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Distributing Blackness

Ayo Technology! Texts, Identities, and Blackness

This text situates Black culture within a Western—specifically American—ideological context, where Blackness operates as a cultural and social nadir in the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013). Black information technology use highlights Black technical and cultural capital while disrupting the white, male, middle-class norms of Western technoculture. Black digital practice challenges these norms through displacement, performativity, pathos, and the explicit use of Black cultural commonplaces. These practices are optimized for communicative efficiency on their respective media, drawing from a pleasure in creative linguistic expression and the historical, discursive practices and experiences of evading white racial surveillance in plain sight. An externality of Black digital practice—thanks to the codifying, broadcast, and textual qualities of networked digital media—is the uptake of Black digital content by out-group audiences. Accordingly, Black digital practice has become hypervisible to mainstream white culture and the world through positive, negative, and political performances of Black cultural aesthetics and, more recently, social media activism. This is in marked contrast to historical media portrayals of Blackness, where the white racial frame positioned Blacks as bestial, deviant spectacles or as culturally and mentally impoverished wights. It also differs from popular and academic accounts of the Information Age, which either elided Black participation in digital design and use or rendered Blacks as unable to surmount the digital divide due to their essential lack of material, technical, or cultural resources.

For the few of us researching Black folk online during the first decade of the new millennium, there were only brief, isolated examples of how Blackness could operate in online spaces.[1] BlackPlanet (est. 1999) was one of the first Black online meccas to receive sustained

scholarly attention (Byrne, 2007; Banks, 2006), but by the time much of that research was published (and read!), BlackPlanet had been pushed aside—first by Myspace, then Facebook. Banks (private communication, May 13, 2017) notes that pioneering websites like NetNoir (est. 1995) and BlackVoices (est. 1997) sustained Black online communities for only a few short years before faltering. The realities of media consolidation, site maintenance, and server costs led to many of these early Black online destinations either being bought out or withering on the vine. In their place, Black entertainment and political blogs did enormous work to grow Black online communities between 2005 and 2010 (e.g., Jack and Jill Politics, Prometheus6, WhatAboutOurDaughters, AfroBella, and Racialicious), but blogs were overtaken (and subsumed by social media platforms) by the surge of attention to social networking services. In today's milieu, Black digitality is often referenced by platform or service (e.g., Black Twitter and the "Gram" [Black Instagram]).

In the aggregate, Black websites are labeled as niche online spaces in part because of the technocultural belief that Black folk lack the capacity for "appropriate" internet practices. Historically, these sites were difficult to conceptualize as fully formed Black cybercultures for a number of other reasons—namely, their ephemerality, the still vast numbers of Black folk who hadn't gotten online, and the unnoticed growth of Black online reflexivity and interiority. This is true even for my Black Twitter research. I researched Black Twitter before the murder of Trayvon Martin and before Ferguson. At the time, I was intent on fleshing out the research into Blackness and the digital, celebrating moments of Black online culture in the process. It felt imperative to examine Black culture's mediation by a service that seemed ephemeral and niche even with respect to its then burgeoning user-generated practices of second-screen shared media viewing and political activism. In that long-ago moment of the first dot-com hype, too many social networking services and other Silicon Valley darlings had crashed and burned—Path, Dodgeball, and so on—for me to think of Black Twitter as anything but a momentous yet momentary marvel.

Identity as the Tension between the Self and the Social

This warrant (and the next) emerged out of my need to explain racial and cultural identity without relying on an essential quality of Blackness

or on the materiality of Black phenotypical qualities. As I began formulating arguments for this book, I realized I also needed to argue for an internet identity that was not dependent on materiality—neither the ownership of an internet-enabled device nor the virtual manifestation of the web page. I have argued across my research stream that written text is the preeminent mode of identity creation and maintenance across online and digital spaces—even with the rise of image-oriented social network services (SNS) such as Instagram and Snapchat—so I needed to develop warrants for precisely how discourse and semiosis work to fix identities in physical, political, and virtual spaces.

The internet's interactivity and archival capacities provide interesting spaces within which to articulate identity. In these areas, digital text and multimedia—information—become the meaning-making substrates from which we understand individuals and groups. Goffman's (1959) formulation of identity as conveyed through "expressions given" and "expressions given off" (p. 4) is manifest in digital practice and online media, where profiles, likes, and status posts are equated to representations of the self. Where once people relied on memory and anecdotal experience to fix individual identity in time and space, the internet provides an endless archive of identity performance—or as Black online culture calls it, "the receipts."

Cultural online identity is trickier (for me) to argue for, however. While websites and social media services construct individual identities for internet and computer users through affiliation and practice, group identity is constrained by the technological environment in which it occurs. Thus we easily group Twitter users or LinkedIn users—or alternatively, email users or short-message service (SMS) users—but these are communities of practice, which may offer a social collectivity but only a weak cultural one. This is not the place for a history of the concept of community in internet studies, but suffice it to say that Ferdinand Tonnies's ([1887] 1999) concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, along with Benedict Anderson's (2006) "imagined communities," have had an oversized effect on the way internet communities are argued for. Both concepts have some place in my research stream—how could they not?—but my warrant for group and cultural identity instead draws on sociological and philosophical perspectives on race and identity.

As I began collecting my thoughts about Black cultural online identity for this text, I was reminded that all identities are racial identities; the digital is a mediator of embodiment and identity, not an escape from it. For example, how exactly does one identify white online identity? Whiteness is often conflated with computer use. It's easier (and tricky) to argue for Black internet identity based on its differences from white digital practice, but as USC[2] found out, Black people are *very* concerned to not be conceptualized as a "low class, undifferentiated mass" (Du Bois, 1940) of computer users (Newitz, 2014; Callahan, 2014). As Tate (2011) writes, there is much that needs to be said about "how it is that racial objects become raced, gendered and sexualized subjects through . . . racialized imaginaries, and everyday race performativity" (p. 94).

The warrant "identity as tension between self and social" supports a cultural formulation of networked online identity. Networks, bandwidth, interfaces, hardware, and environment mediate social performances of online identity, but how racial identity affects those social performances is understudied. The effects are bidirectional; an examination of cultural online performance must incorporate both the intended and unintended audience's technologically and culturally mediated reception of that performance. This has not always been the case in internet and new media research.

This final point deserves elaboration. Internet and new media studies have historically proceeded with the presumption that disembodiment and distance render potential digital interlocutors as an imaginary audience. The Black community, as understood through Du Bois's double consciousness, has never had the luxury of pretending that their interlocutors were imaginary. The in-group interlocutor was necessary as a warrant for a communitarian human identity. Meanwhile, the community's interactions with the out-group interlocutor—if heard or seen—could and often did result in deadly consequences. Networked online identity distributes internal Black community discussions, rendering them visible to an audience who is primed to receive and respond to those struggles. Networked Black online identity also makes Black community discourses visible as a textual and multimedia archive to out-group audiences; these audiences are not always directly addressed in internal Black discourses but are always present as signifiers.

Race has always already been an informational group identity, designating class and cultural capital (or the deliberate denial thereof). In the case of Blackness, the group identity is applied indiscriminately to denigrate individual bodies, whereas whiteness operates as an individual identity and as a designation for "people" and humanity. One sees this happen in the context of internet and computer use: the default internet identity is anecdotally white, male, and middle class, but there is surprisingly little research on how internet practice enacts these normative identity markers. Jessie Daniels's (2009, 2013) groundbreaking research on white supremacist websites affixes an extreme racial and racist identity to white digital practice, but the vast majority of new media and internet research references white bodies without remarking on their whiteness as a constituent factor for their internet practice. Identity emerges in discourse through the shared communication of concepts, which are encoded and decoded through cultural and social signifiers. Even coherent displays of identity—such as those performed and visible on-screen when examining virtual spaces—rely on interaction and ideological constraints. From this perspective, I argue that whiteness's interpretive flexibility and hegemonic positioning render it as a technical identity even across the technical incoherence of multiple platforms and services.

By postulating that identity is the tension between the self and the social, I can examine the tensions between the digital as an avatar of white technical expertise and Black sociality, performativity, and agency. Because I'm arguing for Blackness in the context of American culture, arguing for identity as socially constituted allows me to contextualize the ideological apparatus through which Black identity came to be.

Black Bodies, Blackness, and Black Culture

Racial online identity, for this text, gets dematerialized and reconstituted both as a discursive-social relationship *and* as a code-content-hardware relationship—all while enacted by Black embodied existence. This is Blackness as an "informational identity," a doubly conscious figuration of Black discursive identity and digital practice. As mentioned, my definition of Blackness qua racial identity stems from Du Bois's "double consciousness." Tal (1996) cogently observes that double consciousness

offers a conceptually rich approach for cyberculture researchers examining identity in virtual spaces; Du Bois's concept addresses community and alienation experienced by the same body/person. While Tal does not specifically reference cyberculture scholars of color writing about online people of color, my research incorporates her admonition.

To flesh out Tal's claim about cyberculture, double consciousness, and Blackness, I incorporated Hughes's ([1971] 1993) contention that ethnic identity is to be studied by examining the relations between groups co-existing within the society rather than assuming that a group can be studied without reference to others. That is, it "it takes more than one ethnic group to make ethnic relations" (p. 155). This observation repositions double consciousness away from observable differences between Blacks and whites, instead focusing on how individuals learn the realities and the fictions of their position as a member of an ethnic group (p. 156). It also allows for the incorporation of the digital as the relation, which has been essential to my critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) of race and digital practice. That is, while internet users bring offline ideologies to bear upon their digital discourses, the digital is the mediator, the enactment, and the performance of the relationship between Blackness and whiteness. Finally, this move allows conceptions of Blackness to be freed 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. It does not, however, leave Black bodies behind.

Following Robert Gooding-Williams's (1998) admonition that there is a difference between the Black body and Blackness, this second warrant is my definition of Black culture: *Blackness as a dynamic core of narrative gravity (pace Yancy) sustained through intentional, libidinal, historical, and imaginative Black agency in the context of navigating American racial ideology.* My approach to digital identity takes on additional salience when studying Black bodies and Black culture. Previously, I mentioned whiteness's interpretive flexibility, which is premised on a pejorative fixity imposed by the materiality of Black bodies onto Black culture. Blackness anchors whiteness in the West and in American culture by serving as the nadir of white racial epistemology and ontology. Morrison (1993), in writing about the American literary imagination, argues similarly in her claim for American Africanism, where

Africanism stands for "the denotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning" (p. 7).

This quote animates my claim for (online) discourse's figuration of online identity. I am, like most Black academics writing about Black identity, still enamored of Du Bois's formulation of double consciousness. I have employed it in some form or another across my entire research stream, but not always for the same reasons. Originally, I utilized double consciousness to illustrate how Black folk, in the course of their everyday existence, were always already deeply enmeshed in the kind of virtual existence and social alienation that cyberculture theorists of the early aughts were so ready to proclaim as that new-new. I now see double consciousness slightly differently: double consciousness expresses Blackness as a discursive, informational identity, flitting back and forth in the virtual space between a Black communal context and a white supremacist categorial context. The virtuality of race offline extends my argument that Blackness "double voices" in virtual online spaces, adding a technical-technological-digital dimension to Black identity.

Thus the interpellation of Blackness in digital spaces can be understood as intentional and agentive. In contrast, Blackness in offline spaces is often hailed deliberately or inadvertently by white racial ideology to affix Black bodies at the bottom of a social and cultural order. This should be uncontroversial, but it's a necessary step for arguing about Blackness in online and digital milieus.

Let me offer an example: In my research on Black Twitter, I argued that Black Twitter hashtags brought that digital space to mainstream attention, where it became understood as a Black social public. But even then, Black Twitter practitioners continued making Twitter "do whut it dew"—using cultural commonplaces, digital affordances, and digital sociality to build out a culturally coherent digital practice. My concern was to separate out the social from the cultural and to highlight the contributions of Blackness to digital practice. Black Twitter's agency manifests through Twitter as a discursive digital social public. In this I am inspired by Ian Hacking's (2002) "dynamic nominalism," where he argues that "a kind of person comes into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented" (p. 106). This is not a refutation of Black online existence prior to Twitter; I'd be foolish to repudiate my own research.

Instead, Twitter's status as a reputable information technology (precarious though it may be) mediates Black culture, reframing Blackness as a source of digital expertise despite Black culture's signification as the nadir of American technoculture and racial ideology.

Black cyberculture directly refutes "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Marwick and boyd argue that it is impossible to differentiate self-presentation strategies on a service like Twitter (or any combination of social networking services). But if anything, context collapse is better understood as a descriptor of white racial ideology and identity. What Marwick and boyd are referencing is the collapse of categorial identity, or what Rawls (2000) references as white folks' display of hierarchical identities designed to reveal labor status and individualism. Individualist identities are constrained by the informational scale necessary for the success of SNS; thus these identities could be understood as collapsing under the coercive instrumentality of self-presentation afforded by social media profiles. But individualism is a perk that white folk have long reserved for themselves and denied to others—that is, Marwick and boyd overlook another manner in which context collapse could be better understood: as stereotype.

As Du Bois writes in *Dusk of Dawn*, Blacks are considered "a low class, undifferentiated mass" by American culture, so Black folk have long had to manage cultural multiplicity (double consciousness) in a cultural context where Blackness had to manifest against the context collapse of white supremacist ideology—where overlap was criminalized or barely possible (e.g., interracial marriage, or even passing for white). Part of the pleasure of living while Black is the daily contravention of expectations and stereotypes even when we know negative expectations are levied against us anyway. In his presidential address to the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association, Isajiw (1977) argued that ethnicity has important affective dimensions. He cited Rose and Rose, who wrote that race "involves not only a recognition that because of one's ancestry one is a member of a racial or religious group, and a recognition that the majority group defines one as belonging to that racial or religious group it also involves a positive desire to identify oneself as a member of a group and a feeling of pleasure when one does so" (p. 80). This is the jouissance that informs Blackness and, by extension, Black digital practice.

Blackness—in the guise of Black digital practice—opens the "Black box" of the digital to show that all along, culture has warranted information and communication technology use. I argue that Black facility with digital artifacts and practices displays a technical-cultural identity defying technocultural beliefs of Black primitiveness. Indeed, Blackness brings a particularized coherence to digital practice that affords my claim for Blackness as a normal digital identity. My claim for Black cyberculture builds a compelling vision of Blackness as an informational identity that avoids the essentialization of Black cultural identity despite the hegemonic influence of Western racial and technocultural ideology. In the sections that follow, I discuss the concepts powering the analyses of digital artifacts throughout the text, perceived through the lens and practices of Black cyberculture.

(Information) Technology as Text

At this stage of internet and new media studies, it might seem condescending to argue for operationalizing digital technologies as texts. After all, cultural and media studies scholars regularly conduct close readings of texts enframed by media artifacts; that methodology is well represented in humanist and qualitative research on internet, new media, and digital phenomena. My CTDA approach asks that internet and new media researchers "read" the mediating artifact—the interface, client, hardware, software, and protocols—as a text. This happens in my work as a hermeneutic of the cultural and social influences on design but can also operate as a semiosis of the technology's communication of its needs and uses. This section serves as a warrant and as a reflexive moment to explain why this is important for understanding Black online cyberculture.

Here I pull from Woolgar's (1991) thesis that technologies should be read as texts, which buttresses my rationale for a cultural and media studies approach to interpreting information technologies. Woolgar notes, "Readings of technologies are accomplished both by technologist subjects *and by the analyst*" (p. 39; emphasis original). This is an epistemological standpoint; the reflexivity directly connects my technology research to my beliefs and practices as a critical race theorist. The analyses and readings I conduct are as constitutive of the technology as the readings and

interpretations conducted by the technology users I study. My subject position as a Black male information technology researcher has much to do with how I study my natal community's use of technology; I have long been observant of the ways in which information technologies permeate Black communities, even (or especially) in their absence.

While the internet today is easily understood as a technologically constructed and mediated web of communication and sociality, when I first began studying the online doings of Black folk soon after September 11, 2001, those understandings were not as widespread. Computer-mediated communication researchers were still largely focused on Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs) and MUDs, object oriented (MOOs) while social informatics was driven by studies of institutions and computer use. While individual scholars (Lisa Nakamura, Judith Donath, Anna Everett, Lori Kendall, Sherry Turkle, Ananda Mitra, and Janet Murray) were penning important texts investigating internet culture and sociality (Nakamura, Everett, Kendall, Turkle, Donath, Mitra), the academy overall was only just marshaling the disciplinary resources it needed to delve into the phenomena arising from the commercial internet's introduction in 1996—a task that was complicated by the internet's recovery from the dot-com crash of 1999.

Meanwhile, the terms *Web 2.0* and *social media* had only recently been coined for the new types of sociality and digital practice emerging online in 2001 (O'Reilly, 2005). At the same time, weblogging became characterized by platform-based software rather than hand-coded websites, leading to astronomical growth. Prototypical social networks like BlackPlanet and Friendster also coalesced during this moment, while chat and SMS communication steadily grew in mindshare. I believe that lowered barriers to internet practice, coupled with the growing standardization of content platforms (less hand-coded HTML), encouraged academics to study emerging internet communities and subcultures, but most did so with only marginal attention to the meaning-making strategies of the artifacts and protocols being used by those same communities and subcultures.

Fortunately, social informatics shares a conceptual space with computer-supported collaborative work, computer-mediated communication, and later, community informatics. Collectively, scholars in these disciplines take an empirical approach to the specificities of computer

use, interface design, and information behaviors, and they collect this information to assess how users in a social context utilize computers. This instrumental approach to information technology often elides cultural[3] factors such as race or gender. Escaping this instrumental conundrum requires a different understanding of technology as well as a revised epistemological and methodological stance to unpack how culture affects technology use and design. Ronald Day (2007) argues that social informatics has three strands: normative, analytic, and critical. In response to Day's argument, my research builds out an interpretive critical approach to social informatics, pulling from science and technology studies and cultural studies.

This text operates based on a triadic formulation of technology drawn from Arnold Pacey (1984) and also found in the work of Clifford Christians (1989) and Ivan Illich (1973)—namely, technologies should be understood as having three aspects: material, organizational, and cultural. Pacey's original concept located technology practice as a part of the material aspect, but I chose to instead rephrase *organization* as *practice*. That is, "a kind of person comes into being at the same time as the kind itself was invented" (Hacking, 2002, p. 106). I arrived at this formulation because of the computer's ability to re-create practices, people, and even environments through virtuality. The computer user is an informational being—she is constructed, conceptualized, enacted, and received through code. The graphical user interface (GUI) obfuscates this textual, informational reality; it does not erase it. Indeed, the GUI adds additional complexity through the semiosis of social and technical signs that contextually configures meaning and practice. Thus "technology as text" warrants that technologies are constituted within, and have an impact on, social relations and cultural meanings. This move affords my research technique: a discourse hermeneutic (cf. Wodak, 2001) "discourse-historical" mode of critical discourse analysis of technology as constructed through the influences of society, *techné*, and culture.

The Limits of Rationality and Resistance: Political Economy and Cultural Theory

How best to study what Black folk do in online spaces? The first step is to relinquish the ways in which whiteness has been centered in sociological

and cultural research into information and media use. In Brock (2018), I argue that neither cultural studies nor social science offers compelling possibilities for studying nonwhite digital practice. I reserve my ire specifically for social-scientific, political-economic analyses of digital and new media—particularly the Marxist or critical theory strains.

My concern with these theories, who share some commonalities in their examinations of economic and class struggles, is their focus on domination, hegemony, and ideology—or conversely, on resistance and emancipation. The first set of positions have been the lot of Black folk in the Americas since the 1500s, while the second set has been only incompletely articulated for Blacks by the academy since the middle of the twentieth century. While the critical tendencies of political economic analyses ostensibly speak to the ideologically and culturally curtailed information experiences of an underclass, these theories neglect to account for the information experiences of the *ur*-underclass, Blackness, which Orlando Patterson (1982) accurately describes as "social death."

What becomes clear when evaluating digital practice is that political economy does not do well analyzing cultural commodities as artifacts (e.g., Vine videos as a social media service) or audience commodities as cultural collectivities (e.g., Black Twitter hashtags; Meehan, Mosco, & Wasko, 1993). Critical political economy offers possibilities for understanding Blackness online, but its focus on oppression and resistance lingers on labor, the state, and the public sphere, leaving cultural aspects behind. For example, Faltesek (2018), using a political-economic lens to investigate social media, contends, "Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, and dozens of other services have been described as the vanguard of creative destruction across the media industries-disruptors of established business, heroes of a new economic narrative that supposes that the attention of individual users can be measured, managed, manipulated, backing methods that securitized, patented, and litigated attention in ways impossible before. Selling Social Media catalogues the key terms and discourses of the rise of social media firms with a particular emphasis on monetization, securitization, disruption, and litigation" (n.p.). Cultural studies of media shares political economy's interest in media industries; new media and internet research from this perspective examines texts, identity, and audience reception and limits its critical take on communication and media to commodification, oppression, or

resistance. When directed toward representation in digital spaces, cultural studies often glosses over race as a salient category to instead argue for internet culture as a freestanding aesthetic that is separate from offline identity politics.

Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery in the late 1990s, has waxed and waned in popularity as a powerful, culturally centered analysis of Black culture and technology and is often deployed as a supplement or alternative to political-economic approaches or cultural studies. Its most potent applications have seen Afrofuturism combined with Black feminist epistemology (Womack, 2013; Weheliye, 2002; Morris, 2016) to conceptualize Black digital practice, but Afrofuturism's futurist perspective and utopian leanings often occlude the possibilities of the present digital era for Black folk. In the same vein, Black and Africana studies should be at the forefront of examining Black digital practice, production, and industry, but apart from a few isolated researchers (many of whom are not in Black studies departments), that field is only slowly beginning to systematically investigate Black digital practice and production. The final chapter in this book offers a full-throated argument for these particular claims for those who are inclined to dispute this position.

Political-economic and cultural-theoretic analyses of new media and the digital fall short for Blackness and Black digital practice. Mosco (2009) contends that political economy is the study of control and survival in social life, which leaves little room for linkages between desire and activity. Political economy elides creativity and aesthetics in its analysis of digital practice, design, and consumption. From a communications perspective, political economy interprets relationships between media institutions, structures of production, and the state. A political-economic analysis of digital media and information, then, examines the social production of digitally mediated meaning, focusing on linkages among new media, capitalist development, and state power.

This focus on control and survival leads me to argue that the aesthetics at play in a political-economic analysis of digital practice draw on technocultural and capitalistic *virtues*: beliefs about rationality, productivity, efficiency, or commoditization. Any deviation from the realization of these beliefs is read as "play," "leisure," or "deviance." Under political economy, Black digital practice is rarely understood as productive or efficient. For example, political-economic analyses of the "digital divide"

tie information use and access to the "social and economic progression of nation states" or view them as opportunities to overcome social inequality (Selwyn, 2004). Researchers examining minority informational and digital practices deemed them deficient based on the minorities' lack of access to institutions (education or home ownership), to the state, or to structures of production (material and information deficits). All the while, Black musical artists of the era—in hip-hop and R&B—were discussing the mediations of social, extralegal, and cultural relationships through information technology practice. I mention these artists, but I am not excluding earlier Black sonic luminaries in other genres interrogating Blackness, modernity, and sound, such as Derrick May, George Clinton, Roger Troutman, and even Sun Ra.

Even when positively argued from a political-economic perspective, Black digital practices receive short shrift. They are limited to being rebellious and resistant, commoditized and branded, or they are seen as (futile) attempts at seeking authentic representation in a white-dominated media sphere (Smith-Shomade, 2004). Writing about Black technoculture often revolves around oppression, resistance, labor, and consumption (Fouché, 2006; Sinclair, 2004; Pursell, 2010), including research on

- Black Lives Matter and online activism,
- the digital divide, and
- Black Girls Code camps and other science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) efforts.

Even as Black Lives Matter was celebrated for its digital media use, the movement was also derided for its lack of efficacy in shepherding members to "actual" political activity that would benefit Black communities. The activists were also unfairly criticized for contributing to online incivility, lending credence to the arguments made here about the perceived rationales for Black digital practice.

The blind spot of all these approaches—quantitative social science, political economy, cultural studies, and Afrofuturism—lies within the ideology of Western technoculture. Technoculture is often sutured to political economy to justify beliefs about technology as an avatar of productivity. This leads to evaluations of technological practice through

progress, efficiency, or in more recent decades, ideological capture. Even when cultural studies or Afrofuturism addresses Black technology use, the previously mentioned perspectives on Black cultural production as evidence of resistance and oppression limit the possibilities for articulating a more nuanced understanding. In response, a cornerstone of this text is that it is more productive to understand technoculture through the concept of *libidinal economy* (Lyotard, 1993; Wilderson, 2010). Libidinal economy undergirds political economies, driving political and economic processes through affect. Incorporating a libidinal economic analysis to digital practice, then, offers a release from considerations of Black digital practice as labor or commodity.

Libidinal Economy

Incorporating libidinal economy into analyses of information technology use allows us to examine how racial ideology powers digital practice. Libidinal economy, as defined by Lyotard (1993), describes the libidinal impulses powering the machinations of any political economy. Libidinal economy is in turn fueled by jouissance, which, as I have said, is a conceptually rich word describing an excess of life. Jacques Lacan, who coined the term, writes that jouissance "begins with a tickle and ends with [a] blaze of petrol" (Seminar XVII, 72).

What does the libidinal mean, and how does it power an economy? Lyotard (1993) argues that events and actions are stabilized by interpretation, but there are always excess elements outside these interpretations. For example, consider a police report detailing an encounter with a Black woman. The report will represent the encounter from the perspective of the state, especially if the woman "somehow" ends up being shot by the officer. Missing from the report is whether the police officer is racist or misogynist, whether his department is known for mistreating minorities, or whether the city itself is racially segregated. Occasionally, the encounter will be captured on video by a dashcam, a bystander, or the victim herself, and the libidinal intensities of the situation and the participants become more (but never fully) apparent. The recording itself is invested with libidinal energy; we often take the regard of the camera as a "truth" to be trusted even as we understand that the perception of the truth varies with each individual, institution, or system. Thus

libidinal economy aids in understanding why police encounters with armed white men vary greatly from those with unarmed Black men.

Lyotard (1993) argues that capitalist exchange is inescapably infused with libidinal intensity; similarly, I contend that informational exchange is laden with libidinal energies. For example, online incivility, née trolling (Nakamura, 2013; Phillips, 2015), can be understood as a pleasurable, white masculinist, patriarchal digital practice, even or perhaps because of its deviance. Along these same lines, "callout culture," which is often described as the bane of white feminism and, by extension, online civility, is more properly understood as discursive, gendered Black cultural critique—a Black womanist signifyin' practice transposed to social media environs. Finally, the long-delayed "last mile" implementation of broadband service to segregated urban neighborhoods is not a technical problem; it is best understood as part of long-standing antiblack technological policies of residential planning, urban planning, and segregation. While Lyotard's libidinal concept incorporates affect, it is not limited to that. Drawing on Freud's concept of the libido, the libidinal is energy—generated by phobias and desires—that has a visible effect on the world. Affect more properly describes an emotional state, whereas Lyotard's deployment of the libidinal is meant to capture the "whole structure of psychic and emotional life" (Sexton, cited in Wilderson, 2010, p. 24).

Political-economic analyses foreclose the sensual, the erotic, or the deviant by arguing that they have no value in a rational worldview, but the denial of their "exchange value" does not negate their existence. How does one value love or anger? Political economy claims that if a thing cannot be exchanged, it has no value and does not exist on the market. This position works only for the interests (desires) of those who benefit from amoral, unemotional rationalism (e.g., capitalism). Lyotard (1993) writes, "One must realize that representing is desire, putting on stage, in a cage, in prison, into a factory, into a family, being boxed in are desired, that domination and exclusion are desired" (p. 12). He continues, "Even when the capitalist machine is humming in the apparent general boredom and when everybody [sic] seems to do their job without moaning, all these libidinal instantiations, these little dispositifs of the retention and flow of the influxes of desire are *never unequivocal* and cannot give rise to a sociological reading or an unequivocal politics" (p. 114; emphasis original).

In Shannon and Weaver's ([1949] 1998) canonical illustration of information transfer between entities, where sender and receiver are two points connected by information while any misunderstanding is noise, jouissance suffuses the entire rationalistic, instrumental process—whether the transmitter/receiver is machine or human. That is, jouissance is the impulse that initiates the communication in the first place, the power maintaining the connection, the various impulses distorting the message (noise), and the impulses and feedback following the transmission. The flexibility of *jouissance* does not translate well to English; it can at once reference "affect," "intensity," "pleasure," "catharsis," and "sexuality." While *jouissance* is seminal to the arguments made throughout this book, I find that the term's linkage to capitalism (especially by Lyotard) is too transactional for how I argue for Black digital practice.

Lyotard (1993) notes that "it is extraordinarily difficult to recognize the desire of capital" (p. 110), but I believe this difficulty can be reduced by examining the social and cultural contexts in which capitalistic endeavors take place. Wilderson (2010) is helpful in this regard, expanding the definition of libidinal economy to encompass racial ideology. He identifies antiblackness as a desire of American society and culture, writing that "Blackness overdetermines the embodiment of impossibility, incoherence, and incapacity" (p. 73). The devaluation and reduction of the human body to its technical and labor potential are clearest when the body is Black. Moreover, the specter of antiblackness allows whiteness to devalue the labor of non-Black bodies, encouraging nonelites to accept less economic capital in exchange for the cultural capital of not being Black. For example, Donald Trump, who won the presidential election in 2016 by appealing to xenophobia and nativism, has had his inchoate antiblackness codified into Republican legislative proposals to transfer wealth to white elites by defunding social welfare programs that are perceived as aiding minority families, eliminating environmental protections (disproportionately affecting minority and poor communities in the process), disenfranchising religious and ethnic minorities, and expanding military aggression in the name of xenophobia.

Given the ephemeral, immanent nature of desire and the protean qualities of information technologies, it seems difficult to identify the

desires of new media. But if one accepts Dinerstein's (2006) figura-
tion of whiteness as seminal to the American technocultural mythos,
then the characteristics of whiteness—organization, embodiment/
disembodiment, and enterprise (Dyer, 1997)—can be understood as the
jouissance, or desires, of new media and information technologies as
well. Dinerstein also references "religion"—in this case, Carey's techno-
logical sublime—to highlight how relating information technologies to
the domain of "the spirit" locates new media and information desire
in transcendence. That is, removing the limitations of embodiment from
traveling through space and time—or even the identification of a disem-
bodied, ephemeral textual practice—defaults to whiteness.

Wilderson (2010), in writing on antiblackness, offers Jared Sexton's
clarification of libidinal economy: "The economy, or distribution and
arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and dis-
placement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the
unconscious . . . a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention,
anxieties, pleasures" (Sexton, cited in Wilderson, 2010, p. 24). Building
on this, I argue that one should understand the distribution and ar-
rangement of Black digital practice as digital labor *and* desire, as online
politics *and* desire, or as digital representation *and* desire. Removing
desire from Black digital practice reduces agency—online members be-
come "users" or, even worse, "data." Further, invoking the libidinal high-
lights how the removal of the erotic and the banal from "appropriate"
Black digital practice renders said practices—constituted as resistance
or commodification—as sterile attempts to escape "the master's house
using the master's tools" (Lorde, 1984). My argument for a libidinal
economy of new media and information technologies incorporates the
concept of pathos to show why digital practitioners engage in "nonpro-
ductive" and "inefficient" online activities.

Pathos as a Determinant of Digital Practice

Lyotard's (1993) conceptualization of desire does not limit itself to
expressions of pleasure. The translation of *libidinal economy* from
French to English retained the concept of jouissance to refer to the
enjoyment of use and the seeking of pleasure, play, and climax. Simi-
larly, Wilderson (2010) notes that libidinal economy is linked not only

to "forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption" (p. 24).

To clarify the ontological power of libidinal economy, I replace *jouissance* with the term *pathos* for this text. While modern definitions of *pathos* revolve around sympathy and empathy (both descended from the term), for Black digital practice, I evoke the Aristotelian definition. Aristotle argues that pathos encompasses the speaker's familiarity with her audience's value and belief systems, preferred presentation styles, and techniques of argumentation. It is tempting given pathos's association with style to infer that pathos's emotional appeal is illogical and shallow, but that is far from the case. Logic (logos) depends on a particular style of presentation (objectivism), a particular set of values and beliefs (rationality and positivism), and specific techniques of argumentation (e.g., the scientific method and syllogism) in order to be effective, rendering "science" as a set of emotional appeals to a specific audience. Indeed, there is an entire field of study dedicated to the rhetoric of science and technology that is intent on unpacking the persuasions underlying science and engineering research, but the inquiries only superficially address issues of race.

Pathos is also stunningly relevant as a conceptual framework for the Black experience in the Americas. The United States was founded on the cultural logos that Blackness is not an intelligible part of society. As such, ethos was denied to African Americans based on the ideological assignation of deviance and embodiment. To counter these discourses, which were presented as "logical" and juridical, Black discursive culture cultivated a warrant of pathos to ground their identity. My definition of pathos also draws from Joan Morgan's "Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure" (2015). Morgan asks how desire, agency, and Black women's engagement with pleasure can be developed into a viable theoretical paradigm. While doing so, she argues for Black female interiority as "the broad range of feelings, desires, yearning, (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the politics of silence" (p. 37).

Similarly, I argue for Black culture's interiority in an online milieu, or as Yancy (2005) describes it, "In my everydayness, I live my body from an existential *here*. Wherever I go, I go embodied . . . in my phenomenological return, however, I am *reduced* to a point that is viewed. My *here* is experienced as a *there*" (p. 221). The epistemological awareness Yancy

articulates—that Blackness is consciously and experientially reduced to an object from an agentive being through ideology—can be understood as Black interiority and thus serves as a warrant for my use of pathos. Digital practice encourages us to appreciate and evaluate Black identity performances and activities in situ, contributing to my claim for online interiority. From these warrants, I argue that the reductive power of the phenomenological return is significantly decreased thanks to the affordances of digital and online spaces.

Black Pathos

Given the Black experience in America during and following the Middle Passage, I incorporate an approach that allows me to systematically situate Black philosophy and knowledge in history and technoculture. Sandra Harding's (1992) discussion of standpoint epistemology and feminist accounts of science and technology have proven especially valuable, as they encourage an evaluation of the world from the perspective of the oppressed rather than the elite. She writes, "In societies where scientific rationality and objectivity are claimed to be highly valued by dominant groups, marginalized peoples and those who listen attentively to them will point that from the perspective of marginal lives, the dominant accounts are less than maximally objective" (p. 442). Standpoint theory encourages inquiries into the material, political, or cultural aspects of social structures; more importantly, it is a structural intervention focused on the creation of group consciousness rather than shifts in the consciousness of individuals. I see standpoint epistemology as a complement to a libidinal economic analysis in that it specifies *whose* libidinal energies are important to the institutions or phenomena under examination. Crucially, standpoint epistemology is a focus on how practices—digital, material, and ideological—demonstrate human relations with each other and the natural world.

Thus I have chosen to identify Black pathos as the epistemological standpoint (Harding, 1992) of a libidinal economy of Black technoculture. This epistemic stratagem allows me to incorporate race—in this case, Black culture and Black bodies—without permitting America's antiblackness to overdetermine Blackness. This approach offers multiple beneficial outcomes, such as the disinvestment of technoculture's

substrates of logic and rationality. Replacing the highly circumscribed positivist and "objective" emotional character of logos with pathos allows this inquiry to incorporate analyses of Black digital practice engendered by joy, sexuality, playfulness, anger, and politics. Another benefit is the acknowledgment and theorization of Black communal identity as a meaning-making strategy. In this way, we can understand Blackness as a discourse in conversation with, but not wholly subject to, whiteness as epistemology—a refutation of the categorial nature of capitalist identity and, most important, antiblackness. As KRS-One says, "Rap is something you do; hip-hop is something you live." This distinction also exposes a critical perspective on racial ideology by interrogating and speaking to the contradictions of practice and belief. Finally, a libidinal economic perspective on Black technoculture allows us to tease apart the reasons behind Black digital practice's distribution, performance, and aggregation across digital and material social structures. Black folk use technologies that were not designed for or about them in ways that confound traditional technology analyses, and this approach is intended to redress that shortcoming.

The claims I make about Black cyberculture throughout this text are driven by three warrants:

1. Technology as text
2. Identity as the tension between the self and the social
3. Blackness as a dynamic, protean core of narrative gravity and weightlessness

These warrants, which I will develop in the following chapters, lead to my claim for Blackness as an informational identity. Let me be clear: I am arguing for Blackness not as a *virtual* identity but as an informational one—an identity powered by discourse, technology, and the phenomenology of embodiment in a white supremacist ideology.