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Master of His Domain: Political Polemicist Gives the Web a Shout-Out

Michael Bowen wants to give you a piece of his online mind, from race to politics to being a black Republican father.

by **Grace Lee** | 02.27.2004 ReadMe 4.3 | **Print it.**

On any given day, Michael Bowen, spends an average of 10 hours in front of his computer—writing his daily blog, *Cobb*; creating his drily funny **comics**; or working at his day job, a software consulting business he runs from his home.

In addition to *Cobb*, Bowen's numerous websites include **The Race Man's Companion**, where he publishes his political essays on race, such as "**What is Racist?**", the newly formed collaborative website, **Vision Circle**, a forum for black political issues, and **XRepublic**, a space Bowen hopes will become a virtual democratic parliament, with actual political power, in the future. Users can access all these websites through Bowen's **homepage**.
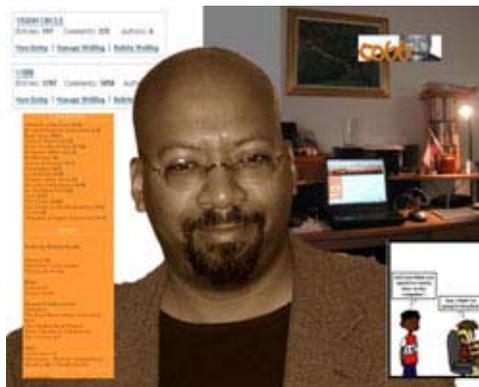
Michael Bowen *Photo (c) Michael Bowen 2004*

Bowen was a staunch believer in the potential of the Internet before most of the public was even aware of it. In the mid-80's, he helped create the Xerox Corporate Internetwork; in the late 80's, he lurked and posted in the early Usenet discussion groups and on BBS's (Bulletin Board Systems) such as Bix, CompuServe, Delphi, Panix and The Well.

From the first, he pulled no political punches. "I injected political and cultural subjects and topics into digital spaces before it was considered right or proper to do so," said Bowen.

Bowen's numerous websites are not just a hobby; they're also his bully pulpit; the Web is his "domain."

Cobb is Bowen's most popular online persona. Its primary purpose is to put his "kind of opinion" as an "**Old School** conservative" black father or, simply put, a religious Republican capitalist in a general context rather than a specialized political space or a black cultural forum.

Cobb is the gateway between Bowen's past works, such as "**Is Color-Blindness the Moral Equivalent of Racism?**" which explored Bowen's refusal to accept the once-fashionable idea of a "colorblind" cyberspace, and his current work, which promotes the notion of African—American bipartisanship, as exemplified by the union of "Republican husbands and Democrat wives", in order to gain more socioeconomic power.

"[*Cobb*] is more about politics for social power as contrasted with liberation politics and the politics of civil rights and human rights," says Bowen. It works to eliminate "the

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stranglehold of the Democrats on African American attention," he contends.

On his site, Bowen recounts personal experiences in an attempt to enable readers to "wear [his] emotions, navigate [his] logic and see through [his] eyes," in contrast to the "fake objectivity" he believes predominates in mainstream corporate media.

"When I believe that I know something, I put my biases directly out there," says Bowen, adding, "I've been to some places, I know some things."

While *Cobb* acts as a journal in which Bowen narrates his life, touching on political and cultural thoughts about today's headlines (such as Howard Dean's departure from the Democratic presidential race and the controversial issue of gay marriage), Boohab, Bowen's previous online alter ego, had a vastly different role.

Boohab is a "persistent black object," a metaphoric black personality created for cyberspace to serve as a "catalyst and facilitator" of race discussions and confront racial stereotypes.

The term "boohab" is borrowed from the lyrics of a hip-hop/jazz group named Broun Fellinis. The group coined the word "boohabian" as the name of a prophet of "phlow" or flow. Bowen's creation, Boohab, is a "black in the vein of a progressive funkified George Clintonesque and sometimes post—modern style" of blackness.

Bowen created Boohab in response to two ideas. First, that race and color evaporate in cyberspace. People extol the "false neutrality" of being colorblind, Bowen argues, because the alternative is to be aware of race, which would include the admission of negative racial stereotypes. Bowen champions a new definition of race, rich in positive associations. People tend to "refuse the good and the newly [created] positive because it is overloaded with the baggage of the negative," he maintains. In his opinion, this hinders **anti-racist politics** because it maintains racism.

"Colorblindness does not challenge people to rethink their own racial identities," says Bowen. "It simply tells others to ignore [race]."

Boohab acted as a nagging reminder that black can be "different and better" than all other preconceived notions of being black. Bowen claims that the colorblind ethos responded negatively, saying, in essence, that said since cyberspace is free of race and color, Boohab must by definition be racist.

"Nonsense like '[race] doesn't really matter' is arrogant and presumptuous," says Bowen. "We're not all the same and we are not all trying to be the same thing."

The second reason for the creation of Boohab, he says, is to challenge the idea that white racial identity is neutral because it lacks racial stereotypes. There are no negative racial connotations, so it is perceived as "better."

"[Society] literally cannot look at an African—American and think 'black is beautiful'," writes Bowen. "[It] literally cannot look at blond hair and blue eyes and not think 'better'." It is this mentality that Boohab stood in defiance of, he says.

Bowen decided to kill Boohab in 1999, partly in response to the death of his grandmother. After sharing his grief online, in a private forum, he realized that he'd been restricting his own freedom of expression by shying away from personal subjects in his online writing. Shortly thereafter, he launched *Cobb*.

"So this was the beginning, really, of my writing and existing on the Web as something other than an activist," said Bowen.

Today, Bowen is less focused on anti-racist politics. Instead, he has shifted gears, and is concentrating on bringing upper—middle class and wealthy African—Americans together to gain **social and political power**. He believes that "when wealthy black elites begin congregating, they will begin a new wave of institutions that will benefit the nations and the world."

This, in turn, will lead to alternative voices in the political and social sphere, free-thinking alternatives to liberal Democrats such as Al Sharpton and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, implies Bowen.

Vision Circle, a collaborative website, serves as an arena where these alternative voices can be heard. Jointly authored by Bowen and fellow online essayists Michael Hicks and Inkspence, the site focuses on the black political issues of the moment as well as black political strategies for the future. Bowen and his cohorts are working, he says, to divert attention from Sharpton and Jackson and "those who aspire to inherit their dubious mantle."

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Grace Lee is a journalism student at NYU and media editor of ReadMe.

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