

## “The Black Purposes of Space Travel”

### *Black Twitter as Black Technoculture*

He can read my writing but he sho can't read my mind.

—Zora Neale Hurston

Forty-five years ago, long before the commercial internet spaces we know as the World Wide Web timorously considered the possibility of Black folk online, the poet Amiri Baraka turned his considerable intellect toward contemplating the possibilities of Black culture and information technology. Citing Norbert Wiener's contention that machines are an extension of their creators, Baraka (1965) argues for an informational Blackness, writing,

If I invented a word placing machine, an “expression-scriber,” if you will, then I would have a kind of instrument into which I could step & sit or sprawl or hang & use not only my fingers to make words express feelings but elbows, feet, head, behind, and all the sounds I wanted, screams, grunts, taps, itches, I'd have magnetically recorded, at the same time, & translated into word—or perhaps even the final xpressed thought/feeling wd not be merely word or sheet, but itself, the xpression, three dimensional—able to be touched, or tasted or felt, or entered, or heard or carried like a speaking singing constantly communicating charm. (p. 154)

Baraka's “informational Blackness” has three components. The first is cultural. By arguing for Blackness as embodied cultural cognition, Baraka's premise drives my arguments for Black pathos as an epistemological standpoint, where one's body is the interface between the world and sociocultural phenomena and cognition. The second is

technological. Baraka fantasizes about inventing a modern communications device, firmly situating Black creativity as *techné*, or practice grounded in theoretical understanding.<sup>1</sup> The final premise is technological. Baraka transforms Black cultural practice into informational Blackness by linking cultural communication practices to then extant music-recording technologies or even future iterations of information and communication technologies.

Baraka's words could easily apply to today's digital and social media practices and technologies. Specifically, his description of the "final expressed thought/feeling" as three dimensional or "heard or carried like a speaking singing constantly communicating charm" neatly maps onto the ways in which our smartphones have become part of our embodied cognition; it also speaks to Black Twitter's demonstration of how culture crafts digital practice.

Baraka asks an important question, one that Western technoculture and algorithmic computation rarely ask—namely, Could an informational technology possess a "spirit as emotional construct that can manifest as expression as art or technology" (p. 154)? Baraka's "expression" involves kinesthetics, linguistic discourse, visual aesthetics, and affect overlaid upon (and perhaps even supplanting) the rationalist, neoliberal practices envisioned by Western information technology creators and policy makers. I extend his definition of *expression* by linking spirit to Black interiority and reflexivity, or as Moten (2013) would say, the "dispossessive force of Black speech" (p. 770). Interiority and reflexivity demand a full engagement with a world structured to displace Blackness. Black speech, from this position, signifies upon and through discourses to communicate and socialize within a reality where we can recover subjectivity and agency. That Black discursive styles are rhythmic, stylish, striking, and visceral is an inevitable facet of engagement with a world that demands rationality, hierarchy, and control.

Finally, Baraka closes by asking, "What are the Black purposes of space travel?" My answer to this question is Black Twitter. What is Black Twitter? The answer to this second question has evolved since I first wrote about Black folk on Twitter in 2012. The brief answer: Black Twitter is Twitter's mediation of Black cultural identity, expressed through digital practices and informed by cultural discourses about Black

everyday life. One cultural-digital practice, the hashtag, works to bring Black Twitter to the surface of mainstream visibility.

The longer answer: Black Twitter is an online gathering (not quite a community) of Twitter users who identify as Black *and* employ Twitter features to perform Black discourses, share Black cultural commonplaces, and build social affinities. While there are a number of non-Black and people of color Twitter users who have been “invited to the cook-out,” so to speak, participating in Black Twitter requires a deep knowledge of Black culture, commonplaces, and digital practices. As I briefly noted in the introduction, being Black in the American racial context requires intentionality; representation and recognition are only part of the equation. Thus Black Twitter users intentionally signal their cultural affiliations to a like-minded audience in a space where, until recently, racial identity was considered a niche endeavor. While their use of Twitter accrues to them a technological identity that intersects with their racial and gendered selves, Black Twitter users are as heterogeneous as the community they hail from. The combination of social affinities, network participation, and content enables Black Twitter hashtags to “trend,” or gain visibility through Twitter’s trending topic algorithm.

More specifically, the digital + virtual practices and affordances of Black Twitter map onto the ritual, formalized performance of embodied, libidinal Black identity discourses, distributing Black discursive identity across the service and into the wider information sphere. Libidinal discourses drive the joys of Black Twitter musings on #DemThrones<sup>2</sup> and other manifestations of Black everyday life. Libidinal energies also power Black Twitter catharsis: the political engagement and righteous anger of Black Lives Matter and articulations of racial fatigue syndrome characterized by #SayHerName.<sup>3</sup>

This longer definition acknowledges but does not overly emphasize the contribution of the Black Twitter hashtag to either the formulation or the composition of the community. The hashtag offers participants and viewers topical and cultural coherence and in the process renders Twitter slightly less chaotic. However, its primary utility for Black Twitter is the visibility of a Black informational identity to the mainstream afforded by its uptake in Twitter’s trending topic feature. The hashtag and trending topic work together to make Black Twitter visible to users

of the service and to the wider information sphere, allowing non-Black outsiders to see an informational culture that is strikingly similar, yet significantly different, from their own.

### Analyze This

As with other chapters, I analyze Black Twitter as a three-part phenomenon:

1. As a technical artifact
  - hardware and protocols necessary to use Black Twitter
  - Twitter interface (client)
2. As a practice
  - technical and digital literacy conventions
  - discourse conventions
  - Black discourse conventions
3. As a set of beliefs
  - in-group beliefs about race and technology
  - in-group beliefs about race
  - out-group beliefs about race and technology
  - out-group beliefs about race

This chapter focuses primarily on the Twitter interface. As was made clear by *Blackbird*, digital technologies hail their users, primarily defining and capturing them through interactions with the interface. It is tempting to reduce Twitter to the tweet, but doing so reduces the possibilities for understanding digital practice as expertise, which allows one to examine the material and functional rationales behind Twitter use. Thus I also survey selected Twitter antecedents—mobile phone adoption, short-message service (SMS), and the messaging application TXTmob—to highlight how a number of elements contribute to Twitter’s capacity to mediate Black discursive practice. From the interface, I move on to the technical practices that are necessary to participate in Twitter, with an eye on how those practices build discourse communities.

Next, after a brief overview of signifyin’ discourse, I analyze how varyin’ signifyin’ practices—including style, format, and audience—map onto Twitter practice. This analysis explores why Black Twitter

hashtags and the tweets powering them are able to influence Twitter’s trending topics. I argue here for Black Twitter as an example of Blackness-as-discursive-identity by exploring the affordances of a specific information and communication technology (ICT) as a mediator for articulations of Black online identity. By using *affordance*, I build on Hutchby’s (2001) definition, where artifacts have functional and relational aspects that frame the possibilities for agency in relation to those artifacts (p. 445). For Twitter, I argue that format and device (among other things) frame the ways that Twitter users converse but do not wholly determine them. Similarly, for Black Twitter, discursive rituals, culture, and performativity frame Twitter participation but do not wholly determine them.

While analyzing functions and discourses brings light to how Black users enjoy Twitter, technology use doesn’t occur in a cultural vacuum. Cultures build and reinforce beliefs about appropriate users and technologies; Twitter is not exempt from judgments about either. Indeed, Twitter has been repeatedly called out for its diminution of the gravitas and civility of online discourse as well as for its role in promoting “identity politics.” Trending topics and hashtags brought Black Twitter to the attention of other Twitter users, to online and mainstream media, and eventually, to the wider world. The reveal encouraged both in-group and out-group members to articulate cultural beliefs about race and information technology, which is valuable in understanding how beliefs power technology use. I analyze selected online responses to Black Twitter from out-group and in-group media and online figures during the early days of Black Twitter’s emergence in 2010.

Finally, after examining online responses to Black Twitter, the chapter closes by discussing how racial and technocultural ideologies shape mainstream perceptions of minority tech use. There I speculate about how to understand technology as a cultural rather than simply social endeavor. After all, the activities of whites on Twitter are never assumed to have political goals—with the unpleasant exception of racist Twitter trolls. Non-Black Twitter, despite its multimillion-dollar valuation, instead struggles against the dictates of neoliberalism and capitalism, whose constituents question its use-value daily. Unpacking #SayHerName and #DemThrones gives rise to one of the more compelling questions about Blackness’s engagement with Twitter: What are the “ends” of Black

Twitter? Black Twitter engagement has certainly served as catharsis and a call to action, but asking Black Twitter to do “more” is clearly a question about the leisure and technical capacities of the Black body rather than a coherent inquiry about Twitter’s productive capacity.

## Research Background

To situate this chapter in research and conversations about social network services (SNS) in general and about Twitter in particular, I offer a brief review. Hoffman and Novak (1998), in their canonical work on the digital divide, noted that a lack of Black-oriented online content should be considered a serious impediment to Black participation. As Byrne (2007) pointed out, BlackPlanet.com’s sixteen million users serve as evidence that sites promoting Black cultural interactivity can become enormously popular. Similarly, Banks (2006) writes, “Black participation on [BlackPlanet] also begins to show the ways cyberspace can serve as a cultural underground that counters the surveillance and censorship that always seem to accompany the presence of African American speaking, writing, and designing in more public spaces” (p. 69). Accordingly, Black Twitter can be understood as a user-generated source of culturally relevant online content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information.

In their canonical research article, boyd and Ellison (2007) defined SNS as web-based services that feature profiles, lists of social connections, and the capability to view and navigate profiles, connections, and user-generated content. Many SNS allow comments, which operate as threaded posts by network members about user-generated content (UGC). Twitter differs from other SNS in that the “comment,” or tweet—not profiles or networks—is the site’s focal point of interaction as opposed to an ancillary part of the intended content.

Some researchers take an instrumental approach to Twitter, which enables them to perceive and measure social interaction quantitatively, but this method assumes that Twitter is culturally neutral. Although Twitter has been examined as a social microblog (Java et al., 2007), as a social network (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2008), and as a messaging application (Krishnamurthy, Gill, & Arlitt, 2008), there are cultural affordances that are missed by each of these approaches.

Turning to communications research on Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that Twitter users imagine their audience, citing Scheidt’s (2006) statement that online audiences exist only as written into the text through stylistic and linguistic choices. However, in examining uses of Twitter’s “@” function, Honeycutt and Herring (2009) found that it enabled direct conversations by reinforcing addressivity. Tweets including @ were “more likely to provide information for others and more likely to exhort others to do something” (p. 6). Zhao and Rosson (2009) found that Twitter’s “follow” mechanism serves to curate content, allowing users to build personal information environments centered on topics and people of interest. Frequent, brief updates reduced the time necessary for interaction with others, paradoxically allowing users to feel stronger connections to their Twitter contacts. Twitter’s capability for real-time updates on current events or social activities increased engagement as well.

To recap, Twitter’s temporal, electronic, and structural discourse mediation encourages weak-tie (Granovetter, 1973) relationships between groups through informal communication practices. Analyzing Twitter as an information source captures data about social use and information types but elides cultural communicative practices. Communication studies research offers greater insight into sociocultural rationales for Twitter usage, but such research rarely examines the influence of race on online discourse. Examining paratextual reactions to Black Twitter’s online articulations of Black discursive culture illustrates how culture shapes online social interactions. These paratexts also show how Twitter’s interface and discourse conventions helped frame external perceptions of Black Twitter as a social public.

### Public Sphere? Black Twitter as “Mature” Digital Practice

Writing about Black Twitter as a public sphere after the presidential election of 2016 is bittersweet even as it also seems superfluous. It is bittersweet because Donald Trump, the forty-fifth president of the United States, is increasingly seen as a Twitter power user, although the source of his social media expertise has yet to be understood as drawing on white Twitter / American culture (Brock, 2017)—even as he built on long-standing themes of xenophobia, nativism, and racism to power

his campaign. Instead, pundits and academics view his Twitter savvy as an appeal to class, unreason, or nationalist rhetoric. Arguments for Black Twitter as a public sphere are slightly superfluous because the Democratic Party’s failure to retain the White House has had the unanticipated effect of turning down the volume of organized Black online activism; the widespread attention that activists were able to marshal for Black political causes has been subsumed as a palliative for wider-scale, more frantic white liberal and progressive reactions (e.g., white fragility) to the Trump administration. Nevertheless, Trump’s Department of Justice and the FBI’s designation of Black Lives Matter as a “Black identity extremist” terrorist organization (prompted by alt-right and white supremacist media) render it necessary to address the political possibilities of Black Twitter at this point in the chapter.

As Black Twitter has become more widely known, many have sought to ratify the phenomenon by locating the political valences of Black Twitter within the concept of a counterpublic. Squires (2002) contends that *counterpublics* occupy and reclaim dominant and state-controlled public spaces while strategically using enclaved spaces. Utilizing public and private spaces in this fashion increases interpublic communication as well as interaction with the state. Moreover, counterpublics employ protest rhetoric and reveal “hidden transcripts” of Black discourse to argue against stereotypes and describe group interests. In an earlier version of this chapter, I argued for Black Twitter as an *enclaved counterpublic*, but upon further reflection, I am here arguing for Black Twitter as a *satellite* counterpublic sphere. Squires’s differentiation of Black counterpublics hinges on defining the spaces and discourses in which these publics operate. Enclaved counterpublics hide themselves from oppression in private spaces (often in plain sight, like churches, salons, or the stoop or corner) while internally producing lively debates about Black life.

Squires defines *satellite publics* as occupying independent—not private—spaces that are open to group members. While these spaces are not completely detached from other publics or the state, their separation reflects the lack of a need to regularly engage with nonmembers rather than the result of oppression. Squires defines these satellite spheres as publics that seek “separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but [are] involved in wider public discourses from

time to time” (2002, p. 448). Think of, for example, the Bechdel test, an informal assessment of gender equality in televisual media that measures whether at least two women talk to each other about something other than a man. Similarly, Black Twitter often engages in conversations about Blackness that have nothing to do with whiteness or white folk. Most importantly for this chapter, members of satellite publics do not feel compelled to hide or change their cultural particularities. Black Twitter, whose everyday interactions between members only occasionally rise to a level of visibility for mainstream Twitter users, fits this definition perfectly.

Twitter—the service—has messily, exuberantly become the public sphere we deserve even as it does not neatly fulfill technocultural expectations of productive, rational informational exchange. Similarly, Black Twitter was (and in many cases still is) often framed as “immature” and “ineffective” because its creative and discursive practices, in their viscerality and sensuality, do not directly lead to Black political or economic empowerment. This technocultural framing of Black digital practice is in line with long-standing Euro-American material conceptions of the Black body as labor/chatel, where Black energies must be directed toward the enrichment of their owner/institution. Moreover, Black Twitter fails under the disapproving scrutiny of Black respectability politics, where Black activities are “mature” if they are seen as leading to the political enrichment or advancement of the Black community. From this perspective, I’m sure you are nodding and saying, “Yes, that’s *exactly* Black Twitter,” and with respect to specific moments and instances, I would agree. However, protests and demands for state recognition of Black humanity are not the only, or even the primary, discourses of Black Twitter. Insisting that they are the only ways in which Twitter can be understood as a legible artifact of Black culture diminishes the ingenuity and pathos displayed every moment on the service by Black Twitter users.

While Black Twitter *can* be understood as a public sphere, Squires (2002) cautions that we need to distinguish the *discursive actions* of a public sphere from the *political actions* of a public sphere. Thus this chapter argues for Black Twitter as a heterogeneous Black discourse collective, bound by certain cultural and digital commonplaces in pursuit of similar and sometimes competing goals, which may include political action. This argument respects the banal contributions of everyday Black

Twitter users, who use hashtags like #ThanksgivingforBlackFamilies to celebrate and reflect on Black culture. It also allows for the possibility of international or even non-Black Twitter users—whose cultural competence aids in decoding Black Twitter’s cultural commonplaces or political concerns—to be considered part of Black Twitter discourse.

Naming Black Twitter practice as an activity of a satellite counter-public allows for the formulation of Black Twitter as a digital/virtual space where Blackness frames the politics of the everyday, occasionally breaking free of internal discourses to confront or simply inform wider publics about their concerns. Twitter is the means through which certain Black users separate themselves from mainstream, offline, and on-line publics, while Black Twitter hashtag use reintegrates discussants in wider discourses across the platform. Twitter makes this satellite public sphere possible in ways that other social networking services or even predecessor communication technologies have not by promoting the *public* discursive *actions* of a public sphere. These possibilities are afforded by Twitter’s format, sociality, network, and material capabilities, which I will detail later in this chapter.

### Finding Black Twitter

Even before surveys revealed the extent of Black folks’ involvement with Twitter, it was a space where Black cultural practices helped users gain an appreciation of the service’s discursive fluidity and sociality. In 2008, Anil Dash—vice president of the early blog platform SixApart, D’Angelo fan, and Prince stan—was one of the most prominent nonwhite Twitter users in the early days of the service. Dash’s early adopter experiences offer a glimpse into the ways that Black expressivity can enrich information technologies. He and several other early adapters decided to use Twitter to comment about the impending McCain/Obama presidential race by “throw[ing] out some . . . snaps.”

*Snaps* is slang for playing the dozens, one of the more prominently known (read “understood by the mainstream”) signifyin’ discourses. Dash, his followers, and other contributors compose their tweets using the well-worn insult trope about “yo’ mama.” For yo’ mama snaps to be rhetorically effective, they must connect the sacred feminine body with a surreal, embodied, often ridiculous and arcane condition, phenomenon,

or artifact. In doing so, they express a libidinal, sensual joy and critique in pithy, often humorous terms. Dash himself notes this, writing that one of the best snaps to arise from this event was “Absurd, obscure, specific—perfect!” However, many of the tweets he cited were not the best examples of this discursive art form.

For instance, Dash himself pens a pedestrian one:

Yo moms such a ho they set up robocalls for all her booty calls.<sup>4</sup>

Wired writer Lore Sjoberg fares a little better:

Yo mama so fat, she got an endorsement from General Mills.<sup>5</sup>

And Dash’s previously mentioned “best” tweet is by Guillermo Esteves:

yo momma’s so fat, John McCain looked into her eyes and saw three letters: KFC.<sup>6</sup>

To contextualize these tweets and others in the same vein, Dash writes,

Playing the dozens is a uniquely and explicitly African American tradition . . . it seems to me like the playfulness of the language and the absurdity of the medium may have masked something timely and fitting. This obviously and intrinsically Black tradition has been adopted by a community like Twitter that is, frankly, disproportionately not black. You could see it as the deracination of the tradition, or even worse as a deliberate omission of cultural context in its appropriation. But I actually see it as something positive.

Dash’s speculation on Twitter’s demographics was unsourced but later proven correct. Moreover, his designation of Twitter as an “absurd” medium speaks to a technocultural belief about Twitter as an unproductive and inappropriate technology. His argument for Twitter’s potential for deracination through appropriation, however, frames Twitter as a “culture-neutral” service. From this perspective, it is remarkable that Black discourse practices can be employed to effect topical coherence over a medium ostensibly designed for a technorationalist,

technologically proficient, mostly white user base. Promoting the technosocial mediation of Black culture by non-Blacks as a “positive,” however, only accrues social and technical capital to non-Blacks. While Dash is in many ways exempt from this critique, several of his collaborators in this signifyin’ moment were not.

When Black Twitter users employ Black discourses to interact on the service, significantly different opinions about race and information technology use emerge. Craig Wilson, on the Black interest website *The Root*, was one of the first in the Black press to write analytically about Black folk using Twitter. Observing the vitality of #uknowurblack,<sup>7</sup> Wilson (2009) speculates that the presence and popularity of trending hashtags featuring Black culture “suggest a strong, connected Black community on the site.” His article suggests that Black Twitter users can be identified as deploying the following Twitter practices:

- a culturally relevant hashtag (cultural specificity)
- network participation (either a comment or a retweet) by tightly linked affiliates (homophily and intentionality)
- viral spread to reach visibility on Twitter’s home page (propagation)<sup>8</sup>

Wilson does not specifically label these digital practices as “Black Twitter,” but his informal analysis of Twitter practices of Black users provides the beginnings of a technocultural explanation of the phenomenon. He also deserves credit for being one of the first to connect Twitter usage by Black folk with Black folks’ mobile and smartphone usage. Indeed, Wilson’s analysis has utility not only for understanding how Black Twitter operates and thrives but for evaluating how white culture propagates across the service. For example, even with the known presence of Russian bot accounts on Twitter who artificially inflate his tweets, President Trump’s early morning posts to the service still accrue vitality through his appeals to antiblackness and xenophobia.

### The Great Reveal

Arguably, Black Twitter would have remained undiscovered by outsiders—or curious academics—without the hashtag and trending topic feature. Trending topics “found” Black Twitter in large part thanks

to the 2009 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards. This event, which recognizes Black achievements in the arts, culture, and sport, can be understood as the catalyzing event bringing Black Twitter to mainstream recognition. The telecast, which aired soon after the untimely death of Michael Jackson, featured tributes to the iconic performer and received the largest audience share ever for the network at the time. During the program, Black folk on Twitter immediately cheered or jeered their favorite entertainers, which in turn powered tweets and hashtags mentioning the BET Awards, Ne-Yo, and Jamie Foxx to reach national trending topic status. The appearance of these Black cultural topics as informational trends was met with confusion—if not outright revulsion—by non-Black Twitter users. From these Twitter reactions, it is possible to see the hitherto unexplored role of antiblackness in Twitter practice, Western technoculture, and cyberculture.

Soon after Twitter’s introduction of the trending topic, the *initial* mainstream recognition of Black Twitter can be attributed to Choire Sicha in his 2009 article on The Awl, “What Were Black People Talking about on Twitter Last Night?” (Manjoo, 2010; Brock, 2012). Sicha, cofounder of cultural interest site The Awl and former Gizmodo writer, named the phenomenon “Late Night Black People Twitter” while referencing the tweets curated by the blog “OMG! Black People!” In this important article, Sicha perceptively notes that Twitter allows for the bridging of online worlds. Also, in a prescient foretelling of Black Twitter’s capacity for marshaling ratchet response en masse, Sicha begins his post with “At the risk of getting randomly harshed [*sic*] on by the Internet.”

To provide a counterpoint, Sicha quotes a blog post by Nick Douglas,<sup>9</sup> former editor and writer of Valleywag (a Gawker Media tech industry gossip blog) and another early Black Twitter observer. Douglas writes that Twitter “shattered our insulated perception of how everyone uses this thing” (Sicha, 2009, para. 3). Douglas here is referring to Twitter’s trending topics algorithm, which was introduced by the company after the user-generated hashtags were added to the service in 2008. Sicha’s rationale for why Black folks’ Twitter use dominated the late-night trends during the BET Awards is interesting. He notes that Black Twitter traffic occurred on the service all day but might have been obscured during daytime periods by the traffic from media sources and mainstream users. As that traffic waned, Black Twitter content became

visible to those following the public timeline, or firehose. In closing, Sicha notes that Twitter’s trending topics feature surfaces a reality that few people in tech, media, or the academy had previously considered or cared about: Black People Twitter was, two years after Twitter’s debut at South by Southwest (SXSW), the enactment of Black digital identity and practice in a form that was visible to the mainstream.

These inquiries into Black Twitter before it was Black Twitter are valuable historical documents even if they’re not academic research—or perhaps because they’re *not* academic research. Reflective, culturally sensitive analyses into information technology are rare—in part due to deeply held beliefs and stereotypes about minorities’ use of technology. These articles are powerful because while the authors are excavating digital practice, they are doing so from a cultural *and* technological perspective.

### Stirrings of Black Cyberculture: Manjoo’s Black Twitter Explainer

Over the last few years, a type of online news genre has grown in popularity: the “explainer.” It is not the newest form of journalism; Rosen (2008) describes the explainer as a filter for those who are increasingly overwhelmed by the exploding information/media sphere, “where until I grasp the *whole* I am unable to make sense of *any* part.” When they are published by mainstream media outlets, explainer articles often become *the* definitive take on complex phenomena that are frequently mentioned but rarely contextualized (e.g., Ramsey’s [2015] Black Twitter explainer in *The Atlantic*). They typically become highly prominent in search engine results.

You should not be surprised, then, by my suggestion that Black culture is often the subject of online explainer articles, especially when the practices, politics, and aesthetics of Black culture become noticed or appropriated by the mainstream. Unfortunately, mainstream explainers tend to obfuscate Black cultural origins by attributing the phenomenon to white folk.<sup>10</sup> They would get away with it too, if it wasn’t for those meddling kids—that is, Black Twitter’s heterogeneous and wide-ranging net of media sources that are on alert for *any* mention of American Black culture.

Black Twitter received its first—but far from its last—significant mainstream explainer from the online news site Slate. Farhad Manjoo, then the lead technology writer at the site (now with the *New York Times*), penned an article that is worthy of regard thanks to his use of a technocultural (rather than ethnocentric) rationale for Black Twitter usage. This explainer is also notable because it does not attribute Black Twitter practice to a deficit model of technical or computational literacy. Manjoo’s (2010) article marks the “tipping point” for Black Twitter’s perception by the wider world. Although other online writers—and Pew Internet research—had discussed Black trending topics, participation, and cultural contributions to Twitter, Manjoo’s “How Black People Use Twitter” authoritatively presents itself as “the latest research on race and microblogging.” Despite Manjoo’s balanced racial and technocultural approach, the column introduced itself as an expert on racial online activity, a claim bolstered by its publication in a mainstream news site and the subsequent uptake across the web.

Unfortunately, the article begins with a poor editorial choice of artwork to represent Black technology users, which is illustrative of my argument that technocultural beliefs about appropriate technology use and users define what technology *is* and *does*. The lead illustration is a brown bird wearing a jauntily askew baseball cap (with a hashtag as a logo) and holding a smartphone. I speculate, but cannot confirm, that the image was meant to represent race, racial aesthetics, and computational and technocultural identity. Refashioning the Twitter logo—a blue silhouette of a bird in midsong absent any technological or cultural signifiers—to imagery that is more commonly associated with “urban” masculinist fashion “plucked a nerve” for Black Twitter. As will be discussed later, Black folk are extremely sensitive about being locked into a fixed racial or cultural representation. Du Bois (1940) argues that Blacks are acutely aware of the opinions whites hold about them as well as how these opinions often negatively influence Black life.

Manjoo suggests that Black Twitter networks tend to be densely homophilic and more reciprocal than other nodes. On Twitter, reciprocity measures the ratio of followers to followed—most Twitter users tend to have fewer followers and follow people who don’t reciprocate. Manjoo finds that most Black Twitter participants have a reciprocity ratio of

nearly 1:1, suggesting that Blacks use Twitter as a “public instant messenger” to connect with friends.

Manjoo uses nuanced racial rationales to explain Black Twitter content as well. Noting a relationship between “the Dozens” (signifyin’) and Black Twitter discourse, he writes:

The Dozens theory is compelling but not airtight . . . a lot of these tags don’t really fit the format of the Dozens—they don’t feature people one-upping one another with witty insults. Instead, the ones that seem to hit big are those that comment on race, love, sex, and stereotypes about Black culture . . . the bigger reason why the Dozens theory isn’t a silver bullet is that . . . people of all races insult one another online in general, and on Twitter specifically. We don’t usually see those trends hit the top spot.

This reasoning has merit. Manjoo correctly identifies Black Twitter discourse as a cultural perspective on everyday Black culture. Moreover, he buttresses his argument on homophily by noting that the density of Black Twitter networks leads to their domination of trending topics, not their tendency to insult one another. Manjoo closes on another positive note, claiming that Black Twitter comprises the actions of a specific set of highly engaged Twitter users, rather than typical of all Blacks on Twitter.

These ruminations on Black Twitter can be contextualized in a number of ways. First and foremost, mainstream media has long sought to explain the significance of the Negro and his culture in ways that elevate whiteness while exoticizing Black practices. However, Sicha’s and Manjoo’s takes on Black Twitter do not clearly fit this paradigm; they both note the significance and the unexpectedness of Black digital practitioners without capitulating to the technocultural norms of antiblackness. Second, there is a strand across all these takes that respectfully considers the Black technical and cultural expertise of otherwise banal digital practitioners. That is, where typically Black expertise—usually in the field of entertainment or culture—is understood by evoking the trope of the “Black exception,” here everyday Black discourses are understood as sophisticated, technical, expert work. This is where Craig Wilson’s take on Black Twitter stands out:

he evaluates Black Twitter practice from a communitarian perspective without prejudice or antiblackness.

Finally, these perspectives can be seen as reshaping beliefs about who digital technologies are “for.” That is, they open digital technoculture to a new awareness about appropriate users of digital technologies in general, of social networking services in general, and of Twitter specifically. In doing so, they also point to the capacity of Black discourse to provide topical coherence to technical, as well as cultural, artifacts and practices. The next section provides a brief summary of the conceptual framework employed in this analysis, which allows me to make this claim.

### Conceptual Frameworks

As with other chapters in this text, this chapter utilizes critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to analyze a networked, computational digital artifact. By operationalizing technology as a “text” (Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Brock, 2016), I conduct a critical discourse analysis of the artifact, the practices powering that artifact, and the beliefs powering the use of that artifact. Beliefs are the most powerful yet least examined aspect of digital technology use, circulating as “common sense” understandings of why people use digital technologies that are unavoidably inflected with cultural biases. CTDA is careful to ground its discourse analyses of technocultural beliefs through explicit connections to the empirical analyses of interface and function. CTDA’s conceptual framework incorporates critical cultural theory originating from the group under examination to understand how culture and technologies mutually constitute one another. In the previous chapter on Blackbird, the analysis employed racial formation theory and critical whiteness theory to unpack the browser’s ideological presentation of information. In this chapter, I switch from Blackbird’s CTDA framework of critical race and Black culture to drill down into a specific enactment of Blackness—that is, a focus on signifyin’ discourses and Black discursive identity. This chapter’s CTDA framework draws heavily on Du Bois’s (1940) concept of double consciousness as well as research on signifyin’ published by Geneva Smitherman, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Ronald Walcott, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

### *Racial Identity, On- and Offline*

The conceptual framework powering this inquiry turns to racial identity—specifically, the production of racial identity through discourse. Discourse and discourse analysis are natural fits for online research given the prominence of textual interaction in online spaces, but the production of racial identities online necessitates some investigation into how those identities were always-already extant in the offline spaces hosting online interactions. If race is a social construct, then how does racial identity manifest online, particularly in the absence of offline signifiers like embodiment?

In the early days of cyberculture research, online identity was assumed to be fluid and playful, leading to charges that racial identity couldn't credibly be assumed to be authentic (Donath, 2002; Nakamura, 2002). As I presented research on Blackness and online, I would invariably be asked how did I *know* whether the communities I studied were *actually* populated by Black people without personally interviewing each and every one of them. Then as now, I argue that online practice—specifically (but not limited to) information exchanged between users and services—can be understood as performing *racial* identity. There is no human identity performed online that is not articulated by a racialized body. The key for online researchers interested in race is identifying the signifiers that mark ethnic or racial identity in digital practice; these signs and signifiers can be found through analysis of the written textual discourses that are the backbone of online practice.

Again, my arguments here closely follow Banks's argument for the linguistic and rhetorical capacities of Black online discourse. Banks (2005) writes that Black online spaces “mean three things: first . . . a repudiation of much early cyberspace theory that insisted race is and should be irrelevant online, that it would be made irrelevant by online subjectivities. Second, it would confirm the importance of discursive and rhetorical features that Smitherman links to African oral traditions for the written discourse of African Americans. . . . Third, it would show Black people taking ownership of digital spaces and technologies and point to the importance of taking Black users into account in technology user studies” (p. 71). My operationalization of racial identity draws on Everett Hughes's ([1971] 1993) argument for ethnic identity: “An ethnic

group is not one because of the degree of measurable or observable difference from other groups. It is an ethnic group, on the contrary, because the people in it and the people out of it know that it is one; because both the *ins* and *outs* talk, feel and act as if it were a separate group (p. 153; emphasis original).” This definition maps precisely onto the ways in which online identity is constructed, contested, and deconstructed through online discourses—mainly, but not limited to, text and other user-generated content. More important, this dialogic formulation of the discursive, affective, and performative aspects of ethnic identity is also a powerful conceptualization of racial identity. It is powerful precisely because Hughes has identified and operationalized the pervasiveness of racial ideology’s effect on both in-group and out-group members. Thus this definition accounts for beliefs that are evoked in everyday life in ways that are occasionally outrageous (but always problematic) for both in-group and out-group members. Finally, Hughes’s explanation of how both in- and out-group members “talk, feel, and act” complements the triadic formulation of technology as artifact (talk), practice (act), and belief (feel) used across this manuscript to conceptualize information, communication, and new media technologies.

Finally, in the same way that Pacey (1984) cautions technology researchers not to limit their inquiries to just the material artifact or even the practices surrounding that artifact, Hughes warns that it is an error to consider that individual cultural traits are the measure of belonging to an ethnic group—or even a measure of the solidarity of the group itself (p. 155). An ethnic group is *not* a synthesis of its cultural traits; instead, traits are attributes of the group (p. 154). This warning is significant for digital and new media researchers excavating racial identity online. While the signs-given-off (e.g., profile pictures), or the signs (e.g., the number of self-identified Black users in a given online space), offer clues to help determine racial affiliation, it is important to not solely depend on these visual signs to ascertain race.

### *Racial Formation: Whiteness*

As mentioned earlier, whiteness is premised on its delineation against and disavowal of “the Other.” Dyer (1997) contends that white identity is founded on a paradox: whiteness entails being a “sort of” race and the

human race as well as an individual subject and a representation of the universal subject. This gives whiteness interpretive flexibility even as it depends on the specificity of embodiment and practice. Giroux (1996) adds that “whiteness represents itself as a universal marker for being civilized and in doing so posits the Other within the language of pathology, fear, madness, and degeneration” (p. 75). From a discursive perspective, the white American takes the role of the white “other” toward the self without any fundamental contradiction—essentially without being aware of doing so unless prompted (Rawls, 2000, p. 244).

American identity is enframed and extended by negative stereotypes of Black culture, or African Americanness (Morrison, 1998). Indeed, for many nonwhites groups, antiblackness became a mode of achieving social parity with white citizenry. Whiteness does not limit itself to civil and political dominance, however. More specifically, whiteness is strongly associated with the instruments of civilization and modernity: technology, industry, and technical capital. Du Bois (1940), in an allegorical discourse with a white American interlocutor, writes,

VAN DIEMAN: Go out upon the street; choose ten white men and ten colored men. Which can carry on and preserve American civilization?

DU BOIS: The whites.

VAN DIEMAN: Well, then.

DU BOIS: You evidently consider that a compliment. Let it pass. (p. 146)

The recent film *Hidden Figures* (Melfi et al., 2017) excellently depicts the practices and beliefs of white male technologists in its unflinching dramatization of the difficulties, discrimination, and erasure Black women technologists faced as information professionals during the 1960s (see also Green, 2001). Curiously, the twenty-first century may have witnessed the obscuring of racial animosity through discourses of multiculturalism and diversity, but information technology and new media institutions are still predominantly white and male. While advertisements for computer and social media might feature light-skinned or mixed-race actors and actresses, the demographic numbers for minority employment in the field are grim (Myers, 2018). White monoculture in information technology reinforces beliefs about the inability of (primitive) nonwhites to participate in information cultures (Brock, 2011a).

Dinerstein (2006) calls this out specifically, arguing that technology as an abstract concept functions as a white mythology and that technology is the unacknowledged source of European and Euro-American superiority within modernity (p. 569).

### *Racial Formation: Blackness*

Through his formulation of “double consciousness,” Du Bois (1903) sets the stage for an argument that Blackness should be understood as a conflicted identity shaped by the need to participate in parallel yet discontinuous discourses. For Du Bois, personal (not individual) Black identity is the intersection between Black communal solidarity and a national white supremacist ideology. His formulation acknowledges the hegemony of whiteness without privileging it over the agency and spiritual energy found within the Black community. It is worth repeating: double consciousness, as a formulation of identity, has to do with differences in the *experience* of being an individual in the two communities and not with the marginalized social roles within a single community (Rawls, 2000). This approach highlights the protean nature of Black identity mediated through different digital artifacts, services, and practices. The digital provides an indexical location where experiences and perceptions, promoted through the acts of individuals, occur (see Alcoff, 2000). From this position, Pacey’s (1984) triadic formulation for technology can be repurposed to illustrate Alcoff’s contention—that is, Black identity as an “artifact” with “practices” (here argued for as Twitter practice and signifyin’) and “beliefs” (double consciousness).

Robert Gooding-Williams (1998) offers an alternative take on Black racial identity as a *consequence* of white American racial classification schema rather than solely “the beliefs and practices which are shared by or distinctive to the people whom that practice designates as black” (p. 21). Gooding-Williams’s definition allows racial identity to be understood as a shared, socially constructed identity that is not hard coded into an essentialized “common culture.” This move sheds the need for analyses of Black online identity to rely solely on the identification of phenotypical or visual signifiers. It also avoids the epistemic closure of how digital textual practice is often conceptualized, as Gooding-Williams (1998) notes that becoming Black requires one to “make

choices, to formulate plans, to express concerns, etc., in light of one's identification of oneself as black" (p. 23). Articulating Blackness in digital media then becomes the beginning of the analysis rather than the end.

### Signifyin' as Black Discursive Identity

To understand racial identity as constructed through discourse, this analysis is grounded in research on the Black discursive practice of "signifyin," which is argued here as a marker of Black cultural identity (Gates, 1983; Smitherman, 1977; Mitchell-Kernan, [1972] 1999). Signifyin' draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's ([1916] 1974, p. 67) sign/signifier/signified but purposefully reformulates that definition. Beginning with the contention that "the culture of a nation exerts an influence on its language, and the language . . . is largely responsible for the nation" (p. 20), this analysis relies on de Saussure's argument that the relationship between sign and sign-concept and sign-signifier is at once arbitrary and fixed by the cultural milieu in which the sign exists.

Signifyin' practice draws attention to the signifier. In addition to uttering the "sound-object," speech practice *publicizes* the signifier as a playfully multivalent interlocutor to a community of speakers. In doing so, the signified, or "concept," is freed from its role in creating a fixed meaning, generating possibilities (*inventio*) for chains of signifiers. Signifyin' can thus be understood as a practice where the interlocutor inventively redefines an object using Black cultural commonplaces and philosophy. For example, Gates defines signifyin' as "a rhetorical practice unengaged in information giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers . . . the 'signifier as such' in Julia Kristeva's phrase, [is] a 'presence that precedes the signification of object or emotion'" (1983, pp. 688–689).

Smitherman adds call and response to Gates's definition, highlighting audience participation and reinforcing de Saussure's assertion that language has a social component that requires a community of listeners and speakers. Call and response refers to the speaker's reference to, inclusion of, and responses from the audience in discourse as opposed to a monologic, lecturing style of address. Smitherman and Gates each carefully point out that limiting signifyin' to insult or misdirection is

reductive; it is the articulation of a shared worldview, where recognition of the forms plus participation in the wordplay signals membership in the Black community. From this perspective, Black discourse moves from a bland information transfer to a communal commentary on political and personal realities.

Finally, Hughes ([1971] 1993) declares that cultural traits are group attributes: the group is not the synthesis of its traits. In the same way, I argue that Black Twitter does not represent the entirety of Black online presence. As Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016) find, Black Twitter itself is composed of heterogeneous clusters of Black digital practitioners. Similarly, the multitude of racist responses to Black Twitter and its practices do not compose the entirety of the technocultural matrix within which Black culture is understood. While antiblackness is an enduring and powerful context within which Black identity exists, instrumental and functional aspects of technology also determine Black online identity. Thus I analyze the Twitter application and the interface’s mediation of Blackness and responses to that mediation, drawing on technocultural and racial ideologies in keeping with my goal of understanding how racial beliefs shape technology use.

To recap, racial and technocultural ideologies play a part in understanding how online discourse “works.” White participation in online activities is rarely understood as constitutive of white identity; instead, we are trained to understand white online activity as “stuff people do.” Black Twitter confounded this ingrained understanding while using the same functions and apparatus by making it more apparent through external observation and internal interaction how culture shapes online discourses. Given these warrants, let us turn to Twitter and its interface to see how culture shapes code, interface design, and ultimately, information practices.

### Twitter Affordances: Minimalism and Malleability

I conducted a close reading of the affordances (Norman, 1988; Hutchby, 2001) and discourse conventions of Twitter-as-a-service as part of my argument that these interface elements contribute to the Black Twitter phenomenon. Norman defines affordances—or more precisely, “perceived affordances”—as design that relies on “what actions the user

perceives to be possible” (p. 9) rather than what is true. Twitter’s discursive minimalism and subsequent malleability, then, are perceived affordances that shape cultural uses of the service. The social and mechanical discourse conventions—message length, hashtags, and trending topics—map onto Black culture’s performativity, signifying, and publicness in ways that add an unexpected sociocultural dimension to the service.

I will not repeat the apocryphal story of Twitter’s design by Jack Dorsey and former Odeo developers here. Instead, in the spirit of history of technology and science and technology studies, I’d like to briefly discuss an often overlooked design influence on Twitter’s functionality and interface. Some influences can be traced to early attempts to diversify Web 2.0 services, such as direct microblogging competitors like Dodgeball, Jaiku, and Pownce, but there was one application in particular whose features can be understood as forming the foundation of what we know as Twitter today.

TXTmob, an open-source software app, allowed political activists and protestors to the 2004 Democratic and Republican National Conventions to organize via a text message broadcast system developed by Tad Hirsch and John Henry (2005).<sup>11</sup> They developed TXTmob in conjunction with a number of activist organizers seeking to incorporate communication and tactics while coordinating dozens (if not hundreds) of members during protests. Hirsch (2013) describes TXTmob as “essentially bulletin board software optimized for mobile phones and the web” (p. 1). Deploying text messaging (hereafter referred to as short-message service, or SMS) to support and enact political resistance resulted in a decentralized communicative structure that was of great benefit for organizers, demonstrators, and those wishing to lend support. Notably, upon its release, TXTmob immediately fell under the scrutiny of various police surveillance teams. For example, the Giuliani-era authoritarian NYPD was increasingly invested in monitoring (and silencing) all political and civil unrest following the events of September 11, 2001.

Twitter and TXTmob share feature DNA in part because engineers from Odeo were involved in TXTmob’s development. Evan Henshaw-Plath was one such engineer; he helped Hirsch improve the code and even presented TXTmob to the Odeo staff a few days before Dorsey’s infamous design brainstorming session that resulted in Twitter (Hirsch,

2013, p. 2). Hirsch carefully notes that Twitter made a number of innovations and improvements to the concept of text-based messaging that TXTmob had never considered. Comparing Twitter to TXTmob here helps clarify something about Twitter that capitalists, investors, and the media still find confusing: Who is Twitter for? Retelling the story of TXTmob’s encoding activist practice sheds light on why Twitter became a valuable organizing tool for Occupy, for the Arab Spring, and for Black Twitter. It also highlights SMS as an embodied information technology—the mobile phones we use for these services are made to be in our hands, always in close proximity to our bodies. This relationship among embodiment, information, and utterance presages my arguments for libidinal information technology use as an expression of self and culture.

The interfaces of most SNS tend to follow a browser-determined pattern of information display—namely, there is content in the middle bracketed on either side by widgets, photo galleries, applications, and advertising. Twitter stands apart from these browser-based SNS in its simplicity; the feed is the focal point of the web version (Safari/iOS) and its first-party client (iOS 11 / iPhone X). Again, this feature resembles classic SMS client interfaces, where the messages between interlocutors are the primary rationale for visiting the application. While posts published to Twitter’s feed often contain images, image macros, GIFs, videos, and other multimedia, the service prioritizes the visual representation of discourses happening in near real time. Twitter’s message format is a primary determinant of this affordance; it was originally designed as an SMS application to connect people in small groups. SMS messages are 160 characters long; Twitter messages were originally 140 characters (including attribution), allowing tweets to traverse SMS networks without truncation. Sagolla (2009) writes that Jack Dorsey’s Twitter design principle was to make it “dead simple for anyone to just type something and send it to multiple other phones, and to the Web” (p. xviii).

Twitter’s initial configuration on top of the SMS protocol allowed for the integration of offline and online Black worlds in ways that simply adding contact names to a social network did not. For example, every entity in your phone’s contacts list may have a phone number or even an email address, but everyone on your contact list does *not* have a Facebook, Snapchat, or Tumblr account. Thus all mobile phone users are

simultaneously hailed as SMS users, capable of receiving and replying to text messages even if they never use the service. Accordingly, Twitter’s use of the SMS protocol meant that new users were already configured to interface with the newborn service.

Dorsey’s *bon mot* “Just type something and send it” (Sagolla, 2009) as a design principle demands that the client become as transparent to the process as possible. For SMS users, the Twitter short code remains “40404,”<sup>12</sup> and the interface is a series of threaded messages organized by time received. Limiting messages to 140 characters while using the SMS protocol enabled Twitter to be used on millions of “feature phones” and smartphones—regardless of operating system or manufacturer—as well as instant-messaging services using SMS (e.g., MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Chat, and AOL Instant Messenger). One could also send tweets using Twitter’s website or third-party clients on Windows, Mac OS X, Unix, and Linux.

For web users, Twitter’s interface is a two-column page prominently featuring the user’s Twitter feed;<sup>13</sup> a floating header (for navigation and a user profile) is minimally present at the top of the page. A plethora of third-party clients and services are available, thanks to an early release of its application programming interface (API) and subsequent uptake by developers. While these clients add features such as multiple log-ins and organizational features, the focal point of all these interfaces and clients is the message and the message stream.

Unlike other social networks, Twitter was multiplatform from the beginning; was not restricted to certain types of internet access, client access, or protocol; and even encouraged a robust third-party developer ecology. For example, Facebook’s early attempts at mobile were severely hampered by then extant web protocols (e.g., the Wireless Application Protocol [WAP] browser introduced in 1999). Facebook was designed for the web browser in 2004, prior to the introduction of the modern smartphone, and was criticized for its poor mobile offerings even as burgeoning mobile access threatened to destabilize its advertising revenue. In contrast, Instagram was released as a mobile-only application (actually, iOS only until 2011). Twitter’s multiplatform strategy invited and encouraged users to enjoy the service without demanding a lot of screen space, while its minimalist SMS interface allowed mobile access from the beginning. This strategy enabled users to

integrate Twitter into already existing SMS practices as part of their everyday communication patterns. Moreover, the web interface encouraged users to stay engaged in environments where phone usage was awkward or inappropriate. Twitter’s website was the primary source of access,<sup>14</sup> but Foursquare, Google, Facebook, and Flickr all allowed their users to share information on Twitter. The material affordances necessary to use Twitter—an internet-connected computer, screen, and input device—are thus reduced (or nerfed, in gaming terms) to the widest possible number of information and computer technology (ICT) configurations by design. This analysis suggests that Twitter’s minimalist aesthetic and ease of material access played a role in Black adoption of the service.

### Black Twitter Practice: Signifyin’ as Identity, Performance, and Public

Black Twitter’s use of the practices and rhetorical strategies of signifyin’ (Gates, 1983) discourse signals Black online identity to in-group participants and out-group viewers. Earlier, I mentioned that digital technologies interpellate, or hail, people as “users.” For the digital, this can be accomplished through the interface and through the practices and symbols that help redefine user identity. Twitter’s social mechanism—the hail—is enacted through discourse and interaction; it hails its users through three metrics listed at the top of every profile:

- number of tweets written
- number of followers
- number of people one follows

These metrics identify social and digital interactions, yet they do not tell us much about why users communicate. Twitter users publish information and media to a network of followers and in turn read and respond to information and media from a network of people they follow. Twitter’s information stream includes, but is not limited to or even overly influenced by, hashtags. These textual and discursive practices provide a social, service-dependent context for decoding the information received while also offering an essential and understudied cultural context from

which information is encoded. While hashtags organize conversations and social interaction, they are often additional visual obfuscations that hinder the readability of a tweet, further complicating comprehension. Centering a Black Twitter (or Twitter) analysis on hashtags is reductive; it flattens the richness and complexity of the conversations held by individual Twitter users.

One way to understand conversational coherence on Twitter is by analyzing follower and followed networks. Bollen et al. (2011) find that Twitter users either prefer the company of users with similar values or converge on their friends’ values. They speculate, “This may confirm the notion that distinct socio-cultural factors affect the expression of emotion and mood on Twitter, and cause users to cluster according to their degree of expressiveness” (p. 248). In a Pew Internet Research (2015) survey of Black social media users, nearly two-thirds said that most of the posts they see on social media are about race or race relations, while nearly a third said that most of what they post online is about race or race relations. For white social media users, two-thirds said that none of their social media posts or shares pertained to race.<sup>15</sup> In discursive identity construction, such as that found on Twitter, homophilic user affiliations gain coherence and become reinforced by the use of cultural commonplaces. For Black Twitter users, posts about racial identity are the valence around which their digital practice is constructed; for many, signifyin’ is the style in which their discourse is expressed.

The rhetorical and discourse conventions of signifyin’ map well onto Twitter’s discourse conventions and practices. Signifyin’ is a Black discursive activity—*nay*, performance—that depends on style (*wit*), a knowing audience, and *kairos*. The term is an intentional nod to de Saussure’s formulation of sign, signifier, and signified to describe meaning making in discourse. In linguistics, a *sign* refers to anything that stands for something other than itself. De Saussure ([1916] 1974) argues that signs are composed of a *form* the sign takes (the signifier) and the *concept* the sign represents (the signified). For example, the word *love* is not the actual emotion we experience or our practice of that emotion, but we (kind of) understand what is meant when someone deploys the term.

Gates (1983) contends that signifyin’ is a discursive constitution of Black identity that turns on the play and chain of signifiers rather than the straightforward transmission of information. When signifyin’

happens, the interlocutor is inventively redefining an object or phenomenon using Black cultural commonplaces and philosophy. In doing so, the interlocutor defines the form of the sign while *becoming* the signifier in a playfully multivalent fashion. Moreover, the signified—the concept itself—evolves in this formulation to oscillate among form, object, and metadata referencing the signified concept. Finally, the audience is hailed through their knowledge of the practice and their capacity for participation.

In offline spaces, signifyin’ discourse that isn’t witty or timely is considered a failure; similarly, signifyin’ that goes unheard is not signifyin’ at all. On Twitter, signifyin’ works in similar fashion: Black Twitter tweets trade heavily in stylistic performance by a knowledgeable performer to a knowledgeable (digitally and culturally literate) audience situated in time and in digital space. The Black Twitter user is the signifier who exploits the format and conventions of the tweet to invent and invite a new way to perceive a familiar sign.

Twitter practice (indeed, much of social media practice) and signifyin’ discourse rely heavily on *kairos*. I’m drawing here on a set of scholarly definitions that understand *kairos* as

- a situational context,
- a qualitative time, or
- most relevant for this inquiry, “a dynamism and a value dimension to temporality” (Moutsopoulos, cited in Kinneavy & Eskin, 1994).

This last definition clearly marks the temporal aspect of Twitter’s publishing and display of user-generated content. “If you snooze, you lose” perfectly describes Twitter practice, as much of the context necessary to decode tweets depends on *when* you read them. To correctly and profitably engage in Twitter discourse, a tweet must be composed and published quickly enough to be considered part of a specific conversation. Hashtags have diminished, but not removed entirely, the need to be timely for Twitter participation. Indeed, hashtags have introduced another temporal consideration—virality—in Twitter’s kairotic practice. “If you snooze, you lose” is even more relevant for Black Twitter signifyin’, as a slow response to the signifyin’ hail results in invalidity and the inability to perform to an appreciative audience.

Miller (1994) brings forth another consideration for the possibilities of kairos, Twitter, and signifyin’ discourse. She argues for kairos’s relationship to decorum—that is, whether discourse is fitting for a particular moment. Twitter is particularly susceptible to instrumental violations of conversational decorum, as its content-feed mechanism constantly interrupts conversations of interest to the user by publishing newer, oft-unrelated conversational moments. In other online spaces, violations of discursive decorum can be signaled as “OT,” or off topic, to let participants know that the following content isn’t necessarily pertinent to the ongoing conversation but still relevant to the participants. This isn’t possible for Twitter use; at best, one can manually refresh the feed to load new content pertinent to the conversation, but a refresh will also load new content that is often topically incoherent.

Signifyin’ discourse (and Black folk) had a complicated relationship with decorum even before Black Twitter. Decorum, in a Black communal context, can be understood as being influenced to participate in or disseminate uplift and respectability rhetorics designed to enact a modern, civilized Black body. As such, much of the embodied, sensual nature of signifyin’ is a rebuke to notions of Black respectability even when the practitioners themselves are proponents. This becomes immediately clear when examining the invocation of “Black Twitter” as an instrument of critique and retribution; expectations of Black Twitter critique in these cases is that it will be savage rather than polite.

Signifyin’ has its own decorum, of course, although it draws on a complex relationship between content and signification. Despite the play and chain of signifiers, signifyin’ discourse *must* be discernible as relating to the signified. Going off topic—or worse, not being clever—are grounds for violation of signifyin’ decorum and kairos. Returning to kairos, tweets that are time-stamped long after the bulk of signifyin’ discourse about a topic are not timely. Moreover, trying to participate in a conversation that the participants have since moved on from can also be understood as a violation of Black Twitter and signifyin’ decorum.

The tweet-as-signifyin’, then, can be understood as a timely, discursive, public performance of Black identity. In Saussurean terms, the signifier is “the psychological impression of a sound” ([1916] 1974, p. 66). Gates (1983) defines signifyin’ in multiple dimensions: the person doing the signifyin’ performs a message that only represents part of the

intended communication. He adds, “One does not signify something; one signifies in *some way*” (p. 689). The tweet-as-signifier thus represents the following digital and signifyin’ communicative conventions:

- social affiliation (audience)
- message (presence)
- invention and subject knowledge (semiotics)

All these are tightly constrained by brevity, concision, and temporality.

Twitter, as a networked digital medium, complicates and expands signifyin’ practice. The complication derives in part from its ostensible communicative purpose and networked features, which draw on technocultural expectations of efficiency and productivity. While Twitter is efficient, the spatial limitations of an individual’s 140 character (and even the expanded 280 character format) tweet can render messaging incoherent, especially as the individual continues to produce tweets in response to messages that are often unrelated to the previous message. From this perspective, Twitter can easily become unintelligible to users who are not immersed in its practices and content—a charge that can be laid at the service’s feet nearly ten years after its introduction.

Twitter expands signifyin’ practice through its social mechanism and through its networked capacity, embodying cultural communication within individual participation and community reception. Signifyin’ discourse privileges the interaction between an individual and her community. The communal audience is an essential element for Black identity formation through reception, affect, and response. Walcott (1972) writes about the influence of individual and communal style in Black discourse in *Black World*: “On the public level, the individual as stylist operates on a plane, or more accurately, out of a sphere of interest *usually defined from the white point of view as entertainment* and, more profitably, *from the Black or theoretical point as ritual drama or dialectical catharsis*” (p. 9; emphasis mine). From this perspective, Twitter-the-service can be understood as a space for rhetorical invention (*inventio*) rather than simply a service for rote information transmission. Signifyin’ benefits from this affordance while providing Twitter with an alternative *raison d’être*: the performance of drama and catharsis, ritualized in a rigid format as a discursive style that demands attention.

Walcott (1972) defines ritual as “a highly stylized structure perceived and laid out in space” (p. 9). This clearly fits Twitter’s communicative convention: 140 characters in which to proclaim something of interest, where interactants are addressed by name and context is delivered in shorthand (the hashtag). The 140-character constraint affords a ritualistic discursive presentation, similar to the haiku or the limerick, while Twitter’s profile and sociality (follower/followee) offer additional scaffolding for semiosis. Black Twitter as ritual drama, then, highlights the structure, engagement, invention, and performance of these Twitter users employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis to construct discursive racial identity.

Performativity is a crucial element of signifyin’ and is immediately obvious in the case of Black Twitter. Walcott (1972) has more to say about space and Black discourse: “Accustomed to, and perhaps most at home participating in ritual, the stylist is a performer, a man who moves in space, who *attracts attention and employs it in defining himself*” (p. 9; emphasis mine). Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that Twitter, like other social networking services, collapses social context to enforce a univocal identity presentation. I offer instead that Twitter’s strict 140-character limit encourages discursive performativity and creativity (both hallmarks of signifyin’) within boundaries of time and space while *expanding* offline social context to dissolve digital dualist conceptions of social presence.

The expanded yet minimal identity display differs from other SNS, where social capital accrues from the public display of connections or carefully managed self-presentation through multimedia (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In longer-form online or multimedia digital practice (e.g., blogs, news articles, essays), authors have time and space to construct nuanced arguments that may also include citations for support. Long-form virtual spaces privilege monologic speech forms, which only become dialectical through additional digital features, such as comments or hyperlink embeds. Twitter “ain’t got no time for that”<sup>16</sup> and clearly benefits from this imposed limitation. Even as the service has expanded its discursive mechanism to 280 characters plus native tweet threading, Twitter’s signifyin’ capacity has remained intact.

My final argument for the tweet-as-signifier draws on Tal’s (1996) observation that the construction of online identity is in many ways

analogous to “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903). Our online personas are uneasy reconciliations of offline multiplicity and online fixity. “Context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) is one way to understand how the textual primacy of social media “fixes” identity. I argue here that *online fixity* is the assumption that online visitors occupy a “normal” online identity—white, male, middle-class, and hetero—or are so diverse that their cultural origins cannot (or should not) be ascertained. Black users’ employment of Twitter’s rigid format to articulate Black discursive styles and cultural iconography subverts mainstream expectations of Twitter demographics, discourses, and utility. These technocultural displays of Black identity would have gone unnoticed by the wider world except for the visibility offered by another signifier, the hashtag.

### The Twitter Hashtag: Instrumental Analysis

Black Twitter’s public element revolves around the hashtag. For Black Twitter practice, the hashtag serves as signifier, sign, and signified, marking the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the “call” awaiting a response. From a functional perspective, hashtags digitally organize conversations for coherence and archival purposes. Hashtags operate as hyperlinked search terms encoded for human memory retrieval, retrieving up to one thousand publicly available tweets containing a formatted text string that makes sense to people sharing a cultural worldview. But this functional analysis does not offer insight into why Black Twitter hashtags are so effective at marshaling attention and participation.

The hashtag is a user-created metadiscourse convention (# + keyword, often a phrase absent any spaces between words) that was coined to coordinate Twitter conversations by providing topical coherence (Messina, 2007). Although Messina recounts that he pitched the concept to Twitter, the company chose to filter topics computationally, a process that became known as the trending topic algorithm. The hashtag (# + topic) was initially deployed to filter and organize multiple tweets on a particular topic (Messina, 2008). Initially intended as a curational feature, the hashtag quickly evolved into an expressive modifier to contextualize the brusque, brief tweet. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the hashtag’s evolution led to the “discovery” of Black Twitter. Black Twitter hashtag domination of

the trending topics algorithmic feed allowed outsiders to view Black discourse that was (and still is) unconcerned with the mainstream gaze. While hashtags predate trending topics, both played a role in exposing Black Twitter to a mainstream audience that was unconcerned with its prior existence. Twitter’s enormous volume of tweets effectively obscures the activities of groups of users; third-party solutions provide some means to filter the stream but are of limited use to the general user. Hashtags and trending topics filtered Twitter in a way that identified not only topics of interest but who was generating those topics.

A brief moment of clarification: trending topics are not the same as hashtags, although they both serve to organize Twitter conversations. Hashtags are folksonomic (Mathes, 2004), and as Huang, Thornton, and Efthimidas (2010) point out, they are situated a priori for users to situate their message within a wider real-time conversation rather than a posteriori to facilitate retrieval. Trending topics, on the other hand, are intended to capture topics enjoying a surge in popularity (Gillespie, 2011). To do so, the algorithm looks at the number of tweets on a common topic and the rate of propagation across disparate clusters of Twitter users. Thus the algorithm identifies breaking topics rather than the enormous stream of tweets generated daily deeply invested fan communities (e.g., Justin Bieber fans [Beliebers] and Beyoncé fans [the Beyhive]) or through generically invoked hashtags (e.g., #Love and #Hate) that don’t provoke unique content. Trending topics, therefore, provide insight into the influence of Black Twitter practice while also shedding light on topics that Twitter-the-service considers important.

## Semiotic Analysis

Earlier in this chapter, I claimed that hashtags serve as sign, signifier, and signified in Black Twitter discourse:

- *Sign* refers to something other than itself as well as the call to participate awaiting a response.
- *Signifier* marks both the concept to be discussed (or signified upon) and the wit of the originator.
- *Signified* represents the relational (cultural) context within which the accompanying tweet can be decoded (and encoded).

The first bullet requires clarification: *hashtag-as-sign* refers to the hashtag’s presence *and* its function as a hyperlink. The hyperlink was a sign before the hashtag’s arrival; it refers to other information located elsewhere (on the same page, on the same site, or on a different site) and initiates travel to that information’s location. The hyperlink often does this while presenting as text, but it can also present as an image or other multimedia object. Properly speaking, the tweet is *not* a sign, as it includes a hyperlink to the original post, which is usually encoded as the publication date stamp. In its phrase-absent-spaces virtuosity, the hashtag is not the entirety of the message encoded (thus my earlier contention that hashtags are part, but not all, of the Black Twitter phenomenon), but it serves as a visual, textual, discursive, *and* informational marker of the discourse at hand.

Mitchell-Kernan’s description of signifyin’ practice can thus be seen as describing hashtag use as well: “The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential—carrying symbolic systems in speech events . . . the context embeddedness of meaning is attested to by both our reliance on the given context and, most important, by our inclination to construct additional context from our background knowledge of the world” (as cited in Gates, 1983, p. 691). The hashtag, originally intended to collate conversations around an external topic, thus becomes a call for Black Twitter participants to recognize performance and respond in kind. In doing so—clicking a hashtag moves you away from your feed to a separate search window or tab—it also isolates you from attending to other conversations. Even so, the hashtag invites a wider audience for a signifyin’ moment than can be generated using @username alone. This expanded audience—the communal one created by the hashtag’s curatorial function as well as the algorithmic one created by trending topics—can then attribute Black Twitter practice to the coherent practice of a digital public instead of just noise picked up on the trending topic algorithm. Moreover, the hashtag’s signifyin’ and broadcast elements have significantly expanded Black identity to include a digital component even as Twitter-the-service continues to suffer from accusations of incivility and incoherence thanks to the ministrations of the forty-fifth president.

Absent the context of the signifyin’ Twitter user and text, it is not always clear from a linguistic-aesthetic perspective which hashtags are Black Twitter hashtags (e.g., #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies or

#NiggerNavy). I argue this for several reasons. The first is functional: hashtags have become so popular and ubiquitous that many people use them for banal affective (but not libidinal) expressions. For example, #Love is one of the most popular and generic Twitter hashtags, yet it doesn't provide topical coherence because so many users deploy it indiscriminately. Thus generic hashtags are not libidinal, as they only perform an emotional response rather than signify an emotion.

Black Twitter expressions are occasionally difficult to identify because one cannot rely on the performance of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to recognize Black Twitter content. Many Black folk don't employ AAVE as everyday speech, and many more don't employ it in public-facing spaces (e.g., code switching; Spears, 2001). Thus hashtags from Black Twitter users often trend for technical reasons—because of Black Twitter user participation *and* cultural meanings encoded within tweets (e.g., #TVOneShows)—rather than for cultural rationales, such as the signaling of and response to AAVE. Furthermore, research uniformly suggests that AAVE speakers might be familiar with the linguistic patterns of AAVE and are conversant in the meanings *even without speaking in that particular dialect* (Spears, 1999; Rickford, 1999; Labov, 1998; Wolfram, 1994). From this perspective, I argue that Black Twitter participation draws from Black technical and digital expertise, operationalized as social network practice, nearly as much as it does on being able to encode and recode Twitter content in Black cultural commonplaces.

A tertiary consideration for the expertise behind the Black Twitter hashtag is that crafting hashtags that generate attention and participation is not easy. Walcott (1972) argues that command of form is paramount for Black discourse: “One's personal victory, then, is achieved through the fashioning of an individual style that will enable one to operate in space . . . indeed to come to *invigorate the space in which one finds oneself with a sense of oneself, one's vision, values, limitations, resources, aims*” (p. 9; emphasis mine). The user's identity, her followers (and followed), and the crafting of a signifyin' chain all play a role in signaling participation in Black Twitter signifyin'. The Black Twitter hashtag invites an audience—even more so than the publication of a tweet to one's followers—by setting the parameters of the discourse to follow. It is also a signal that the Twitter user is part of a larger cultural

community and displays her knowledge of that community’s practices, discourses, and worldview.

The hashtag’s audience invitation maps onto the signifyin’ practice of call and response, which Smitherman (1977) defines as a practice where the speaker either requests a specific response from the audience or elicits extemporaneous audience responses by appealing to cultural commonplaces. Call-and-response interactions build consensus either by completion of the original statement or through affirmation of the speaker’s intent. Figure 3.1 is an example of how a hashtag’s deployment illustrates call and response: FreedomReeves sounds the call with the hashtag #NewTVOneShows, which refers to the Black-owned cable channel TV One. RenishaRenewed acknowledges the call and expands on it. In this thread of hashtagged responses, these Twitter users are humorously proposing culturally relevant shows for the then fledgling network. Note that FreedomReeves does not address her tweet to TV One’s Twitter account (@tvonetv). Rather, TV One is the sign on which she is signifyin’. Hashtags enable Twitter to mediate communal identity in near real time, allowing participants to act individually yet en masse while still being heard.



Figure 3.1. Tweets using the #NewTVOneShows hashtag

Black Twitter’s utilization of hashtags also enables the signifyin’ practice of tonal semantics, or “voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in Black communication” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 134). You may be more familiar with tonal semantics in digital form as emoticons, emoji, and stickers (Sweeney, 2016). Before smartphones and messaging apps became ubiquitous, however, Banks (2005) observed tonal semantics on BlackPlanet.com chat discourse in the early 2000s. He noted that BlackPlanet users were already familiar with deploying typographic features (e.g., parentheses and other punctuation) to denote affection, dislike, or respect between members. I offer this data point to warrant my claim that hashtags serve a similar tonal function for Black Twitter. In addition to operating as relational signals between individuals, they signal a shift from rote information exchange to a critical yet playful discourse style. They differentiate individual tweets as part of a communal wordplay and identity construction rather than as insults or banalities.

To recap, Twitter’s publication mechanism makes it difficult to keep track of conversations. All public tweets are posted simultaneously to the account @publictimeline (once featured on the home page, but no longer); to the Twitter main stream, or “firehose”; and to a user’s followers. The public timeline is nearly incomprehensible thanks to the volume of tweets and the lack of context, while conversations between subscribers draw context from their shared interests. Black Twitter digital practice affords Twitter-the-service a measure of conversational coherence through networks of tightly linked users engaging in Black digital practice; discursive practices, including signifyin’; and multi-media cultural commonplaces. Hashtags, in addition to their curatorial function, indicate affective, libidinal, and group-level discourses. Black Twitter hashtag use often brings Black discourse to the attention of the trending topic algorithm. The trending topic mechanism attempts to improve the service’s information utility and coherence by highlighting Twitter’s conversational nature. It does so by publicizing and tracking topics of interest across groups, cities, regions, and nations, but unless the topics are published in languages other than English, they are not read as “cultural” content.

Black Twitter’s visibility via the trending topic algorithm—which is how the mainstream became aware of the phenomenon—led to a technological othering of Black digital practice as an intervention on “white

public space” (Hill, 1998). Hill defines white public space as “a morally significant set of contexts in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal” (p. 62). This space is constructed by the intense monitoring of nonwhite speakers along with the invisibility of almost identical signs in white discourse. In the previous sections, I examined how Twitter’s design principles indirectly encouraged Black digital participation in the service as well as how tweets and hashtags (artifacts) can mediate Black cultural discourse (practice). The following section examines racial and technocultural beliefs about Black Twitter as a technocultural practice.

### Critical Discourse Analysis: Reactions to Black Twitter

Manjoo’s (2010) Black Twitter explainer can be argued for as representing a mainstream view of race and information technology use—more specifically, as a mainstream perspective on Black technoculture and digital practice. In keeping with my conceptual framework and definition of ethnic identity as generated by internal and external perception, this chapter also examined two racialized websites discussing Black Twitter: a white-authored personal blog and the personal blog of a Black journalist. To be clear, these sites are *not* definitive examples of their respective ethnic groups. Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation theory, however, argues that individual acts of racial representation draw on social structure. As discussed earlier, Hughes ([1971] 1993) defines ethnic identity as practices and beliefs that the in-group and out-group *agree* can be attributed to the in-group. Therefore, while these websites are not wholly representative, each author recognizes Black Twitter based on their relationship to Black identity and online culture. While hyperlinks offer the possibility of online interaction, they do not necessarily confer the probability that interactants will encounter each other online. Thus the recognition of Black culture on display here depends not on whether the interactants know one another but on whether they are conversant in what American culture believes about Black culture.

An additional rationale for counterposing racial website discourses about Black Twitter can be found in the writings of Ann Rawls (2000), who studies white and Black conversational interactions. She argues,

“While Black and white appear to occupy the same world geographically, they rarely occupy the same interactional space . . . even when they do more often jointly occupy interactional space . . . *the display of moral behavior by members of one group may well look like deviant behavior to members of the other*” (p. 247; emphasis mine). Spoiler alert: the ethnic affiliation of the authors discussed in the following sections colors their perception of Black Twitter activity.

### *White Perspective: Too Much Nick*

One of the original contributors to the “Blacks on Twitter” conversation was Nick Douglas on his personal Tumblr Too Much Nick. I chose this particular blog and post because it was one of the earliest commentaries to be found on Black Twitter, because of Sicha’s reference to Douglas in his “Late Night Black Twitter” post, and because I found it through Alice Marwick’s Tumblr. Marwick is a noted internet researcher on identity and social media, so her participation in this conversation signaled that it might be of interest for this inquiry.

In Douglas’s 2009 post “Micah’s ‘Black people on Twitter’ theory,” Douglas mentions a friend’s comment on nongeek Twitter activity: “These people don’t have real Twitter friends. So they all respond to trending topics. And that’s the game, that’s how they use Twitter” (p. 1). Douglas’s mention of his friend’s commentary is an implicit endorsement of the sentiment that Twitter is for geeks; he later defines it as “white guys with collars and spelling.” In contrast, nongeeky people “use text-speak” and are “minorities, women, and teens.” The post also contains rebuttals from two other Tumblr users—*mariadiaz*, a tech blogger and coder from San Francisco, and *alicetiara*, the nom de plume of Alice Marwick. Diaz notes that Douglas’s friend hasn’t been paying attention to the Twitter communities in which those conversations happen, writing, “I follow a lot of ‘those people’ for my work blog and trust me, they know how to use Twitter.” Marwick adds, “The hipster tech crowd is . . . a VERY small minority [of users] and so they need to stop assuming that their use of Twitter is the ‘right,’ ‘normal,’ ‘correct,’ or ‘usual’ use. It is no longer” (Douglas, 2009, p. 1).

For Douglas’s friend Micah, only certain folk tweet correctly: standard English-speaking white professional male technologists, or “geeks.”

From this racial and technocultural context, Twitter becomes an informational space and social network for white tech elites. Douglas clarifies in response to mariadiaz and alicetiara that neither Micah nor he thinks anyone’s using Twitter “wrong,” but the damage has already been done. Here race and technology are framed by the context in which they appear: Twitter as a rational discursive space. Rawls (2000), writing about white identity, says, “White Americans takes the role of the white other towards the self without any fundamental contradiction and thus essentially without being aware of doing so” (p. 244). In translation, whites assume that the rest of the world sees them as white people wish to be seen. For Douglas, geeks—a community of interest that skews heavily white and male—are the experts in arcane technologies and are thus entitled to exclusive access to Twitter. While he acknowledges that geeks are not “ideal” whites, they are entitled to use Twitter in ways that non-geeks, women, children, and nonwhites are not.

*Black Perspective: PostBourgie*

Shani Hilton (2010), writing as shani-o, responds to Manjoo’s Black Twitter explainer on the group-authored blog PostBourgie (PB; <http://postbourgie.com>). While Douglas’s Tumblr can be understood as a personal blog, PB was one of the more prominent Black cultural blogs in the Black blog era (ca. 2004–10). Its remit was news, politics, tech, and culture, and many of the original PB contributors were journalists interested in complicating media conversations about race and American culture. Several are now senior journalists at mainstream publications. When this blog post was published, Hilton was a contributor at *Colorlines* magazine and the *Washington City Paper*. Gene Demby (GD) now leads NPR’s Code Switch division on race and American culture, and Jamelle Bouie (Jamelle) is a senior political correspondent at the *New York Times*. PostBourgie’s genealogy is important for this inquiry, as it was one of the few bastions during the rise of Web 2.0 (and blogging) of experienced, tech-savvy, culturally competent journalists who happened to be Black. Thus their expertise contributes an important Black digital perspective on Black Twitter use.

Hilton’s post, “You can tweet like this or you can tweet like that or you can tweet like us,” takes an analytical racial approach to Black Twitter.

Her response criticizes Manjoo's authoritative stance on Black Twitter activity, suggesting that he serves as a tour guide for "befuddled and bemused Whites" because "the ways of Black folk are so mysterious." She acknowledges using Twitter and that Black Twitter hashtags—"some very tempting to join in on"—had crept into her timeline. Hilton defines Black Twitter discourse: "Black people on Twitter, just as they do in real life, maintain tight-knit communities where they trade jokes, bicker, and play with each other. The same could be said about any other community using the site." She also provides a technocultural analysis of Black online access: "To address the question about the 'dominance' of Black Twitterers, I believe the answer lies somewhere in this combination of pretty mundane facts: Poor and working class people are more likely to access the internet through mobile devices. . . . Young Black people on Twitter are right on trend. That is, when a large percentage of a racial group is young and doesn't have a lot of money, they're going to dominate a free service that ties in perfectly with their most common mode of communication."

Hilton accepts Black Twitter as normal rather than as a game perhaps because of her own identification as Black as well as her participation in and history with Black digital practice. Her commentary on Black youth and working-class folk accessing the internet through mobile devices is a welcome validation of my claims for Black internet and digital literacies being augmented and shaped by smartphone access. Similarly, she marks Black Twitter discourse as common to all Twitter users. To close her post, she asks for mainstream understanding of Black heterogeneity, online and offline, reinforcing Manjoo's point that Black Twitter is a subgroup of all Black Twitter users rather than the entirety.

Rawls (2000), writing on Black discursive identity, notes that "while Whites . . . are accountable to only one community and one set of values, there are two separate peoples to whom the African American self is accountable. If actions fulfill the ideals of the one group, without fulfilling the ideals of the other at the same time, this is a problem that 'belongs' to the African American self, but not to the white self" (p. 245). This quote supports Hilton's analysis. Hilton claims and acknowledges the actions of poor young Blacks, marking their digital practice as culturally American and technoculturally normal. Her articulation of Black technological prowess—reading Black Twitter users as agentive

in their adoption and command of a nascent social network and digital service—was warranted through statistical findings. In doing so, she counters the deficit-laden moral and functional narrative of racial technology use proffered by Douglas. Moreover, despite her critiques of Manjoo’s Slate article, Hilton’s analysis adds much-needed nuance to Manjoo’s piece by presenting activities from an *emic* perspective. This is only possible because of Hilton’s critical, affiliative take on Black identity and Black digital practice.

### Discussion: Interfaces, Practices, and Beliefs

Returning to my organizing principle of technology as artifact, practice, and belief, I examined Twitter’s interface and features to analyze how this technology mediates Black culture. I also scrutinized online discourses about Black Twitter to understand how culture frames technology practice. I found that a tweet’s content coupled with a topical hashtag, when leavened with cultural commonplaces, could enrich communal bonds between networked Twitter users. This happens regardless of cultural affiliation. Black Twitter exemplifies this phenomenon, but racial and technocultural ideologies brought cultural influences on digital practice to mainstream attention thanks to the pejorative perceptions of Black technology use.

Black discursive culture—specifically signifyin’ discourse’s focus on invention, delivery, ritual, and audience participation—maps well onto Twitter’s focus on rapid discussion among groups of connected users. Twitter’s ubiquity and ambiguity—stemming from design decisions made to encourage the adoption of the service—enabled material access with minimal loss of functionality. This is an important point to note when considering that Blacks access the internet (and Twitter) primarily through mobile devices. Black Twitter illuminates the service’s role as a cultural communication medium, transcending the size limitations and conversational incoherence of chat rooms while allowing users to participate in open-ended community-building discourses in near real time.

Equally illuminating is the role that technocultural and racial ideologies play in shaping reactions to Black Twitter. While my discourse analysis was performed on a very small scale, I conducted it in this manner to triangulate beliefs about race and technology use framed by

Black Twitter perceptions. Where whiteness and tech expertise were ascendant, Black Twitter was viewed as a game and a waste of resources. Where Blackness and tech expertise were ascendant, Black Twitter was understood as the mediated articulation of a Black subculture.

As such, I have exposed myself to claims of selectivity in order to make a political statement about online racial ideology. I submit, however, that the internet does not exist in a vacuum; offline beliefs about race and technology shape online discourses about the same. In chapter 5, which examines Black online respectability politics, the critical discourse analysis is expanded to focus on internet uplift ideology as expressed by Black bloggers, pundits, and audiences discussing Black digital practice.

## Conclusions

I drew heavily on Baraka’s poem “Technology and Ethos” to begin this chapter, so it’s fitting to return to it before moving on to the ruminative remainder of this text. Baraka’s informational Blackness could not have anticipated the internet’s capacity for *distributed* information even as he prophesied the rhythmic and expressive articulations of Blackness made possible by Black pathos and information technologies. His inventive creation of the “speaking singing constantly communicating charm”—to be worn on the person—is a prescient reference to the smartphone. More specifically, he casually references the auditory as an informational and social affordance. Our smartphones carry entire music libraries, signal sociality through ringtones, and garner attention through notification tones. These are all ways in which the auditory captures and unites audiences in a way that the domination and discrimination of our visual senses cannot hope to achieve. Our phones create a virtual space that often serves to brighten or survive the physical spaces that Black folk must navigate daily. To describe our actions in that space as *efficient* or *modern* misses the point: bridging the reaches of space and time while grounded by Black cultural discourses is the Black version of space travel.

Black Twitter came to online prominence through creative use of Twitter’s hashtag function and the subsequent domination of Twitter’s trending topics. I tread carefully here; Black folk have been Twitter users from

the jump. Drawing on Hughes’s ([1971] 1993) definition of ethnic groups, however, I argue that Black Twitter coalesced through the recognition of the unique practices of the group by in-group and out-group observers alike. To this I add Hughes’s observation that cultural behaviors are attributes of an ethnic group; the group is not defined by those attributes.

Twitter’s design principles allow users to access and engage with the service with little loss of functionality across a wide number of device, client, and protocol configurations, including mobile telephones. In turn, this wide reach and access enabled minority internet users to adapt an online service that appears to fit neatly into the offline practices they use in everyday life. The informal communication evidenced in Black Twitter is not idle play; it works as an affirmation of the humanity and sensuality of the Black community in an online space that is unused to this type of spectacle.

Black Twitter is best understood as a public group of intentional Black Twitter users rather than a Black online public. That being said, Black Twitter use has coalesced around the activities of critical feminist and queer activists (specifically Black Lives Matter), allowing for the interpretation of Black Twitter as a public—albeit a terribly understudied one. Like other Black online activities, Black Twitter would have been considered niche without the intervention of the hashtag or the trending topic. As it is, these two features brought the activities of tech-literate Blacks to mainstream attention, contravening the popular conception of Black capitulation to the digital divide. Hilton’s recognition and Douglas’s disparagement highlight the formation of the group, while Manjoo’s column signaled Black Twitter’s arrival.

Typically, social networks gain popularity and public notice as users encourage their networks to adopt them. Viral spread across multiple online venues (e.g., email, instant messaging [IM], YouTube) then leads to the recognition of a “social public” by academics, pundits, and the mainstream. Black Twitter did neither of those things: Black Twitter discourse works best on Twitter, although similar cultural commonplaces are employed wherever Blacks congregate. It is also unclear how many Black Twitter users engage in Black Twitter discourse practices. In fact, as more Blacks adopt Twitter and their hashtags no longer dominate trending topics, the “publicness” of Black Twitter will return to the audience that is most involved: Black folk.

This research was simultaneously made easier and more difficult by race, as a focus on “social publics” encourages analyses of easily defined online communities. If my intent was to mark white discursive styles and practices based on Twitter usage as a social public, where would I begin? Based on the inquiry above, I could have argued for “white Twitter” as banal, efficient communication between interactants. Given prevailing stereotypes about online identity—white, male, and heterosexual unless otherwise marked—all unmarked social conversation could easily be argued for as conversation between tech-savvy white users. Alternatively, I could have examined fringe white demographics such as the alt-right to center racism as a defining characteristic of white masculine identity. I could also have used less-charged markers of white racial identity to attempt to disambiguate white Twitter practice based on class, sexuality, or other demographics. In either case, I would have been susceptible to critics claiming that I had not properly considered the heterogeneity of white identity and digital practice, which is my point.

That Black Twitter is often portrayed as representative of the entire Black community despite the heterogeneity of Black culture speaks to the power of American racial ideology’s framing of Black identity as monoculture. I deliberately omitted mention of the more egregious racist responses to Black Twitter, intent on presenting Black Twitter as the technological mediation of a specific cultural discourse rather than as the product of fevered online fantasies of degenerative Black online behavior. Although these fantasies are much more vivid and easily disparaged, focusing on them moves the gaze away from Black Twitter’s creativity and tech literacy to white framings of Black activity. Examining egregious online racism while ignoring more subtle, structural forms of online discrimination is problematic; equally problematic is social science and communication research that attempts to preserve a color-blind perspective on online endeavors by normalizing whiteness and othering everyone else. It is my hope that this chapter sparks a conversation about both practices.