Five

BLACKNESS AND AI

• • • The euphoria and skepticism about AI that is found in the field of digital studies should not come as a surprise. The dream of a day when artificial intelligence transforms society is decades, if not centuries, old. Moreover, this imagined technologized utopia is often racialized in ways both obvious and subtle.[1] This excitement burst into full view when OpenAI quietly released ChatGPT-3.5 to the general public in late November 2022. This conversational context-generating chatbot can create code, draft essays, write poetry, and produce content for a host of text-driven tasks. This and similar tools fulfill many technophilic desires, but they also raise a panoply of troubling questions about the place of race, disability, and gender in a future configured by AI. On ChatGPT's splash page, OpenAI attempts to quell hovering concerns by asserting that ChatGPT's learning enables it to "answer follow up questions, admit its mistakes, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests."[2] However, we are long past the point where we consider AI/algorithmic processes to be neutral. Technologies never have and never will be value-neutral. Extending a tradition of technological critique by underrepresented, underserved, and marginalized communities to AI, the authors of the this chapter want to think through what an alternative AI future looks like, and how to theorize

and actualize this future. For us, a first step is to reinforce and bear witness to how AIs and algorithms are instantiations of whiteness and modernity. These two mythic structures undergird advanced computational technologies such as machine learning, Large Language Models (LLMs), algorithmic processes, and Artificial General Intelligence (the goal of OpenAI and other companies competing to build the first "true" artificial intelligence). The outcomes of these structuring beliefs have been well documented by Safiya Umoja Noble, Ruha Benjamin, and others: algorithmic processes that are discriminatory toward minoritized groups, and particularly toward Black folk.[3]

While this chapter explores the possibilities about what artificial intelligence created for and by Black people might look and feel like, it will also propose a disruption to the discursive formation of Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism by positing *Afro-skepticism* as a theory of Black technology. *Afro-skepticism*, as we are defining it for this volume, acknowledges the brutality of totalizing systems while at the same time recognizing existing capacities for joy, hope, play, and freedom. Afro-skepticism is the tension between Black technology receptivity and technology refusal. This theoretical approach provides a space for measured hesitance that allows for paced vetting of emergent technologies, such as AI and other computational technologies to come, as well as a clear-eyed acknowledgment of past inventions' exploitative impact on Black life and the anxiety this causes.

In this chapter, we deploy Afro-skepticism as a critical lens to frame strategic digital refusal as a space of possibility for disabled, Black, and Asian people because these are the subject positions that we, as writers, speak from. One radical proposition: if Afro-skepticism allows us to refuse orientations such as Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism, how might this critical position inform how we read technological objects and their possibilities? How is refusal a necessary position that skepticism needs in order to offer alternatives? The metaphor of Afro-skepticism is a sophisticated theoretical position that holds the possibility for either rejection or conditional acceptance of technologies that can scaffold Black joy. Joy can come from places in technoculture that overtly reject it and have been rejected by it: as described in Chapter 2, Asian American *refusal* of joy in our use of technology arises from our

historically justified skepticism about whether our claims to humanity will be honored, and the pleasures to be had in acts of disidentification and disavowal.

Afro-skepticism provides an opportunity to acknowledge the present critically while simultaneously imagining a transformative future, an emancipatory hope, or a utopian expectation of the collective capacity for dismantling race, class, and gender dominance.[4] We position this act of refusal as intentional, embedded within our lived experiences of the past and the emancipatory hope of our future. This kind of refusal assesses the current human condition but is not limited to what exists as given. It is futuristic thinking. Like Afro-pessimism, emancipatory hope resists the notion that freedom can necessarily be gained right now but remains hopeful about the collective capacity derived from joy, play, and community. From this perspective, Afro-skepticism is the emotive process of acknowledging the human condition of Blackness while also leaving open the possibility for Black folks to negotiate the everyday state apparatuses, institutions, and available technologies for Black life and Black freedom. And as we explain in the Coda to this book, technology refusal can also be a practice of care.

What would AI become if Blackness was its starting point? Afro-skepticism is premised upon this type of challenge. More radically, what could AI become if we follow in the footsteps of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's pioneering work on indigenous methodologies, asking, "What if Blackness was indigenous?"[5] What capacities for being would emerge? What conceptions of time, space, property, and relation could be referenced? How would we understand Black connections to kinship and the land to politically inform our institutions, our socialities, and most importantly for this chapter, the predictive and constitutive properties of algorithmic governance and artificial intelligence?

BLACKNESS AND INDIGENEITY

Interlinking Blackness and indigeneity may seem an unorthodox pairing to many. But what conceptual and theoretical opportunities are made possible by extending indigeneity, commonly understood as an identity connecting people to a specific place with knowledge of and

respect for original ways of knowing and being, to peoples of African descent? This step taps into reenergized political movements around the planet, specifically on the African continent, that have begun to reshape our understanding of who can claim and deploy indigeneity.[6] If we hope to conceptualize a new foundation of knowledge exchange and computational processing, we find it imperative to bring Blackness and indigeneity into close proximity. This linkage asserting, quite provocatively, that Blackness is indigenous to humanity posits that Euromodernity's conception of humanity is not the origin of the world but of *a world*. This position asserts for Blackness the potency of a persevering, seemingly eternal wisdom of stillness, one that existed before this modern moment and will assuredly stand if this moment falls. Black indigeneity implies a collective relationship to the world and each other, to the very ground and sky, of reckless giving and melancholic taking. For information technologies, Black indigeneity offers a reassessment of human lives, moving away from extractive impulses that reduce certain humans to data and, in lieu of this, beginning with a participatory, considerate approach to new modes of mediated being.

There are also compelling arguments for championing the interconnections between Blackness, technological design, and artistic practice, positioning Blackness as indigenous to everything. Furthermore, we contend that involuntary and emigrant contact with the West suggests that Blackness is not a pure essence. Rather, Blackness is hybrid, achieved through intermixture with other minoritized populations and with whiteness itself.

Black cultural queerness colors everything I do. In general, I fit nowhere. As such, I wind up trying to make space for my own understanding of blackness and self everywhere.

—Stephanie Dinkins

Historian Kyle Mays notes, "Black Indigeneity is how Black folks construct their belonging—this belonging has at least two components: composing belonging to place and finding freedom."[7] Black indigeneity is emphatically located and dramatically embodied. This being so, the fact of diaspora as a severing agent articulates not defeat but possibility, one where home and community happen with arms outstretched and

hearts open to distant, imagined pasts and assumed impossible futures.

AI currently assembles its representations of Blackness as the expression of extracted data, centering those artifacts of our oppression. AI reads only the record, but Blackness in its unbound brilliance also encompasses the people and happenings in between.[8] In addition, though, Blackness understands the power of *keeping receipts* as a check and noble antagonism against institutions of power. Black indigeneity, as being intentionally and proudly off the record, thrives in a whirling choreography of daps and twerks, cookouts and community, joy amid suffering, and the pain of continual theft. In naming Black indigeneity, our goal is to trouble the binaries of society/nature, matter/meaning, human/nonhuman as being no longer appropriate visions of dividing the world. Instead, we read these distinctions together in a way that exposes the nuances of each while also folding them onto one another. In the words of Karen Barad, "Considering them together does not mean forcing them together, collapsing important differences between them, or treating them in the same way, rather it means allowing any integral aspects to emerge."[9] So then, why not pursue an artificial intelligence born of Blackness and its deep ancestral wisdom?

But to get there, we must first return to the influences of whiteness, modernity, and capitalism on artificial intelligence design, promotion, and use. Let us begin with an unremarkable claim: AI is not an inevitable development of computational technologies. Instead, it is the most recent manifestation of communication technology as the white male spirit's triumph over bodies—theirs and others—as well as over the world.[10] The "magic" of this triumph happens through an intentional "obfuscation" of labor. That is, the palpable effect of "machine autonomy"—that magic mentioned a sentence ago—happens when the worker's labor is intentionally hidden behind the seductive veil of "enchanted" technologies.[11] Black folks built the world as slaves. One specific recognition of the link between such forced labor and repetitious machine-like work appears in Czech playwright Karel Čapek's 1921 play *R.U.R* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*).[12] The Czech word *robota* means "forced labor," and its etymological history includes the Russian word *rab*, meaning *slave*.[13]

Black bodies and intellect serve as the prototype for the machines of our algorithmic- and AI-obsessed present and future. This material

and objectified specificity of Black oppression makes sense out of seemingly paradoxical designations like "human computers," as seen in the book *Hidden Figures* (and, more popularly, its 2016 film adaptation), which highlights the contributions of Black women mathematicians to the U.S. space program.

Following the premiere of his play, Čapek described his work to reporters: "The product of the human brain has escaped the control of human hands. This is the comedy of science."[14] The playwright's cheeky assessment of his own work frames our thinking of the consequence and possibility of Blackness and AI. Race renders human (read: white) "imagination" as a concrete operation of affect and encounter and an essential building block of human division and difference that reveals—in the Heideggerian sense *reveals*—certain people as being instrumentally viable utilitarian bodies.[15] Additionally, Black subjecthood was, as Achille Mbembe puts it, "woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories."[16] In pursuit of AI's technological transcendence, the last decade has ensnared us in endless promotional hype, seen incalculable amounts of funding—both private and public—dedicated to this spiritual quest, all leading to unending paeans to the genius of the white men leading efforts to incarnate the first Artificial General Intelligence system as an implicitly raced, gendered ideal. However, to exist, our Black AI must be completely untangled from the data by which the colonial machinery has fused to flesh. It must be "a comedy of science" where the weapons wielded by the marginalized against corrupt institutions and systems are oftentimes satire, irony, and humor.

AI and algorithms are always already racialized, but their racial capacity becomes even more evident in the context of surveillance, wherein the full armaments of technoscientific institutions and infrastructures have been deployed to track, monitor, and discipline Black, Brown, queer, and dis- and less-abled bodies. In writing on the racialized aspects of surveillance, Simone Browne notes, "prototypical whiteness . . . is the cultural logic that informs much of biometric information technology."[17] In surveillance—as a mode of population control—we can begin to see the linkages between whiteness and modernity. As Browne and others write, slave patrols existed in the American South before and concurrently with the development of "modern" policing.[18] The institution of slavery designated and empowered these informal

groups of white men to control the mobility of enslaved people, to reclaim wayward human property, and to prevent conspiracies, insurrection, and random acts of freedom. What is most relevant for this chapter is that the enslaved outnumbered whites in many areas. Therefore, the state deemed slave patrols necessary to surveil and control a "dangerous population," often invading the homes of the enslaved on any pretext to exercise their power. Similarly, algorithmic governance and the contexts in which the state deploys AI often follow parallel patterns of surveilling non-white populations (e.g., Muslim or Black) perceived as dangerous, while ignoring actual violence from white supremacist militias.

Moving from whiteness and its control of physical bodies, we turn to modernity and its quantitative control over bodies and economies. We specifically refer here to Euromodernity, although other eras, societies, and civilizations also had periods of modernity.[19] In Euromodernity, plantation economies provide some of the earliest examples of modernity's quantification of bodies. These proto-factories reduced the enslaved to columns of data and tallied their labor productivity, reproductive capacity, and work potential for management by landholders and investment by financiers, all in the name of capitalist accumulation.[20] Amazon's algorithmic management systems enact these same practices and irrationalities for its warehouse workers, where "pick rates" measure how quickly workers can pull together orders. The same algorithms also fire workers who cannot meet the endlessly evolving efficiency expectations. Problematically, historically rooted systems of racial oppression, reconstituted through the use of racialized AI and algorithms, support the continual institutionalization of systemic racism and reinforce capitalist structures in which whiteness is one of the beliefs powering the design of managerial and governmental algorithmic processes. What would these modern technologies look like if Blackness were at the core ideology of their design? How might our accounting for intangibles such as generosity of spirit and broad definitions of kin, rather than metadata and platform compatibility, help us know things differently? How could Black human intelligence ally with computational processing to impact our global techno-ecologies?

Computation can unsettle and skew Black subjectivity toward care

and support rather than toward political belonging or capitalist participation. Computation demands not just the processing of data into bits but also the need for a historical understanding of why we imagine that this kind of division is possible: recall that a slave was counted as three-fifths of a man in the pre-Civil War South. The Three-Fifths Compromise quantified Blackness with an intentionality similar to that the National Football League Scouting Combine uses to measure, weigh, and evaluate Black bodies. Given this trajectory, the need for digital and computationally driven reconstitutions of Blackness feels even more urgent and overdue, and Black histories are central to this effort.

Black history screams and echoes the troubled and troubling stories of Black bits, bits of flesh, parts of bodies, and disaggregated Black digital bits. W.E.B. Du Bois articulated a conceptual twoness—the ability to be in two places at once, in two worlds, one of capitalist modernity and the other, some netherworld within the first, seen in and through the crevice as being both liberatory and claustrophobic.[21] The need for Blackness to be a "bit" originates in ledgers and capital. In contrast, the need for Black folks to just be, even if just for a moment, tells not a story of belonging but a longing for being and being in control of reconstituting the fragments of Blackness. But might that be a triumphant recognition of its centrality to our modern world instead of being relegated to the margin or a commodity bought, sold, and scavenged by others?

If these fundamental questions can build a necessary foundation for Black AI, how do we actualize the vision? Does it mean starting with computation and data derived from inherent ideas of what Blackness across space and time means and is, rather than collected and written from the narrative of Blackness in relation to whiteness? Does it mean beginning with the speculation as data instead of output?

Because Black AI language models and chatbots are still in their infancy—and the role of race and AI is not yet codified in standards, devices, and operating systems—this is a key moment to ask how we can take this moment of relative openness to position Blackness as the default setting for AI rather than as an add-on or after-market afterthought. Doing so allows us to further consider whether we have existing frameworks to place AI within an existing technocultural matrix.[22]

This is also a good moment to point toward some guiding theoretical principles for building Blackness into AI, virtual space, and the other technologies to come.

SKEWING THE FEED

AI's technical development, and specifically its datasets, rarely reference Blackness as anything other than a signal or object. When considering the once-assumed consequences of algorithmic technologies and race, Thao Phan and Scott Wark discuss how racial identity becomes subsumed in AI and algorithmic technologies' more broad desire and demand for data.[23] They write, "Using state-of-the-art ordering techniques to classify and sort populations has always been essential to the project of racialization . . . race emerges as an epiphenomenon of automated algorithmic processes of classifying and sorting operating through proxies and abstractions."[24] Put differently, Phan and Wark argue that "racial formations are data formations," a view that, as we interpret it, grinds the brilliant and beautiful variety of race into just another effect of the world's desire to name and, in turn, objectify—literally—its subjects.[25] Though AI does this to all people, the implications for Blackness are potentially more severe. We must never forget Blackness is/was a technology; one, intrinsic to the relationship that humanity has with the modern world. What even is modernity without Blackness—the slave—as a standing reserve? Certainly, the intense datafication and abstraction of Blackness over the course of centuries is the very thing that teaches us why the consequences of our algorithmic life (mass surveillance and sousveillance, as well as mis- and dis-information) are deadly. Seeing and understanding Blackness as being necessary to the proliferation and structure of technologized and datafied global contexts undergirds the anxiety and clamor around these digital institutions and systems of human captivity—as well as being the thing that makes these platforms exceptionally profitable to the capitalists. Thus, when creating and reimagining Black computational narratives, we can recognize how whiteness prefers Black denigration as a dominating regime of existence and being while refusing its domain in our creative processes. Essentially, when creating and

reimagining technology with and for Black narratives, we have to intentionally abandon oppressive notions of whiteness and its relation to Black bodies. This approach opens and embraces the real possibilities of "Black technological utterances rooted within Black cultures, Black communities, and Black existences," or what Rayvon Fouché calls "Black vernacular technological creativity."[26]

Blackness, as a way of being, collects and curates Black life. It enlivens novel data sets skewing away from whiteness and intentionally centering Black everyday experiences outside of oppression, trauma, and a struggle for autonomy. Colonial imperialism reifies the singular, unidirectional notion of progress. That we are always—even if folks need to be dragged in chains—headed toward an esoteric, vaguely seen and understood notion of better. Blackness, on the other hand, has always challenged this. To be Black is to always be askew, to always have told to you that your life and livelihood go against the grain. It is the sensation of always being visible where politics burdens a person's every action or inaction: how we keep our hair and wear our clothes, how we raise our children and love our partners, as well as how we interpret the weight of history and the possibility of the future. To be askew, then, is not just to know the past as history but to be in community with the memories of a people. Also, to be askew is to have a deep understanding of relationality. In other words, we know *we are different*. Moreover, the care we take in either articulating that difference for the benefit of white folks or protecting those differences from cultural interlopers and appropriators reifies the stark divergence of our subject position in addition to marking our personhood as both target and threat. Our implementation, here, queers without peculiarizing, without making Blackness, as it has been historically seen, the victim of psychic and physical *skew*ering and plunder.

Plunder is a process within the machinery of colonial imperialism. It orients bodies to the world. It marks a target upon flesh. For Black folks, it makes them—us—"living ore: *man-of-metal [and] -money*."[27] It is the process by which the fragmentation—the skewering inflicted upon the Black psyche and body becomes economically valuable. Moreover, colonial white supremacy has oriented the world and its human subjects to view and understand the Black body as an always available site of

extraction. Today, while mostly dead—indeed, transatlantic slavery has ended—what we understand as AI exhumes Black fragmentation as a fossil. Foucault described the fossil as the thing "permitting resemblances . . . as a distant and approximative form of identity."[28] So by this definition, AI can only render Blackness with any accuracy as the colonial fabrication *animal laborans*—indistinguishable from the tools of humans and operationalized at their every whim.[29] The pernicious and, at times, deadly effect of AI upon Black life isn't the fault of any white evil genius toiling in some nefarious laboratory but a more banal and, maybe, damning reality—that the data totalizing how AI registers Black life is drowned in the mundanity of white supremacy's ledger.

Sara Ahmed explains: "Orientations . . . matter in the . . . sense of being about physical or corporeal substance. Orientations shape the corporeal substance of bodies and whatever occupies space. Orientations affect how subjects and objects materialize or come to take shape in the way that they do."[30] There has been much work done to reorient Black life and people back into the human fold. Recently, much of this work is happening as "inclusion." While noble, inclusion is emphatically not a panacea. It isn't equipped to dismantle the machinery and code of white supremacy. Rather, it merely adds new operators. Now, Black folks and all marginalized folks can experience—if they behave, mind you—the benefits of capitalist white supremacy. In other words, inclusion is an orientation toward Black abjection within the framework of European modernity and liberalism. It is the equivalent of requesting that white supremacy relinquish power or that trickle-down economics reduce inequality; it is offensive and insufficient. Inclusion suffers in its suggestion of admitting Black folks into the big-top tent of humanity. Our admittance, if we indeed have it, was always already paid for with centuries of brutal dehumanization.

The simple philosophy of inclusion—essentially, "Okay, you folks are in, hooray!"—elides the philosophical, scientific, technical, economic, discursive, and political work of constructing the human as a central figure of meaning, and whiteness, its intentional result, as synonymous with humanity. That is what we wish to set askew. We do not insist on peculiarity or particularity but rather on our singularity—our ability to be, imagine, and live beyond humanity's paradigm. Black AI's specula-

tive, material amalgamations of the human precisely chart new futures for considering what it means to be and live as a human. It undoes the essential and boring centrality of the human, orienting it away from white supremacy as the default orientation and the Black body as a site for dehumanization and exploitation. These insights about flesh and bodies productively reveal the importance of skewing Black data from the oppressive and skewering orientations of white modernity.

Skewing the data and embracing the transformative power of speculation isn't enough. We must also destabilize the fact that our relationship with emerging AI systems, and that relationship's resulting technocultural matrix, still operates within a white masculine and heteronormative idea of how and why technology should be utilized.

Creators, critics, and theorists must endeavor to redefine our relationship with technology as a whole. Our relationship with technology is often transactional, extractive, and exploitative. This framework supports a capitalist power structure, and the idea of generative and restorative interactions with technology is not considered valuable. Thus, to work outside and against these power structures, we have to create new interactions that allow for fluidity, reciprocity, and generative ideation, which are practices and gifts passed down from our ancestors. In order to do this, it is necessary to let go of the expectation that efficiency and convenience are requirements for technology. People, not just developers, must be okay with doing more work and getting their hands dirty. Without this work, we will get the same, desperately inadequate, technological worlds of the past.

SOMEWHERE GOOD

The New York City-based startup Somewhere Good provides an example of skewing social media away from capitalist or extractive logics. This company has designed an audio-centric social network to connect queer people of color in organic, generative discussion. Its intention was to create a "digital garden" where the collective experience would grow as users explore, wander, and discover each other, as opposed to being rendered into data for consumption. The digital garden concept draws from the company's ethos of restoring a sense of joy through the

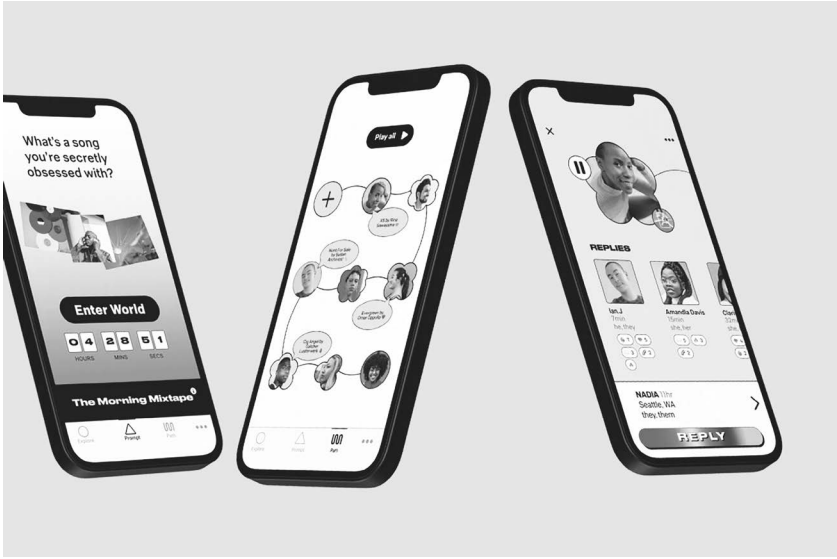

FIGURE 11. A marketing graphic for the platform Somewhere Good. Credit: Somewhere Good.

Alt text (Figure 11): A marketing graphic displaying three phone screens showing the Somewhere Good platform against a yellow background.

use of nature imagery denoting growth and care. According to Annika Hansteen-Izora, lead product and brand designer of Somewhere Good:

> Nature and technology are often only associated as the other's antithesis. Nature is alive, fluid, complex. Technology is machine, predictable, streamlined. The social media idiom "go touch some grass" encourages users to leave the internet for nature, the former supplying illusion and the latter providing truth. . . . But perhaps the separatism between technology and the principles of nature is part of what led us towards this techno-doom reality. I'd offer that the space between digital worlds and nature is one we should linger in. . . . In a techno-social world that is dominantly organized by the pressures of linear feeds, we need digital spaces and frameworks that celebrate the ideas that are seeds just as much as the fully formed blooms.[31]

All SG users see the same things—four or so question prompts that implore individuals to engage thoughtfully with each other via voice responses in "hangs," spaces similar to audio-focused platforms like Clubhouse. Each post is daisy-chained together, creating a generative discussion where each user's response builds on the last. The discussion chain is archived and erased from the feed at the end of the day, making space for new questions. Importantly, the network eschews standard social media mechanisms of sociability (e.g., likes or follows) to further skew from engagement practices and metrics. Their design ethos can be understood through their mission statement:

> "Autonomy lies beyond the individual. Through co-creation, possibilities emerge. We design and thrive with technology that calms and strengthens, that comes from a place of joy with a deep belief in a world that exists for us. We imagine for ourselves. For others. For space. For time. For ideas, both eternal and fleeting. Step outside the limits of constant notifications, connectivity, and availability. Create practices of living rooted in presence. Explore uncharted paths. We have always been here and always will be. The new, the necessary, and the inevitable. We're going somewhere good."[32]

This digital garden network shows us what Black digital practice can look like on the ground. By also incorporating IRL "hangs" in cities across the United States, Somewhere Good can be considered a platform for building a different, less extractive digital world. Unlike Facebook and Instagram, it intentionally reimagines interactions between users by redesigning the user experience away from reverse chronological publication of posts and from curation based on what an algorithm assumes you'd like to see.

In this way, Izora promotes the idea of digital gardens and their potential to skew the feed by eliminating them and providing a more integrative space for collective stewardship, adaptation, and authenticity. These gardens also pull us away from continually leaning on masculine and rote transactional metaphors to explain and represent digital worlds. The small but powerful conceptual step is so very necessary for the collective task of fashioning a truly inclusive and fully representative digital world.

Digital gardens can also allow us to dream past the colonial imaginings of factory farming and the control of nature, valuing pluralism and interdependence, investing in cyclical growth, and rejecting linear time instead. They are a rejection of temporal and colonial rationalities that direct us to embrace this epiphenomenal time of Blackness.[33] They serve as a compelling and hopeful experiment of intentional technology creation that centers the Black queer community and creativity. Somewhere Good is a Black digital space that serves as a call to action and charts a new way to live a full and free digital life. However, Somewhere Good is not without its challenges and obstacles. Issues like scalability and moderation are difficult to address due to the localized and intimate nature of the platform. It also pushes us to consider how we should and need to understand the concept of Black data structures. Are they logic/algorithms rather than the actual container of the data, or both? What threads the Black community together? What is a current overarching need? The desire for safety/to live peacefully with the ones you love? Moving forward, these are fundamental questions we must ask if we hope to collectively prod the digital to be something better than it is currently. To address these questions, it is also worth returning to the process of data collection and skewing to discuss what type of data "can be used."

It is not uncommon for Black developers to attempt to use good, respectable data like works of art, literature, and oral histories that represent Black people and their cultural production as inspirational, uplifting, and positive, with the intention of helping Black people be "better." While this type of content should be included, intentionally excluding other data from the Black experience is to erase some people and their lives. It's important to include data that speak to the multifaceted, multicultural, and diverse nature of Blackness, along with that of all racially dispossessed peoples. Data that capture grief, lethargy, and anger should be valued just as highly by data curators as data that capture strength, play, joy, and power. Only through this whole-hearted inclusion can we have technology that speaks genuinely to our lives and not a caricatured version of it. It is this tension over who and what gets to evaluate Blackness and over judgments about Black life and existence that precipitates versions of optimism, pessimism, and skepticism within Black folks.

BLACK OPTIMISM, AFRO-PESSIMISM, AND THE EMERGENCE OF AFRO-SKEPTICISM AS A MODE OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Black Optimism is a position that enables Black people to gather and collate the resources necessary to thrive, even while mired in this particular moment of Western civilization. To put it another way, Black Optimism embraces how the necessariness of community amid improbable and dangerous times inculcates the virtue of noble persistence in those who are resisting today and who will resist tomorrow. Black Optimism is forward-thinking while remaining aware of present-day and historical discrimination and racial violence. It is also deeply interconnected with Black joy. Joy is the articulation of resources that one employs to thrive beyond survival, modernity, and capitalism. Think of the fish fry or sugar-versus-salt-on-your-grits debates.

Black foodstuffs, once considered the province of enslaved people's diets, have become joyful objects in debates about Black life rather than dismissed based on their humble origins. Such things bring Black folks ambient and explicit pleasure but also allow us to just *be*. They're like the casual, unrequited hug from somebody who sees you struggling: a praxis of care, concern, and self-repair. These are the feelings we see as necessary to counter the microaggressions, obstacles, and violence encountered in the everyday. In this way, articulating joy and optimism is a necessary precondition of freedom. Joy is freedom. It's a place where you're allowed to be who you are. It embraces a level of Black freedom within a system where you understand that constraints and structures do not allow you to be free.

During the first waves of digital divide research in the '90s, the absence of Black digital practitioners was framed as a deficit model: Black folks supposedly lacked the economic capacity, or the technical capacity, or the broadband access, or the necessary written and technical literacies. In response, Neil Selwyn argued that instead of pathologizing Black folks for being enframed within discriminatory regimes they often had no control over (i.e., for being "have-nots"), we should instead consider *Black refusal* as a rational response to information sources that have no relevance to the Black everyday, to resources that represent Black culture through hateful stereotypes or outright racism, or to dig-

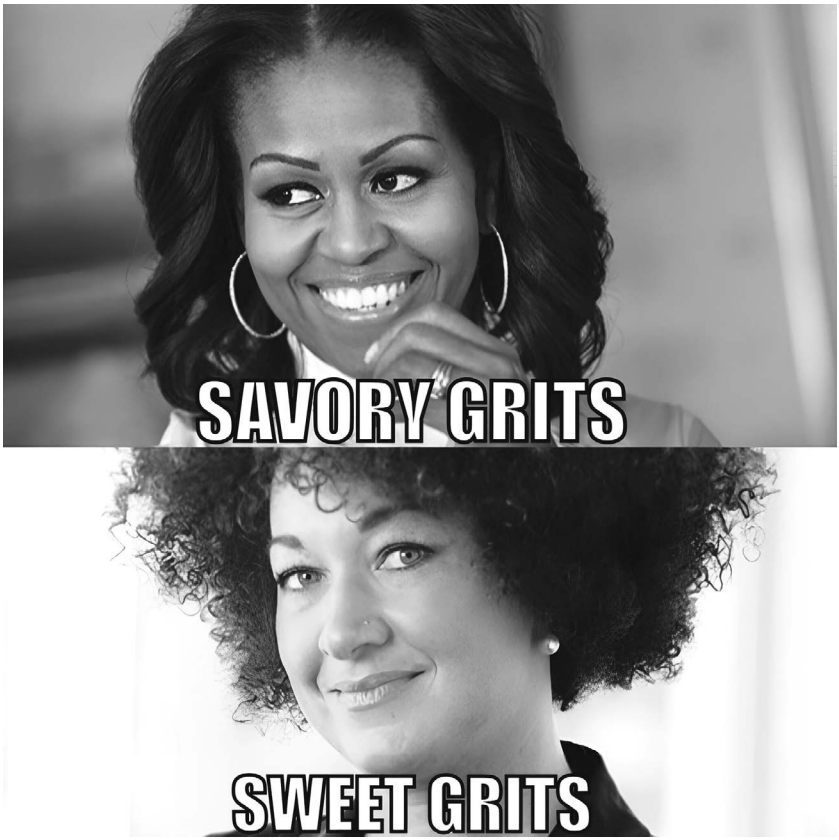

FIGURE 12. The Everlasting Grits Controversy. Credit: @EasyBrezy.

Alt text (Figure 12): The Everlasting Grits Controversy displayed as a two-part meme with, on top, an image of Michelle Obama, smiling and looking to her right, labeled in Impact font with the text "SAVORY GRITS." On the bottom is an image of Rachel Dolezal; she is also smiling into the camera, and the image is labeled "SWEET GRITS."

ital practices that induce feelings of Black technophobia (practices such as allowing surveillance, having a poor "fit" with everyday life, or being so unfamiliar and complex as to produce generalized anxiety).[34]

What if we refuse each of these orientations and instead explore the possibilities of what Afro-skepticism might offer? Afro-skepticism is very different from Afro-pessimism.[35] Instead of thinking of this question

within the framework of a binary choice, skepticism offers a different modality for articulating the Black relationship to the world, to others, and to the self. Blackness moves at a different pace from Western modernity. Take the Ghanaian word and Africana theme of *Sankofa*, for example. Sankofa refers to one's obligation to remember the past in order to make positive progress in the future. Considering this bit of ancestral intelligence as an informing principle for understanding artificial intelligence and Blackness helps us articulate collective memory as a complicated narrative of pleasure and pain. The choice to either enter unabashedly or to reject altogether is no choice. The complicated past may produce pessimism about the future, but it also may produce caution, a useful moment of doubt about Western technology's knowledge claims and the social good that they propose.

Affective responses power Black folks' resistance to emerging technologies. Some of these have been framed as either anti-capitalist[36] or Afro-pessimist, depending upon the perception of these technologies' actual potential for Black liberation and/or economic prosperity. Take, for example, the women of the #YourSlipIsShowing campaign, I'Nasah Crockett and Shafiqah Hudson. The era of technological propaganda was still selling the Web 2.0 era and social media platforms as the pathway forward for improving democratic discussion in the public sphere. These two Black women launched a campaign against Twitter trolls masquerading as women of color, simultaneously critiquing the possibility that the internet could offer a safe opportunity for public debate. Before Gamergate and the 2016 election, Crockett and Hudson tried to warn the public about the threat of racialized and misogynistic disinformation and trolling in the digital public sphere. Major technologists and the media ecosystem did not listen. It was easier to cast their concerns as Black women's issues, unworthy of public consideration.

Afro-pessimism is another iteration of questions Black studies folks have been asking since the founding of the field: What is the Human? How can Black folks be understood within the framework of Western culture? Can the Black be Human? Afro-pessimism asserts that Blackness is a form of technology. Drawing upon Hortense Spillers' comparison of Black women to human cargo ships, Blackness forms a linkage between the nonhuman and the human world.[37] Scholars of Black life

negotiate the tensions in embracing the social world's transformative capacity; Afro-pessimism offers a compelling interpretive lens to perceive and challenge what goes hidden within common understandings of Black hope's uses. As part of our quest to understand *why* Black folks engage, participate, or demur from technology, we believe that a possible affective substrate of the conversation between Blackness and information technologies lies in the long-standing debate between Black Optimism and Afro-pessimism. In this debate, the two philosophical positions tussle over whether the technological advancements of the West could be generative or exploitative for Black people. It is the dissonance between optimism and pessimism for which skepticism can provide a functional resolution for individuals holding onto and living with both joy and pain.

BLACK REFUSAL TO BE DIGITIZED IN THE AGE OF AI

Technoskepticism is refusal's kissing cousin. Black people, in particular, have ample reason to be mistrustful of technoscience, a result stemming from centuries of being denied the right to refuse it. The following example illustrates who *cannot* be trusted and why Afro-skepticism is a reasoned position to take in the face of technologies like AI that can never be divorced from these origins.

A tweet reposting a TikTok video caught our attention on June 16, 2023, as we were writing this book. The account that posted it appears to be that of a human, Black male, middle- or working-class user. The video's caption reads, "The story of George Stinney, Jr." The image of a Black male child dressed in an orange prison jumpsuit struck us as interesting enough to click through further. We watched in horrified awe for the next two minutes as this child told us the troubling story of "his" life and death. As the little Black boy told the harrowing story of Stinney's death, it became clear that the storyteller wasn't a boy at all, but rather an AI-generated video. The computer told this human boy's tragic story.[38]

> I was the youngest person ever sentenced to death in history. I was 14 years old and innocent. My story inspired the movie *The*

Green Mile. My name is George Seney [*sic*]. And this is my story. I was born on October 21, 1929, in South Carolina, United States. I grew up in a poor black family in a country where racial segregation was deeply rooted. In 1944, two young white girls were found dead near my home. Fetty Jun Vinokur [*sic*], age 11 and Mary Emma Thames aged seven, were discovered in a ditch filled with water with severe head injuries. I was arrested and accused of their murder without any motive or evidence against me.

I was interrogated for several hours by the police without the presence of a lawyer or my parents. They deprived me of food and sleep to force me to confess to the murder. Exhausted, I cracked and repeated what they wanted me to say. A month later, my trial began. It lasted only a few hours, the judge appointed me an incompetent lawyer. The jury was exclusively composed of whites. My family was prevented from attending the trial because of their race. The verdict came quickly and I was sentenced to death by electrocution.

My sentence was executed only three days after my arrest on June 16, 1944. They tied me to an electric chair. I was too small, so they made me sit on a Bible. They executed me at the age of 14, making me the youngest person ever to be executed in the United States during the 20th century. It took until 2014, 70 years after my death, for my conviction to be overturned and for my family to obtain justice. It was finally recognized that my constitutional rights had been violated and that the death penalty had been wrongly pronounced. My story is a sad example of how racial discrimination and prejudice can affect the justice system and destroy innocent lives. I hope that my story will help ensure that this never happens again.

We fell deeper into the uncanny valley's pit as the figure spoke, moved its head, blinked its eyes, and the words fell from its oddly moving mouth. What we initially assumed to be human became an object, a troubling reanimation and/or exhumation of a real body. AI-generated Black avatars put a twist on Tonia Sutherland's argument that digital reproductions of departed celebrities like Tupac are subjected to

"carceral conscription," where "spectacle goes hand-in-hand with the ghost of slavery and its uncanny dehumanizations."[39] In this case, Black trauma and pain are material to "feed" AI and create meme-able and viral histories that exclude our bodily participation.

This AI-generated Black body produced language that was perfectly legible, clear, and too perfect; it didn't just "talk white," to use a familiar anti-Black colloquialism. It spoke in a completely deracinated style of English that reflected nothing of the style and affect of a young Black boy from rural South Carolina. The words the AI system or its programmers chose possessed no vernacular, no style; they were just words. We never hear breath sounds, and the image's eyes barely blink. The absence of human-ness and Blackness that this Black child was subjected to long after his life was snuffed out by the state offers a perfectly manicured racial grotesque. Michael Gillespie details his concept of the racial grotesque in *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*: "[It is the] material bodily principle of folk or vernacular culture that presents the grotesque black body (with an emphasis on bodily fluids and orifices) as a disruption or shock to social hierarchies."[40] The grotesque constantly wants to lower the conversation. By way of class consideration and attention, it functions to lower high-minded, spiritual, and abstract ideals to the material muck of bodies. This AI-rendered video accomplishes the same goal, but instead of focusing on bodily fluids and orifices, it performs the equally embodied, though seemingly cleaner and more pristine, work of taxidermy. That is, its grotesqueness materializes not in all that is gross but in the ways this pristinely rendered object turns the life and death of George Stinney Jr. into a meaningless animatronic, dancing at the prompt of a click.

Who made this video? What was its purpose? Its moments of stupefying incongruity left us awestruck with its overwhelming clumsiness and pushed us to investigate the identity of the entity responsible for this content. Enter @ussadstory, a TikTok account that has very little digital footprint, no description in its bio, and no identifiable presence across the web. The collection of videos @ussadstory in its archive suggest the account consists of traumatic stories told by reanimated Black and Asian victims. Moreover, this trauma is entirely without context; the archive contains an endless sea of digitized child things telling sto-

ries of sadness. Here, the volume is the point. Though we learned of George Stinney via @ussadstory's account, that project's purpose is not to educate. Rather, these stories had been reduced to a meaningless *potpourri* of trivia, supplying sound bites that could be recycled to make the user sound both woke and smart on the internet or at cocktail parties. AI's ability to generate cursory and extractive images of racialized death reduces these bodies, and the waves or wakes left behind by their departure as Christina Sharpe describes, to theme show attractions: memorable in their spectacularity, shallow in their tangibility.[41] AI is doing business as usual; that is to say, it misses the mark when pointed at Black cultural norms.

It is common for Black cultural and community practices to protect Black children, particularly children who have experienced trauma or, in this case, death. Black culture is incredibly sensitive when it comes to avoiding additional trauma around the Black dead. This AI rendering fits neatly into a networked web of Black snuff videos, particularly those of children—recall Tamir Rice. The story of George Stinney Jr. is displayed for all to see, to satisfy the desires of all those who desire a quick affective jolt. This video aroused our Afro-skepticism, which meant that we couldn't stomach watching the archive's AI rendering of George Floyd. We suspected a lack of care for the deceased, his family, and the larger extended community and network.

At the same time, we could understand why a Black male Twitter user might have reposted the video. This content came to us from someone who wanted to contribute to the long-form conversation about the problematic and violent relationship between the state and Black people. Therefore, we could not blame "the algorithm" for serving it to him. At the same time, AI's ability to rapidly and cheaply generate Black exposure and display feeds a desire by users to be "good," and therein lies its danger.

As A. Joseph Dial writes of pauses, " 'pausing while Black' is a structural and computational impossibility."[42] The TikTok video of George Stinney Jr.'s life plays on an endless loop, never stopping, denying us the respite of pause. AI can push out this kind of content more quickly than we can possibly react to it, activating our Afro-skepticism. These stories and lives need us to pause in their wake and make space to attend to the

ways that video-based social media like TikTok evoke emotion without necessarily tying that emotion to the material consequences of the displayed moment. At the same time, as Afro-skeptics, we cannot exclude the possibility of Black AI, as is, for example, currently being built by Black AI creators like Stephanie Dinkins and Josie Williams. Their work, created as part of this book project, engenders counter-narratives that create an alternative to non-pausable media. It pushes back against the churn of pushed-out content that flattens and makes our stories uncanny and unreal. It gives us room to pause.

Afro-skepticism as refusal is an undergirding principle of much of Black existence. And unlike the AI-generated Stinney performance, it is not about death. Instead, it's about finding a place of joy and freedom—an angle, a pathway, a way of knowing and existing in the world. It's a recognition that the dominant pathway might not work for Black folks: "I may refuse the pathway provided to me, but I hope and trust that I can find my own way to get there; it's not as if that place doesn't exist." Refusal in the form of Afro-skepticism is a request for care through reassurance, more time, more empathy, and more information. Afro-skepticism is also a performative act, where how you respond is as important as what you choose to respond with, as is the case in many insider/outsider interactions. In Robert Farris Thompson's work on the West African expression "the cool," Black cultural expression privileges the capacity to be nonchalant at the right moment while demonstrating control and the ability to tolerate political and social pressure.[43] The cultural practice of "signifyin'," synonymous with Thompson's concept of "the cool," draws upon "cultural resources" to enact a performance of the metaphorical play, vagueness, and duality of meanings produced simultaneously to communicate.[44]

This idea of performing coolness under pressure is also used to vet or question the push of Western technological advancement. Imagine a Black grandfather too stubborn and financially disciplined to be told to upgrade his mobile phone. If the sales rep, or technology-proficient grandchild, shows frustration with granddad's unease with technology, grandad is more likely to stick with what he knows, to double down on the act of refusal—social consequences be damned. However, if the would-be helper displays the coolness of the phone, describes its ability

to help his grandfather experience family, or presents it as an opportunity to join the family conversation, one could imagine a much more agreeable outcome.

A TECHNOCULTURAL MATRIX FOR AI

André Brock's formulation of a Black Technocultural Matrix provides a starting point to argue for beliefs powering Black digital practice.[45] This matrix comprises six elements: Blackness, intersectionality, invention/style, America, modernity, and the future. These matrix elements suggest additional precepts for placing Black folks at the forefront of developing technologies such as AI:

- Blackness operates at the level of the human and of Being, which situates Black folks as technical subjects instead of objects to be extracted and used.
- Blackness is heterogeneous and complex, incapable of being reduced solely to stereotypes of pathology, deviance, or deficit, even as we acknowledge that there will indeed be "bad actors" and those who find joy in "actin' bad" in our communities and collectives.
- Blackness is blessed with an "excess of life" that manifests in an extraordinary capacity for invention and style in all aspects of being, from aesthetic to computational to metaphysical.
- Blackness is a pan-global social construct/reality that results from contacts with the imperialist/colonialist West but is not solely defined by those contacts.
- Blackness is deeply entangled with (Euro)modernity and the Anthropocene, but not as chattel or as a dangerous population.
- And finally, there will be Black people in the future. Indeed, for Blackness, the future is implicit in our orientation to space, time, the digital, self, community, and nature. Our interiority—the way we understand ourselves—looks both forward and backward to orient ourselves to possibilities of speculative Blackness.

HISTORIES OF BLACK DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY REFUSAL

As we've discussed in this chapter, Afro-skepticism challenges a totalizing acceptance or rejection of technology. It allows us to ask how and when we can refuse technology design and dissemination and, if so, how that might look. In *Distributed Blackness*, Brock writes about the refusal—by Black folk—of BlackBird, a Black-developed web browser launched in 2008 that was designed for the information needs of Black online users.[46] BlackBird was built to run on top of Mozilla's technology. This browser was (and is) significant because very few Silicon Valley initiatives are designed specifically for Black users; the few that are (e.g., BlackPlanet) still face hurdles in receiving funding from white venture capitalists and white-owned banks. While there isn't enough space to go into BlackBird's feature set, one particular aspect deserves mention: BlackBird's dedicated Internet Search tab featuring a customized Google Search prioritizing Black content. This feature prefigures Safiya Noble's excellent and blistering critique of the main Google search engine.[47] Unlike Google, BlackBird Search refused to list porn results for a search query for "Black Girls;" instead, it returned references to Black entertainers or nonprofit initiatives for young Black women.

Given BlackBird's origins, feature set, and purpose, one wouldn't be faulted for thinking that Black folks rushed to embrace this product—especially given that the web browser is infrastructural to online practice. On the contrary, however, Black online practitioners were *very* skeptical of its design and possibilities. They were critical of BlackBird's features, which dedicated valuable interface elements to Facebook and Myspace rather than to BlackPlanet. They were very vocal about perceptions of what BlackBird signified for Black information literacy, arguing that it somehow implied that Mozilla (the browser modified for BlackBird's design) was "too smart," "too white," or "otherwise not good enough for blacks. That's just insulting."[48] They also looked beyond BlackBird to argue that it suggested a return to (digital) segregation: "I see it [as] a step backwards in technology. . . . Once you control content through a browser you control information."[49] From these user observations, we argue that Afro-skepticism is an informed, engaged perspective on how technology affects Black folks in the here and now as well as in future applications.

Afro-skepticism is not an outright refusal to participate; it is an active choice to pause and vet and perhaps create a new avenue to unsettle the parameters of the initial activity of participation. Afro-skepticism makes space for the possibility of both joy and doubt existing at the same time. It privileges a duality of meaning, reserving to itself the ability to communicate both curiosity and caution. Afro-skepticism explores the possibilities of a technological future but also allows the community to ask some of the following key questions: Were Black communities given a chance to refuse AI? Have they been asked, and how? How will the companies behind this tech use our data?

Here, we might also say the quiet part out loud. Western medical expertise is built on the use and abuse of Black folk. As in the Tuskegee syphilis study in the 1930s, where Black men were unknowingly exposed to syphilis in the name of public health research, exploitation of Black bodies has powered decades of genetic research that overwhelmingly serves to provide care for non-Black and non-Brown bodies. In short, *Black bodies are fields of research*—research that often disables and debilitates, even as these disabilities are often erased or elided from the historical record. For example, as Chris Bell writes, Harriet Tubman was disabled, violently so, as a consequence of her actions to attain her freedom from slavery.[50] Meanwhile, the British and European freak shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made a big business out of displaying the exotic African "Freak."[51] Importantly, this mania for viewing Black bodies as freaks is also baked into medical anthropology's history. Movement studies in the early days of the cinema depended on visualizing African women at work and while caring for their families.[52]

Thus, Black people have routinely been imagined and reconfigured as exotic specimens to benefit white patriarchal structures. Is it any wonder then why Black people, disabled and not, would be skeptical of dominant structures of power-knowledge? Skepticism, in this sense, is about using refusal to mitigate the history of violence perpetrated on Black bodies.

More specifically, for Black people, and as described in our first chapter, "Desiring Diagnosis," refusing medical authority can create avenues of pleasure, appropriation, and possibility. Reflecting on her personal experience, adrienne maree brown advocates for Black and

Brown people to engage in radical drug use to more comfortably exist in a racialized and racist world: "It can be medicine for my physical and emotional pain, give me spiritual experiences of awakening and connectedness, [and] soften the impact of a wounded world in long tantrums."[53] Here, brown refuses the notion that Black people are irredeemably broken. Rather, Black folks exist in a society that disproportionately incarcerates and kills them. In this context, drugs, illicit or otherwise, are medicine. Brown muses further, naming Black people "street entrepreneurs who have kept this medicine accessible through a prohibition."[54] When Black people refuse to purchase the "respectable" drugs produced by white-owned pharmaceutical companies, choosing instead to work with the informal technology purveyors sometimes unflatteringly referred to as drug dealers, they take charge of their own practices of care.

FIGURE 13. Still shot from a moving image GIF of Reggie Sergile, 2015. Credit: @BEkgurk.

Alt text (Figure 13): A still shot from a thumbnail video of a Black man, Reggie Sergile, holding a red Solo cup and wearing a brown cap. He turns towards the viewer as the camera zooms into his face, showing his pursed lips and averted gaze. He seems highly skeptical of something.

Black refusal has also been captured in GIF format. The viral GIF of a Black gentleman holding a red party cup captures the image of Reggie Sergile, a rapper who goes by the name of Conceited (according to Buzzfeed, this was one of the most popular memes of 2016.) In it, Sergile purses his lips and turns toward the viewer while averting his gaze, radiating a high level of skepticism. This clip, taken from a 2009 rap freestyle battle video, captures his reaction when his opponent, Jesse James, tripped up over his words. The reaction was first converted to GIF form in 2015, but its popularity spiked in 2016 when viewers of the first presidential debate between Clinton and Trump reacted to the moderator's prompt to the debaters to talk about race.

One of our constant delights in writing about Black Twitter is its inventiveness and timeliness. While each image is a slightly different frame of the original GIF, there is enough similarity between them to understand that Sergile's performance of skepticism was built upon the pleasurable digital connections made between the image, the online audience, the topic, and the accompanying caption.

AI TRAJECTORIES

This is just a starting point to understanding what Blackness brings to artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and computational rationality. We should begin with identifying and incorporating collective ancestral knowledges, practices, and aesthetics as guiding principles for answering the questions "What is this Black AI *for*?" and "What [will] it *do*?" We must interrogate the ways that AI is *deployed* as well as who it is *for*.

The inquiry, the design process, and the data used to train our fledgling "intellect" can *begin* from the speculative; we do not have to see the speculative as only an output. Black queerness provides a lens of possibility here. As one artist puts it:

> I find that I'm able to see the intersections of seemingly different communities intuitively and draw connections between the interconnectedness of struggle, which allows me to reimagine interconnected speculative futures and narratives.
>
> —Josie Williams

It is imperative that we draw upon Afro-skepticism and Black feminist science and technology studies to consider the problematics of AI as it stands today. As we think about the configurations of Blackness and AI, Black feminist scholarship has already considered a world structured by various forms of oppression and pleasure. What have rationality and objectivity in the name of science done for Blackness or Black bodies? We offer the extractive examples of Henrietta Lacks' undying cancer cells or J. Marion Sims' cruelty to enslaved Lucy and Anarcha as a parallel to the extraction and apprehension of Black lives in the construction of AI's decision-making capacities. A Black feminist perspective on AI would ask: "How do we incorporate care into our use and design of AI?" We draw here upon Sharpe's "And to Survive," where she writes, "What are the conditions, the grammars and the tenses, in which those expressed demands and desires might be heard and met not with force, but with care?"[55]

Finally, an Afro-skeptic technological approach would begin from *whether* we should develop computerized technologies to increase productivity. When considering the possibilities for Blackness and AI, Afro-skepticism begins from refusal, arguing that neither the context nor the moment demonstrates a need for a technical solution to longstanding social inequities. There is little evidence that technical solutions provide practical solutions to help Black communities; instead the data collected inevitably reinforce beliefs about Black deviance or pathology. But Black life is not overdetermined by racism; Black life also incorporates joy, sorrow, and care. In the next chapter, we expand Afro-skepticism beyond refusal to incorporate the Black surreal, expressed through aesthetics of style and play. "Fam . . . did you see that?!" is an epistemological standpoint of the Black surreal.

What does an AI Black surreal look like?