

Introduction

Race can be ontological without being biological, metaphysical without being physical, existential without being essential, shaping one's being without being one's shape.

—Charles Mills (1998, p. xiv)

The Black body has long been a feature—and shibboleth—of articulations and theorizations of Black culture.¹ The materiality of the Black body is easily understood as a benighted canvas for the iniquities and oppressions levied upon it, but its materiality has also led to elaborate, strained, scientific rationales about the legitimacy of race as a social construct. When scholars first sought to understand information technology use by Black folk, the Black body was only legible through its perceived absence: absence from the material, technical, and institutional aspects of computers and society. Over the last half decade, however, Black digital practice has become very much a mainstream phenomenon, even if its expert practitioners rarely receive economic compensation for their brilliance or political compensation for their activism.² But online identity has long been conflated with whiteness, even as whiteness is itself signified as a universal, raceless, technocultural identity. By this I mean that whiteness is what technology does to the Other, not the technology users themselves. The visibility of online Blackness can be partially attributed to the concentration of Black folk in online spaces that are not exclusively our own; we are finally present online in ways that the mainstream is unable to disavow. Imagine, if you will, millions of Black people interacting through networked devices—laptops, computers, smartphones—at once separate and conjoined. This online aggregation and coherence of Blackness online, absent Black bodies, is what inspired this book.

I titled this book *Distributed Blackness* to evoke how Blackness has expertly utilized the internetwork's capacity for discourse to build

out a social, cultural, racial identity. Black online culture and sociality are more easily visualized today thanks not only to the hashtag and other algorithmic means but also to the near infrastructural use of social networking services as well as older online artifacts, such as messaging services, blogs, and bulletin boards, where one could see articulations of Black identity across digital networks. My subtitle, *African American Cybercultures*, speaks to this text's theoretical and rhetorical thinking about how and why Blackness and Black culture are easily and pungently performed, absent embodiment, when mediated by technologies—specifically information technologies, the online, and the digital.

Distributed Blackness is also a reference to the methodology used throughout this text: critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). I devised CTDA as a corrective to normative and analytic research on cultural digital practice. It decenters the Western deficit perspective on minority technology use to instead prioritize the epistemological standpoint of underrepresented groups of technology users. CTDA pulls together multiple disparate data points to conduct a holistic analysis of an information technology artifact and its practices. *Distributed* here refers not only to CTDA's analysis of discourses across websites, services, and platforms—published by the technology's users about their wielding of the technology—but also to its holistic approach to analyzing technology as discourse, practice, and artifact. This approach lends CTDA analytic power to understand how digital practitioners filter their technology use through their cultural identity rather than through some preconceived “neutral” perspective.

Finally, *Distributed Blackness* is a callback to one of the first cultural networked informational Black artifacts: *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (Green, 1941). On first glance, the *Green Book* is just a book—a directory of Black businesses published by Blacks for Blacks long before the internet. Hall (2014) argues for the *Green Book* as a tool to resist postcolonial and postbellum legacies of white racial violence and hegemony (pp. 307–319). I agree but insist that the *Green Book* should also be viewed as one of the first cultural network browsers. The network in this instance was the US highway system—a developing infrastructure tailored for the exponentially growing numbers of automobile owners. As early as the 1910s, Black drivers saw automobile ownership as a pathway

to personal mobility and technological expertise and as a signal of belonging to the middle class, with the attendant properties of racial uplift ideology (Franz, 2004, pp. 131–153). Moreover, one of the hallmarks of post–World War II life in the United States was the spread of “leisure” as an outlet for relaxation, and Blacks were just as eager to share in it as any other American. Like many whites, Blacks began to consider cross-country driving as not only a pathway to leisure activities but also a way to return to their ancestral homes in the South following the Great Migration’s dispersal of Black families across the United States.

In doing so, however, they had to traverse entire states—particularly in the Midwest, where “sundown towns” were most prevalent (Loewen, 2005), but also in the West and Northeast, where local Blacks were mired in state-sanctioned Jim Crow violence and customs. Imagine, then, in spaces where Blacks were already discriminated against, the arrival of affluent “foreign” and unfamiliar Blacks looking for sustenance, fuel, or just a chance to rest. *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was precisely designed to provide these highway “browsers” with a guide to safe spaces that would welcome weary Black travelers and vacationers.

First published in 1936 by Victor Green and continuing through 1967 (albeit under a different name), the *Green Book* featured information garnered from those who drove across the country by necessity: salesmen, athletes, clergy, and entertainers. This singular Jim Crow–era periodical helped Black folk navigate America’s roads by annotating safe waypoints and destinations. It was distributed in part by the United States Travel Bureau and, crucially, by the Standard Oil Company, lending the *Green Book* a national audience. Eventually, the book listed resources available to traveling Blacks across the continental United States as well as locations in Canada, Alaska, the Caribbean, and Mexico.

Arguing for the *Green Book* as an example of distributed Blackness—an informational artifact linking Black information seekers to Black cultural resources across a network—then, seems like a no-brainer. The *Green Book* was the Google (or more appropriately, the Yahoo! Open Directory Project of Black information, since the directory was human-reviewed rather than algorithmically determined) of its time, a search engine for those seeking culturally vital information. These resources, catering to the needs and wants of a technologically enabled mobile Black community, were distributed unequally across the network. Even

as highways and driving were increasingly promoted as “quintessential American” activities, Blacks were often excluded from enjoying them in the same way. The *Green Book* imagined the US highway system as a Black technological network—not as an Afrofuture but as a present-day marvel containing possibilities for joy and for violence—that performed resistance alongside Blackness as the capacity to enjoy leisure even as urban renewal projects used the construction of interstate highways as a means to destroy vibrant Black urban communities. While the internet doesn’t offer the same physical potential for discrimination and racist violence against Black folk, there is still a pressing need for the curation of digital and online resources for Black folk seeking information and “safe spaces.” These spaces range from portal websites like Everything Black, to bulletin board websites like Nappturality, to the pioneering gossip blogs Crunk and Disorderly and Concrete Loop, to the Blackbird browser, to upcoming efforts to create mobile apps. In short, networked information—in the form of resources for identification, community, self-defense, joy, resistance, aesthetics, politics, and more—is essential to Black online identity. How, then, do the internet and digital media mediate Blackness?

The possibilities of Black digital identity, Black digital practices, and Black digital artifacts first came to me upon reading Miller and Slater’s (2000) ethnographic study of Trinidadian internet users. Trinidad and Tobago—a polyglot former English colony in the Caribbean inhabited by people of African, indigenous, Indian, Chinese, and white descent—while tiny, has an immense diasporic population across North America and Europe, yet this has done little to diminish the diaspora’s national and ethnic identity. Over the course of their eleven-year study, Miller and Slater found that the internet became an expression of Trinidadian identity. This finding was (and still is) in direct contrast to bromides about technology forcing users to adapt to mainstream culture and also counters long-standing deficit-based beliefs about people of color and information technologies. Instead, the Trinidadians found ways to make the internet Trinidadian in thought and in deed. Miller and Slater write, “Trinidadians have a ‘natural affinity’ for the internet. They apparently take to it ‘naturally,’ fitting it effortlessly into family, friendship, work and leisure and in some respects they seemed to experience the internet as itself ‘naturally Trinidadian.’ . . . It provided a

natural platform for enacting, on a global stage, core values and components of Trinidadian identity" (p. 2).

This revelation of nonwhite culture manifested through information technology was mind-blowing to me in the era of the digital divide, when many argued that Black Americans were technologically and computationally deficient. The lessons I learned from Miller and Slater, then, are equally applicable to African American uses of information and communication technology: Black folk have a natural affinity for the internet and digital media.

By *natural*, I am by no means arguing that internet use is an “essential” quality of Blackness. Essentialism, for nonwhites, has a long, pejorative history within Western culture; only nonwhite bodies suffer reduction to a perceived intrinsic characteristic. Instead, my claim is pragmatic; Black expressivity is rightfully lauded in literature and in art, but Black linguistic expression is denigrated in modern (i.e., technical and professional) society. Indeed, Black identity is associated with many things, but the internet—or more specifically, the expertise in information and communication technology practice—is not usually one of them.

My claim is ecological: Black folk have made the internet a “Black space” whose contours have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice while also decentering whiteness as the default internet identity. Moreover, I am arguing that Black folks’ “natural internet affinity” is as much about how they understand and employ digital artifacts and practices as it is about how Blackness is constituted within the material (and virtual) world of the internet itself. I am naming these Black digital practices as Black cybersculture.

Black cybersculture can be understood as the protean nature of Black identity as mediated by various digital artifacts, services, and practices both individually and in concert—or Blackness as

- an informational identity premised on
- libidinal online expressions and practices of joy and catharsis about being Black
- expressed through semiotic and material relationships between content and hardware and code performances and cultural phenomena online as Black cybersculture.

At the intersection of the digital and Black culture, Black cybersculture offers a transformative cultural philosophy of representation, technoculture, politics, and everyday life.

Blackness Online

Black folk have been online inhabitants nearly as long as the commercial internet has existed. It is only in the last decade, however, that their digital practices can be seen as a reimagining of what information spaces can be in the West—a cultural virtual space like that of China, India, and Nigeria, to name a few. I’m not referring to the political and civic prowess of Black Lives Matter, even though many consider their online activism to be the pinnacle of Black digital practice. Instead, I am much more interested in the ways Black folk use the internet as a space to extol the joys and pains of everyday life—the hair tutorials, the dance videos, the tweetstorms, and more—using its capacity for multimedia expression and networked sociality to craft a digital practice that upends technocultural beliefs about how information, computers, and communication technologies should be used.

I should distinguish here between Black cybersculture and Black culture online. Research on Black culture online examines Black arts, literature, multimedia phenomena, artifacts, and audiences, whereas research on Black cybersculture interrogates an ontological perspective of what Blackness means for technology use and, occasionally, design. There is an inevitable overlap between the two; for example, Black artists and creatives are often hyperaware of how their art contravenes American/Western aesthetics. Keith Obadike’s “Blackness for Sale” eBay page is a canonical example of Black art being deployed as a critique of technology and of whiteness. However, research on Black culture online enters the domain of Black cybersculture when it incorporates respectability politics into evaluations of Black online culture—that is, when writers, academics, and pundits find ways to criticize “inappropriate” Black technology usage. In later chapters, I will cover respectability and Black online virtue as frames of Black digital practice in greater detail.

Despite protestations about color-blindness or neutrality, the internet should be understood as an enactment of whiteness through the interpretive flexibility of whiteness as information. By this, I mean that

white folks' communications, letters, and works of art are rarely understood as white; instead, they become universal and are understood as "communication," "literature," and "art." This slippage allows for a near infinite variety of signifiers for linguistic and aesthetic concepts—absent the specific racial modifier centering them in white American culture. From this perspective, Western technoculture has an inordinate role in shaping the internet experience in many online environments. "General interest" websites, apps, and social media services target unnamed, unraced, and often ungendered users but inevitably are represented through white bodies and white cultural commonplaces.

This interpretive flexibility allows whiteness to operate paradoxically as the individual and as humanity—to be "spirited" and in control of the body and other bodies (Dyer, 1997). In doing so, interpretive flexibility undergirds one of this manuscript's claims about Western technoculture: the internet's base purpose is to behave as a rational, productive information space because of its association with whiteness. Even when online whiteness becomes unruly and deadly, Western beliefs drawn from classical liberalism serve as warrants for individualist—never to be understood as cultural—white digital practices such as incivility, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and violence in the name of "protecting" the freedom of speech and property rights.

"If You See a Fork in the Road, Take It": Double Consciousness and Black Cyberspace

This text is deeply invested in the material, technical, and social multiplicity inherent in Black cyberspace. These arguments would not be possible without Du Bois's (1903) canonical formulation of the interweaving strands of Black embodiment and American identity. In that vein, the doubleness in this text takes form in the interweaving of a methodological approach to examining culture online with a theoretical approach spanning critical race theory, libidinal economy, and science and technology studies. This book is best read as a journey, moving from my maturing work on Black digital artifacts and discourses to a more interpretive, theoretical approach to Black digital practice. It marks a way station (never an end point) for my thinking about how Black folk "make it do what it dew" on these internet streets. In doing

so, I sketch out and fill in blank spots vis-à-vis Blackness online, from the infrastructural utopia of “bridging the digital divide,” to the elision of Black digital practice in the BlackVoices/BlackPlanet era, to the ongoing conceptual lacunae normalizing whiteness as cultural information use in the English-speaking West. My approach is methodological and theoretical—a doubly conscious corrective to Western misconceptions of Black subjectivity and agency in online spaces.

“I Count Two Guns”: Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis and Libidinal Economy

Methodology arises from epistemology, ontology, and axiology. How we know what we know, how we know what is true, and how we know what is good provide the tools for examining the world around us. Thus CTDA is the organizing framework for my arguments throughout the rest of the book. My training as an interdisciplinary scholar—whose boundaries cross over new media studies, internet research, information studies, communication, ethnic studies, and even sociology and anthropology—makes it necessary to describe *how* I devised the explanatory power of CTDA. The ontological aspect, or the *what*, is (and isn’t) the technological artifact; it’s the *assemblage* of the artifact and its practices and, importantly, the technocultural beliefs about the artifact as evinced by its users. The *why*, or the critical axiological rationale for CTDA, is immediately apparent to those interested in analyzing identity, difference, and the digital.

CTDA interrogates culture-*as*-technology and culture-*of*-technology, examining information technologies alongside discourses about them. CTDA is innovative for two reasons. The first is its holistic inquiry into tech artifacts, practices, and users. Reducing technology analysis to the design and function of artifacts obscures the beliefs embedded by the designers, systems, infrastructures, and the users themselves. The second, and most important, innovation is the centering of technology use by marginalized groups within their own understandings of themselves rather than unmarked racial and socioeconomic standards of “modern” technology use. CTDA is designed to be open to any critical cultural theoretical concept—as long as the same approach is applied to the semiotics of the information and computer technology (ICT)

hardware and software under examination as well as the discourses of its users. This openness features prominently in the organization of this text, as each chapter utilizes CTDA but invokes different Black cultural concepts to center its respective conceptual framework. For example, chapter 3 on Black Twitter draws on Black discursive identity in the form of “signifyin,” while chapter 5 delves into Black respectability politics as a frame for Black digital practice.

Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis in Brief

CTDA serves as the organizing principle of this book. Many of the insights throughout would not have been possible without CTDA’s conceptual frameworks and a systematic critical cultural analysis linking Black culture to disparate information technologies and digital practices. This stems in part from CTDA’s cultural imperative; the conceptual framework allows for considerable latitude in selecting cultural concepts and theories designed to represent the standpoints of underrepresented users. There’s also an element of analytical flexibility; CTDA was designed to evaluate a wide range of digital artifacts and practices. Each chapter is a showcase for CTDA’s utility, from covering various aspects of the digital artifact under examination to integrating a discussion about that artifact as part of a holistic analysis.

CTDA was designed to counter the epistemological drawbacks of normative, instrumental, and theoretical approaches to studying information technology. To do so, it operates as a discourse-hermeneutic analysis (Wodak, 2000) of the practices and users of information and communication technologies. An essential part of any CTDA analysis is the attention paid to the material substratum underpinning the interactions of people “through, around, and with technologies” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 450). CTDA does this by operationalizing the computational object as a discourse (technology as a “text”) to be read for the mediation of the discursive actions enacted as digital interfaces and associated practices. As such, a CTDA analysis “reads” graphical user interface (GUI) design, narrative, and context of use against the discourse of its users.

An equally essential component of CTDA is a critical analysis of the ways people manage technological constraints on action, agency, and being (the “technocultural” aspect). People follow the interactions

and practices mapped out by the designers and engineers who code the technology, but they also find ways to create additional pathways and practices to represent themselves within that technology—an excess energy that helps make the technology part of their everyday lives. In doing so, they draw on their cultural, environmental, and social contexts to make meaning from their technological interactions. CTDA's hermeneutic approach thus interrogates ideological influences within the technological artifact, within the practices incurred through the artifact's design, and within the discourses of that technology's users.

Libidinal Economy

This chapter also includes an overview of *libidinal economy*, which I use extensively in the second half of the book. Libidinal economy offers a powerful counter to rationalistic, modernist (and postmodernist) theories used to understand both Black agency and information technology uses. These theories, when addressing information technology, are themselves often beholden to pejorative beliefs about nonwhite users, leading either to deficit models of technology use or, conversely, to glorifying nonwhite capacities for resistance. Libidinal economy makes clear the affective tensions undergirding modernity and Western technoculture and provides a path toward conceptualizing Black technology use as a space for mundanity, banality, and the celebration of making it through another day.

The libidinal is closely related to affect. Massumi (2002) argues for affect as apart from cultural context and prior to an indexed referent. Ahmed (2013), on the other hand, situates affect (as emotion) as an orientation between things (and bodies)—relations that shape the contours of social imaginaries. The libidinal is also integral to cultural contexts; it is the value-laden tension underlying the beliefs within which we operate *where* we operate. Like Ahmed, I argue that the libidinal illuminates social imaginaries while also undergirding social realities. The libidinal is neither precognition nor preintention. Instead, it can be understood as the combustion powering the engine—a visceral, powerful, and necessary component in any figuration. It is infrastructure, invisible to our perceptions just like the materials and processes we pass by or utilize every day—until a rupture occurs.

In this way, I contend that the libidinal can also be understood as *pathos*. Pathos, the most misconstrued sibling behind *logos* and *ethos*, must be interpreted as the speaker's mastery of the shared cultural commonplaces and energies that will support arguments made to an audience. For example, an argument about how Black poor folk don't deserve to spend money on luxuries like iPads is not an argument about money, although conservatives certainly frame it that way. Instead, it is an argument about what money signifies—whether the poor possess the capacity for pleasure—contextualized by the subjects' race and socioeconomic status and the speaker's and audience's beliefs about technology (technoculture). Moreover, the conceptualization of technology as leisure—particularly with respect to Apple products—also signifies how certain goods and practices are deemed “appropriate” for consumption by certain folk. Thus the explanatory power of libidinal economy vitalizes this text's analysis through the term *jouissance*, which represents “an excess of life,” often sexual (the libido), visceral, and subconscious. Importantly, *libidinal economy* highlights the difference between discourse and praxis, especially with regard to technology's promises of progress and innovation. *Affect*, for this text, undersells the intimate power of the libidinal.

I came to libidinal economy through the works of Frank Wilderson (2010), Jared Sexton (2010), and Fred Moten (2013), prominent theorists of Afro-pessimism and the powerful concept of antiblackness. Their argument, broadly explained, is that antiblackness connotes the incommunicability/incommensurability of Blackness to the West—aesthetically and politically. Wilderson and Sexton specifically reference antiblackness as a libidinal economy powering Western arts and literature. Antiblackness and Afro-pessimism, however, are strikingly devoid of the creative and inventive capacity of Black culture. As I will explain later, this text instead turns to Afro-optimism and the standpoint epistemology of Black pathos to ground my explanations and theorization of Black digital practice.

“Do You Know the Importance of a Skypager?!”: A Road Map to Studying Black Technoculture

Gramsci understood that [epochal] concepts have to be applied to specific historical social formations, to particular societies at specific stages in the

development of capitalism, the theorist is required to move from the level of “mode of production” to a lower, more concrete, level of application.

—Stuart Hall (1986, p. 7)

As Hall notes, it is crucial as a theorist to make concepts that change how we think about the world as accessible, relevant, and concrete as possible, especially when they are applied to specific cultural moments. Chapter 1 of this book unpacks the concepts grounding CTDA and, by extension, the entire project. I am heavily influenced by introductions to translated works by European scholars, where alert translators offer prospective readers insight into the thinking behind the explanatory power of the concepts to come. While it may read a bit like a literature review, outlining my inspirations in this way is a marker of critical qualitative scholarship; I cannot assume everyone is aware of the authors and concepts here. I must admit to having been cautioned that you, dear reader, may already be aware of the concepts ahead, but I can assure you they have never been assembled in this fashion with the intent of analyzing race, the digital, and technoculture. For example, this text’s definition of Blackness *qua* racial identity begins with a sociological concept of ethnic identity, where ethnicity is understood as the agreement between in-group and out-group members on what the in-group says, does, and believes. I chose this formulation to relinquish the Middle Passage epistemology (Henry, 2006; Sharpe, 2013; Wright, 2015) often used to define Blackness and also to allow Black folk—inescapably connected to the concept of race in the West—to define themselves, in their own voices, as members of a multitudinous culture without being reduced to the political or historical positions proffered by academics.

This move allows two signal contributions to the study of Black internet use, extending Du Bois’s canonical concept of “double consciousness” to digital practice. The first contribution frees articulations of online identity from essentialized notions of Black identity tied to physiognomy, as markers of human deviance, or as political entities based on their resistance to white racial ideology and neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on libidinal economy (Jared Sexton, cited in Wilderson, 2010), I argue that Black digital practice is mediated through, but cannot be fully explained by, the productivity and efficiency paradigms

of modernity and digital technoculture. Instead, Black digital identity draws in equal measure on expressions of joy and pain in everyday life in American racial ideology, which are articulated as cultural critiques and enacted online. As such, Black digital identity can be political, caustic, or both, and in so doing, it troubles utopian ideals of the internet as an apolitical, rational space.

This second contribution of double consciousness to this research is a discursive and informational formulation of networked online identity. Networked online identity makes internal Black communal discussions visible to an audience that is primed to receive and respond to those struggles while also making them visible to an audience of out-group members who might not be directly addressed but are always present as signifiers. Networks, bandwidth, interfaces, hardware, and environment mediate social performances of online identity, but the ways in which racial identity affects those performances are understudied.

Chapters 2 and 3 employ CTDA to establish evidence for a matrix of Black cybersculture by conducting inquiries into beliefs about Black uses of information and communication technology. Studies of cultural online performance must incorporate *both* the intended and the unintended audience's technologically and culturally mediated reception of that performance. These chapters examine intersections of race and the digital, but libidinal economies and Black technoculture do not feature prominently. Instead, they offer insight into the heterogeneity of Black online existences. Examining Black digitality mediated by the interface rather than focusing on remediated content posted online fosters an inductive, empirical approach to Black technocultural practice and the digital performance of Blackness. In chapter 2, I turn to the Blackbird browser, which is specifically targeted to Black users, to unpack how software applications and beliefs shape Black identity from a technocultural framework. Web browsers led the Web 2.0 charge into the personalization of the internet's vast content; their interfaces and practices encourage beliefs about the web as simultaneously universal and individualized. These individualized perspectives, shaped by the availability of content and popular narratives about internet use, tend to default to representations of whiteness in code and in content. I argue here that racial digital practices can and do shape information design and behaviors and introduce Black users' beliefs about their role

and presence in information technology as a metric for technology analysis.

Moving from browsers to microblogs and social networking services, chapter 3 answers a question that's rarely been considered: What would a Black online network look like? Amiri Baraka (1965) presciently asked a similar question in the mid-1960s: Could information technologies possess a "spirit as emotional construct that can manifest as expression as art or technology"? My answer to both questions is Black Twitter. Black Twitter manifests style-in-space; in the raceless void of social networking services that are premised on "interests" and "friends," Black Twitter deploys Black discursive identity and intentionality to vivify the service as an emotional construct centered on catharsis and invention. This chapter argues that Twitter can be understood as an online venue for shared pathos and catharsis due, in large part, to the contributions of Black culture and cultural content. By introducing ritual catharsis as a meaning-making strategy for computer-mediated communication, I lay the groundwork for employing a libidinal economic approach to Black digital practice.

Turning to libidinal economy for the remainder of the book offers insights into broader genres of Black digital practice and discourses than simply evoking "use" or "content." In doing so, I find that Black digital practice reveals a complicated mix of technological literacy, discursive identity, and cultural critique. By making libidinal economy explicit in CTDA's conceptual framework, I illuminate the digital mediations of Black communities' political, technocultural, and historical commonplaces. These commonplaces are here articulated as three frames, or *topoi*, shaping Black digital practice—ratchetry, racism, and respectability.

Chapter 4 examines the first two frames of Black digital practice: ratchetry and racism. I keep them together because racism and ratchetry are inextricably interrelated tensions pulling on Black identity, and I consider these two frames to be incomplete articulations of the libidinal economic tensions within Du Bois's double consciousness. Writing about the two frames in the same chapter will, I hope, encourage a dialectic about how it feels to enact Blackness and how Blackness feels when acted upon. In the vein of public health studies, this chapter focuses on how racism affects Black folk by examining online responses to "racial

“battle fatigue” as well as conceptualizing how online Black enclaves can manage racists without encountering direct racism from nonwhites.

Chapter 5 argues for framing online Black respectability adherents as dogmatic digital practitioners who legislate Black behavior by promoting a specific set of moral virtues in and around digital practice. The libidinal tensions between racism and ratchetry overdetermine the libidinal frame of Black respectability. By this I mean that respectability, in its quest to be modern and thus fit into white American culture, overcorrects for ratchetry and undertheorizes racism to coerce Black folk into becoming civil subjects in a white supremacist regime. Thus it deserves its own chapter.

The final chapter is a provocation rather than a true conclusion. The preceding chapters place Black folk at the center of their own information technology use rather than at the periphery, fighting to be heard. Chapter 6 furthers this work to extend the possibility of libidinal economies of information technology to build out a matrix of Black cultural beliefs about technology and self, or a Black technocultural matrix. Afrofuturism is rightly understood as a cultural theory about Black folks’ relationship to technology, but its futurist perspective lends it a utopian stance that doesn’t do much to advance our understandings of what Black folk are doing now. This chapter, then, articulates my concern about Black digital practice as vitality, energy, and occasionally, joy. While these libidinal impulses may become commodified or surveilled, the embodied cognition expressed preexists the digital platforms on which they are visible, published, and deemed appropriate for consumption.

“What Does It All Mean?”

I began this introduction by referencing *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, which, upon reflection, is an appropriate metaphor for describing this book. While the internet is not nearly as physically dangerous as the roads and highways traveled by Black motorists between 1930 and 1970, it is still a largely uncharted space within which Blackness manifests for safety, leisure, and joy. These uncharted spaces of the internet, like the areas between American roads and byways of the early twentieth century, are marked by whiteness. To understand the inroads that have

been made by Black digital practitioners and designers, then, it is necessary to interrogate not only the spaces they have made their own but the beliefs behind the networked materials and practices that made their efforts necessary.

Along the way, however, I realized that online Blackness wasn't always clearly defined. This book also shows my evolution in that regard; I began with Du Bois because one *should* begin discussions of Blackness by citing the father of American sociology and critical race studies. From Du Bois, I dialed into rhetorics of Black discourse-as-identity, citing the works of Geneva Smitherman, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. As I continued researching, I found and incorporated philosophers of race such as George Yancy and Charles Mills to deepen my arguments about the metaphysics of Blackness; I later included arguments by Fred Moten, Frank Wilderson, and Jared Sexton to further my arguments for the libidinal, rather than political and economic, possibilities of Blackness. Without the arguments made by Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Francis White, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, this book would be woefully undertheorized.

In the end, I believe I've crafted compelling arguments for beginning science and technology studies from racial and cultural grounds rather than limiting analyses to the technologies themselves. I'm not saying this as an "all cultures matter" argument; this book wouldn't have been written if I didn't love my Blackness and that of others first and foremost! Instead, I'm noting the applicability of a culturally oriented conceptual approach so other scholars—especially white researchers—will see that cultural particularity offers powerful insights into technology use and design that color-blind, instrumental, or political-economic approaches do not. Happy reading!