some combination of those identities and behaviors filtered me through Facebook's (proprietary) algorithms and one day listed this Facebook group in my newsfeed. I had no prior affiliations with any members of the group. None of them were Facebook friends. Interviews suggested that many in the group found it through similar algorithmic means. They were placed in each other's path by the invisible hand of Internet sorting, stratifying and signaling that defines much of our Internet experience without our knowing it.

I return to my studies of for-profit colleges for an example. As I noted previously, the hegemonic narrative about the rapid expansion of for-profit colleges attributed it to the sector's success with enrolling "non traditional" students. They offered "flexible" online courses that appealed to busy working adults. Working adults and non-traditional students is a discursive collapse of several intersecting inequalities: gendered time gaps, racial inequalities in educational access to college preparatory curriculums, class inequalities in reliance on public sector labor markets, and a growing service economy

that disproportionately impact the life chances of the poor and working class. Students classified in the literature as "non-traditional" comprise half of all students enrolled in degree-granting institutions (Deil-Amen 2012) Despite comprising a significant number of all college students, non-traditional students are marked as different from traditional students. The distinction has utility because of ideological, cultural distinctions about normativity, race, class, and gender. Deil-Amen says, "Our conceptions of the typical idealized college student are based on traditional notions and an imagined norm of someone who begins college immediately after high school, enrolls full-time, lives on campus, and is ready to begin college level classes" (2011:2). Traditional notions and imagined norms are allusions to cultural ideologies about an ideal student type. Like the ideal worker type (Kelly et al. 2010), these ideologies begin as material realities. When higher education organizations were defining their institutional norms, de rigeur and de facto segregation prevented women, non-whites, and non-elite status groups from participating in higher education. The ideal student type has persisted despite socio-political extra-institutional changes like demography patterns. When we unpack the categorical definition of "non traditional student" we find intersectional oppressions lurking just beyond the neologism.

To recruit status groups similarly vulnerable because of those intersecting oppressions, for-profit colleges became one of the single biggest Internet advertisers in history (Cottom, 2016). In 2012, the Apollo Group, the largest for-profit college company and owner of the University of Phoenix brand, spent $400,000 a day in Google ads alone. For- profit colleges made the "jobs and education" sector the fourth-highest

industry advertising on the major search engine and e-commerce platform (Cottom

2014). And of that sector, the top five advertisers also happened to be the largest

national for-profit college chains. Together, they spent more than $1.1 billion in online

advertising with a single search engine in 2011. For-profit colleges also kept "lead

generation aggregators" in business after their other major client, the mortgage

industry, took a hit during the Great Recession. Lead generation aggregators capture

user content, ostensibly under the guise of providing free college information. They

then sell that customer information to for-profit colleges who use it to recruit new

students. Senators in 2013 wrote to the Federal Trade Commission about lead

generators that they "have become a key part of the aggressive recruiting strategy for

many for-profit colleges and they "deceive consumers to obtain personal information by

misrepresenting their affiliation with for-profit colleges, as well as concealing how and

by whom their information will be used." Googling for "college grant money" is a

practice in information democracy. Wealthier students, or those with the cultural know-

how to navigate the complicated student aid process, often know about grants and

loans. Students without the benefit of that cultural largesse do not. The Internet makes

finding that information more accessible. But lead aggregators and privatized

relationships between the financial sector and educational institutions use algorithms to

skew searches in favor of capital interests. When my Google is no longer everybody's

Google, my structural inequalities are transposed into new kinds of ephemeral

inequalities through algorithms one cannot see, touch or easily contest.

For a thought experiment of what such an approach might look like, let us consider again a status group for the purposes of for-profit college expansion. They targeted non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are not defined just by descriptors like age or parental status. They are also defined in opposition to the ideal norm of a "traditional" student. A traditional student is not only unfettered and younger than 24 years old. She is also adequately prepared for college level coursework. Benefitting from the vast educational industrial complex of tutors, sports leagues, essay coaches, college application consultants and standardized test prep certainly helps one be prepared for college level coursework (Stevens 2009). So, too, does parental income and wealth that strongly correlates with the neighborhood segregation that drives group differences in access to high performing K-12 schools in the U.S. (Massey and Denton 1988; Massey and Fischer 2006). Those resources, both the material and cultural, provide prospective students with a fairly good cognitive map of the institutional prestige that defines U.S. higher education. Knowing what a small liberal arts college (SLAC) means in real, practical terms is an example of the kind of cognitive maps born of privilege and wealth. When an algorithm is calibrated to capture attention for non-elite, low status, controversial forms of school like a for-profit college, it would be most efficient if it targets groups without the capital to know that the University of Phoenix is not a SLAC. Targeting inequality is transformed into a technical efficiency. The same report on for-profit colleges' use of lead aggregators found that "unemployment insurance" was one of the sector's top five targeted search terms. If those targeted messages resonate across social locations it is likely because those groups share similar

levels of resources to discern types of colleges or are similarly constrained in their ability to choose among different types of colleges. An analytical focus on race, absent a consideration of the cumulative and integrated effects race with class and gender, can easily lead one to conclude, "race is not a significant predicator of enrollment" in for-profit colleges as Chung finds in a recent study (2013). Race is not a biological construct with inherent associated abilities. There is no reason that race should predict enrollment in a higher education institution. But, race *is* a social construct. It is constructed, in part, through the classification activities of institutions. These classification activities do not only reproduce social class but intersecting planes of race, class and gender. Focusing on the process by which attention is stratified using technical affordances like lead generators and search algorithms can clarify these processes.

<1>CONCLUSION<./1>

Black cyberfeminist theory bridges gaps in current theory and method in Internet Studies, as well as various other disciplinary modes of studying the Internet. Status groups are constantly morphing but the power relationships that define status groups are remarkably stable. Focusing on categorical descriptions to the exclusion of process conflates compositional change for structural change. In the case of for-profit colleges, they need not singularly recruit black students or poor students or female students to recruit from those groups in significant proportions. They needed only to target the shared vulnerabilities among those various social locations. Once that is done – flexible online classes you take from anywhere after the kids are asleep – technology makes targeting those vulnerabilities efficient and scalable. Broadly conceived, algorithmic

stratification captures the shifting landscape of intersectional groups; macro changes in economies and policy that bracket how the Internet works; and, the conditions under which groups use the Internet for critical institutional engagements. Importantly, algorithmic stratification would attend to class but not only class. If the aim is to understand the nature of contemporary inequality, there is value in discerning the life chances of poor white women in Western nations distinctly from those of poor second generation Congolese immigrants in a Western nation. Algorithmic stratification would account for the intersections of history and biography that define integrative intersectionality under contemporary structural conditions. As privatization complicates datafication, neo-liberalism weakens social reforms, and capital further inserts its way into how we live our daily lives on the Internet, intersectionality is critical to Internet studies and social science. Algorithmic stratification's focus on process, both online and off, across intersecting power relations is a way to move the study of contemporary inequalities forward.

In my study of minority women in online for-profit degree programs intersectionality complicated common prescriptions for privacy, suggesting that calibrations of an Internet for everybody cannot be tuned for a typical user without exacerbating the very inequalities we hope the Internet can redress. As critical institutional arrangements are increasingly mitigated by (often proprietary) digital platforms, intersectionality gives us a framework to consider how these contexts contour access differently. All evidence points towards a future where platforms and algorithms mediate everything from healthcare and education to civic participation and

labor participation. If classification situations urge us to consider the role of algorithms

in reproducing class inequalities, then thinking more broadly about class as an

intersectional social location strengthens the utility of algorithmic studies in

understanding contemporary social inequalities.

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<1> NOTES </1>

[1] I acknowledge the lively debate about "digital dualism", particularly among cultural studies scholars. For analytical clarity I will occasionally use "online" and "offline" in the structural sense. It primarily refers to the centrality of space (online) as opposed to place (offline) as the dominant mode of interaction being addressed. These are analytical distinctions.

[2] Famously, Work First training requirements rarely conceded that many welfare recipients would not qualify for even minimally competitive post-secondary admissions. That delimits the pool of potential institutions greatly. Additionally, not all open-access post-secondary institutions offer qualifying short-term certificates or offer admissions to them as frequently as those constrained by Work First guidelines would need to stay benefits eligible. See: Shaw et al (2006) for more.

[3] "Allied health care" refers to the paraprofessional medical field occupations, e.g. phlebotomists, medical records clerks, and nursing assistants.

[4] For-profit colleges are so named because their Internal Revenue Service designation permits extracting profit from tuition revenue to be distributed to owners. They are more expensive, on average, than comparable not-for-profit public college credentials at every level from certificate to graduate degrees. And, they are almost as expensive as the most elite private not-for-colleges with few institutional or foundational subsidies like grants to reduce student tuition costs.

[5] There is so much here that oddly rarely crosses the disciplinary divide. I would start with the following key readings for the trajectory of sociology of education: (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Collins 1979; Stevens 2009; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008)

[6] I am also aware of a parallel and intersecting literature on "digital natives". This framing recalls linear theories of racial assimilation (e.g. Robert Park) that disquiet me. For a history of linear racial theories one may want to read Eduardo Bonilla Silva to consider the complexity of that framing for status groups defined, in significant part, by the legal, political and social ascription of race and social enclosure (1997)

[7] For more on the issues of privatization and datafication specific to the institutional context of formal education I suggest Audrey Watters and Jeffrey Alan Johnson (Johnson 2014; Watters 2013)

[8] And at the aggregate level, those assumptions would match data that continue to show gendered, classed, and racialized differences in everything from parental care responsibilities, care work, extended kin support, and the experience of the "time bind".

[9] danah boyd cites Goffman as the intellectual tradition of "context collapse" (2013). Exercising a little academic iteration, I prefer to think of context collapse's intellectual tradition as DuBoisian. Not only does it call to mind DuBois' classic double-consciousness dialectic. But as I use it and think through it, double-consciousness engages the political economy of ascription in ways useful to think of context collapse as it relates to intersecting power relations and institutions.

[10]If I had one wish I would think long and hard about using it to make Massey et al.'s "The Source of the River" required reading for all conversation about technology and education.