Three

NOSTALGIA GONE TO BITS

• • • The world is in a moment of digital "transition." With the proliferation of "new" tech everywhere, all at once, from generative AI to blockchain, we hear time and again that we're on the precipice of a new technological age, one that operates on an unfathomable scale. We remain skeptical, however, of these deterministic promises, which break linear time into a succession of distinct periods from less to more "advanced." Can we really still consider ourselves in a moment of transition if the transition never ends, if we're all in permanent beta? Is there even such a thing as a stable or cohesive "digital era" when capitalism has colonized time itself, making nonsense of the idea of progress or of linear time that we can hold at arm's length and break into "eras?" In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary debunks the idea that this transitional phase will inevitably end, arguing that: "the very different actuality of our time is the calculated maintenance of an ongoing state of transition. There never will be a 'catching up' on either a social or individual basis in relation to continually changing technological requirements."[1]

If we are not, in fact, on the cusp of anything but merely enduring and maintaining, then developing emotional attachments to technologies that will soon become obsolete seems futile—like treading water.

FIGURE 7. AI image generated from the prompt "People expressing nostalgia for bygone digital technologies." Credit: Josie Williams and Stephanie Dinkins.

Alt text (Figure 7): An AI image, generated from the prompt "People expressing nostalgia for bygone digital technologies," shows a collage of a Black woman in a yellow top and red pants interacting with retro technology.

Do we build community on Bluesky or Mastodon, after Twitter is now supposedly over? Is the new Apple Vision Pro dead on arrival, a call back to the failure of Google Glass? Against the current of the bleeding new, a kind of "digital nostalgia" is everywhere—a feeling of belatedness that goes hand-in-hand with promises of innovation. This nostalgic pull is an urge to hold on to a past that is already gone or never existed. It's an emotional response of ambivalence, grief, anxiety, and pessimism to a temporal world with which we will always feel out of sync.

This chapter explores the force of nostalgia in an era of promised digital transition into new technologies and technological worlds, staged in places from the mundanity of the bedroom to the expansiveness of the Web3 metaverse. We start by exploring what nostalgia looks like on digital platforms. We argue that material or ephemeral nostalgic sites function as what psychoanalysis calls *transitional objects*—but transitional objects at a time when transition itself is impossible. Transitional objects ferry us from one emotional state to the next. Instead of the gummed blanket or stuffed animal that eases the separation anxiety of a child being weaned from its mother, we cling to these scraps of remembered or reimagined digital ephemera that spring from our desire to hold on to a moment that is always already obsolete.

There's a politics to how we use these objects to summon up technological pasts. Our experiences living through the end of the possibility of transition reveal this perpetual state of digitality to have uneven effects. Whose transition? Whose nostalgia? Nostalgia is highly differential, heterogenous, and textured, thus underlining the importance of thinking through the specificities of social experiences rather than the generalities of technological abstraction. These insights tell us that our attachments to and detachments from these transitional objects are worth exploring, in that they illuminate the personal, social, and political stakes when "new" technological worlds are pressed upon us by the mystical engine of progress.

Some pasts are preserved as ready sources for fond recollection and curation. Others are left as refuse, discarded because they have been deemed "worthless" within capitalism's system of value and exchange. Refuse can be made and planned, put out by the continual transition into the technologically "new." But refuse is also the stuff of nostalgia,

and this chapter lingers with old objects, old times, and old feelings. We examine nostalgia as a contested and negotiated terrain, at times manifesting as a whiteness of technological nostalgia and at other times expressed differently, from Black, queer, and Asian perspectives. Is refuse made or embraced? Like memory itself, nostalgia can be messy, ephemeral, and impure. We've assembled a set of nostalgic anecdotes, across different generations of internet users. Our stance might ultimately be one of ambivalence, as we aim to complicate the progress narratives endemic to moments of digital transition.

BEDROOMS AS TIME MACHINES

The conclusion of Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* describes cyberspace as "the new frontier." In this section, she makes an intriguing connection between home life and digital home pages:

> The recent phenomenon of video recording someone's home life on a home page gives a whole new meaning to the expression "being at home." Being at home in this self-imposed panopticon scenario means being watched or being a voyeur for no particular political reasons. For all participants in this interaction, privacy becomes vicarious and virtual; no longer the property of a single individual, it turns into a space of projection and interaction.[2]

Boym's situatedness as a scholar writing at the beginning of the 2000s evokes digital nostalgia as we read her, nostalgia for a hopeful historical period before the immediacy and intimacy of TikTok, which would go on to build new aesthetic styles of digital placemaking and homemaking.

What does nostalgia look like on digital platforms? In 2020, Vice Media's *i-D* magazine published an article titled "TikTok Has Reinvented the Teenage Bedroom," pointing to the platform's role in transforming the bedroom from a private refuge into a public space during the pandemic.[3] On the platform, a whole subgenre has emerged of videos that feature users who record, edit, and consume content from within the confines of their highly staged and aestheticized "TikTok bedrooms." What the article doesn't address is how these bedroom videos are not

just about style, but are also charged with nostalgic longing for an impossible and often highly specific time and place. On TikTok, a whole community of Gen-Z users transform their bedrooms into spaces of longing for an earlier moment in technological history—any moment but the one into which they were born. These moments range from time periods as recent as the 2010s (very much still the digital) to as early as the 1930s (long before the rise of personal computing and the internet).[4] Perhaps this roving nostalgia, unanchored to any specific decade—unlike the way the 1980s longed for the 1950s—is a symptom of the sense of stuckness that comes from living in permanent beta. Bedrooms become time machines and users become time travelers through a combination of vintage and/or vintage-inspired furnishings, fashion stylings, digital editing tools, and an accompanying musical hit from a given decade. Together, this assemblage crystallizes a particular historical moment into a set of nostalgic visual or sonic tropes that can be easily distilled for circulation and consumption, in turn generating particular affective publics.

One such TikTok user, @cantbuyme80s, has built her entire profile around aestheticized nostalgia for the 1980s. In every post, she appears with teased Cyndi Lauper–esque hair, thick eyebrows, and candy-colored pastel eyeshadow, syncing each video with 1980s glam pop hits. Her "Get Ready With Me" videos, a popular genre on TikTok, invite us into her bedroom, where the walls are plastered with posters for films like *Back to the Future* (an unintentionally potent illustration of nostalgia as time travel?) and where stacks of cassette tapes sit on top of the dresser. Owners of such "bedroom nostalgia" accounts frequently acquire media objects that have long been out of date—and are only becoming more so now in a perpetual cycle of novelty and obsolescence. In a "1970s room," there are no signs that the digital turn ever happened: only a collection of clunky analog cameras on the dresser. Fleetwood Mac plays in the background.[5]

At the same time, however, the digital filters that emulate the earth tones and warm color palettes associated with the '70s or the punchy jewel tones and neons of the '80s remind us that this is an "analog nostalgia" made possible only *through* the use of the digital. By analog, as opposed to digital, we refer to the distinction between technolo-

gies that transmit and store information as a continuous curve (e.g., radio, broadcast television, VHS, etc.) and ones that use binary code, which transform singular artifacts into modular data to be manipulated and edited at the pixel level.[6] In one video, @cantbuyme80s takes a pretend call on a transparent plastic landline phone whose audio has clearly been added in after the fact—the *analog liveness* of connection the phone promises here is thus an effect of *digital compositing*.[7] Digital tools provide possibilities to experience and perform nostalgic emotions for a time when personal computing and the internet were in their infancy or nonexistent.

Clearly, digital technologies and platforms lend themselves to the widespread circulation of nostalgic objects and effects. But what's new about this form of digital nostalgia? Here, it's interesting to see what @cantbuyme80s herself has to say on the topic. In January 2023, a user left a comment on her account reading: "yeah for real, cause you can be authentic for the 80s when you're 19, lol." @cantbuyme80s responded to the comment in a video that's been modified by a digital filter to look "analog"—the resolution is slightly blurred, the edges warped, and we can glimpse a watermark reading "Kodak Portra 400." @cantbuyme80s seems to be egging on her critics, who accuse her of "making the 80s her whole personality"[8] in this wholesale embrace of ersatz analog desire. She speaks to the camera: "I know someone somewhere has been like, 'She's been incredibly extra.' Darling, I know for you it's extra. For me, it's enough."[9] Being "extra" in this case seems to indicate an excessive-bordering-on-camp embodiment of period style. But whether the style in question is "accurate" or "authentic" is ultimately irrelevant. Like the faux-analog Kodak filter, nostalgia blurs the edges of reality rather than merely reproducing it.

Nostalgia is notoriously slippery, seemingly universal, and transhistorical, yet highly individualized—what triggers one person's nostalgia may have little or no meaning to somebody else. Yet, memory is intensely historical, embodied, and political. Each generation brings a new, varied set of longings for the past—even if it's a past that long preceded their very existence. Boym reminds us that nostalgia is a "historical emotion"—one that was once seen as a curable illness but which, over the course of the twentieth century, became "the incurable modern

condition."[10] As Boym notes, the word *nostalgia* comes from the Greek *nostos*, "return home," and *algia*, "longing," meaning that one cannot be nostalgic for a time or place that still exists. This absence—a yearning for completeness or wholeness—is central to the experience of nostalgia, and our current moment keenly feels it. But is it possible to feel joyful or even at home in the present when the technological objects and virtual communities we invest in run the constant risk of becoming obsolete or bought out?

Today, we use phrases like "digital native" and "born digital," suggesting that members of younger generations, like @cantbuyme8os, feel wholly at ease in hypermediated environments. These truisms, as Crary points out, suggest that "catching up" to new technologies is a possibility, when the reality is that even so-called digital natives are stuck in a moment of transition. While no doubt performative, the confessional format of many TikTok bedroom feeds points to this general sense of malaise at the heart of this nostalgic turn in virtual communities. @matthildeherlerr, a teen whose content is dedicated to "bedroom videos" and "mental health," has shared multiple videos showcasing her collection of analog trinkets that include vinyl records, vintage clocks and thermometers, and black-and-white portraits in circular gold Victorian-esque frames. One is captioned: "I often wonder if it's me there's something wrong with. If it's me who doesn't deserve friends, me who doesn't deserve love, me who doesn't deserve happiness, and me who needs to change. Maybe I do."[11]

Here, the interesting question isn't whether this sentiment is "authentic"—a concept belabored to death—but why these nostalgic artifacts and objects routinely prove such powerful conduits for emotion, longing, and the construction of the self online. @matthildeherlerr saying that she doesn't "deserve" happiness evokes a feeling of being out of sync with one's environment, and—if her habit of collecting and amassing vintage trinkets is any clue—even embodied time itself. In 1931, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote about the elegiac feelings that often accompany the acquisition of material objects. "Every passion borders on the chaotic," he observes. "But the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."[12] Those experiencing digital nostalgia seem to seek out this "chaos of memories" as they collect pos-

sessions others have donated or thrown away. They soothe themselves with objects too old to go out of style, attempting to drown out calls beckoning them back to the accelerated, technology-saturated digital present.

FIGURE 8. TikTok image: "I often wonder if it's me there's something wrong with. If it's me who doesn't deserve friends, me who doesn't deserve to be happy, me who needs to change. Maybe I do." Credit: @mathildeherler.

Alt text (Figure 8): A TikTok image made by @mathildeherler. The image displays a bedroom with vintage and old-timey photos and kitschy objects on the walls. The superimposed text reads: "I often wonder if it's me there's something wrong with. If it's me who doesn't deserve friends, me who doesn't deserve to be happy, me who needs to change. Maybe I do."

ON TRANSITIONAL DIGITAL OBJECTS

Nostalgia is highly commodified by digital technologies: so many period-appropriate knick-knacks transformed by faux-analog filters, so many clicks and swipes on a social media platform. So it makes sense that our emotional attachments to objects are a crux of nostalgia in the digital catalysts that summon imagined communities created through shared experiences.

The fear of losing the memory of a beloved person, a cherished experience, or a familiar digital node strikes an emotional chord. As Tamara Kneese has shown, these three increasingly go hand-in-hand: we die, are buried, and mourned, only to have our digital remains scattered when the site that hosted them drops out of the web.[13] Platforms go dark, devices brick, and with them, whole worlds disappear. Nostalgia, even when diffused into online subcultures like bedroom TikTok, might be a way of mourning these losses. But, even if the terrain of memory is fraught, and citation itself a "chaos of memory," we remember what Freud wrote about the distinction between mourning and melancholia: while mourning can be transitioned through, melancholia is pathological because it names a loss that is, in a way, "impossible," a loss of something you can't name and didn't know you had.[14] Melancholia is pathological precisely because it permits no transition; the future is blocked because the past is obscured. But if, as Crary argued, this phase of technological transition is truly permanent, our digital nostalgia might be more melancholic stuckness than transitional mourning. Our attachment to these objects might be a digitally enabled longing for impossible times, a tacit admission that we will know no other cleanly discernible era, no other technological time than our own.

Yet, if our care for these digital objects is "small-c" conservative, keeping bits of the past alive for contemporary communities, that isn't to say that they aren't reparative, powerful, or even potentially revolutionary. Transitional objects serve as theaters for fantasies of autonomy and power. They offer a way of treading water between the total absorption of the self in parental care and the bodily and psychic autonomy that enables you to navigate the wider world. The kinds of transitional objects we find in digital nostalgia, carefully reconstructed with filters or stumbled across while cleaning out a cache, might do this, too.

Artifacts of digital nostalgia can reference transformational and arguably transitional moments in life. For me, the early digital was a window into a world that I, and I assume many others, found compelling because it enabled access to things, information, and data I assumed that I should not access. For example, from my early digital excursions, I learned how to make a pipe bomb. Not that I had any intention of actually making or using a pipe bomb, [but] early digital spaces provided me with the skill, if needed. I am nostalgic for the power, both metaphorical and material that a keyboard could provide. Though not specifically a digital object, this transitional artifact enabled me to reach, experience, and consume knowledge traditionally cordoned off from adolescent boys. A keyboard no longer has that transformative power or meaning. I am incredibly familiar with this now mundane instrument of input. Arguably, what makes it mundane is that it has not significantly changed. It has not disappeared in the residue of a technological past. Perhaps in a future where inputs are no longer driven through keyboards, cue Apple Vision Pro, keyboards will have a decidedly different nostalgic effect.

— Rayvon Fouché

The early digital worlds we miss in this anecdote could only be experienced at a distance, so to speak. You had to dial up and log in, and what was there was mostly text, so much of that world was viewed through the mind's eye. But the fantasies those worlds enabled, or at least the fantasies we project now on them and through them, were rich with detail and personal in a way that our sleekly designed, hyper-commodified "immersive" and "interactive" contemporary technological landscape forecloses. The dial-up FTP site, *The Anarchist Cookbook* you found there, the pipe bomb instructions it contained, and the keyboard that made it all possible: all of these were part of a fantasy of power. Whether or not one intended on making a bomb, the keyboard could conjure this forbidden knowledge "if needed." It was a fantasy that helped someone grow up, even if "growing up" meant using the keyboard to submit expense reports instead of preparing to join a revolutionary group plotting to overthrow the government.

Maybe when we're submitting expense reports via Vision Pro or Neuralink, then, even the now mundane input device of the keyboard

will become an object of digital nostalgia. Maybe we'll see bedroom TikTokers use painstakingly restored mechanical keyboards to log on to resurrected Warez sites. But part of what we take the permanence of a state of transition to mean is that we'll never be allowed to grow up.[15] Even so, what fantasies of power might we—Black, Asian, crip, and queer—access when we revive these objects in digital nostalgia? What kinds of autonomy, care, and even violence might we be able to glean from them to buoy us in the deluge of obsolescence or to start getting over, little by little, to what might be on the other side?

WHOSE DIGITAL NOSTALGIA?

When we try to imagine answers to these questions, we're thinking about the reparative potentials of *our* digital nostalgia. But the landscape of digital nostalgia is deeply uneven: it hits differently depending on where you stand and who you are. From that perspective, we might have buried the lede when we analyzed bedroom TikTok previously. These users in period-appropriate fashion and makeup, with simulated watermarks dating their videos, are, more often than not, white girls in their mid-to-late teens. What power differentials are built into the assumption that "older is better?" For whom are these simulated pasts a haven or a refuge? For instance, @cantbuyme80s dances in a TikTok to Mötley Crüe's "Girls, Girls, Girls," a song written as a tribute to strippers, while a caption is overlaid: "the feminism leaving my body when this song comes on." There may be something subversive or even pleasurable about these anachronistic indulgences of a less socially conscious moment.[16] The #aesthetic tag ubiquitous on these videos claims a universal nostalgic pleasure that is quite demographically specific. So that this digital nostalgia takes the form of an exorcism, purging oneself of even the most evacuated identity politics: white feminism.[17]

But, as we said, nostalgia hits differently. As white teenagers imagine themselves back to a world before bra burning or *The Vagina Monologues*, Black nostalgia today is able to draw upon the digital in a way that previous generations had little access to. From the 1970s to the present, Black technophilia led to our exuberant embrace of instant, digital, and smartphone cameras. The resultant adoption by everyday

Black folks led to a cornucopia of recorded Black pleasure, from Polaroids of sharply dressed partygoers to Freaknik videos to "do it for the Vine (i ain't gon do it!)."

Where previous media technologies such as 8 mm film, VHS recorders, and single-lens reflex photographic equipment were expensive and often owned only by Black elites, the instant camera and its descendant, the smartphone camera, have expanded possibilities for Black nostalgia. In concert with infrastructural access to cheap and easy film processing on nearly every corner, Black mundane leisure and joy were captured, stored, and shared—first on slide carousels in darkened living rooms, then on our thirsty social networks. But for older Black folk, from the 1960s all the way back to Columbus's landing in the Caribbean, the available media engendering Black historical nostalgia are overwhelmingly, unspeakably violent and from them "no period can be culled to inspire good feelings in the present."[18] Even worse, beliefs that the enslaved didn't even possess the capacity to *experience* nostalgia helped ensure that archivists, politicians, and academics would not ever consider Black interiority a legitimate criterion for historical study, leaving only scattered collections of Black leisure or solemn portraits of Black elites to mark what the Black everyday used to looked like. But Black memories are "not limited to traumatic resonances of the past, nor are they constituted only through or in relation to histories of violence."[19] As we discuss in Chapter 6, "Playing with Black Style," the Black digital can also serve as a virtual home to Black discursive spaces we liken to our historic gathering places dedicated to Black aesthetics and politics—the beauty salon and the barbershop.

In thinking about our emotional attachments to technology, we are also thinking about crip tech and the role of forced obsolescence, or how we disabled folks are in constant negotiation with technologies that sustain our lives and livelihoods. Through the logics of cure, we are entrained to hold out for technological promise: for the exoskeleton or other high-whiz gadget that will let one "walk again," for the gene-editing tech that will let one "swallow again," for the digital app that will let one "be neurotypical again." But, as we discuss in relation to diagnosis in Chapter 1, these promises are often futile. Disabled people are wranglers of technology, forced to agitate and fight with the very things

that are supposed to keep us alive or let us do the sustaining tasks of everyday life. What happens when Delta kills your power chair? What happens when the tech company that maintains your bionic eye goes under? What happens when—as we've seen during COVID—there's a ventilator shortage? What happens when auto-captions stop working during a doctor's visit? What is digital nostalgia for those whose body-minds are always in waiting?

Returning to Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, it's hard to see the year it was published—2001—as purely incidental. The word "digital" comes up only four times throughout the book (three of them in the conclusion), but each mention tellingly points to the techno-optimism characteristic of the early internet. By way of conclusion, Boym brings the reader to the present. "Cyberspace seems to be the new frontier" for nostalgia, she writes, echoing the language typical of the late-1990s and early-2000s fantasies of the internet, in which users could supposedly transcend their bodies and annihilate the boundaries of time and space.[20] But as Lisa Nakamura has pointed out, transcending your body on this new frontier often meant appropriating others' identities, with predominantly white users trying on any number of gendered and raced screen names and avatars.[21]

The "frontier" invoked by Boym and early techno-utopians was already a specific kind of white transitional object inherited from a long colonial and imperial history. In the violence of European colonialism in the Americas, idealized love for the mother was abstracted as an idealized love for the *motherland*. Pursuing this idealized love through recreating a motherland by repopulating a "frontier" manifested as a genocidal fantasy that depended on eliminating and dispossessing native peoples.[22] The enchantment of this fantasy holds so strong that it functions as an alibi for violence toward the native other deemed unworthy of and outside of the distribution of this "love." When we scrape the surface of white technological nostalgia, we find the same frontier emerging again. This nostalgia is an idealized abstraction, distributing "love" for more versions of the selfsame made in the image of the privileged and wealthy. In its most extreme case, it can be the stuff of dreams and nightmares in the "Make America Great Again" era, reviving the past as a contested source of self and community narration. This is what

Boym might refer to as "restorative nostalgia," a national or religious (at least in fervor) return to origins.[23]

From AI technologies as the "cognitive layering" of the web to dreams of metaverses, Web3 has been fueled by a restorative nostalgia that aims at reopening a future for white settler colonialism. It's an old future, one that reboots those 1990s dreams of immateriality: embodiment without bodies (virtual reality), land without land (metaverse properties, crypto-utopias), and work without workers (generative AI). This productive capacity of Web3 draws from its fungibility, a technical attribute that evacuates lived realities and histories to generative value. These rebooted dreams speculate on and conjure up frontiers yet to open on other worlds, as with SpaceX's projects to colonize Mars, projects that enlarge planned obsolescence to the planetary scale. This techno-capitalist privilege of being able to unmoor oneself from planetary belonging in an era of environmental collapse is mirrored in the desire to homestead in the metaverse, devising new ways that digital belonging can be propertied and commodified. And "crypto-utopias," like Vanuatu's Satoshi Island—planned as Vanuatu's indigenous inhabitants undertake a managed retreat in the face of rising sea levels—offer real-life examples of the age-old emptying out of land and peoples, replaced with infrastructures of speculative techno-capital.

As imaginaries of a third-generation internet built on blockchain technology revivify the same frontier "ideal," they imply an ultimate answer to the question, *whose nostalgia?* Following Cheryl Harris, we might see whiteness as less a racial identity than a relation to property.[24] Less an ancestry than a provenance, whiteness is constituted by enforceable trails of ownership of one's own body and the bodies of others. To think of nostalgia as a propertied relation—whose nostalgia?—is, in part, to tease out the possessive logic of whiteness. As the U.S. historian Michael Kammen writes, "nostalgia is . . . essentially history without the guilt."[25] We might extend this to understand nostalgia as a willful erasure of historical violence, extraction, and exploitation. From islands to the extra-planetary to the metaverse, Web3 speculates on the digital as a propertied relation, an idealized frontier that distributes possession for a loved few and dispossession for the rest. Blockchain's promise of

permanent, distributed ledgers is one way of resurrecting this frontier of possession and dispossession as infrastructural and final. A technical intensification of the constitution of whiteness as property, it reenvisions the web as nothing more or less than property relations. It makes digital history a record of transactions: an unbroken, eternal chain such that something that is yours will always verifiably once have been yours, even when you no longer own it. In a sense, this technical refusal of the possibility of loss is nostalgia taken to a logical extreme. And, through it, Web3 also imagines a frontier that *stays white*.

Given that the past, present, and future can continue to propagate this fantasy of colonial whiteness, is there room for joy or recuperative nostalgia that breaks with this narrative?

"NOTHING MATTERS," OR FEELING ASIAN AMERICAN JOY

In June 2023, Apple released a long trailer for its new Vision Pro, a VR lifestyle headset that marks Apple's most notable technological contribution to the metaverse. This techno-utopian (and easily memed) device was introduced as ongoing reminders of planetary climate collapse were in the air, this time quite literally as Canadian forest fires raised air toxicity levels to extreme degrees across North America. Even our writing of this collaborative book was affected, as we arrived at our retreat location only a few days after the toxic atmosphere started to return to breathable levels. The specter of planetary devastation has fueled our writing of these pages on digital nostalgia. An article in the *Atlantic* comments on techno-capitalist optimism in the time of planetary obsolescence, where the headline says it all: "The Vision Pro Is the Perfect Gadget for the Apocalypse."[26]

White technological nostalgia is about the restoration of a structuring permanence (a world built around whiteness and whiteness as property), hiding behind the alibi of planned obsolescence. In the project of colonial modernity, Asians have been brought in as coerced and underpaid laborers to build and maintain the infrastructures of these new worlds, as inhuman and machine-like Chinese railroad laborers, as Filipinx social media content moderators, as Taiwanese women building computer chips in semiconductor factories, or as post-1965 South

Asian high-tech laborers in Silicon Valley. Asians have played a central role in building technological and digital worlds from the industrial to the information ages. For this reason, Asians in the United States are closely associated with robotic and inhuman forms of labor, replication rather than reproduction, and techno-competency.[27] So wherever we find the digital, we also find the question of Asian racial identity, being, and belonging.

Yet, the infrastructural position of Asians within technological worlds means that thinking through Asianness might offer a new critical orientation toward technological novelty. If technology is extractively utopian and optimistic, then what does it mean to think of Asian American joy as an alternative to this violent love?

In the Apple Vision Pro commercial, which proclaims that the era of "spatial computing is here," the Daniels' 2022 Oscar-winning film *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (abbreviated as *EEAAO*) makes an appearance. Demonstrating the immersive capacities of Vision Pro, the trailer shows an annoyed white woman on a plane putting on the headset to watch *EEAAO* in full immersive view. We see Evelyn Wang

FIGURE 9. Apple Vision Pro commercial (5:32, 2023), featuring *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022). Credit: Apple Inc.

Alt text (Figure 9): A screen capture from an Apple Vision Pro commercial showing the scene from *Everything Everywhere All At Once* in which Evelyn Wang turns on her multiverse device by pressing her left Bluetooth earpiece.

(played by Michelle Yeoh) getting sucked into an alternate universal dimension for the first time by clicking her Bluetooth headset (which can actually be purchased as a film novelty item from the film's production company, A24). This cinematic moment registers the promises of Vision Pro and is strategically integrated by Apple to demonstrate this desired, universal escapism of VR worlds. The richness of the film, which is ultimately a queer Asian American multiverse story, is sucked into a universal story about Vision Pro and VR possibilities.

Everything Everywhere All At Once helps us think toward an answer. The film centers the perspective of Evelyn Wang, a Chinese American woman who owns a laundromat, as she races across multiple universes to save—and ultimately understand—her queer Chinese American daughter, Joy, who is also the villainous incarnation of the multidimensional being "Jobu Tupaki." Joy/Jobu has spent her life running away from home, from the gravitational pull of her immigrant mother. And the wake left by her departure leaves behind infinite new worlds and universes.

While *EEAAO* is about infinite universes, the film is staunchly not about universalism. It is not about the permanent creation of any particular world or world vision, but rather the makeshift feeling that each world is fleeting, a flash visit to a place with no purpose. The universes are highly improvisational, silly, and temporary, as mentioned in the "closet" universe, which serves only to inform Evelyn of the existence of multiple universes before the closet is quickly destroyed. This is the first time we, as viewers, meet Joy as Jobu, flickering through different nail colors in exuberant animation.

The digital world loves Asian digits—that is to say, Asian fingers and hands. Donna Haraway's landmark essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" describes the "nimble fingers of Oriental women"[28] in the making of computer chips and the fetishization of manual dexterity as model digital labor (a history that can be linked to Fairchild Semiconductor's idealization of Navajo women in its manufacturing plant in Shiprock, New Mexico).[29] These digits are often not only racialized but also gendered in order to be integrated and rendered interchangeable in the creation and maintenance of digital infrastructures, networks, and worlds. Asian women's hands are built into digital technologies.

FIGURE 10. Evelyn Wang with "hot dog" fingers.

Alt text (Figure 10): Another screen capture from *Everything Everywhere All At Once* depicting actress Michelle Yeoh staring in horror at her prosthetic hot dog fingers.

If Asians' integration into technologies and the digital is through their hands and as model hard workers, then *EEAAO* is obsessed with perverting and subverting this trope. One of the possible alternate universes features Evelyn Wang as an Asian woman with "hot dog" fingers. The gag is to showcase the nonsensical corners of the most disconnected alternate universes in existence, where pre-human species ancestors developed long, extended fingers resembling hotdogs rather than functional digits. These fingers are not made for work, and viewers see Evelyn continuously trying to figure out how to even navigate the hot dog finger universe. Instead of being efficient, productive, or even functional, Evelyn Wang's hot dog fingers are wobbly, stupidly useless, and nonsensical. Hot dog fingers signify the deformation of formed fingers, which have been a fetishized racial part integrated into technological development.

The nonsensical provides a moment of respite in the rigid demands of digital work: being hardcore gamers in global competitive esports teams and Twitch streams, being backend developers for Big Tech, and being seen only as a widget made for labor. *EEAAO* orients us toward

nostalgia for love of something that has not been made to matter through the imperative to work, building digital and technological worlds for others. Asian American joy is glimpsed in the fleeting and flickering nonsensicality and meaninglessness. To be infrastructurally overdetermined inspires a desire for the fleeting.

In the digital world, do I experience joy? As an Asian American who grew up in 2000s gaming culture (and whose name in Mandarin means "Joy"), it isn't easy to identify something resembling joy. Part of this difficulty is because any easy articulation of joy that I find is tied to a sense of the "grind" or only makes sense in some relationship to "work" (the clearer nostalgic feeling is "guilt"). Everything mattered, perhaps too much, even games in the grind to be the best, and it was the weight of this everythingness that clouds any clear recollection of joy. Perhaps the closest is to think about something much more deflated than the high emotion of joy, which to me is something closer to a type of nonsense—something highly unproductive, un-work-like, uneconomical, unintelligent, and altogether meaningless. Thinking about EEAAO draws out this affinity with something "stupid" that doesn't map onto a single platform, a site, or digital space. It is an embrace of just existing that is not bound to obligation, complicity, coercion, resistance, or even the gravity and burden of being mapped onto a social world or structure. It is to find pleasure in letting the world go, where nothing mattered, a joy out of being unburdened, and to experience this unburdened world, if only fleeting.

What if clicks were pointless, and there was joy in this? I remember playing Neopets, a game that taught a generation of early internet kids how to play and raise digital creatures called Neopets. The website allowed players to create, design, and raise their own digital pet, explore a virtual village, and play online flash mini-games. When Asian aesthetics became global in the age of Pokémon and Tamagotchis, when there was so much online related to cute digital creatures (a precursor to Web3's NFT culture), I found myself exploring the site for hours and playing the most useless, nonsensical games. What comes to mind is the time-suck of playing a dice game called Dice-a-Roo, where you could win virtual currency (Neopoints) by clicking a die deciding whether you win or lose Neopoints. The game of chance itself made no economic sense and was a horrible use of time if one wanted to follow the logic of being able to raise Neopets successfully.

The game did not advance one's status as a monied person in the world of Neopets. This mini-game comes to mind because it represents these minor moments of nostalgia, a relation to the world that does not necessarily situate digital phenomena within historical structure or context. This is the obverse of the metaverse's seductive promise that everything matters, and you must invest, invest, invest! This is not to say that there was bliss in ignorance but rather to get at this fleeting orientation to online spaces and basking in the delight of nonsensical digital activity.

— Huan He

In the climax of *EEAAO*, when Evelyn finally confronts Joy, she repurposes the self-nihilist mantra repeated throughout the film: "We can do whatever we want. Nothing matters." Joy suffers from a deep sense of estrangement and alienation, which has led to her depressive spiral and expulsion from her home universe—expanding into the multiverse. The whiteness of technological nostalgia might claim one interpretation. "We can do whatever we want [because] nothing matters" easily augments the whiteness of technological nostalgia that is interested in a fantasy power for reproducing more of the same: images of the same worlds with the same people living in them, at the expense of racialized and disabled others. Evelyn, who in this moment speaks directly to her Asian American daughter, Joy, inverts this statement to make an argument for nonproductivity, nonsense, and nothing mattering as a makeshift universe for joy. This fleeting joy is structurally inverse to the large-scale planned obsolescence of technological newness, and we search the corners of the digital universe for more of it.

"Nothing matters." We might take the productive ambiguity of "nothing matters" as evidence for the thing we name as Asian American joy. While Evelyn's utterance—"nothing"—is expressed in the negative form, it is not a negativity that can be subsumed under the idealized act of refusal. Rather, it lingers in the gray space between possibility and refusal, the contours of an interstitial, makeshift universe. Historically, Asians and Asian Americans have been viewed as inhuman workers who created the digital and therefore cannot refuse always being seen in relation. The very technologies that animate white techno-capitalism and Afro-skepticism (discussed in depth in the conclusion) are both the

site of our labor and the result of it. We find joy in knowing through our own ancestral memories and intelligence that although our roles in this country are reduced to our labor and instrumental value, we know that we exceed them.

There is deep joy in this despite the complicated relationship Asians have with technology, whether industrial or informatic. In contrast to African American community efforts like Detroit's Project Greenlight, which protests the use of facial recognition technologies and cameras in some of the city's most densely populated Black neighborhoods, Asian Americans are less visibly involved in refusing technology or questioning what it's doing to our communities. Some Asian American high-tech entrepreneurs, such as Jerry Yang or Andrew Yang, are key facilitators of extractive global techno-capitalism. All throughout, however, our awareness that so many of us built so much of that techno-capitalism while failing to benefit equally informs our own skepticism and calibrates our own forms of refusal.

Digital life shows us that time-wasting in video games and other unproductive digital activities pushes back against the idea that we are here only to labor, to create the digital for others. The ancestral intelligence that artificial intelligence exploits as a resource to create Black joy, Afro-futuristic theory, and aesthetic objects predates the digital and, at the same time, shapes it. In contrast, Asian ancestral intelligence consists of a deep awareness that every time we touch a device or engage with AI, an-other Asian body that we can't see built these material objects with their own hands. Our hands are built into the technologies that others refuse or accept. Refusing to feel joy about that is part of a strategy for finding joy and pleasure in our capacity to move ahead in and with technology, nonetheless biding our time and saving our energies for struggles to come.

CONCLUSION: FINDING JOY IN NO SAFE SPACE

The idea that technological novelty depends on planned obsolescence is nothing new. Here, we've teased out what *might* be new about the phase of digital nostalgia we see all around us and how it might respond to a time when the acceleration of planned obsolescence has left

us stuck in permanent beta. We explored how this nostalgia deploys digital platforms and tools to revisit analog pasts in bedroom TikTok. Cases like these may seem niche or trivial, but they point to a collective disenchantment, malaise, or even pessimism that defines digital nostalgia—one that, as we have shown, is only gaining traction with the emergence of blockchain technologies and generative AI. At the same time, we argue that digital nostalgia might not be simply retrogressive but might also leverage digital transitional objects as sites for fantasies of reparation and agency that we still draw on today to call different technological futures into being. But what this nostalgia promises varies drastically across groups and contexts: makeshift universes of digital memory give us glimpses of Asian American joy, while nostalgia for the "frontier" of the 1990s internet underwrites new expansions of white techno-capitalism.

Digital nostalgia might hold reparative potential, but its inherent unevenness ensures that it's no safe space. And even our own experiences of digital nostalgia are deeply ambivalent; we revisit digital moments and experiences not just to cherish and reflect on them but also to assess and judge. One final anecdote illustrates both kinds of unevenness at work:

I am nostalgic for Machinima, but for different reasons than most gamers. One person's cherished digital moment playing old video games can be another person's cherished digital moment of seeing how racism works in what was then a new medium. A comment posted a year ago to a 2007 YouTube video entitled "Ni Hao: A Gold Farmer's story," reads: "2022 and keeping the nostalgia alive. Thank you, Nyhm. This era of WoW will always be special to me, and your videos are a part of that. Much love wherever you are and whatever you're doing, my man." Other posters chimed in with "fond memories," "those were the good days," "Nostalgic as fuck," "Listening to it while playing WoW Classic brings back true Nostalgia," and "Time flies fast." Machinima is obsolete, an artifact of earlier game engines, but the anti-Asian racism that motivated "open season" on Korean and Chinese professional gold farmers that this video celebrated isn't. Even though gaming has become much more conscious of its own racism and misogyny in the last fifteen years, the pleasurable feeling of nostalgia for short-lived media

forms like Machinima gets articulated by viewers remembering the "good times," erasing what reads even more obviously today as egregious hatred. In 2009, I published "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft," analyzing "Ni Hao" as an artifact of "late capitalism" and the "dispossession of information workers in the Fourth Worlds." Looking at the "Ni Hao" video fifteen years later made me nostalgic for the early days of digital media studies when I read this paper for the first time at the New School for Social Research's Digital Labor conference. Game studies was so hostile to race and gender critique, and I remember even that feeling of audiences' attacking the paper when I read it at other places with nostalgia because of the pleasure of presenting something that I felt was new.

—Lisa Nakamura

By 2013, "Machinima" was the most-viewed YouTube channel worldwide. It has since been more or less forgotten, even by the millions of people who contributed to its popularity as viewers. But among those who do remember it, it's a still contested site. Some are nostalgic for the unevenly distributed "good times" of early online spaces, a Web 1.0 nostalgia for a "disembodied" community that tacitly turned on racist violence. Others, as in the anecdote above, are nostalgic for the feeling of articulating a new critique of digital racism, and for the feeling that that critique, even if resisted, might actually have a purchase on the world. This is a nostalgia we draw on now when we think about how our own work might make space, however fleeting, for transformative joy.

In the next chapter, we turn to a different way nostalgia makes a reparative kind of space, one that brings out the *nostos* in nostalgia. It focuses on the digital spaces we wish we could go home to, even when those digital spaces were not "safe spaces," and the homes we found there were contested and ephemeral and—like Machinima—not always meant for us.