

Conclusion

REFUSAL

• • • In 1981, Maze featuring Frankie Beverly released the song “Before I Let Go.” The song has become a classic in the Black community, often serving as the final song played by a DJ at a wedding, a family cookout, or any other intra-community event. The song is often accompanied by a line dance, preferably the electric slide, to close out the party. The song’s title feels apropos for concluding a fun gathering, yet the contrast between the warm feelings produced by the song and the lyrical content provide an important lesson on refusal. In the song, Maze sings about leaving his partner, letting go, and moving forward. He wistfully sings about the good times while contrasting them with the present reality. As he says, “we’re hurting each other, and ain’t that a shame.” In this illustration, the lyrics suggest a nostalgia for a past portion of a good relationship but not one that requires us to remain rooted in something that no longer serves us.¹ In 2021, Beyonce released a remix of the song as a surprise addition to her *Homecoming* album and Netflix special. A new line dance was created and popularized, such that now both versions end the party, prolonging guests’ refusal to let go of the song, and each other’s company.

While Black music has long adeptly transcribed the human condition into blues, soul, and R&B lyrics, Adam Banks details how the more

recent innovation of digital sampling adds to musical works through layering, rupture, and repetition. The interstitial additions of melody, rhythm, vocals, and temporal references become necessary when the prose is too important for a single reference.² As Banks outlines, it is the DJ's job to find the work that bears repeating and to sample, scratch, and remix it into something that is both old and new. Silk Sonic's recent album, *An Evening with Silk Sonic* (2021), makes distinct nostalgic style choices mirroring that of multiple '70s Soul artists, such as Sly and the Family Stone, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown, and also has Bootsy Collins narrating interludes. The album marshals the power of remixed Black discursive styles without descending into fluffy pastiche, or even worse, engaging in the kind of techno-minstrelsy that the AI reanimation of Biggie embodies, as described in the previous chapter. This is not nostalgia, it is the resurrection of Black performance as corporate intellectual property. Re-creating the sound and aesthetic of the time requires care and the deep archival practice of memory required to scaffold and nurture nostalgia. The samples refuse to let go. This can, however, move away from productive nostalgia if it leans too heavily into a refusal to take new risks because of an overreliance on the past.

It might seem paradoxical to play a breakup song at a wedding. Similarly, it might seem contrary, naive, or at worst straight-up self-destructive for Black, disabled, Asian, and other people who have been on the wrong side of technology for so long to refuse to participate in what's been called the Golden Age of AI. Refusal is an especially precious space of possibility, particularly for those who have historically not been given the option to say no, to evade, or to log off. The refusal to let go of the music that gives us comfort, feelings of belonging, and chances to do new forms of the electric slide; the refusal of the disabled person to request access to technologies in favor of just taking what is needed; and the refusal to pretend that racial injustices didn't and don't still condition who gets to refuse what can empower and energize our awareness of the possibilities skepticism can create.

REFUSING THE MACHINE: TECHNOSKEPTICISM

The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines the term *Luddite* as a “member of an organized band of English mechanics and their friends, who (1811–16) set themselves to destroy manufacturing machinery in the midlands and north of England.”³ The rioters assumed the name Luddites and acted under the authority of an imaginary Captain Ludd. This original definition doesn’t mention race; however, white refusals of technology are motivated differently from racialized ones. White and abled Luddism, or tech refusal, is possible because many normative white people can personally, professionally, and socially afford to refuse engagement with social media. BIPOC and disabled people’s refusal to adopt specific types of new technology often reflects less a reviled and conservative Luddite position than it does a strategically and intentionally crafted part of identity. For example, refusing to upload your resume into sites or apps that might connect with potential employers makes perfect sense if your body has always been a site of surveillance and both the alibi and the testing ground for many of the most cutting-edge remote sensing, processing, and facial recognition technologies.⁴ Similarly, sequestering medical or carceral records away from systems that rescind medical treatment and job access may look like Luddism, incompetence, or technological backwardness, but may instead reflect the technoskepticism learned by those who can’t afford to push back against the realities of the surveillance state.

Technoskepticism takes many forms. For those of us who are Black, Asian American, and/or disabled, techno-refusal emerges from our specific racialized histories and legacies of skepticism as a necessary emotional position developed in the face of white refusal to acknowledge us and our *existing* relationships with technology. The act of refusal comes with significant risks and consequences that we are willing to take because we see the potential violence of the alternative. Each instance and style of refusal reflects the lived realities of our histories and how we came to live where we do. Asian American refusal emerges from the deep histories of intergenerational and global labor extraction and cultural invisibility that have created the material conditions for the digital. We are here in many cases because we offer value to the

state as technology workers. In contrast, but relatedly, we argue that considered acts of Black refusal in the age of machine learning and artificial intelligence embody the Afro-skeptical position and are a viable alternative to such affective responses to modernity as Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism. The specific forms of technoskepticism practiced by these groups emerge from distinctive emotional and intellectual positions that animate myriad forms of technology refusal by those seemingly most in need of it.

STEALING AND THIEVING: CARE AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF REFUSAL

Can care be refused? Perhaps by some, some of the time. Not all care is kind, as is demonstrated throughout this book. It can be destructive, in some cases genocidal. Moreover, emerging work in critical disability studies encourages a “healthy” skepticism of attempts to render the world more accessible,⁵ joining Black studies’ history of Afro-pessimism, skepticism, and cynicism. Access to things—data, technology, platforms, and so forth—does not *necessarily* guarantee more equal worlds. We refuse this equation of access with liberation. Access can also mean subjecting yourself to having saleable data extracted from you, sometimes by force, sometimes in secret, oftentimes both. Or, if access does equal liberation, we have to ask: what is liberated, platformed, or set loose on the world when we render our world more “accessible?”

As J. Logan Smilges notes, discourses of accessibility do not “naturally” and “logically” produce more progressive societies. Indeed, emphasizing access as a solution can produce more ableism, not less.⁶ In particular, if ideologies of accessibility are used to force disabled bodies to conform to the established status quo, this becomes an infrastructure for toxic exceptionalism and the model minority myth. In hewing to this mode of access, we are not liberated from oppression. When we are asked to identify with the idea that access technologies can make us free, we find ourselves instead isolated by impossible expectations that evacuate care of meaning and are integrally isolating. Smilges writes:

I don't know a single disabled person who hasn't at some point felt, however ephemerally or fleetingly, that they aren't, in the end, a burden. Because if we were anything else, so it seems, we wouldn't be so alone. Life would be easier; no, life would be possible, we think to ourselves. We could live if the world wanted us. But it doesn't want us. We aren't wanted. We are lonely because we are alone, and we are alone because we are truly and utterly unwanted.⁷

In the face of extractive access and ever-present bad crimp feelings, we find ourselves asking, what else is possible? How do we model care? Perhaps, as Smilges further suggests, we steal it. The idea of access thievery builds on care as revolution, drawing on a wide canon of disability activism and critical thought. The crux of such thievery is the suggestion that if you have to request access, then a space, place, or experience isn't truly accessible; there is inherent dignity in taking what you deserve instead of passively waiting to be denied. In asking us to steal, Smilges argues, and we concur, that pursuing access as pleasure is vital because we deserve to thrive, not just survive.⁸

For me, "access thievery" as such is many things. It is writing in bed, because that is comfortable—taking meetings in bed, because that is also comfortable—using a paved street that is smooth and even in lieu of a small, poorly cared-for sidewalk that feels as if it might dump me out of my very large and heavy wheelchair, or that it might fall on me. I am not supposed to admit these things; that sometimes it is easy to think under hot water, and steam feels nice on my skin, so I will leave the water on past the point of conscientiousness, or that I often get messy from eating, due to my unreliable muscles—and I don't really care, if I think about it. Refusal here is the refusal to fit my body into positions it cannot now, and never has been able to, sit in. Refusal is also a strategy that communicates a deep dissatisfaction for some, if not all, of the choices available to us.

—David Adelman

Refusing care can take many technoskeptical forms. Skepticism enables complex and fluctuating positions in regard to, for example, the digital wellness industry. While, as described earlier, wellness has

become an after the fact justification for the abandonment of collective care, the same cheap or free phone apps and games sold as technologies for productivity, emotional healing and connection, and spiritual restoration actually can engage us meaningfully; sometimes they work. As Catherine Knight Steele described, apps like Shine that center Black women can move us from wellness to wisdom. Thus, the term *technoskepticism* is particularly apt to describe our unstable and sometimes tense relation to the digital that it makes sense for us to take, given how “wellness” technologies amplify, reshape, or extend our wellnenses that came before. Similarly, users have leveraged infrastructures like TikTok to claim self-diagnosis as an affirming push against the digital clinic.

PLATFORM NOSTALGIA: BLACK AND ASIAN STRATEGIC REFUSALS TO FORGET

Nostalgia, the holding close of bygone feelings, objects, and relations, might seem to be the opposite of skepticism or refusal. Yet, as we explained in our analysis of “Before I Let Go,” the willingness to forgo the beloved, to hold in tension our doubts about it with our love for it, is the precondition for both loss and growth. Lately, bad nostalgia for a post-2016 American myth of “manifest destiny” has become married with the dream of a technological utopia powered by a U.S. empire. The last forty years have seen the political far right in the United States engage in campaigns of fear of the Other, a fear wrapped in the cloak of nostalgia. The proliferation of mis- and dis-information via social media platforms has only elevated the possibilities of nostalgia as an extension of white supremacy and other pointed forms of bigotry and as an organizing principle. Both regressive political actors within the United States and external players who wish to sow discontent among the American public have made use of campaigns of nostalgia as a productive strategy of harm. White digital nostalgia in these scenarios manifests as a refusal to accept or acknowledge what is now and what is new, since what is new is forcing a redistribution of power. In this case, nostalgia for a particular kind of past is a productive act. A refusal to let go of platforms and technologies that funnel power away from Black, Brown, and Asian individuals and groups and away from the disabled

needs to be met by technoskepticism, or the belief that technologies are just as likely to create more racist and ableist outcomes as they are to open possibilities. Technoskepticism is the act of holding on, but very loosely, with an eye for contingencies, shifts in feeling and intention, and with an intention to preserve the digital spaces where, for example, Black women thrived as some of the earliest content creators.

For example, Black content creator Jamilah Lemieux established herself during the early days of the blogosphere and has since successfully grown her following on Instagram and on Twitter. Her return to the style and format of writing from a previous era—her refusal to let go of narrative and rhetorical forms from pre-app and pre-mobile blogging—is an example of productive nostalgia both for the individual and community. In her first newsletter dated 2021, Lemieux writes:

I admire writers who are really good at strategizing around their own work. I've developed #content for publications and organizations that was intentional and well-planned, but I've yet to approach my own output in the same way. That's not to say that I've never been strategic as it relates to my writing or My Internet Life; however, "strategy" has never been at the heart of how I've conducted myself online. I can't count the bags that may have cost me, but that's probably a good thing. Honestly, my entire career has been a mostly-happy and sometimes-terrible accident, not unlike the rest of my life thus far. At 36, I can confidently say that this is NOT, I repeat, not the best way to orchestrate one's steps. Or, maybe it is?

Lemieux disavows any kind of strategy when she reverts the format of her writing back to newsletters from tweets or posts. This longer-form writing style was most popular in the earlier days of digital writing. She suggests the move is a happy accident, but this moment of humility and humor does not really highlight her years of expertise as a digital writer and user and her use of productive nostalgia that led her to stick with the older digital forms that suit her and the community she serves through her work. Refusing to go along with the digital present and instead holding onto a productive nostalgia for the past can be liberatory for Black women and others whose radical work has happened online

and continues today. Here and at other points, Lemieux demonstrates how refusal to let go actually arises from an acute awareness of how the affordances of sites like Twitter or Instagram have changed in ways that undercut the collective digital practices of Black online sociality, support, leisure, and pleasure that provided a cultural energy and infrastructure to users' efforts. Because platforms allowed Black creators to self-brand, distribute content rapidly, and build a broad network of followers, it may not feel right to abandon them.

Productivity, which is often tied to efficiency, has become a watchword for neoliberal and austerity economies. When deployed in the digital context, this term often signals the *reduction* of human capacity in favor of computational (once industrial) practices. Moreover, productivity is a byproduct of the Protestant ethos, where devotion to work (and an accompanying distaste for "idle hands" or leisure) is understood as contributing to the common good or to a "rational" pursuit of economic gain. However, we use *productive nostalgia* here to point us instead toward the pleasure that comes of the strategic refusal to comply with a digital present while never losing our hold on our digital past.

Refusing to let go can also be seen in others who strategically deploy nostalgia to protect and archive past artifacts that would otherwise be lost to history. Genres like bedroom TikTok are sites of memory and sometimes of mourning for periods like the '80s, a use of the digital to keep certain artifacts and styles from perishing. It seems that digital technologies such as Pokémon, Machinima, Neopets, and other semi-obsolescent older new media objects provide space for the layering and sampling needed to combine a refusal to let go with a refusal to remain stagnant. Marisa Parham describes these kinds of digital objects as "roughly constituted transmedial assemblages: *signals*—how communities use compressed texts to come into being across time and space; *samples*—cultural performances that both crystallize and iterate signals; and *strokes*—oscillations that break the signal, event-times that capture the truth of the signal's displaced origin."⁹

While this chapter also addresses uncare-ful deployments of nostalgia-driven futures that center whiteness (when care is abstracted and has "gone to bits"), it also finds respite in examples from Black and

Asian care-oriented engagement with the technologically “new.” Care can look like an exuberant embrace of the technologically new when older technologies were inaccessible or too expensive for the Black non-elite, limiting the possibility of storing and capturing Black aesthetics, culture, and joy on devices and media. The ability to have media and media-recorded experiences to be nostalgic about in the first instance points to the unevenness of even talking about something retrievable as “nostalgia” in the digital. On the other side from the user are the hands that made the devices and digital networks, which are largely Asian. Care is making more space for unproductive relations to digital and digital technologies in order to find fleeting joy in meaningless digital interactions, or to refuse the insistence on joy. Care is creating these moments to enjoy the fruits of one’s labor on one’s own terms.

As we argue in Chapter 4, “The Longing for Home: Nostalgia for Digital Platforms,” wanting to return home or to the past can be fraught; refusing the new can empower precisely those whose pasts have not been protected. When Black creative and cultural producers use old and seemingly outdated features to create and sustain digital archives, we can see how their skepticism about the new plays out. Whether it is Solange’s calculation to use her personal retro brand and style to attempt to revive BlackPlanet with her album release, or writers like Jamilah Lemieux and Luvvie Ajayi choosing to intentionally re-deploy newsletters via a listserv instead of releasing work on platforms like Twitter or Patreon, a technoskeptical refusal to let go of the past can showcase expertise in understanding the cyclical nature of media affordances.

Conversely, we also question how refusing nostalgia may push our thinking forward. Is it possible that for the Black, queer, or disabled user and technology researcher, nostalgia may slow our community’s growth and path to developing new ideas and new modes of exchange? In this case, we must refuse nostalgia, even as the allure of “better days” works to convince us to either remain in stasis or revert to an earlier state. Technoskepticism’s willingness to question what feels both new, shiny, and utopian along with the familiar and the comforting arises from the necessities born of lived histories inside and outside the digital.

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