Four

THE LONGING FOR HOME

Nostalgia for Digital Platforms

• • • In 2020, the journalist Joanne McNeil wrote that "fondness for Myspace has grown as time passes. It has come to represent a particular moment of freedom and drama online, especially to those too young to remember it."[1] The notion that someone might miss or yearn for a technology they don't remember using might seem like a paradox, but we read this instead as a marker of what we've already identified as a specifically digital nostalgia. Digital nostalgia represents a longing not only for our own specific digital experiences and places that evoke feelings of home and familiarity, but also a different and possibly more intense longing: the desire for the thing you never experienced. Just as with the TikTok bedrooms we discussed in the previous chapter, distance may make the heart grow fonder; lovingly reproducing an '80s style might feel very different to a Boomer compared to a Generation Z creator who doesn't remember the Reaganomics, gas rationing, and licensed misogyny and racism that now seem laughable in media from the period. While rock music fans idealize bellwether moments in musical history such as Woodstock, this feeling is premised in some ways on *not* having had to wade through oceans of mud, wait in miles of traffic, and endure the chaos of an event that history remembers as transcendent.

Similarly, as McNeil writes, the "freedom and drama" of early social

networking on Myspace may be intensified by distance. The digital lethargy that Tung-Hui Hu argues characterizes our post-social media moment[2] may feel especially lethargic because of our nostalgia for a livelier, more energizing period as remembered by those who didn't experience it *because* they were "too young to remember it."[3] Even those of us who are old enough to recall a specific cultural moment may not have been present in its key spaces and thus may feel a different kind of nostalgia: FOMO, or fear of missing out or having missed out. Nostalgia, as we wrote in Chapter 3, "Nostalgia Gone to Bits," is premised upon the *realization* of having missed out. And the ephemerality or "too late-ness" of the digital (e.g., all the Myspace data gathered before 2014 were accidentally deleted in a server upgrade in 2019) makes that feeling particularly acute.

What are we really missing when we feel nostalgic for older websites like Myspace, personal home pages, BlackPlanet, AsianAvenue, and blogs? If nostalgia is the longing for a home that cannot be returned to, the internet was for many years marketed as a virtual home. That is, it consisted of spaces for home pages rather than profiles, and fostered settling in or homesteading rather than swiping through.[4]

"Home" is clearly a complex and moving target. At the same time, digital spaces were designed to create a virtual and transportable home. We feel nostalgic for the ways in which many of the aforementioned platforms provided refuges outside of dominant racial and cultural frameworks, and how what made them distinct also marked a particularly fleeting moment in digital memory. AsianAvenue—an Asian American social networking service introduced in 1997—predated (and contributed ideas and code to) Myspace and was more comfortable and homier for Asian users. Similarly, Black women's blogs offered alternatives to spaces like GeoCities that remediated physical neighborhoods. These Black and Asian enclaves create safe harbor homeplaces amid exclusionary, putatively white digital spaces. If nostalgia is the longing for home, digital nostalgia is the perpetually unsatisfied desire for both the digital places we had and those we couldn't have, particularly for those of us who have always been on the periphery of the virtual map.

On the one hand, nostalgia can be a way to ignore and gloss over dissatisfaction with our present reality and to revise our past to allow

those in power to escape responsibility. At the same time, analyzing digital nostalgia for pre-Web 2.0 digital spaces provides a way to consider what has been lost in the development of new social media and digital technology and how we might imagine a different future. When digital nostalgia is experienced from the point of view of people of color, women of color, and disabled people, we are able to reassess how we look at our recent digital past and reconsider how the notion of the home itself constituted that digital culture. Who misses which digital spaces and why depends greatly on lived experience and positionality. Whereas McNeil describes nostalgia for the dawn of Web 2.0, pre-mobile media and pre-app, as a longing for "freedom and drama," we may remember this moment instead as one that more directly interpolated users and incorporated them into communities—to create digital homes, to be good hosts and guests, and to build spaces for others to visit and feel welcome.

Anxiety and resentment about the governing logics of algorithms that tell us what to read, what we might want to watch, and what is "news" may have made us nostalgic for sites that didn't have feeds but rather profiles that had to be purposely visited. At the same time, users of those earlier sites were definitely unsafe, and the technology didn't work well. Myspace crashed often, and the customizable pages that taught so many people how to use CSS and HTML loaded agonizingly slowly—and like early 2000s fashions, we loved/hated them. Regulations that aim to protect folks from online harms, theft, and harassment were virtually nonexistent. This nostalgia for the digital literacy that Gen Z doesn't need/get to have in the age of apps can leverage that sentiment toward transformation. Has the transition from home pages and websites to apps and widgets left us with a tenuous but nascent reconceptualization of what a digital home can be? What, then, can be our origin point? Why did we first create home places online, and what might the loss of homes online mean for our digital futures?

We recognize that not everyone's home is a safe space, a site they want to replicate, or one to which they may want to return. Home can be a person's first encounter with abuse. It can be where a queer child experiences profound rejection, or a disabled person's care is withheld. Many of us grew up in circumstances where those visions of unsecured

Americana were not only unattainable but not even considered a realistic possibility. For many living in these circumstances, the threat of violence or theft was ubiquitous.

At the same time, homes also served as a site for organizing the women's and Civil Rights movements. Organizers for racial justice, such as Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr., had their rights violated, were surveilled, and some were even killed in their homes. Those of us who reckon with this history have to hold multiple truths about what home has the capacity to do and how safety and fear can be bound up together in one space. When folks experience home as a site of trauma and abuse, does it make sense to be nostalgic, or do we then try to build "home" in a drastically different way?

This chapter expands on this concept, showing how personal pages, blogs, and sites like BlackPlanet, Myspace, and AsianAvenue could feel like home and, indeed, served as a welcoming and accepting alternate home for many. Yet even so, the assumptions of care, protection, and safety commonly ascribed to the home were not universal. While many may have carried the assumption of freedom from surveillance in their home, others have always navigated this reality, both online and offline. While your home may not be wiretapped in the same way the homes of civil rights organizers were in the '60s, your data are most certainly mined. What was once a problem for the most vulnerable among us has now become a reality that we all must face in our digital lives. Just because some Black, Asian, queer, disabled, and autistic folks may not have experienced "home" in positive ways doesn't mean that they can't feel nostalgia for the *idea* of it, just as people who never used Myspace can still feel a longing for what they think it felt like to use the site and create a personal page. As V. Jo Hsu suggests, home might be understood as a kind of "communal and reflexive making," where nostalgia for (and reimaginings of) home can become a political or communal act of reclamation.[5] In their engagement with queer and trans Asian American and Pacific Islander (QTAPI) archives, Hsu reframes home as both storytelling and networked in character. They describe home as the "difficult, collaborative, at times contradictory practice of replacement, reimagining, and relating across distance and difference."[6] The following sections work through what our digital home spaces have

provided to us and, then, why we might feel nostalgia for their offerings now, and how we continue to reimagine our digital longing for home to address our unsatisfactory present.

MISSING WHAT WE ONCE NEVER HAD

The idyllic view of American life on television at the midpoint of the twentieth century showcased small towns or suburbs where kids rode their bikes and played in the street without fear or concern. There were lemonade stands, kids ran in and out of unlocked front doors, and postal workers left packages on the front porch.[7] This romanticized view of the home that so many of us have never experienced provides a metaphor for digital nostalgia as well. It allows us to question whether the image of a previous era exists in our lived reality or in a mediated version of reality that supplants our experiences. Longing for home on- or offline requires us to come to terms with the realities of our differentiated experiences of home and whether we long for something we ever actually had. Social networking sites had far less regulation and oversight in their early days than now, yet for many users, they also produced much less fear of engagement than users might experience today. The affordances of sites like BlackPlanet promised a networked experience with other users of the same cultural and racial background outside the purview of the dominant group. Because these sites were not considered political organizing platforms and instead replicated the familiarity and mundanity of the home, the church, or the bar (deeply segregated spaces in American culture), they largely escaped the harms brought by interlopers seeking disruption. Just as is the case in the long history of Black organizing, outsiders often overlooked these spaces. This largely benefited communities like Black folks, queer folks, and others who developed homes and neighborhoods online.

Digital homes could provide a sense of security and privacy for users. Like the vision of small-town U.S.A. broadcast on the television screens of a certain generation of early internet users, which appears self-referentially in the 1998 film *Pleasantville*, earlier web platforms and social media spaces allowed users to, in effect, "leave their doors unlocked," all the while feeling "safe." There was far less regulation of

internet content, making dangerous and explicit information and sites widely available to all users. Our personal home pages could put us in contact with anyone; we were not yet afraid of everyone—because, honestly, who was looking for us?

The neighborhoods of MiGente, BlackPlanet, and AsianAvenue were produced by the enclaved nature[8] of discourse housed within the dialogic communities of the sites. The multimedia architectural choices of the home pages also manage them. But perhaps a more direct representation of home building online appears in the work of the life/social simulation found in online gaming sites like *Second Life* and its much less social precursor, *SimCity*. *Second Life* was released widely by the Linden Lab in 2003. It invited users to build 3-D navigable homes and personal spaces, many left unlocked by default for guests to explore.

Second Life emerged alongside other popular simulation games like *The Sims* and the *Tycoon* series. While some of these games focused directly on accomplishing tasks (building a hospital or becoming a successful real estate tycoon), *Second Life*, like *The Sims*, provided users the opportunity not only to build a house but also to create a home. The promise of these games was to dream and imagine shareable homes that could be experienced and enjoyed by others. In this way, they evoked the same desires as the home pages of early social media, which served visitors as an introduction to the page creator's ideas and person. Unlike *The Sims*, which is largely played offline and therefore provides control to the users of their own online and digital homes and worlds, *Second Life* demonstrated that satisfying one's desire to share one's home with others comes with risks and consequences as well.

In our digital present, Meta capitalizes upon a public that misses a sense of control in creating online homes.[9] Yet, the metaverse reimagines what home and our desire mean for how we engage technology. In the metaverse, we can bring others into our homes and turn our homes into places we need not leave to experience work, play, travel, shopping, and the like. Meta's headsets provide us with an immersive experience and a virtual escape, with the illusion of control even as our bodies remain tied to physical home spaces. *Second Life* was an interesting and enjoyable nostalgic imagining of a private home as an alternative to a newly securitized, paranoid United States, whereas Web3's metaverse

evokes fear of surveillance and control. *Second Life* homes were places of our own making—at least in a nostalgic rendering that ignores that the residents of the virtual world were yet plagued by what Tom Boellstorff calls "creationist capitalism."[10]

Scholars have laid out the problem of the dichotomous delineation of the public and private spheres in the digital age.[11] And, as we note elsewhere, not all bodies have a right to privacy on the internet or elsewhere. For instance, many disabled people rely on care workers who come into and out of homes daily and, out of necessity, have unrestricted access to clients.[12] For care workers, this transforms the private home into a workspace, often surveilled by the state through technology like EVV (Electronic Visit Verification). And this extends beyond disability; many people work from home for one reason or another—the notion that home is inviolably private was never true.

Still, the key tension remains that we long for home and increasingly seek more privacy in an online world that pushes us further away from our ideals of both home and privacy. To sort through the contours of this tension, we must reflect upon the messy complexities of home as a mechanism to consider both what we believed we had and what was never there. As we make the move from browsers to apps for navigating the web, do these evocations of the digital home remain compelling, and if so, what are the implications for users who never experienced them? Returning to the slice of Americana that began this chapter, we must question what purpose this, or any other nostalgic image of home, did or does for us. Only then can we understand why a digital home has and may become a welcoming space for us to live full and complete lives.

HOSTING: PERSONAL PAGES AS HOME SPACES

GeoCities became the fifth most popular website on the internet in 1997 by offering users "free" hosting, or real estate, for personal pages. It offered users a free "homestead" in one of six neighborhoods modeled after U.S. metropolitan areas—precisely those where real-world real estate has since become unreasonably expensive. Owning property in a virtual place was considered uniquely valuable because you could con-

trol it.[13] GeoCities and other sites that required customization addressed internet users' need to style sites that offered hospitable experiences for friends and strangers.

The idea of the personal website as a home became solidified in the first two decades of the 2000s and has been a driver for digital nostalgia ever since. Early social media sites like Friendster and Myspace, because they were spaces that could be owned, created, and curated by users, are missed even by (and perhaps especially by) those who never had or even wanted to have them. The feeling of loss or nostalgia for Myspace started to peak in 2020 after widespread disenchantment with and critique (or refusal) of Facebook. The idea of a less-regulated, scrappier internet appeals to us because it was ugly and because it was ours. Myspace *felt* homier precisely because of its flaws and realness. (As Kendrick Lamar wrote in his 2017 song "Humble," in the aftermath of the post-algorithmic, social media–fueled Trump presidency: "I'm so fucking sick and tired of the Photoshop . . . give me something natural like ass with some stretch marks.")

As danah boyd wrote in the 2010s, what we now call authenticity was then called "ghetto," and it was always racialized.[14] The very things that we miss about the early internet—its programmability, aesthetic diversity, and its celebration of "alt" culture—are inseparable from its ratchet non-respectability, its adoption by people of color, its "raw sexuality," and its identification with the white emo "alternative" working class. Yesterday's ratchet is felt as today's nostalgia. Yet, Myspace users weren't creating content branded as authentic. Rather, they were doing online what many who also worked in the service industry were doing offline: chatting while waiting tables, serving drinks, cleaning, hosting, and making space for other people to visit. The early 2000s encouraged us to build our own virtual homes, where clicking and typing produced a sense of hospitality and care in what was then a new and unfamiliar digital space. It was a place where *our* people were welcome.

The careful curation of a "top friends" list on Myspace made this virtual home—and who was invited to it—all the more explicit. The ever-changing roster of who was on your top friends list was theater, a public declaration of who your people were in a way that is no longer possible with the more

discreet declarations of friendship on Instagram close friends or Twitter circles, where you only know you made the cut from within. Along with your choice of music, you declared your style in an ephemeral way, changing with your mood and offline allegiances. My Myspace top friends, circa 2008, was a shifting picture of my crushes—which was a mistake because one noticed and publicly declaimed me on another friend's Myspace page, leading to his immediate removal from my top friends list and my allegiances, shifting as regularly as they do when you are thirteen.

—Rianna Walcott

Nostalgia for websites like Myspace and BlackPlanet (and others like AsianAvenue, MiGente, or AutismHub) signals a desire for the more autonomous feelings and personally hosted user pages that were run by users with idiosyncratic, racialized, cripped, and gendered geolocated identities. For many of these folks, the understanding of how to engage in digital praxis (building a website; sorting, storing, retrieving, and sharing files; embedding media and HTML and CSS coding), came through the experience of having an online home (page). Myspace gave Millennials great motivation to learn how to script and code pink dragons, Linkin Park clips, and gothic templates to decorate their pages and create a vibe. The early 2000s provided users with a home space in the form of home pages wherein they could learn how to navigate and build using digital tools.

Whether or not you visited these pages, signed their guestbooks, or were warned by "under construction" signs that parts of the site might not work or exist yet, the sense memory of hosting and being hosted is part of the collective digital unconscious, a driver for a nostalgia that is also a form of mourning for the lost capacity to play the host. If you're not invited, not welcome, but rather treated as a resource for data extraction, a "user" instead of a "guest," you occupy the position of the parasite.[15] Nostalgia for being "poor but happy" feels keener when we are comparatively digitally rich but *feel* poorer, knowing too much about what we missed and can never again have. These online homes were also laced with an American dreaming work ethic. You only needed to put in the work to create a "spot" that folks wanted to visit and where they could hang out with you.

When confronted with the nuances of "hosting," I cannot help but think of online communities of the early '90s like Gay.com and PlanetOut—and the social and sexual bonds formed between Queer people online. The refrain here is, "Can you host?" A complicated phrase that remains on modern dating apps like Grindr and Scruff. Understood, literally, it is, are you available to have sex in your home—now or at some point in the future? If we understand hosting as an invitation toward intimacy, it shifts the register of what it means to be a good "host" and guest. This, too, is a media form made possible by the earl(ier) internet that evokes nostalgia for many.

— David Adelman

There's an imagined memory of a digital home, much like the implanted or artificial memories of replicants in science fiction films, that comes out as feeling cheated of an experience that can no longer be had today, like the single-family houses and apartments that are no longer affordable even for the professional or middle class, never mind the working class. These websites evoke nostalgia about a moment when the most entrepreneurial could independently develop their digital real estate to far outstrip their non-digital lives. A dominant desire was to host your people. This hosting imperative has lost its place, or at least the nature of hosting has changed significantly. For example, TikTok doesn't use the metaphor of hospitality[16] or home page but rather of virality—after all, TikTok accounts want you to pay attention to advertising in order to support creators and the platform. Viral content, like a virus itself, requires a host. But the shift on the part of TikTok away from the metaphor of hosting is notable. Content appears algorithmically on your "for you" page, not because a user puts together an appealing space designed for repeat visits and coded with its own soundtrack, graphical templates, or guestbook, but because the home was supplanted by monetizing your digital engagements.

Nevertheless, the desire to host is so strong, despite TikTok not really wanting us to, that it overcomes our separation from the possibilities offered twenty years ago. The carceral state is in alliance with TikTok because it also prohibits participation from people who were never meant to entertain guests. In 2020, incarcerated person Jeron Combs started a viral TikTok account that documented his cooking

skills using commissary ingredients, an improvised cooktop made of a hot pot element and his own steel bed, and a contraband cell phone. Combs's TikTok videos were all deleted within a year of having been posted. We weren't told why, but we can imagine it had something to do with possession of a cell phone being punishable by up to four months in solitary confinement for prisoners caught with one. This exercise of infrastructural fugitivity, tagged with the #PrisonTok hashtag, invited viewers to enter Combs's personal space despite his not having a "real" home—or a real home page he could control.[17]

Combs's use of TikTok to virtually "host" visitors, broadcasted how he resourcefully cooked appetizing food in his cell, and his ability to create content and protect his own TikTok account marked a triumph of the drive to hospitality that is the engine for digital nostalgia. Combs's work shows us that even without claims to digital property, people will find ways to host. Just as improvised housing, informal dwellings, and encampments are busted up, and cells are randomly tossed and destroyed by police and prison guards who do not view them as "real" homes, prisoners' TikTok accounts are confiscated by the carceral systems that deny hominess by systematically separating people from their homes. Their loss is part of the uncanniness that fuels nostalgia, and their creation is an attempt to make that creepy, wobbly feeling more cozy.

Understanding digital nostalgia also forces us to contend with what it means to long for things that may now be unsavory. For example, can we be nostalgic for the controversial Vietnamese American Myspace pioneer Tila Tequila, one of the most important digital media producers of the first years of the 2000s? Tila Tequila was among the earliest people to take advantage of the "creator economy," a global industry currently valued at $250 billion and projected to grow to $480 billion by 2027.[18] In other words, she was among the first digital influencers and therefore occupies an important place in technology history. And her success had much to do with her ability to attract and keep viewers by sharing the minutiae of her everyday life: she posted to her page several times a day. If today this seems like a given for anyone who wants to attain success as an influencer, it has much to do with her having perfected this recipe decades ago. In 2006, Tila Tequila was the most

popular person on Myspace, the most popular site in the world, because she put enormous amounts of manual labor into hosting "friends" (who were not yet known as "followers"). When she was on Friendster, her account was regularly banned for nudity and obscenity, and every time it was, she and her assistant had to add friends again, one at a time, by hand. They did this thousands, maybe millions of times until Myspace CEO Tom Anderson recruited her to leave Friendster for the then-new company Myspace by promising he wouldn't delete her followers, making her guests feel unwelcome.

Tila Tequila's pioneering work as one of the first digital influencers makes her an important figure in the history of the internet. Yet, her turn to white supremacy after her attempted suicide and worsening mental illness has made her a pariah, a person that many have decided to stop caring about and stop caring for. Here it is worth remembering that as the most popular person on Myspace, *and* as a refugee queer woman of color, Tequila was subject to incredible amounts of abuse on the site. Myspace's lenient moderation policies meant that she or her assistant had to read and then take down abusive comments—of which there were many—themselves. At the same time, she had to maintain a bubbly, positive attitude. She may have been the first person to experience online harassment and abuse *at scale*, in a historical moment when digital celebrity and its dangers were uncharted territory. Nonetheless, she was popular because she was the most skillful host, responding to almost everyone who commented on her page, just as a party hostess will talk at least once to everyone who sits at her table. She popularized slut feminism, prototyped paid adult content like OnlyFans with Tila's Hot Spot, a paid membership site for nude(ish) pictures and videos that launched twenty years ago, and was the first broadly successful digital creator—and she did it while being a queer woman of color with an interracial reality dating show who was born in a Singaporean refugee camp and taught herself how to code Myspace pages. We may not be nostalgic for *her*, then, but we are nostalgic for the Tila Tequila moment.

Our current digital moment does not have the same coalescing points as past moments. The recent COVID pandemic changed society's relationship with the world and the digital. Perhaps COVID highlighted the desire and need for nostalgia for earlier digital home(pages).

This could have happened partly because some sequestered humans struggled to maintain the social literacy and skill required to be a good host and share any space, short of having people over to their houses. At the same time, the start of the pandemic was a moment where multiple sites attempted to fill this physical distance with virtual closeness (before that petered out when everyone got fed up with Zoom quizzes). Apps like Houseparty and Teleparty, which allow users to watch videos remotely alongside friends and family, lent new meaning to the digital homeplace when we were physically separated by a force beyond our control. This reality begs the question: are we no longer broadly interested in hosting, did we just forget how, or is the real source of digital nostalgia a feeling that cannot yet speak its own name or know its origin?

HOMES HAVE CLOSETS

If nostalgia can be understood as an emotional longing for a "home"—whether it be a place, a time, or a thing—then this orientation can be productively troubled by turning to queer and diasporic frameworks. For queer/crip and queer of color folks, the idea of home is not always associated with feelings of comfort, safety, or even identification, as it can often reinscribe and reproduce normative heterosexual structures of family and nation as well as biopolitical regimes of surveillance. Return itself might also be a return to trauma, to violence, and/or something altogether unsettling. Thus, in thinking about home as a concept of the digital, it can be valuable to reorient the discussion toward experiences of queer and diasporic nostalgia, to understand, as V. Jo Hsu notes, "home as more than location."[19] Unfortunately, in many cases, the platforms or digital artifacts of the past are not necessarily places and things one long for—or is able—to return to.

For example, queer folks, especially those of color, know that online spaces can be incredibly toxic, spaces in which participation means that trauma constantly has to be negotiated and reconciled. To be a digital body and presence is to live with trauma that can arrive and erupt at any unexpected moment. Gamers know this especially well, as systems such as XBOX Live and MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-

playing games) such as World of Warcraft promote voice-based and text-based forms of connection, player-to-player world-building, and other communicative forms of belonging that sustain the immersive experience of virtual worlds. In these instances, community moderation can only do so much and, in some instances, is weaponized against the players whom it was supposedly created to protect. But as game scholar Kishonna Gray and others have argued, markers of embodied difference are never fully unshed in virtual space.[20] To be a queer gamer, then, is to tread carefully in the virtual waters. These lessons from the belly of the beast, from the intense trauma of multiplayer online play, continue to be a palpable force within all eras of online play.

Game scholars such as Bo Ruberg have articulated queer histories of gaming outside of AAA video games and trauma-based frameworks, reminding players that queer games exist in plenty outside the AAA model.[21] These spaces signal a convergence with what queer studies scholars call chosen families and the creation of homes that prioritize kinship outside of biological bonds. Yet, there is still something undeniable about digital gaming's association with trauma and toxicity (manifesting as sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, etc.). Like the global servers that host various regions of online play but are still porous and able to connect players from East Asia to North America, the toxicity born out of multiplayer gaming spaces can spread into other corners of the internet like a contagious virus. The result is far from the affirming homes that digital life can also support.

In her thinking on queer diasporas, Gayatri Gopinath uses queerness to talk about a particular orientation to "home" that cannot easily be assimilated into heterosexual formations of family, home, nation, and empire.[22] Her critiques came at an important time, when the politics of visibility and representation saturated queer politics, and the collective desire for queer rights was limited by what José Esteban Muñoz calls the "prison house [of] the here and now," resulting in bids for queer rights such as marriage and military enlistment.[23] The close union between queerness and nationalism begged new ways of relating to a "home" that might not necessarily even be recognizable as a "place," but something much more ephemeral or bodily. While Gopi-

nath was not writing about internet cultures, her book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), turns to desire itself as that ephemerality that escapes legibility and visibility within nationalist ideologies. Yet, thinking of the queer diasporic critique emerging out of the early 2000s era can enable us also to think of these minor ephemeral forms of desire and acts that fuel nostalgia outside of an identifiably visible and representative platform or site. What is it about these feelings and the desires in those moments? What is it about these non-legible, minor eruptions of queer digital nostalgia that cannot be assimilated into a normative, developmental, or linear story of the internet? What do they attune to?

Home might also mean returning to a feeling in which one is still in the closet, which can be traumatic for some but comforting for others. Against progress, narratives of "coming out" that have been the horizon of queer liberalism,[24] a queer diasporic approach elaborates on what is joyful about this state of recalling a queer relationality with the world before identifying—or worse, being exposed—as queer within socially legible markers of (white) queerness. Queer kids were on the internet even before they necessarily self-identified as queer; queer diasporic nostalgia on the internet is, in part, a search for making the internet queer before the liberatory burden of queer rights within Euro-American social and political landscapes. If "surfing" the net recalls the volitional movement of navigating through various content and offerings of the internet, then a queer diasporic approach finds resonance with the non-volitionality of "treading" the waters of the net, a type of staying put. Treading is not revolutionary, nor is it defeatist; it is about keeping your head above water while staying afloat.

Research on the queer internet often offers Tumblr as a quintessentially queer platform, where rich conversations and design provided a life-saving "safe" space for LBGTQ users to find each other.[25] Tumblr has also played a large role in the mainstreaming of queerness and queer identity that eventually spread it to other parts of the web. Yet, the perspective of identifying queer platforms still operates under the frame of visibility, representation, and recognition that ultimately privileges a white queer subject, even if queers of color might still benefit in uneven ways. If queerness is untethered from the visibly queer digital spaces, what queerness might one be nostalgic for?

I remember sharing a home computer as a closeted queer child in an Asian immigrant household, sharing a singular home page and home screen. With slow download speeds on [an] AOL dial-up connection (I'm very nostalgic for the AOL static!), accessing gay content on the internet, whether that be in the form of gay FAQ forums, porn, or online communities, was always a discreet act that was timed strategically against the rhythm of my parents' schedules and ever-present watchful eye. Data surveillance was the eye from the hallway glancing into the room external to the computer. Before Google watched me, my Asian mother watched me. The home's physical environment, including the computer's orientation to the door, played a role in when it was safe and comfortable to be online, to being gay and Asian online. Being online while closeted does not recall any memory of a welcome stay in a clearly visible queer platform (I was not a regular participant in any online LGBTQ community unless you consider Neopets a gay space!). Instead, what I remember are the stolen moments of not only being online but being gay online.

There was a ritual to this experience on the internet and any digital trail that led back to any gay site (whether "innocent" or not) needed to be systematically erased to make the home page and home screen straight again. Search histories were purged on a constant basis. I taught myself how malware works since many of these rickety queer sites also infected the shared home computer with gay pop-ups that would appear on the home screen when I was not even on the computer! While this curation of online activity is not unique to queer people, I feel like there was a queer pleasure in this deviant relationship to being online, of the makeshift relationship of figuring out when to be on and offline. It was cruising the net from home, even when one did not have the framework or words to name it as such. This is especially noticeable considering how social media pages today can be highly visibly queer in their relentless targeting and distributing of queer content. This is not a story about the trauma of the closet (a story that resolves in coming out) nor a story about controlling parents, but an example of a non-visible and closet perspective to being queer online that does not begin with an identifiable queer platform. The story lingers in a queer act of being online in the first instance to carve out a time and space in the normative rhythms of being a "good immigrant son."

—Huan He

HOME (PAGE) TRAINING

Doesn't that kid have any home training? It's a question you might be asked as a Black parent whose child has engaged in behavior an older relative finds unacceptable or, conversely, has shown that he or she doesn't have the requisite social skills to participate in a given familial or cultural context. A lack of home training could be shown by anything from not providing a proper greeting when entering a house or room to forgetting to wear a slip under your dress when going to church. The training was not *for* the home, it happened *within* the home. A lack of home training suggested a problem with the home environment. Kids weren't ready for the world unless they had home training. Sadly, the complex interlocking practice of Black love and respectability, connoted by the phrase "home training," has been transmogrified by a movement aimed at delimiting conversations about racial and ethnic diversity in school. This movement, defined by its demands that kids should learn about race, sex, gender, disability, and any form of difference at home, reinforces the contention that home may not be safe for all. It may not be a place of freedom and expression. And it may be a place where hateful behaviors are sown, fertilized, and allowed to grow wildly. It is also such places that make the concept of home, particularly a digital home, challenging, dangerous, and a necessary site in which to consider the power of transformative engagements.

Part of our longing for the homes of our previous selves, those who came of age and received very specific training, emerges from frustration that this specific training is no longer as useful. If our grandparents and parents long for a time when kids had better "home training," perhaps those of us who came of age in the early 2000s long for a time when our home (page) training provided us material and social benefits that no longer exist. There's an increasingly black-box feel to interfaces when users no longer need to learn how to code or design them themselves.[26] The home (page) training for using a site like BlackPlanet was derived from a community of users not bound to the norms of white middle-class understandings of online civility. But a more modern iteration of social media moderation has moved us ever closer to heterosexual, white, masculinist norms. As many of the authors of these chapters

have previously written,[27] things that should be moderated (misogynoir, subtle harassment) can be ignored, while what gets moderated is the intra-cultural discourse that feels the most like home.[28] If the average user today is not a guest or host in the home but a creator of content inside an algorithmically driven scroll, we no longer have "home training" and instead are unwillingly acculturated to a platform logic to which we may not ascribe.

Digital nostalgia for the early Black blogosphere is a longing for what we learned when we felt at home. Rhetorically, it matters that we were building our home pages rather than training as coders or programmers whose skill set was meant to be developed for monetary gain or employment. Because this was home training, users and creators were allowed to create a blog that was not easily findable by trolls or "flamers." There was a sense of control over what skills we needed and how to apply them. Building the blog was as much about aesthetic choices and architecture as about the content. Blogs were built as much as they were written. This difference is critically important. The power to build something in a seemingly wild digital landscape was powerfully transformative.

Bloggers may not have thought of themselves as programmers or coders at the time, but many are now nostalgic for the skills they learned while creating posts. They were building sites that served as home pages for their writing, thought work, artistic expression, and community dialogues. Yet the training they received in this process provided them with both a skill set and an approach to digital life that centralized the home. Just as Myspace has been described as mirroring a bedroom wall, dorm room, or locker to build as you saw fit, the early blogosphere was a safe haven and enclaved site of creativity for so many. Teenagers or young adults with little agency over their physical home space could exercise agency in their virtual rooms, and as discussed in Chapter 3, bedroom TikTokers decades later are still using their personal spaces to nostalgic ends. These early blogs were a space to return to for comfort and safety, where you had as much control as your skill set allowed. Creating a space that feels like home online may seem a daunting feat in our current social media landscape. Apart from the complexities of what an online home space would look like, our creative ability and

agency have changed greatly from the blogging era to the social media era. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram allow us the ability to create a profile page, but no one *needs* to visit it to see your stuff. Once again, you no longer need to be a good host or hostess, you only need to be an efficient poster. The affordances of this space are greatly limited, which is another way of saying—it's not a home we miss. But as a new generation shapes a new set of digital experiences, they may be nostalgic even for this hostless home.

PAYING VISITS AND WANDERING IN DIGITAL SPACE

Do you remember websites that had guest books? If you cared enough to sign one or cared enough to create one on your own home page, you were offering and receiving a kind of care that we no longer have but want without even remembering it. Our own maps of where we have visited are denied to us: whereas web browsers kept a list of bookmarks to map where we had been as part of our histories, TikTok and other platforms we haven't yet had a chance to be nostalgic about have been hiding our histories in the "security settings" section of the TikTok app. Instead of landing pages, we have been given continuous scroll. Is it possible to feel at home in the scroll?

Home seems decidedly oppositional to the scroll. We sacrificed control for gentrification in the first years of the 2000s and have lately come to regret that choice in a visceral way. Jessa Lingel's 2020 study of digital nostalgia, *An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist*, documents the scrappy, purposely antique-feeling site that people have used to sell and buy everything from musical instruments to (at various times) sex and random encounters.[29] Craig Newmark's stubborn refusal to update or change the site in any way has made it feel stable and home-like in the same way that a lone unrenovated house in many neighborhoods across the country serves as a marker of triumph against an ever-changing and gentrifying neighborhood, even though you might not want to live in that particular house.

When Solange tweeted in 2018 that she wanted to release her album *When I Get Home* on BlackPlanet, new visitors who never made the site their home flocked to it. BlackPlanet was a site of Black interiority

not frequently visited by outsiders. The artist suggested she wanted the site to hold the album's visuals to demonstrate that Black culture "is not simply an aesthetic but is something we really live."[30] Situating that content on BlackPlanet harkens back to a different time. However, the interiority of BlackPlanet feels nostalgically out of place in our current social media landscape, which seeks publicity as a means of financial viability. Reaching back toward BlackPlanet is also like seeing the lone unrenovated house in an increasingly gentrified neighborhood. It is desirable for what it once was and the possibilities it held, but it is also a startling marker of what has permanently changed. On each side of that old home, we have rows of identical townhomes and condos that don't look or feel like homes but can ably perform the functions of a home, while also being largely unattainable for most people and standing as a glaring reminder of the extractive power of capital.

It is important to remember that hosting is not a unidirectional experience. The digital dialogic relationship between being a welcoming host and a respectful visitor has always been interesting and delicately balanced. Therefore, if making an online home and hosting in it has changed within digital landscapes, visiting and visitation will substantively change as well. Unlike scrolling, perusing, or wandering, visitation implies a certain specific and dedicated intentionality. Many non-digital communities have visitation traditions. For instance, a key component of the Black church is the visitation ministry. This important form of religious, cultural, and community outreach (also known as the sick and shut-in ministry at other places of worship) is tasked with more than simply "visiting" those who do not have access to a house of worship. Members of these church organizations commit to checking in and checking on their fellow church members. Embedded within histories and traditions of religious and community service, members commit to staying engaged at all times with how and what everyone is doing, what they need, and how resources can be connected to those spaces. It is a material way to extend the arms of the church and embrace those who, for whatever reason, cannot make it to their chosen sanctuary and worship with their home congregation. This version of visiting is a decidedly different experience than what digital visiting has evolved into. This visiting is not about the idea of extraction (as in visit-

ing a webpage to gain information or engage with the material present). Instead, it is a mutual and reciprocal exchange that is not only helpful and informative but nourishes the soul. Again, these engagements are intentionally situated within service, appreciation, and love. These types of hosting and visitation exchanges can be a conceptual foundation from which to produce supportive and welcoming digital homes.

Currently, this mutuality is significantly different from the way most users visit dominant digital sites like YouTube or TikTok. It is the conceptual shift underlying what hosting and visiting actually are now that can cause cognitive dissonances with digital experiences. When we purposely call an app like Twitter or Facebook a "site" or a "hell site," we're hearkening back to the pre-Web 2.0 period that no longer exists. That familiar but past moment when websites were "places" we actually visited on the web and saved within our browser bookmarks clouds our understanding of how the app infrastructure currently works. Though we still hope apps will allow us to have a home (page), they are not structured to reflect a past hominess. Sadly, apps don't provide the feeling of hospitality, hosting, customization, and visiting that earlier websites offered to us before mobile digital media came along. As we use these media, we criticize and call them out for this limitation and for abandoning their responsibilities to the architecture of "sites." The draw of having a digital home to visit is strong, even though most people never got to use these sites before they were transcoded into apps. The rhetorical necessity of calling mobile apps "sites" underscores their alien and un-homely or *unheimlich* feeling.

CONCLUSION: YOU CAN NEVER GO HOME AGAIN, BUT WHAT KIND OF HOME CAN YOU MAKE TODAY AS NEITHER A RENTER NOR AN OWNER BUT A GUEST?

We can make the case that Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram supplanted the home(page)s of the early 2000s. While none of these platforms was built around the concept of home, they brought into their affordances the features of the blogs and networking sites that preceded them. As another shift is happening in our online sociality toward the multimedia content creation of platforms like TikTok, where does Blackness or

Queerness find home online now? Have we given up on home as a central organizing principle of our digital lives? Where can safety, comfort, and security be found for users for whom platforms have never cared? Analyzing the pre-Web 2.0 period allows us to understand why we long for sites that were quite frankly janky, a pain in the ass to use and make, and can't be seen today except as static page snapshots on archive.org. These platforms were never designed for *everyone*, but we turned them into homes for Black folks, queer/autistic people, Asian users, and others who don't fit the dominant paradigm.

As we sit amid yet another housing crisis in the United States, governmental entities seek new policies to criminalize homelessness. Some of the unhoused living in temporary encampments must find ways to constantly make and remake homes as their tents and property are moved or destroyed. Longing for a digital home is not comparable to the violence experienced daily by the unhoused. Still, we should ask what our hard-won experiences of digital loss can inform about what kinds of digital spaces we long for now. How can we identify and locate these spaces? Perhaps it is time to accept the aims of digital usage outside the framework of the home.

Our bodies grieve the loss of digital home(li)ness. We both grieve and long for what once was while also always already imagining futures differently. Though the early 2000s read as a *homely* period visually—Myspace pages are often disastrously ugly and were considered ugly even then—these pages are objects of digital nostalgia because they were some of our earliest digital homes. They felt like ours, at any rate, even if they have all been deleted now, and we consumed them largely without ads or surveillance, at least none that we felt. If we can't have digital homes, what can we have? Nostalgia is an itch that cannot scratch itself, and we can't stop wanting the things we never had. But the energy born of loss and digital longing can animate what we can build in the future and how we respond to the present.