Introduction

POSSIBILITIES

••• Starting in the nineteenth century, society slowly redefined the terms Technik and technique until they became "technology"—a new concept hinging on the application of science—a term that has since become embroiled in conversation, debates, and arguments about our future.[1] This contested space is often described using the comfortably familiar, but overly simplistic, dualism of optimism or pessimism. Choose an area of technoscientific research and questioning—the construction and use of atomic weapons, electric/hybrid versus internal combustion vehicles, the use of DTC (direct-to-consumer) genetic testing and treatments to cure a host of ailments, the existence of a Y2K bug, the interaction between children and social media, online platforms and mis-/dis-information—all such efforts have enthusiastic supporters and damning critics.

The crises we see piling up all around us are so urgent that sometimes we forget to step back to understand what we are attempting to change and how we are going about it. We have chosen to write as a large collective of fourteen authors—atypical in many of our fields of media studies, history, digital studies, ethnic studies, and gender and sexuality studies—in order to reflect the myriad approaches and bodies of knowledge that are needed to move beyond techno-optimism and

techno-pessimism. What are the strands we draw together to do the work we do? And how is that work not just transformative but revolutionary? What underlying conceptual structure are we trying, together, to bring to light?

This text is a collective production of the Digital Inquiry, Speculation, Collaboration, and Optimism Network: DISCO for short. The network comprises six laboratories, each of which operates both independently and as a network node to write, talk, and think about the past, present, and future of technology, Blackness, Asianness, disability, and liberation. We wrote this work to inject a new message into the continuously emerging worlds of old and new technology, worlds that accumulate nostalgia and affect, and that mingle in the seductive horizon line of technological progress. In the chapters that follow, we bring together our central values of inquiry, speculation, collaboration, and optimism. One strand is in the world of traditional academic research, an area where we sometimes feel comfortable, empowered, and familiar as academics and postdoctoral fellows, and at different times completely alienated, cynical, and disenchanted as people of color and people with disabilities. The other is in the world of science and technology policy, aesthetic and visionary practice, and experimentation.

THE STAKES

The DISCO network scholarship is academic, but also deeply personal. This work expresses our lived experiences—which vary greatly. Some of us relate to experiences of being dismissed, overlooked, hated, fetishized, or vilified for being who we are. Yet, all of us must also acknowledge temporal moments of privilege that our positions as academic experts provide. Nevertheless, our intellectual investments and our political commitments drive our work to transform the way scholarship impacts and shapes the multiple communities that we invest in, commit to, and support.

Race was initially constructed as a science of difference to create a set of seemingly essential qualities such as skin color and strategically invisible or immeasurable qualities like intelligence to categorize and quantify an individual's humanity. For those determined to have the "best" qualities, the social value and political use of these qualities have

become so powerful that often the only way for them to be overwritten or challenged is through the writings in speculative genres like science fiction.[2] When we try to "do science" without taking racial politics and histories into account, we find that the ability to lay claim to one's own genes is unevenly distributed. It is because Henrietta Lacks was a Black woman that the hospital that collected her cancerous cells for research and the laboratory that patented them felt no obligation to share this information or financial profit with her family.[3] Similarly, genetic editing technologies are being used to systematically code disability out of new (and existing) human life, preventing specific crip genealogies from existing and simultaneously representing our ancestors in a different way, as problematic and disposable.

Even though we humans, from a genetic perspective, have many more biological properties and qualities in common than we do separating us, we continue to divide ourselves into categories: race, gender, abled, disabled, old, and young. The mass media trope of labeling different generations as different species defined by their proximity to and perceived proficiency with digital media—that is, being a "digital native," being "tech-savvy," being a "digital activist"—is another way to make the cut. Instead of listening to rhetoric that exhorts us to be "good digital citizens," *we want to know how we can get free*—in other words, how we ought to be bound together and bind ourselves to others. In the age of the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and other disruptive technologies, we need new narratives recognizing and prioritizing the ties that bind us more than ever. Unless we do some things differently, our technologies will continue to push us toward the homogenization of humankind. Our collective work pushes back on this with new, nuanced narratives and critiques that rely on specificity and the lifting up of our individual and collective experiences, (dis)abilities, and ways of being in this world, those we must contend with and those we'd like to inhabit.

TECHNOSKEPTICAL POSSIBILITY

"Tragically, as many as 9,625 out of every 10,000 individuals may be neurotypical."

So states the website for ISNT, shorthand for the Institute for the

Study of the Neurologically Typical. Hosted by the autistic-led political clearinghouse *autistics.org*, ISNT is a diagnostic parody website that provided treatment guidance for those afflicted by the ravages of neurotypicality in the late 1990s and early 2000s. ISNT's symptom checklists and screening questionnaires satirically mirrored the language of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*), reformulated as the DS*N*: the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Normal Disorders. Neurotypicality's numerical designation in the mock manual is 666.00, with the disorder featuring symptom clusters such as "[insists] that exactly the same social behaviours always be followed when shopping" and "[demonstrates] lack of interest in computers or other logical fulfilling pastimes."[4]

ISNT's critique of diagnostic absurdity emerged in the midst of two interlinked phenomena: increasing autism prevalence and the dot-com bubbles at the turn of the millennium.[5] Steve Silberman's 2001 article "The Geek Syndrome," in *Wired* magazine, inspired pop-cultural representations of the Silicon Valley software engineer as an embodied configuration of autistic traits.[6] Linked to Silberman's piece was an abridged version of the Autism Quotient—an autism screening tool developed by the Cambridge Autism Research Centre—alongside a byline that implored readers to "take the autism test," presumably to see where they'd fall in autismland.[7] Silberman's was one of the first mass-published essays to suggest the possibilities of claiming autism in an identitarian sense, using the rhetoric of technological innovation as a mechanism for reconceiving awkward nerdom as a desirable disability.

The linkage between the computeristic and the autistic has long been fraught, with many disabled activists (and later, Silberman himself) critiquing the propensity to equate productivity and wealth with disabled value.[8] The logics that animate the staying power of the autistic tech nerd stereotype hinge on whiteness and cis-masculinity, creating an impossibly narrow purview through which an autistic person might be seen as something more than burdensome or terrifying. There is little, if any, possibility of this in the land of tech bros, wherein Elon Musk looms as autism's new patron saint.

This isn't a book about good crips, shiny aspies,[9] or deferential activists. We draw attention to ISNT's theory of "social delusion"—in which

neurotypicals are convinced they can read minds simply by staring at someone's dilated pupils—for its refusal to accept dominant autism politics. The creators of ISNT highlight that they deploy neurotypicality as a foil to "show the arrogance and foolishness of much medical research on autism."[10] Such tactics, as we discuss in Chapter 1, might be understood as counter-diagnostic. But they are also lamentations about the ableist nostalgia for a (mythical) time before autism, showcasing how some forms of digital nostalgia, as we highlight in Chapter 3, are "deeply uneven."

The refusal to accept ableist arrogance creates conditions for possibility, for alternate futures in which disabled, BIPOC, and trans people can thrive. The plurality of futures is important here. We write both personally and collectively in this book, traversing narratives that bridge a dialectic between singularity and solidarity. Our decision to open this book with ISNT might be read as arcane or niche, just as it might be read as a story about digital tactics for subversion and creation that might allow us to imagine otherwise.

As we think toward the otherwise, we wonder about the perverse possibilities of/for/with the digital and the extent to which those perverse possibilities are inextricably bound with refusal. Hacking with the design of inaccessible bathrooms, for example, is both an act of disavowal and a method for desiring otherwise. In 2023, three of us attended a glaringly white summer institute that was rife with inaccessible and trans-antagonistic architecture. While there, we were forced to self-create our own access and our own community, retrofitting for ourselves on the fly. We skipped sessions and instead prioritized dinner, friends, and naps. The dorm restroom marked as gender-neutral was a communal men's bathroom whose only signifier of gender-neutrality was the sign hastily taped to it. We created a sign-up sheet with fellow participants and closed the bathroom door—against the norms of campus policy.

How do people imagine otherwise when their digital and physical spaces constantly present them with attempts to marginalize or erase them? We could not imagine the summer institute space as a home because it did not imagine us as its residents. The conditions for possibility were nonexistent for us, and the extent to which we could imagine

otherwise was afforded only through the labor of our persistence, defiance, and straight-up clocking out early.

Possibility can be seized when it isn't given, and this book imagines the ambivalent project of carving out digital and physical homes in inhospitable spaces. Here, V. Jo Hsu's work on trans-crip Asian American rhetorics can be instructive. Hsu highlights the fissures of diaspora, of being between homes and homelessness. Responding, in part, to the access labor inherent in community organizing and retrofitting hostile spaces, Hsu offers *homing* as a means of reckoning with the dialectics of refusal and possibility. Homing signals the betweenness of possibility and refusal; Hsu uses homing to describe the im/possibility of belonging for Asian diasporic, crip, and trans/queer bodyminds, using sonar as a metaphoric model for how we might find our fellow people amidst pain, violence, malaise, and general suckage.[11]

How does one refuse what is given without foreclosing possibility? How do we find belonging, both individually and collectively?

ABOUT THIS BOOK

We are a modular group of technology scholars and artists who combine to create new ways to engage in transformative politics, build new alliances, and inspire media-making. We aim to engineer new forms of inquiry and new possibilities that might spread throughout contemporary thinking around digital technology, difference, and justice. As a group of authors dedicated to and invested in developing ways to ameliorate the impacts of injustice and inequity, we endeavor to use writing as a tool to reclaim the right to reconfigure and envision through our experimental authorship that deliberately traverses disciplinary boundaries. We write here both personally and collectively, and we write differently, with styles and voices that reflect our own bodies, histories, and commitments. Our collective "we" is less a univocal plural than it is shifting and frictional. We implicitly refer to our own ancestors and intellectual and personal genealogies to describe how science and technology police the boundaries of power and identity.

In our efforts to write and think about destabilizing and eventually dismantling problematically institutionalized systems of technological

and scientific rationality, we also want to embrace the fact that we possess the right to optimistic *possibility*, but also, potentially more importantly, to *refusal*. The intermingling of possibility and refusal allows us to envision and enact futures that make space for us and for our kin and our boundaries, and to refuse what disenfranchises us, erases us, makes our lives unlivable. Ruha Benjamin's speculative field note "Designer and Discarded Genomes" experiments with the "line between fact and fiction" in order to "question the assumption of inevitability that surrounds technological development," as a "methodological exercise . . . to fashion possible futures and probable pasts."[12] Similarly, in the collaborative field notes that follow, we combine our own personal narratives, collective voice writing, spontaneous experiments, and critical play with emerging technologies. We excavate possible pasts and probe the futures that might emerge in three major, interconnected areas: digital diagnosis and wellness; the political opportunities of digital nostalgia; and the radical potentialities of Blackness and AI. This collective project takes the first of many steps to reimagine the political uses of digital nostalgia, recuperate our ideas of what it means to be well or cared for, and reconceptualize the connection between Blackness and AI in order to find solace in a world that is often too content to discard us.

Context is everything; and this book needs a bit of contextualization. We produced the first draft of the text during a week of collaborative writing in rural Pennsylvania. This intense and intensive effort demanded much intellectual and emotional energy. We hope readers will see that our collective commitment to free ourselves of individual ownership of words, ideas, and concepts precipitated much fruitful collaboration. But it would be misleading to imply this effort was not rife with conflict, confusion, and disagreement. We settled many of these concerns, but some still dangle and whip in the wind of the text. Because we prize intellectual transparency, we have allowed them to persist. We hope for a modicum of generosity from readers and a willingness to "go along for the ride," so to speak. We also hope that readers will understand and appreciate that this text is an amalgamation forged from a diverse set of individuals with hearty commitments who are also all invested in this collaborative process. For us, collaborative writing allows for unique, experimental, and rare opportunities

to think together. The collective "we" that we adopt at specific moments is one of those opportunities, surfacing our shared commitment to the power of theory and experience, creation, and reflection. At the same time, the scholarship gathered here attends carefully to specificities: the specificities of space, place, and platforms, and the specificities of experience and of life. As the collective "we" is one kind of collaborative opportunity, the first-person interludes threaded throughout this text are another, a way of emphasizing the fine-grained detail of lived difference within this multivoiced text. Collectively and individually, our aim throughout has been to push ourselves to ask better questions of our digital worlds, in the hopes that we might find better answers. Along the way, we've remained committed to the tangle and swerve of collaborative experimentation and the thrill of possibility it holds out.

In the pages that follow, we analyze the desire for technologized medical diagnoses and undefined digital wellness; the alternately exploitative and productive relationship between Blackness and technology; and the pull toward digital nostalgia that is increasingly ubiquitous on the precipice of Web3. Across these three areas, which we see as deeply interrelated, we develop the concept of *technoskepticism*. Technoskepticism stakes out a position between optimism—whether the zeal for unlimited "progress" that animates the technology industry or our own crip, queer, Black, and Brown visions of better worlds—and outright refusal. Technoskepticism mediates between the two poles of optimism and refusal. As we noted earlier, technoskepticism compels us to wrangle with the complexities of singularity and solidarity, whether that wrangling involves guerilla bathroom tactics or the flagrant taking of naps. It makes space for ambivalence, for the paradoxical cohabitation of joy and doubt, curiosity and caution. For example, in Chapter 6, "Playing with Black Style," it is technoskepticism that moves us to ask, doubtfully, hopefully, if critical experimentation with new forms of AI might do what the world, for so long, has refused to do: see and understand Blackness outside of the oppressive logics of commodification and consumption.

Technoskepticism draws on both optimism and refusal to offer alternatives, still-spectral visions of how we might rewire the digital world around us. It names our shifting and tense relationships with emerg-

ing technologies, relationships grounded in our own histories of exploitation and erasure. But it also might prompt us to hold on, however loosely, to those digital pasts, attentive to shifts in feeling and intention, and to the power they still hold. In Chapter 3, "Nostalgia Gone to Bits," it's with a technoskeptical eye that we revisit the force of nostalgia in an era of digital transition, finding it everywhere from suburban bedrooms to the Web3 metaverse. Conceptualizing the phenomenon and availability of nostalgia as contested and negotiated, we tease out the unevenness of nostalgia that can facilitate white settler colonial capitalism as well as alternative technological worldviews from Black, Asian, queer, and diasporic perspectives.

Explicitly or implicitly, there is another thread interwoven with technoskepticism throughout this book: care. We understand our work as a collective, including the fractious, joyful, exhilarating, and exhausting process of writing the words you are reading right now, as springing from and giving body to the care we have for each other and for our communities. We see technoskepticism and care as ineluctably linked: the possibilities we might seize from emerging technologies, as much as the powers to be gained from refusing others, are meaningful only insofar as they enable us to better care for ourselves and each other. Technoskepticism, then, is an ethic of care, whether it takes the form of recuperating our lost digital homes or making kin with generative AI. We ask the reader to keep in mind this thread, even when it might seem little more than an overtone to picking apart algorithmic diagnostics or the racial politics of AI style. At the end of this book, we return explicitly to care, to speculate, in part, on what might come after.

While this book might push you to adopt a skeptical stance toward the platforms and devices people today live their lives with, we are not skeptical about the work that we can do together. Nor do we have any doubt about the urgency of the task we face. We hope you'll join us in that task, and in the new sites of research and new styles of inquiry we explore throughout this book, as we try to meet it.

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