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Black Online Discourse, Part 1

Ratchetry and Racism

> In the technological realm, creativity by African Americans is regularly dismissed as cleverness, instead of being interpreted as smart, ingenious, or innovative.
>
> —Rayvon Fouché (2006, p. 647)

> In societies where scientific rationality and objectivity claimed to be highly valued by dominant groups, marginalized people and those who listen attentively to them will point out that from the perspective of marginal lives, the dominant accounts are less maximally objective.
>
> —Sandra Harding (1992, p. 442)

> Who
> can be born black
> and not
> sing
> the wonder of it
> the joy
> the
> challenge
>
> —Mari Evans (1970)

The previous chapters recounted case studies of Black digital practice. This chapter and the one following represent my efforts to synthesize those chapters and earlier musings on Black technoculture into an admittedly incomplete conceptual framework of Black digital discur-

sive practice. These chapters theorize Black digital practice through three interrelated frame[1] sets, all drawing on Black aesthetics: ratchetry, racism, and respectability. Ratchetry (the quality of being ratchet) here refers to digital practice born of everyday banal, sensual, forward, and "deviant" (Cohen, 2004) political behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse. Racism—here defined as a set of external practices and beliefs delineating and maintaining Black identity—is an inescapable context through which Black digital practice must be contextualized. I am not arguing that Black folk are racist,[2] as racism by definition incorporates structural discrimination that Black folk have little access to. Instead, racism—as a synonym for white supremacist ideology—is the milieu in which Black identity was created. As such, responses to racism are deeply interwoven into Black discourse and aesthetics even in digital spaces where embodiment is elusive and symbolic. Finally, respectability—drawing on Higginbotham's (1993) "respectability politics"—refers to uses and beliefs about "appropriate" Black digital practice and will be addressed in the next chapter.

In a sense, I conceived these three frames of digital practice in answer to Pursell's (2010) entreaty to look at what technologies *mean* and do—in this case, the meanings intended by Black folk when they do digital practice. They are also a preliminary answer to the larger questions posed throughout this book: How do Black aesthetics shape Black digital practice and discourses? Moreover, my approach engendered an unintended yet familiar claim for the Black academic: Should racism be considered a part of the Black aesthetic?

My argument for a libidinal economy of new media and information technologies incorporates the concept of pathos—specifically, Black pathos—to argue for the rethinking of Black digital practitioners' "nonproductive," "inefficient" online activities. I apply this concept to my three proposed frames of Black online discourse, beginning with the most voluble and, I argue, most misunderstood frame: ratchet practice, or ratchetry. Given Twitter's proficiency at ritual drama and catharsis, ratchetry—thanks to its unrestrained nature—lends itself to Black Twitter practice like no other discursive frame because of its cathartic use of libidinal tensions and expressions.

Racism also has a powerful libidinal tension, the expression of which powers and colors today's social and digital media. This chapter closes

by examining racism's libidinal effect on Black digital practice. While the *practice* of racism online has received enormous attention from media and the academy, the *effects* of racism on Black digital practice have not been as thoroughly researched. These effects are not limited to microaggressions or internalized racism; instead, this chapter argues that racism-as-technology mediates digital discourses of Black interiority in the context of white racial ideology.

Taken together, I reason here for ratchetry and racism as competing tensions that overdetermine the discursive frame of respectability. This perspective is deeply beholden to Du Bois's double consciousness; indeed, it only works by taking his claim seriously. Mills (1997) states that the African American experience, culture, and worldview are "deeply motivated by the necessity of doing a critique *of* the dominant view" (p. 4; emphasis original). As such, ratchetry can be (incompletely) understood as influenced by and opposed to racism. My arguments for racism also draw on Mills's research—specifically, the fact that Enlightenment thinkers wrote extensively about universal equality while ignoring arguments for the complete elision of slavery present in the majority of Enlightenment philosophy. To exist, then, Black folk continually operate in a racist paradigm through affirmations of self-worth and personhood and the recognition of racism with a *militant* insistence that others recognize it too (Mills, 1998, p. 9). In its visceral expression, this militancy can be understood as ratchet behavior, which is often identifiable by the resigned annoyance of the Black middle class and the glee of Blacks who can relate. It is visible because of the context within which it exists.

Thus I have made the choice to address both ratchetry and racism together in this chapter. In doing so, I hope to uncover the interlocking set of tensions keeping both frames active. One cannot exist without the other; racism needs a shibboleth to justify its coercion, while ratchetry without racism is just Black libidinal agency. That is, would we need to define Black agency-as-incivility as *ratchetry* if there was no gestation of *Blackness* by white supremacist ideology? Finally, I recognize the fragmentary nature of reading in this digital age. Many readers will explore this book piecemeal, and because these two concepts cannot be separated, I examine them together in the sections that follow.

Ratchetry: The Online Politics of the Everyday

> Respectable anger calls lawyers; ratchet anger calls goons. Respectable anger throws barbs; ratchet anger throws bottles.
>
> —S. G. Benjamin (2014, p. 61)

> If you want to feel humor too exquisite and subtle for translation, sit invisibly among a gang of Negro workers. The white world has its gibes and cruel caricatures; it has its loud guffaws; but to the Black world alone belongs the delicious chuckle.
>
> —W. E. B. Du Bois (1940, p. 75)

I begin with ratchetry—the enactment and performance of ratchet behavior and aesthetics—to highlight the sensuality that is present in Black digital practice. For Black culture, the invocation of *ratchet* conjures up someone who has no filter or propriety; a condition that across American race relations has often been akin to a death sentence. Ratchet shares connotative space with *ghetto* but differs from *ghetto*'s aesthetics thanks to its enactment and performance of militant insouciance.

I appropriated the term *ratchet* to ground this frame in the banal, sensual, and outspoken aspects of Black expressive culture. A second and third reason for using the term lies within the technical and technocultural denotations of *ratchet*. Technically, a ratchet is a device that, once engaged, can only rotate in one direction, while technoculturally, *ratchet* describes a process that is changing irreversibly or deteriorating. The multiple dimensions of *ratchet* offer a directional, agentive, and technical identity that works well for this frame. Finally, it is my firm belief that before commodification and before resistance, Black folk enact their cultural identity online because they enjoy being Black; my definition of *ratchetry* thus includes a libidinal component of pleasure. In all cases, *ratchet* indicates a change agent—one that seems inexorable and unamenable once involved.

For example, reconsider the intersection of *Black* and *Twitter*. Neither has ever been considered technoculturally appropriate; neither has ever possessed much cultural or social capital with mainstream institutions. Twitter is historically and currently understood as a banal (or more recently, toxic) online space, and despite its acclaim as an

agent for social justice, its utility is questioned daily. Similarly, while Blackness may have reached its peak approbation during the eight years of the Michelle Obama administration, it nonetheless stands as the signified cultural nadir for American whiteness—uncivilized, impure, and primitive. The modulation of Twitter by Blackness, then, should signal a desolate wasteland of incoherent technical and digital discourse, but instead, Black Twitter is considered the premiere use case for the microblogging service, with significant contributions to information and computer technology (ICT) practice as well as social activism.

I chose *ratchet* rather than *banal* to describe the energies expressed within everyday performances and practices of Black folk online. *Banal* is a diminutive, pejorative term meant to indicate the mundanity and irrelevance of activities denoted as such. *Ratchet*, on the other hand, is hypervisible thanks to its embodiment and its performance of agentive deviance—to external and internal social and cultural orders. To be ratchet in Black culture is not always intended as a compliment but is always indicative of agency. In online spaces, ratchetry should also be understood as the willingness to intentionally be Black and perform Blackness in spaces that are still uninterested in recognizing Black agency. For Black women and queer folk online, race is often no respite from in-group prejudice; being and performing Blackness is often met with Black male misogyny, sexism, and homo- and transphobia, but nevertheless, they persist.

Feminist media scholars have been interrogating ratchetry and ratchet behavior since the term entered the popular lexicon from 2000s-era Southern rap. *Ratchet* joins a long list of slang terms (e.g., thot,[3] basic) linking Black bodies—often female and/or queer—with "hood" or deviant behavior (Bradley, 2013a, 2013b; Cooper, 2012; Warner, 2015). From rap's perspective, ratchetry revolves around perceptions of crass materialism, promiscuity, rudeness, ignorance, inappropriateness, dishabille, and occasionally violence. Ratchet even has a digital practice component: the highest-rated definition of *ratchet* on Urban Dictionary includes the stipulation "owning a BlackBerry." Given the BlackBerry's one-time association with white professional culture, the Urban Dictionary's reassigning of the smartphone to a raced, gendered, technical identity is a signifyin' recognition of Black digital practice.

My aim here is to reconstitute *ratchet* as a positive force by positioning it as (uber)performative authenticity—as "'bout it," "real," and "doing the most"—which links implicitly with the technical definition of the ratchet as a one-way force. In this I am not alone; there are a number of cogent academic definitions as well. Stallings (2013) calls *ratchet* "the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race" (p. 136). Bradley (2013a) positions *ratchet* as a Black Southern cultural export—a form of expression intervening against the ways in which respectability politics denigrates women of color. I would add that ratchet folk are unapologetic about their Black identity, and even suggesting that it is performative would rub many the wrong way. I argue here that ratchetry's superpower is its refusal to apologize for or assimilate to out-group and in-group notions of appropriate behavior and aesthetics.

Ratchetry as Online Praxis

At this point, it is necessary to highlight the foundation of my framing of ratchetry as online praxis and Black digital practice: Cathy Cohen's (2004) article "Deviance as Politics." Defining *deviance* as "breaking the assumed agreed upon norms of socially acceptable behavior," Cohen argues that "in the space created by deviant discourse and practice . . . a new radical politics of deviance could emerge. It might take the shape of a radical politics of the personal, embedded in more recognized Black counter publics, where the most marginal individuals in Black communities . . . act with the limited agency available to them to secure small levels of autonomy in their lives" (p. 28). From here, it is but a small step to associate ratchetry with deviance; doing so invigorates deviance by deliberately associating it with Black (women's) bodies. "Small levels of autonomy" clearly refers to everyday moments when Black folk are able to assert agency despite the forces arrayed against them, not grand gestures of respectability or political solidarity (e.g., the choice to wear a purple weave as an expression of self rather than a relaxed hairstyle). For instance, the canonical hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, created by Twitter user CaShawn Thompson (@thepbg), is a beautiful example of the creative libidinal tensions present in ratchet embodiments of Black femininity. Finally, Cohen's phrase "the space created by deviant discourse and practice" anticipates Twitter

beautifully a full three years before its creation and five years before Black Twitter began to be noticed. While Twitter fits this phrasing best thanks to its unconventional discourse practices, Cohen also describes Black digital practice—an unanticipated cultural intervention into a virtual space through discourse and technical skill. She adds, "It may be that through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals new identities, communities, and politics are created and a space emerges where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior might evolve into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance" (2004, p. 42).

My claim for ratchetry diverges from Cohen's definition of deviance to avoid equating Black deviance with "wrongness," which it incurs even in Cohen's generous interpretation. Recasting *deviance* as *ratchet* links my libidinal economic analysis of online Black deviant behavior and practice to expressions of joy, sensuality, and anger; some of these expressions might occasionally manifest as online politics and a counterpublic sphere. Where discourses of respectability tend to link ratchet with the hardcore strip club anthems of the 2000s or the scripted reality-show antics of Black women, I am suggesting an alternative perspective. Despite the constraints of the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013), Black culture as a whole is unabashedly, joyously, cathartically ratchet. Even enmeshed in white racial ideology, Black culture still manages to create agency through pathos, here defined as revels in sensuality and the erotic.

Similarly, linking deviance to the "most marginal individuals" undersells the capacity for acts of uncivil resistance across the entire Black community—for example, consider recent arguments for Black professional women's enjoyment of ratchet performances of Black womanhood on reality television (Warner, 2015). Given my arguments for libidinal tensions as Black pathos, I see ratchetry and ratchet digital practice as expressions of joy—as celebrations of self in defiance of norms that can be imposed by both external and internal forces. This is particularly evident in examining Black Twitter practice but also lives on in the visual expressions afforded by (Black) Instagram or Snapchat. These expert enactments of Black identity—as referenced by the hashtags #BlackGirlMagic or #BlackBoyJoy—are in and of themselves shows of defiance to a world that expects obeisance and victimhood. Thus

marginal can only insufficiently describe the technical capacity or even the assets of Black digital practitioners.

For example, in communities where monopoly telecom providers extend lackluster broadband internet, mobile technologies and devices have propelled Black digital practitioners beyond multiple digital divides. Pew Internet reports that nearly 64 percent of Black users access the internet solely through smartphones, taking full advantage of mobile app development and broadband to be full participants in online and social media. The catch—and a basis for my arguments for ratchet digital practice—is that activities promoting the self are often seen as supplanting appropriate practices, such as "work" or "progress."

Benchmarking the Ratchet: Appropriate Digital Practice

To strengthen my argument for ratchetry as deviant digital practice, however, I must discuss "appropriate" internet digital practice. Given the wildly heterogeneous nature of the web, it seems disingenuous to suggest that there is a "right" way to internet. As I found in chapters 2 and 3, however, both white and Black internet users believe Black folk behave online in certain ways—practices, performances, and discourses—even as the different groups disagree along racial lines about whether those activities are appropriate for online spaces and devices. Thus it makes sense to argue for ratchet digital practice's deviance by benchmarking what appropriate digital practice might be.

The web's heterogeneity can be traced back to the epistemology of the hyperlink. Conceptualized by Tim Berners-Lee as content-agnostic, the hyperlink's design draws on Vannevar Bush's (1945) and Ted Nelson's (1974) arguments for connecting culture and information. Its function enables access to *any* media stored on remote servers via *any* client or protocol. This freedom has been extremely generative for the web, encouraging the development of an incredible variety of websites, applications, platforms, and services—enough so that many believe the internet has its own culture. However, race has never been fairly considered as a contributor to that culture. Whiteness is rarely understood as an element of internet culture(s) even though the vast majority of creators, coders, engineers, venture capitalists, and designers are white or white-adjacent. Their copresence in and proximity to the internet standardize their

conduct as a norm for internet behaviors. Consider the activities of two former Google employees, James Damore and Kevin Cernekee. Damore was terminated for posting a ten-page manifesto arguing that women are less capable than men (Conger, 2017), while Cernekee was fired for proposing that his colleagues fundraise in support of white nationalist efforts (McKay, 2019; Copeland, 2019). These examples and other recent events illustrate that racism, sexism, and misogyny are long-standing practices in the tech community. The refusal to mark whiteness as an identity powers the concept that internet culture is raceless, that racism is a "glitch" (Nakamura, 2013), and that Twitter is the cause of internet incivility.

How, then, does Black embodiment—not just performance but enactment—manifest in online spaces? Earlier I suggested that ratchetry can be understood as a hypervisible, embodied performance of agentive deviance. Despite the absence of physical embodiment in online venues, Black folk have constructed, contested, and maintained cultural online places through symbolic means: online discourse—including images and memes—and the design of home pages and social media profiles.

Home Pages > Social Media

Consider the World Wide Web. Even before Black folk, with their deviant selves, were understood to be active in online spaces, Web 2.0 was argued for as a deviation from the hand-coded transactional and individual expressiveness of online practice (e.g., webrings or spaces like GeoCities) thanks to its narrowly tailored design principles, which served as aesthetic correctives to the chaotic design values of personal home pages. At the same time, others complained that the nascent movement was a continuation of mass media's hegemonic cultural apparatus due to the rapid capture of these new artifacts and platforms by investors and media companies. Nevertheless, Black folk turned to weblogs as spaces for personal and cultural expression in rapidly increasing numbers (Brock, 2007).

Personal website design in the Web 1.0 era largely consisted of hand-coded HTML, GeoCities templates, or BlackPlanet personal pages.[4] The freedom to experiment with fonts, text effects, graphics, and media players made the early personal web a cacophonous destination.

Blogging platforms such as Blogger or Typepad sought to address this—even as they lowered barriers for casual users seeking to build a web presence—by promoting a more uniform design. These sites read more like printed pages, with standardized internet fonts and a white space–oriented design aesthetic. When encountering Blogger, Typepad, or WordPress sites of this era, one knew to credit the platform rather than the individual user for the page's design choices. I argue that more than any other internet spaces, the blogging platforms encoded Web 2.0's focus on information transmission that was only lightly flavored by personal tastes. In short, these platforms helped establish what "appropriate" web design should be, an aesthetic later solidified by Facebook.

As mentioned earlier, BlackPlanet encouraged users to design their home pages and promoted designs on the portal's destination page. Omar Wasow and Gary Dauphin's initiative to embed HTML design tools and social affordances within BlackPlanet prefigured Web 2.0's digital sociality and personalization. Oh, but the designs. In addition to the excesses of Web 1.0—sparkling cursors, autoplaying media players—BlackPlanet was one of the first spaces where user-generated content featuring Black everyday culture was proudly displayed and promoted (Banks, 2005; Byrne, 2007). While BlackPlanet functioned as a portal site offering employment resources and news, its home pages often featured content that was intent on generating culturally based emotional appeals: alluring pictures of beautiful brown people; gospel, R&B, or rap music; and appeals for page votes as a marker of popularity were in vogue as early as 1999. BlackPlanet was ratchet long before Myspace or Twitter were understood as minority-dominated online spaces.

In danah boyd's (2009) canonical talk "The Not-So-Hidden Politics of Class Online" (later published in 2011 as "White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with Myspace and Facebook"), she argues that the design aesthetics of two early Web 2.0 titans—Myspace and Facebook—are linked to the cultural, even racialized uses of each site. She focuses on teens, and her argument is noteworthy for the ways in which the interviewees talk *around* race. The assertions boyd makes also hold true for BlackPlanet even though the site never gained the notoriety of Myspace or Facebook.

The lack of mainstream attention—perhaps in part because BlackPlanet's demographics skewed older—also helped BlackPlanet initially avoid the *ghetto* tag associated with Myspace, which like then contemporary social network services (SNS) Bebo and Xanga appealed to younger users.

Black culture, however, has never been considered as a natural space for information technology use and design. BlackPlanet's explicit focus on Black users led academics and the mainstream media to view it as a "niche" online destination, even hindering it from being considered as one of the first social networking sites. Indeed, Dauphin suggested that investors were reluctant to fund the site because they did not believe Black folk would be interested in creating or able to code their own home pages (Brock, 2007). These sentiments—that Black folk were not "serious" or rational internet users—also framed early commentary about Black Twitter use (Brock, 2012). I contend that the dominance of Black cultural content on Twitter has even led some to declare the "end" of Twitter (Topolsky, 2016; Romano, 2019; Schroeder, 2014) as investors and tech pundits scramble to explain why Twitter cannot continue in its current iteration. These prognostications and opinion pieces are driven by libidinal energies of antiblackness rather than political economy—that is, technocrats cannot conceive of a successful technological enterprise driven by Black pathos.

Although there is little consensus on whether today's mobile internet constitutes Web 3.0, there will always be arguments about what constitutes appropriate internet practice and design. Design privileges a certain type of user; from this perspective, Twitter has long been considered incoherent and inappropriate based on its design principles privileging personal contacts, terse content, and broadcast messaging. Few realize, however, that much of Twitter's interface and features draw on its originally conceived platform: the smartphone's short-message service (SMS). SMS was derided as inappropriate in the United States for years because teenagers took to it so quickly and thoroughly despite their lack of jobs or productivity. SMS (and the smartphone) should instead be considered as one of the first communication technologies linking digital use and embodied discourses. The next section briefly considers how mobility and connectivity in a Black digital context tie race (and often class) with information resources in ways that transform "inappropriate" digital practice.

. . . and Mobile Digital Practice

I began this chapter by appraising how race mediates website design; however, we must also consider the rise of the smartphone[5] as a deviant Black cultural and informational artifact. Black folk use cultural aesthetics to inform their mobile computing use—they are "on trend"—in ways that perform Black identity in a recognizable form while consistently gaining attention in (and in some cases, dominating) our crowded information spheres. While late 1990s and early 2000s arguments for Black digital technology adoption traded upon capitalism, desktop computing paradigms as "productivity," and respectability ideologies (e.g., community technology centers where Black folk could learn technology to get "good jobs" or code academies for today's minority youth), the mobile phone's interpenetration into everyday life meant that a new type of user was reshaping information technologies in their own image. I don't just mean poor Black folk either: Black and Brown parents overindexed on home-computer ownership during the aughts (Smith, 2010a) to ensure that their families would have access to these new information resources, which were largely unrestricted—unlike historically segregated institutions, such as the library or the academy.

Smartphones, introduced in the United States in the early 2000s, are high-end variants of mobile (née cellular) telephones. Whereas cell phones were first deployed in 1994 and were primarily designed to connect to a cellular radio system to provide mobile telephone service, smartphones employ an operating system featuring mobile applications as well as a suite of features, including higher-resolution color screens, more powerful processors, multitouch interfaces, web access, multimedia technology and playback, and GPS navigation. Smartphones overlap and extend both the personal data assistant and the Pocket PC phone era (e.g., Windows CE, BlackBerry, and Palm phones and devices); these devices, characterized by resistive touch screens, physical keyboards, and styli, enacted a digital and ideological commitment to productivity and enterprise software needs and interfaces. I should mention an additional category of cell phones, the feature phone, which allows voice calls, limited internet browsing, and text messaging but offers few other features. These phones were once mainstays of prepaid and lower-cost cellular subscription plans, but low-cost Chinese smartphones have

largely supplanted them. This means that smartphones are employed by an ever-growing number of users who are boxed out of more expensive postpaid plans.

Smith (2015) notes that a greater percentage of Blacks and Latinx (70 percent and 71 percent, respectively) own smartphones compared to whites (60 percent). Smith also contends that Blacks and Latinx have higher rates of smartphone dependency—that is, they have fewer alternative ways to access the internet. This dependence can be attributed to a number of economic, social, and technical factors, including the deregulation of the landline telephone industry, the disinvestment in landline telephone access in underserved communities (and thus broadband access), the inability to afford unmetered data use cellular subscription plans, and the falling prices of computational technologies.

The initial uptake of the smartphone by early adopters—a small set of technological, cultural, and economic elites—furthered technocultural beliefs about mobile information technology as a productive, efficient artifact and practice. For example, for several years, the BlackBerry was the preferred communication device of industry, medicine, government, and tech elites. Indeed, President Obama was loath to give up his BlackBerry device upon assuming the Oval Office, as its security features and material affordances were familiar to him even though it was not fully supported by the woefully underprepared White House information technology infrastructure.

Although governments and enterprises rapidly adopted BlackBerry phones and Windows CE–based phones, mobile computing has long been considered less competent than desktop-based computing thanks to multiple technical, aesthetic, and technocultural constraints (e.g., display technology, interface design, and beliefs about productivity). Mobile devices are commonly derided as lifestyle products even with advances in connectivity, increases in screen size, and leaps in computational power. This dismissive attitude gained strength with Apple's introduction of the iPhone (2007) and iPad (2010), as Apple is commonly seen as a "fashion" or "lifestyle" brand instead of a "serious" computing manufacturer like Palm, RIM, and Hewlett-Packard.

From a digital divide perspective, mobile broadband access has significantly increased the number of Blacks online. Rainie (2016) notes that only 55 percent of Blacks enjoy home broadband access, while

nearly 80 percent of Blacks access the internet using smartphones and mobile devices. When media reports on these surveys claim (Riley, 2019; Marriott, 2006) that Black smartphone usage signals the closing of the digital divide, counterarguments—particularly those referencing the lack of "desktop-class" apps or the use of "lifestyle" appliances—are quickly deployed to dismiss these assertions. These counterarguments are made not only by whites; they are also deployed in the service of respectability by well-meaning, progressive, and technophilic Blacks for whom the current statistical dominance of smartphone ownership is not a marker of progress precisely because of the libidinal and banal practices (i.e., "consumption" or "distraction") Black folk engage in while enacting Black identity online.

From a libidinal economic perspective, what are the consequences of having an internet-connected, social network–connected, high-powered computational and video device in one's pocket every day (and night)? Claims about mobile productivity and use must be reevaluated, as the smartphone serves as the genius loci around which one's communicative life revolves and as a witness for many mundane activities up to and including sleep. For Black smartphone users, these devices reduce social isolation in unfriendly spaces through their capacity to share culturally relevant content and connect with other, often isolated Black others. Smartphone affordances, such as instantaneous communication, the ability to record moments of everyday life, and the transmission of these moments and communications to already-identified affiliative cultural group members, offer Blacks a virtual third place similar to that defined by Oldenburg (1999) or Nunley's (2011) African American "hush harbors."

The Smartphone as a Digital Third Place

I have argued for Black online spaces as third places before (Brock, 2009), but it's worth reconsidering the differences between an online third place and one anchored by the materiality of the smartphone. According to Oldenburg (1999), third places offer

- a home away from home, where
- conversation is the main activity and
- playfulness is the prevailing mood.

Let's unpack these characteristics to see how they work as digital affordances.

Neutral yet Intimate

A desktop-based online third place is always anchored to a specific computing location: your living room, the library, a college campus, or the office. Even as one spends time in a virtual location with friends, she is also geographically present in either a home or a work space. By contrast, smartphone usage can and does happen anywhere—particularly on the go, in the street, or in "inappropriate" spaces, such as the bathroom and the car. For Black and ratchet digital practice, smartphones allow the recording and sharing of activities—impromptu dances, risqué behavior, and moments of hilarity (or violence)—that couldn't take place in more proscribed environments. Thus there is an uncoupling of technology use from appropriate behavior. Moreover, Black discourses once located in private spaces, such as the barbershop (Steele, 2016, 2018) and beauty salon (Nunley, 2011), have been extended to group chats, discussion threads, and other messaging applications.

The smartphone's portability is based on the ergonomics of the hand—and to be held and used at arms' length—as well as its small[6] screen size. Together, these attributes concentrate the user's visual and cognitive focus on a small area held in close physical proximity. Smartphone use thus affords aspects of "personal space" to invoke intimacy while simultaneously connecting the user to (and disconnecting from) a wider world. Whereas webcams present the video creator in an intimate, personal space, thanks to technical features, embodied locations, and environmental aspects, smartphone video retains physical proximity while transferring intimacy to spaces outside the home. As such, the smartphone becomes nearly as much a domestic locus of identity as the home itself; so much of our intimate activities and social relationships occur in the space between screen and self. In doing so, the smartphone supplants the telephone's capacity to forge intimate virtual spaces, bringing conversations that were once held in our bedrooms or on our comfortable couches into public spaces.

Ratchet digital practice benefits from the smartphone's public intimacy. One benefit is catharsis: the smartphone modulates an intimate

space where the affronts and excesses of American racial ideology can be shared with other Black folk. These cathartic moments are not just postencounter but, importantly, also preencounter. A jarring example of postencounter catharsis would be the Facebook Live video testimony of Diamond Reynolds following the murder of her boyfriend, Philando Castile, by a Minnesota police officer during a random stop. Reynolds narrated the events immediately preceding the video, maintaining her composure with great difficulty. While her video was not enough to convince a jury of the police officer's malfeasance, her recording stands as a powerful example of Black digital practice transforming information technology into a wailing wall, reposted thousands of times across the social web.

To explain preencounter catharsis, consider two comedy routines in the legendary concert movie *The Original Kings of Comedy* (Harvey et al., 2000). The first is philosophical: comedian Cedric the Entertainer muses on differences in racial epistemologies of progress by arguing that white folk "hope," while Black folk "wish." He gives an example of seating arrangements at a concert: late-arriving white folk *hope* no one is sitting in their seats, but Black folk *wish* "a muthafucka *would*" be sitting in their place. This dialogic longing for confrontation as a corrective to deliberate misunderstandings of humanity and entitlement can be understood as ratchet discourse. It also allows the interlocutor to build energies from both their performance and the reaction of the audience, creating a precatharsis moment.

The second instance from *Kings of Comedy* is Bernie Mac's canonical ratchet grammar exercise, where he articulates Black uses of the word *motherfucker*. A description doesn't do it justice, so I have reproduced it here as best as I can to honor Bernie's diction and intensity:

> When you're listening to one of our conversations, you might hear the word MOTHERFUCKER about thirty-two times. Don't be afraid of the word MOTHERFUCKER. . . . Imma break it down to ya. . . . If you're out there this afternoon and you see like three or four brothers talkin', you might hear a conversation, and it goes like this:
>
> "You seen that MOTHERFUCKIN' Bobby? That MOTHERFUCKER owes me thirty-five MOTHERFUCKEN' dollars! He told me he gone pay my MOTHERFUCKIN' money last MOTHERFUCKEN' week. I ain't

> seen this MOTHERFUCKER yet! I'm not gonna chase this MOTHERFUCKER for my thirty-five MOTHERFUCKEN' dollars.
>
> "I called the MOTHERFUCKER four MOTHERFUCKEN' times . . . but the MOTHERFUCKER won't call me back. I called his momma the other MOTHERFUCKEN' day . . . she gonna play like the MOTHERFUCKER wasn't in. I started to cuss her MOTHERFUCKEN' ass out, but I don't want no MOTHERFUCKEN' trouble.
>
> "But I'll tell ya one MOTHERFUCKEN thang . . . the next MOTHERFUCKEN' time I see this MOTHERFUCKER . . . and he ain't got my MOTHERFUCKEN' money . . . I'm gonna bust—his—MOTHERFUCKEN' head! And I'm OUT this MOTHAFUCKA!"

The ratchetry within this extended utterance happens on multiple levels: the denotative and connotative profanity of *motherfucker*, the aggressive energy of the invocation, the repetition, and the audience. These two examples highlight the signifyin' practice of the "woof" or "wolf ticket"—that is, "barking but not going to bite." They establish agency through the performance (not the enactment) of verbal violence.

While the connection between these comedy bits and the digital might seem tenuous, I link these two cases of preencounter catharsis to digital and mobile practice to support my arguments about the digital's mediation of offline Black discursive practices. The smartphone recasts these activities as Black discursive identity, broadcasting their libidinal tensions to a virtual space and audience. These are crucial affordances for those of us who are "the one Black person" in primarily white environments. Instead of expressing these cathartic sentiments to those with institutional or social power over us, we can preserve our sanity by relating them to those who understand the need to vent in safety. Where once these conversations had to wait until one returned to Black enclaves or the home, now they can take place in a neutral yet intimate third place.

Conversational

This is the easiest point to support, given that the smartphone's raison d'être is communication. The smartphone benefits from its telephonic origins as a precomputation virtual space, where intimate conversations

could (and did) take place away from visual feedback. Its audiovisual capabilities add additional bandwidth to intimate conversations and activities (e.g., Yo Gotti's "Down in the DM" and Snapchat's mix of visuality and ephemerality). Additionally, the smartphone's capacity to record and store video or images at any time adds archival affordances to libidinal digital practices, like sharing intimate pictures. The smartphone's maturation as a social networking device—particularly for near real-time networks like Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram—encourage discursive interactions. Finally, the rise of group chat applications—for example, GroupMe and Facebook Messenger—should dispel beliefs about the smartphone as an alienating, isolating device, since group conversations connect dozens of intimates (or associates) while demanding virtual presence and participation to prosper.

Playful

The smartphone's ability to distract the user from his geographic surroundings leads to my final quality: playfulness. The device's capacity for play and, by extension, pleasure contribute to technocultural beliefs about its inappropriateness as a social and productivity artifact. I am avoiding the smartphone's capacity for gaming as playfulness because that is a facile distinction, and smartphones are not yet considered "true" gaming devices like desktop computers or consoles. I will, however, discuss the link among leisure, playfulness, and distraction.

Smartphone use affords a lesser-known aspect of playfulness in digital spaces, one that is often granted to proponents of uncivil and hurtful behaviors, such as trolling (Phillips, 2015)—namely, spectatorship. This is the recognition, acknowledgment, and sharing of the joy of people *like me* captured by the smartphone's camera. It differs from voyeurism in that I am not viewing the activities of strangers. It's also not consumption, although new media researchers have studied social media as second screens for media consumption (the television is the first screen) and building online community (Williams, 2016; Lee & Andrejevic, 2013). Instead, the metrics of digital platforms interpellate spectators as users, audience members, and participants. Where sporting event ticket sales and Nielson Media Research use quantitative data to

determine audience size and composition, the digital metrics of views, likes, shares, reposts, and quotes define spectators as vital components of playful moments that are shared to social media. Accordingly, gaming scholars such as Gray (2016) document how internet-protocol television has empowered spectatorship as a viable part of the gaming community through participatory personal game streaming and online-only coverage of digital gaming competitions, lending credence to this argument.

Consider the smartphone's function as a music player. It neatly usurped radio, the Walkman, and even the vaunted iPod's place in American culture as the avatar of portable entertainment, communication technology, and leisure, but "leisure," mediated by the smartphone, has significantly changed in representation and practice. Radios were depicted in popular media and in advertising as a source of musical pleasure for physical gatherings and even as catalysts for enabling leisure spaces in unlikely physical locations (the stoop, the street corner, etc.). There are even racialized representations of the radio: transistor radios for white youth versus the canonical boom box for Black and Brown youth. As a music player, the smartphone is often depicted as an isolating activity thanks to a lack of quality speakers.[7] Indeed, smartphone music listening is represented through racialized shorthand. For example, Apple's white EarPods signify the upper class, whiteness, and leisure, often modulated by Black bodies for rhythmic, soulful emphasis. Similarly, prior to their purchase by Apple, Beats by Dre headphones were argued for as a sign of lower-class and nonwhite identity due to their bass-heavy sound profile and association with Andre Young, a canonical hip-hop producer and rapper.

The smartphone as music player, then, encourages a reconsideration of leisure as digital practice. After all, leisure requires time and attention; it is not idleness or simply distraction. While leisure is often defined as sociality, many find pleasure in solitude and isolation. The isolation that the smartphone-plus-earbud combination provides often masks, if not alleviates, the frenetic chaos of urban living. Moreover, the smartphone affords the music or podcast listener the capacity to enjoy—not just endure—the unavoidable tedium of work, long commutes, and extended exercise sessions. Thus an inappropriate digital practice can contribute to leisure and to quality of life.

To return to ratchetry, the smartphone's capacity for creativity-as-play is also a component of inappropriate digital practice. Burgess and Green (2009) argue that everyday content creation should be understood as social network formation and collective play. Gaunt's (2015) work on twerking, mobile phones, and YouTube provides an illustrative example. Twerking, Gaunt argues, is a "kinetic orality" (p. 247) that draws on a genre of dances across Africa and the African diaspora featuring the rotational isolation of the hips. Given the Western racialized and gendered pejorative association of a woman's hips and posterior with libidinal erotic energies, twerking is deemed an inappropriate activity. Although it came to mainstream attention through the shenanigans of Miley Cyrus, it has a nearly twenty-five-year history that is tightly tied to Black women's bodies and southern rap music. Gaunt deftly unpacks YouTube's capacity for the expression of Black girls' and women's kinetic and artistic creativity in dance; she argues that the recording, broadcast, and sharing of Black women's dance videos breaks social and spatial boundaries for Blacks and non-Blacks. To this, I add that the smartphone's uncoupling of videography from the semifixed lens of the webcam and the expense of high-definition video cameras and studio settings has contributed to Black women's digital expertise in video production and dissemination. The smartphone also lends the user mobility, detaching intimate, celebratory, and energetic Black cultural performances (like twerking) from the domestic sphere and moving them into less "appropriate" spaces. Smartphone videos even recast the domestic sphere as a public space, as twerk videos are often posted from home, enabling women to simultaneously express the freedom to be on their own terms in public *and* in private. In a similar vein, Bragin (2015) determines that "hood dance" challenges assumptions of where and how dance can be performed as improvisational practices teaching hip-hop aesthetics of freestyle and rhythm.

To recap: smartphones can be understood as digital networked Black cultural third places. The interactions in these virtual gatherings draw on libidinal expression—sometimes violent, sometimes pleasurable, but always sensual—in the context of computer-mediated communication, leading to my characterization of the smartphone as a ratchet, often inappropriate device.

Ratchet Digital Practice

After that lengthy preamble, let me offer examples of ratchet digital practice. In keeping with the connection between digital practice and computer-mediated communication, my first exemplar reflects my admiration of the creativity of Black Twitter display names, which often follow a long Twitter tradition of embodied, libidinal Black online user names. These inventive pseudonyms have received short shrift, as they should be properly considered discrete, ephemeral snippets exemplifying the playfulness of Black discourse and culture. Let me explain: Twitter, like many other online services, allows users to identify themselves through a unique username. For example, countless profile generators use an email address to authenticate and identify the account holder. In recent years, developers have begun to understand that personalization creates a deeper bond between the user and the technology and thus encourage users to proffer their "government name"[8] or nickname. These names, rather than the username or account number, often serve as a marker[9] for the user's account profile.

Twitter differs from most services; it also allows users to create a pseudonymous display name to be displayed *alongside* the username.[10] Twitter user names, which serve as profile links, addresses, and account identifiers, have historically been limited to fifteen characters and do not allow spaces. Usernames were originally counted as part of a tweet's 140 characters[11] even as their use diminished the space available for the message.[12] Display names, however, could be up to 20 characters long; this was recently expanded to 50 characters and can include spaces, emoji, and other Unicode characters. Many users set their given names as their display name—especially verified users—which lends legitimacy and authority to their Twitter practice. Display names can be changed at any time; Black Twitter users often take advantage of this to display affiliation, cultural knowledge, and more.

I argue that Twitter's extended display name feature eschews utility while affording Black Twitter users cultural specificity, their allegiance to Black culture, and the performance of style and aesthetics in ways that are not always possible on other digital spaces. Moreover, Twitter's prominence to the mainstream exposes these display names to audiences who have never encountered Black culture elsewhere. To redress

the lack of attention to this Black digital practice, I offer an incomplete list of Black Twitter display names gleaned from my timeline as avatars of Black agency in digital spaces. These names are all from public accounts. Rather than decode them, I present them in their unaltered, signifyin' glory as a way of acknowledging the ratchetness they perform:

- Gucci Ma'am
- Auntie Hot Flash Summer
- Wikipedia Brown
- Fatniss Collargreen
- BitchesLoveLibraries
- DarkSkintDostoyevsky
- coochiechagulia
- skeptical brotha
- Tardy B
- Blanket Jackson
- y'all dont read
- Zora Neale Hustlin'
- Mercury in microbraids
- kin klux klan
- Ho, Ho, Hotep!
- Durags & Dialectics
- Optimus Fine
- Swole Porter
- lupita's sideburns

I will not sully the ritual, inventive signification of these display names by attempting to unpack their symbolism or their connections to Black culture. I should note that display name creativity is a common feature shared by all Twitter users, not just Black Twitter; in many cases, users coin creative and imaginative pseudonyms to mark their accounts. However, the names listed here share Black cultural commonplaces, articulated in a limited space, to construct Black discursive identity in digital spaces. These names anticipate the libidinal, signifyin' Black Twitter content that these users post, making it clear that style, rather than efficiency, is a productive method of communication.

Ratchetry in Action

An interesting example of ratchet digital practice occurred while I was writing this chapter. On March 6, 2016, Nancy Reagan, former first lady of the United States, passed away at the age of ninety-four. The next day, "David D" created a Change.org petition asking that then popular rapper Fetty Wap perform his breakout hit "Trap Queen" at the first lady's funeral. While Fetty Wap—born William Maxwell II—would not be the first African American artist asked to perform at a state funeral, the petition goes far beyond quotidian uses of Black culture to commemorate government actors. The vulgar song directly criticizes US drug policy by addressing the devastating effects of that policy on minority communities.

This ratchetry works in multiple dimensions. From a digital practice perspective, Change.org is a privately run nonprofit website where users create online petitions to advance social causes; it is similar to other public policy–oriented websites that follow the principles of crowdsourcing, such as MoveOn.org. One of its most popular petitions, with more than two million signatures, argued for the conviction of George Zimmerman during his trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Change .org petitions have been signed by political figures such as President Obama, and the site has been acknowledged as a change agent. Change .org is not, however, the same as the White House–sponsored petition site We the People (https://petititions.whitehouse.gov), where petitions that meet a certain threshold of participation may be reviewed by the White House administration and even engender an official response.

What's ratchet about a petition website? A banal (but not ratchet) We the People petition in 2014 garnered nearly three hundred thousand signatures to ask the US government to deport Justin Bieber because he was "dangerous, reckless, and drug abusing" ("Deport," 2014). The White House responded to the petition by promoting immigration reform but declined to take action to deport the young singer. While this example says much about Americans' professed distaste for popular and Black music—and also reveals a hint of xenophobia—it's not ratchet.

David D's petition achieves ratchet digital practice in use, content, and intent. It was created *using* an online service to subvert political activism through deviant means: the critique of public policy using

hip-hop. This is particularly evident in the choice of *content*; rather than suggesting an appropriate artist from an appropriate genre to provide a musical tribute for a sober state occasion, David D selected a rapper whose song specifically references inappropriate libidinal topics: drug dealing and the objectification of women. Fetty Wap's[13] debut single, "Trap Queen," was released in 2014 and reached the number-two spot on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart in 2015. Julianne Escobedo Shepherd (2016) describes the song as a "loving ode to a woman uniting with a man in emotional, spiritual, and economic matters, the latter of which involves cooking crack cocaine . . . an excellent song that perfectly melds romance with nihilism." Finally, David D's *intent* links the positive connotations of "Trap Queen"—despite its negative depictions and negative context—to Nancy Reagan, who David D describes as the "biggest Trap Queen ever." Despite Reagan's ostensible intentions to curb drug use in minority communities, the "Just Say No" campaign had little effect during the 1980s, as it merrily glossed over the conditions under which the drug trade flourishes, including environmental and educational inequality, racially biased enforcement, and economic policies intended to punish minorities for being poor.

The petition garnered more than seven thousand signatures at the time of this writing; it doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell of exerting any influence over the former first lady's interment ceremony. But the outcome isn't the point—it's the performance. In speaking out of turn while violating boundaries of propriety and civility, David D's petition achieves ratchetry through the hypervisibility of digital media used to signify through libidinal Black cultural critique.

Discussion

This section has done significant work in connecting libidinal economy to digital practice but at the expense of omitting more outrageous, visceral examples of ratchet behavior. This omission includes a dearth of profane, obscene, or violent ratchet digital practices, such as the meme "WorldStar!" referencing the hip-hop site WorldStarHipHop, which is notorious for posting uncensored street fight videos. I take my cue from Judy's (1994) pronouncement: "The human can be designated a phenomenal thing of the slave experience, *nigger*, but never *is* a nigger"

(p. 217; emphasis original). Given America's fascination with Black deviance, I could have easily turned to Antoine Dodson's viral interview, which ignited the Auto-Tune sensation "Hide Yo Kids, Hide Yo Wife," or Kimberly "Sweet Brown" Wilkins's viral interview and her Black commonplace catchphrase "Ain't nobody got time for that." Moreover, it is far too easy to highlight social media memes about "things respectable Black folk don't do," including posing with guns on social media; "thots," thirst traps, and fuckbois;[14] twerking; and wearing outrageously colored hairstyles, sagging pants, or grilles.

I use these examples to illustrate my own discomfort with ratchetry; they show that the problematics of ratchetry largely lie in the perceptions of those worried about being seen as ratchet. Selecting instances guaranteed to offend those who are even slightly interested or invested in respectability would have short-circuited my arguments for ratchet digital practice. Similarly, choosing more visceral examples of Black folk behaving "badly" would have obscured my efforts at constructing a nuanced definition of ratchet digital practice.[15] Ratchetry is often interpreted by the mainstream—and middle-, upper-, and working-class Blacks—as the only behavior of (often poor) Black folk. That is, pejorative perspectives of ratchetry are shaped by (1) the mainstream racist frameworks in which ratchetry takes place as well as (2) the effects of that racist framework on Black folk.

In making this claim, I am guided by Du Bois's (1940) description of Black middle-class attitudes toward working-class Blacks. Observing Blacks and their "peculiar social environment" (p. 61) from a sociological perspective, Du Bois writes, "The American Negro, therefore, is surrounded and conditioned by the concept which he has of white people and he is treated in accordance with the concept they have of him . . . if in education and ambition and income he is above the average culture of his group, he is often resentful of its environing power; partly because he does not recognize its power and partly because he is determined to consider himself part of the white group from which, in fact, he is excluded" (p. 173). This concept—the veil from *Souls of Black Folk*—is not internalized racism; instead, it should be understood as Black interiority within American supremacist ideology. Du Bois here offers a cogent example of the heterogeneity of the Black community, but he also addresses the complicated nature of a communal identity constructed

from histories of oppression and discrimination. Thus the second frame, *racism*, addresses the "peculiar social environment" that technology affords white racial ideology while ratcheting up the libidinal tensions on Black digital evocations of interiority.

Racism and Reflexive Digital Practice

> Like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
>
> —Karl Marx, as cited in Joe Feagin (2006, p. 7)

Reflexive digital practice often works hand in hand with ratchet digital practice to read, shade, or celebrate Black everyday life through sensuality, humor, or anger. Racism implicitly and explicitly compels reflexive digital practice; while the explicit is egregious and shocking, the implicit is more damaging across time. To illustrate this, historian Kevin Kruse (2018) posted a Twitter thread discussing lynchings in the American South in the early 1900s. Throughout the thread, Kruse reiterates in nearly every tweet that *only* twenty-eight lynchings occurred in the 1930s—but each served as a signifier to Black folk that their lives were forfeit to a white supremacist regime. The threat of lynching was nearly as debilitating as the lynching itself, serving as a coercive, disciplinary measure to keep Blacks "in their place."

Focusing on racism as a frame for Black identity, however, seems deterministic. After all, not every Black activity is subject to—or determined by—the racism Black folk experience through daily or systemic macro- or microaggressions. Nevertheless, given the structural inequalities that have been levied on Black folk and that are endemic to American culture, any research into Black online culture must address how technocultural racism has shaped Black digital practice (Daniels, 2009, 2013; Feagin & Elias, 2013). In the previous section, I referred to Du Bois's "veil"—and its articulation of the effects of internalized racism—as *Black interiority*. From a libidinal perspective, Black interiority is powered by the libidinal tensions of *reflexivity* as a response to the multilayered elision and hypervisibility of Blackness online; this may come in the form of catharsis or concerns about online representation or digital visibility.

George Yancy (2005) argues that racism's power lies in its enforcement of a logic foreclosing the possibility of Black bodies body from being anything "other than what was befitting [their] lowly station" (p. 219). This imprisoning, epidermal logic is required to support the invisibility of the negative relation—the elision of Blackness—through which whiteness is constituted (p. 219). This imprisonment is reproduced in digital environs as well. Consider the archetype of the "default internet user" who is white, male, middle class, and heterosexual. Based on this default, interfaces were designed, content was created, and networks were structured, leading to the seemingly inevitable conclusion that minorities are on the "wrong" side of the digital divide. However, this reasoning ignores the deliberate environmental, geographic, educational, and economic discrimination underlying the deployment, decisions, and designs of internetworks and digital media (Straubhaar, 2012). Thus the carceral libidinal economy of Western technoculture deliberately obscures the Black digital practitioner. Black internet use is obscured by whiteness; as such, it is difficult to apprehend, much less credit with anything more than unproductive, "playful" engagement with information technologies.

Racism-as-frame is steeped in Black historical narratives, awareness, and responses to egregious acts of racism, like the burning of Tulsa or the New York City draft riots. It is also indebted to early online social justice activist moments, such as support for the Jena Six or Shaquanda Cotton. Here, however, my focus is on the smaller, distributed, more insidious effects of structural racism on Black online life. Racism as a libidinal frame references Black online discourses engendered by micro- and macroaggressions—from the algorithmically driven social media sharing of Black death at the hands of the state, to the constant reality of being surveilled and judged, to the reflexive pleasure and pathos involved in eating fried chicken in public spaces.

Racism as a frame of Black digital practice operationalizes Yancy's (2005) assertion that "Blacks . . . possess a level of heightened sensitivity to recognizable and repeated [racist] occurrences that might very well slip beneath the radar of others" (p. 6). He continues by noting that such perception might indicate that Blacks are part of an epistemological community where the very culture is an ongoing master

class in the critical interpretation of a reality that film director Jordan Peele (2017) has evocatively described as "the Sunken Place." These perceptions—apprehension over the implied violence heralded by racism and racists—also work as a *ratchet*, applying more and more tension to further complicate Black interactions with the world.

Nakamura (2013) explains the centrality of racism to digital practice, arguing that racism online is not a "glitch" but a feature. Instead of being engendered by internet practices such as anonymity and a lack of physical feedback, racism is as old as the network itself. Nakamura adds that online "content that includes people of color often becomes part of a technosocial assemblage that produces racism and sexism" (p. 1). This aligns with the infrastructural nature of everyday digital practice, where implicit racism is encountered in the mainstreaming of the white racial frame through appropriation and representation in online media. Simultaneously, explicit online racism toward Black culture has found its most pungent, mediated expressions in comment sections and social media feeds. Social media provides evidence for Black epistemologies of racist ideology through the continual reproduction of racist practices, representations, and discourses, which are in turn driven by algorithm-based digital media, social sharing, and individual affronts. This evidence, taken together with Yancy's (2005) contention that the world systemically and systematically destroys Black dignity while reducing Black folk to a state of nonbeing, supports my argument for pathos as an epistemological standpoint.

Online spaces contribute to—and are, in some ways, more susceptible to—the fixity of Black identity and representation. For example, the 2014 Gamergate campaign created sock puppet Twitter accounts of social justice activists featuring Black women avatars and Black slang. These tactics were emulated by Russian botnets in the 2016 presidential campaign. It was even reported that a prominent and influential Twitter account supposedly helmed by a Black Lives Matter activist was actually a Russian troll account (O'Sullivan & Byers, 2017; Parham, 2017). Also consider Natasha Tiku's (2018) recent findings about Netflix's algorithmic machinations to surface Black televisual representation on video streaming services. Tiku uncovers that the streaming service shows content thumbnails featuring Black actors in otherwise mainstream white movies to certain viewers, although Netflix does not require subscribers

to provide their racial identity. While Netflix responded by saying that the service only determined content offers from users' viewing history, they acknowledged that these decisions stemmed from a recently implemented machine-learning approach to subscriber retention. From these examples, we can see that just like in offline spaces, online Black positionality vis-á-vis the white racial frame is reified by space and context.

The algorithmic racialization of Black-oriented digital content is a new and unexpected phenomenon given the historical paucity of Black representation in mainstream television, film, and the arts. As mentioned earlier, Anderson and Hitlin (2016) of Pew Internet Research conducted a study that investigated the types of content Black and white users encounter online. They found that Blacks are more likely than whites to see race-related content on social media. The researchers also found that over a fifteen-month period, only .04 percent of all tweets published on Twitter mentioned race. This time period included the mass shooting of nine churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina; the findings of an inquiry into the death of Sandra Bland; and the unrest in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray. Pew addresses this startling finding obliquely by noting that Blacks are nearly twice as likely to *post* on race and racial matters than whites but the authors of the study did not venture further.

The digital gives additional weight to arguments for racism as a structural quality, as social beliefs are encoded within these technologies as meaning-making strategies for developers and users alike. Gray's (2012) research on multiplayer gaming demonstrates that users bring explicit racial ideologies to digital interfaces and practices; similarly, boyd's (2011) research on racial attitudes and social networks provides an example of how technological aesthetics can be racialized. Whereas Dinerstein (2006) argues that whiteness powers Western technoculture, I argue here that racism is a libidinal technocultural norm. As such, it has an inordinate influence on Black online technoculture.

With this in mind, racism-as-frame operationalizes Black digital practice as an *awareness* of racism and its enveloping effects on- and offline, generating a marked libidinal digital interiority. This awareness shapes digital practice through pathos, leading to—but not limited to—acts of political agency and resistance. It works hand in hand with ratchet digital practices to call out racial and social microaggressions not

only through catharsis but also through sensuality and humor. The following section investigates how Black activity online responds to racialized and racist content in order to frame reflexive Black digital practice as an evocation of an epistemological community in libidinal tension with white supremacist ideology.

Reflexivity, Interiority, and the Digital

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois argues that white people often ask Black people, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (1984 [1903], p. 43). Black responses to this question are often interpreted as resistance in cultural studies or social science research. However, a libidinal economic perspective affords the contention that resistance is powered by the emotional energy engendered by *reflexivity*. That is, to resist white supremacy, Black folk must evaluate both the ontology and the epistemology—the *what* and the *why*—of that racial ideology as well as how the methodology of white supremacy affects them on a daily basis. From this standpoint, Black offline existence in the American racial regime requires constant reassessments and adjustments in order to not run afoul of the existing order. This is particularly true for racial microaggressions, which require daily vigilance to assure that one's sanity has not been compromised or to ensure that one has not fallen afoul of some new, previously unknown discriminatory policy.

Black online existence as digital practice articulates reflexivity under a slightly different set of circumstances. Consider, for example, racial microaggressions happening in offline spaces. Much of their offensive power lies in the recipients' sudden awareness that within a certain physical space, they are not considered as equals or even as existing within a "good, moral, and decent society" (Sue, 2010). Likewise, racial microaggressions' covert, often subtle nature induces isolation, self-doubt, exhaustion, and frustration (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In online spaces—thanks to a communicative infrastructure of voracious, always-on websites demanding content, combined with a twenty-four-hour news cycle needing spectacle to drive viewership and the private(ish) publics of social media services—microaggressions have been elevated from individual experiences to widely broadcast, reverberating moments experienced by many Black digital practitioners.

For example, in describing the stress associated with articulating Blackness as a journalist with an extensive online portfolio, Cord Jefferson (2014) writes, "My anger over each new racist incident is now rivaled and augmented by the anger I feel when asked to explain, once more, why Black people shouldn't be brutalized, insulted, and killed. If you're a person of color, the racism beat is also a professional commitment to defending your right and the right of people like you to be treated with consideration to an audience champing at the bit to call you nothing but a nigger playing the race card" (para. 10). Here Jefferson expresses the libidinal consequence of claiming that "Black lives matter" in a space that is predisposed to minimize the presence of nonwhite bodies. Without the internet, stories about racial animus would be restricted to local newspapers and talk radio shows or and even disregarded entirely by non-Black-owned media companies. But online, the cumulative effect of these microaggressions—encountering multiple incidents that are happening to others like you—can be understood as *racism-without-racists*, or online microaggressions facilitated not by individual actors but by the internet's capacity for distributing information bolstered by SNS' mechanisms for sharing information to affiliative groups. In response, Black digital practitioners have co-opted online spaces and services to engage with microaggressions or overt racist incidents through *reflexive digital practice*. The most attention-grabbing reflexive digital moments tend to be cathartic and political, addressing macro- and microaggressions in ways that assert the humanity of Black folk while decrying injustice.

Weak-Tie Racism

Jefferson's response, as a journalist, to the continual demands of having to professionally articulate his humanity in digital spaces can be understood as racism's generative capacity for reflexive digital practice. But absent institutional coercions to articulate the racialized self, how do mundane Black folk become interpellated into online racism-without-racists? Consider offline racism: in the course of everyday life, Black folk cannot avoid racist institutions or incidents, as racism is integral to American culture. Similarly, despite the internet's vaunted freedom to provide individualized, personalized content, Black folk must still deal with racism in online spaces.

To address the mechanisms through which Black folk respond to and reflect on racist and racialized online content, I developed the concept of weak-tie racism. This phenomenon draws from tightly-knit networks of Black digital practitioners combined with the internet's need for content and its capacity for effortless distribution, leading to a pronounced libidinal framing of Black online interiority, or reflexive digital practice. The term refers to the relationships among user, machine, and ideology—that is, the networked libidinal tensions arising from the diffusion of racist and racialized content through social media practice, connectivity, and algorithmic publishing.

Weak-tie racism is an extension of Granovetter's (1973) explanation of the generative sociality of weak tie relationships, arguing that the "emphasis on weak ties lends itself to discussion of relations *between* groups" (p. 1360; emphasis original). In my formulation, the machine, network, and/or algorithm is the distancing catalyst *and* the bond between entities, demanding its own interaction and reciprocity to sustain the relationship between user and network (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Granovetter (1973) states, "The strength of the tie is a combination of the amount of time, the *emotional intensity*, the *intimacy*, and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (p. 1361). Many researchers have equated intimacy and emotional intensity with *friendship*, which allows them to distinguish a (presumed) positive comity for strong and for weak ties. I argue instead that racism, as a marker of relationships between Blacks and whites, similarly includes qualities of intimacy and emotional intensity.

Weak-tie online racism, then, is racism that is indirectly experienced through digital representation and the distribution, interactivity, or algorithmic repetition of antiblackness directed toward a specific Black body or bodies but abstracted through social media participation. It has no author; instead, racism is enacted through digital networks of social interaction. Weak-tie online racism is not individually performative; it operates as a signifier of racist ideology that is structurally manifested through digital means. Weak-tie racist activities are often minimally interactive; they are likes, shares, reposts, and retweets—especially if the account sharing the content has a wide network of followers. This does not mean the account holder is racist, although that occasionally is the

case. Rather, the account's reach and visibility allow for the imposition of indirect racism through dissemination on social media.

Finally, weak-tie racism is a computational manifestation of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000); the differentiator is the indefinite, amorphous originator or interlocutor. When one sees a racist tweet receive thousands of likes, is the platform the antagonist? Sue (2010) cogently notes that microaggressions can be environmental, a characterization that explains to some extent the virtual spaces in which weak-tie racism is encountered. Weak-tie racism also harms through accretion—that is, the "text is only experienced in an activity of production" (Barthes, cited in Ott, 2004). Nixon (2011) describes this as "slow violence," or "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2). The act of liking a video can be influenced by the already-present signifiers of virality (e.g., number of comments, likes, or reposts) but is (correctly) not assumed to be in and of itself a racist act; yet its contribution to virality can often be understood in the aggregate as weak-tie racism.

Weak-tie racism is the means rather than the ends; perhaps the best way to describe it is as a hate-speech act as opposed to hate speech itself. Likes and reposts alone are not microaggressive acts even though they may denote affiliation or recognition in a social space that is counter to one's own beliefs or affiliations (*pace* hate-watching[16]). When the aggregation of likes causes one's feed to be populated by racist content, however, this demonstrates that weak-tie racism occurs through the reproduction of banal social signals that are deemed important through minute traces of social interaction promoted by algorithmic means.

Through the aggregation of and interaction with hateful content, white and machinic articulations of racism present intimate, intense libidinal tensions bonding the out-group and the in-group. When presenting this work as it developed, my canonical example of weak-tie racism was whiteness as antiblackness—for example, the social media impressions of police shooting videos broadcast by mainstream news outlets, where the institutional imprimatur of the "fourth estate" authenticated the content shared as content over unaffiliated sites, such as

Facebook and YouTube. However, the best example I could never have asked for occurred during revisions: weak-tie racism vis-à-vis the libidinal intensities of Donald Trump's social media activity while campaigning for president and since his inauguration. While it was immediately clear that racism (and xenophobia) were the elements driving his social media popularity, I was bemused to see that media outlets and the academy constantly misconstrued the libidinal element of Trump's social media content as "economic anxiety" to explain white folks' allegiance to the Republican candidate. I find vindication in the recent findings about the roles Facebook and Twitter played in disseminating and promoting racist misinformation using likes and retweets (rather than actual comments) posted by Russian content farms, such as the @Blacktivist account mentioned earlier.

Black folk (the in-group) can and do similarly bond over their awareness of racism, their positionality to racism, and their responses to racism regardless of intensity. Libidinal Black digital clapbacks to weak-tie online racism create affective and intimate in-group bonds that are responsive to racist ideology but not solely constituted by racism. These acknowledgments are characterized by interiority, riposting to (weak-tie) racism as a "hail," or the catalyst for a cathartic or emotional rejoinder.

This section has repositioned weak-tie theory to emphasize the emotional intensity and intimacy of racism. The resultant application to algorithmically driven social media feeds predicated on libidinal tensions reveals that computational technologies can serve as both conduits and agents in the formulation of relationships. Where weak-tie theory has been used to examine the utility of weak ties in allowing individuals access to information from disparate networks, this perspective offers a way to understand how a negative informational interaction can create loose relationships between ostensibly oppositional entities. Weak-tie racism, then, can be understood as *machinic racism*—absent individual contribution—promoting an atmosphere of social death to be experienced thirdhand by Black internet users.

I have been careful to limit my argument for weak-tie racism to online milieus, as is appropriate for the overall argument of this text—that is, I strive to be cognizant of the mediating effects of digital media and tech on Black culture and identity. From this position, weak-tie racism manifests through digital and online media's affordances for sharing

information, including, but not limited to, algorithmically presented social media content. A large part of digital practice is textual and discursive even as digital visual technologies have become a larger part of everyday communicative practice. Code occupies some of this textual space, shaping the interfaces, mechanics, and protocols through which digital practice can happen.

Similarly, algorithms are also discursive forces. Gillespie (2014) notes that "algorithms need not be software: in the broadest sense, they are encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations" (p. 167). In this inquiry, by *algorithm*, I am referring to data-mining processes that attempt to infer patterns of human activity. Algorithms are similar to actuarial tables, which are used by financial entities (e.g., insurers or banks) to predict risk based on the statistical analysis of data sets of observed social behaviors. Their similarity rests on both processes' efforts to uncover "related attributes or activities or potential proxies for outcomes" (Barocas & Selbst, 2016). This is potentially problematic. As mentioned previously, out-group behavior is not the sum of its traits, appearance, or practices. Actuarial tables have a long history of discriminatory intent toward Black folk; their assessment of racial group characteristics as "risk" tends to encode difference as a negative stereotype using eugenic theory, speculation, and ideology (Wolff, 2006). Algorithms have not escaped these biases, for all their technological and technical sophistication. For algorithms, which infer patterns[17] from historical instances of a decision problem, Hardt (2014) observes, "Race and gender . . . are typically redundantly encoded in any sufficiently rich feature space whether they are explicitly present or not. They are latent in the observed attributes" (p. 1).

Ott (2004) offers a valuable way to understand algorithmic contributions to weak-tie racism. Citing Barthes, he argues that "the Text is experienced only in an activity of production" (p. 202) in the name of pleasure. Consider that many videos of extrajudicial killings are captured by governmental devices (e.g., body cams and dashboard cameras) as documentary moments but not as evidence (or culpability). Their meaning and authorship change when they are posted and distributed to a wider audience on social media—often prefaced by an exclamatory catharsis or heralded as "objective" news reporting. Each iteration—reposts and shares—is yet another moment of production;

each interactant has a different interpretation. Thus the algorithmic post is a multidimensional collaboration among the corporation, the computer, the network, the content, the post's originator, and the audience. Far from being a single-authored artifact, the algorithmic feed is an intertextual moment for all, inscribing meaning on the viewer while deprecating his or her understanding of self as a unified subject (Ott, 2004). Returning to the libidinal economy of information technologies, I offer that weak-tie racism, as evidenced in algorithmic social media content, is a libidinal tension powering Black interiority and reflexivity. Without a need for a single author or an individual racist, social media algorithms become evidence of the (infra)structural forces elevating prejudice to racism.

Reflexivity: Racial Battle Fatigue

Theorizing weak-tie racism offers the potential to reframe discussions of online racism to focus on the *effects* rather than the incidents of racism and the digital. One such possibility lies in the examination of how online contact with racialized and racist content over time mediates Black digital practice. Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano (2006), in examining the impacts of constant racial strife and stress on Black academics, coined the phrase *racial battle fatigue* (RBF). RBF refers to the harmful psychophysiological symptoms resulting from living in racist environments. The symptoms arise from the cognitive and emotional effects of decoding microaggressive subtleties: sufferers struggle to decide whether to acknowledge and how to respond to these affronts. Similarly, my colleagues, friends, and associates of color have attested to fatigue and anxiety upon viewing yet another racist incident posted online, served up by social media algorithms designed to surface content that has been algorithmically determined to be of import to the reader.

That Black folk experience RBF in online spaces serves as a compelling example of weak-tie racism's libidinal effects. Black digital fatigue and stress accumulate not only from direct racist posts or comments but also from repeated exposure to televisual and textual racial affronts that are displayed as a result of the algorithmic mechanism of social media feeds, shares, or indirect contact with well-meaning non-Black others.[18] The most visceral examples of online RBF can be found in

Black reflexivity about continual exposure to police shootings of Black folk shared across social networks. RBF also manifests through social network relationships with non-Black folk who are unwilling to engage with their own relationships with whiteness and white racial ideology.

Another indicator of RBF is the articulation of online Black interiority. These practitioners reflect on existing in the mundane world of white supremacist ideology and on having to coexist with the pain of people like them yet not them. Novelist Brit Bennett (2014) wrote about RBF on Jezebel in an article titled "I Don't Know What to Do with Good White People." For Barnett, weak-tie racism came in the form of a hashtag—namely, #CrimingWhileWhite, which was created by well-meaning white people responding to Michael Brown's execution at the hands of Darren Wilson. After a grand jury declined to charge Wilson, Barnett wrote, "Over the past two weeks I have fluctuated between anger and grief. I feel surrounded by Black death. What a privilege, to concern yourself with seeming good while the rest of us want to seem worthy of life" (2014, para. 8). The weak-tie affront here is not about explicit racial confrontations; Barnett even says, "Sometimes I think I'd prefer racist trolling. . . . A racist troll is easy to dismiss."

For Jefferson (2014), online writing about race leads to overexposure driven by weak-tie racism. In "The Racism Beat," Jefferson recounts his experiences as a journalist of color working "the race beat"—that is, stories that are intended to illustrate the lives of nonwhites in the United States and elsewhere. He writes, "When another unarmed Black teenager is gunned down, there is something that hurts about having to put fingers to keyboard in an attempt to illuminate why another Black life taken is a catastrophe, even if that murdered person had a criminal record or a history of smoking marijuana, even if that murdered person wasn't a millionaire or college student." His frustration and pain at absorbing Black tragedy from online media only to translate it for outsiders can be understood as an example of Black interiority and pathos. In particular, Americans' ongoing fascination with antiblackness leads Black digital practitioners to rationalize and debate the humanity of the victims to those "born not to know" (Saadiq et al., 1988)—those tied to them through the aggregation of social network affiliations.

Finally, in her long-form essay "Treading Water," Dionne Irving (2016) writes, "The malaise and nausea I feel when I recognize the rhetoric of

racism and privilege coming out of the mouths of people whom I have confided in, brought into my life, whom I work with and respect, keeps me off the Internet. . . . It visits me with the symptoms of a depression so deep and so all-consuming that I have, more than once, closed my office door in the middle of the day to cry. I cannot eat, cannot sleep, cannot write, and cannot think" (p. 52). Irving's essay is not about being Black on the internet; it is about the difficulties of being Black in spaces that are resolutely white, such as the Midwest. Irving explains how racism taints intimate and social relationships—perhaps doing more damage over time than casually tossed off slurs from unknown passersby or random store employees. Irving explores how incidental racism—expressed as privilege by non-Blacks—debilitates her digital practice and leads to spiritual, cognitive, and emotional distress.

I have written elsewhere about the role the internet plays in relieving the isolation of being Black and male in the Midwest (Brock, 2012), but "Treading Water" adds a metaphysical aspect to internet usage that I had not considered. Irving is of Caribbean descent, and the essay is permeated with her island-engendered love of water and swimming. Water is also a long-standing metaphor for those experiencing the internet; Netscape Navigator was one of the first popular web browsers, for example. We also talk about traversing the web as "surfing," and many of us speak of "drowning" in information. Irving's essay, however, specifically references how water and the act of swimming rejuvenate her—water serves as her space for rejuvenation and psychic hydration.

I believe reflexive digital practice can also rejuvenate Black digital practitioners. Rather than withdrawing from the digital spaces where they are exposed to constant trauma, reflexive digital practitioners reshape otherwise banal internet content to include cathartic discourses. In the process, they gain support for navigating the everyday contexts of white supremacist ideology from others sharing similar experiences.

Reflexive Digital Practice: A Military SNAFU

Reflexive digital practice is not always cathartic or political; it is sometimes irreverent and decidedly not respectable. Even under the smothering blanket of racism, Black folk find pleasure and seek leisure opportunities. Consider a tweet issued in error—and subsequently

deleted in less than twenty minutes—by Yahoo! Finance in January 2017, which promoted an article on the Navy's financial budget wish list for the incoming Trump administration (figure 4.1).

Deleted tweets are inaccessible, but unfortunately for Yahoo Finance, Archive.is captured the tweet, "/r/BlackPeopleTwitter" moderator Dawood16 pinned a screenshot of the tweet to his subreddit, and smart Twitter users took screenshots of the offending item. BuzzFeed News (Griffin, 2017), in an article describing responses to the tweet, credits the resultant hashtag #NiggerNavy to Twitter user JeSuisDawn, who caught the mistake at 11:09 p.m. Soon after, Black Twitter awakened, stretched its muscles, and began to signify.[19] Many of the first responses by Black Twitter users were image macros and GIFs expressing disbelief or outrage, but then things got funny. Their responses evoked Black cult humor to darkly critique labor practices, social protocol and etiquette, Black parenting strategies, and much more. Although not depicted here,

Figure 4.1. Yahoo Business' No Good, Very Bad Day. Tweet by @YahooFinance, January 5, 2017. Screenshot by author.

many tweets contextualized the hashtag with photos of Black celebrities and Black media culture, all mediated by the call-and-response functions of Black Twitter hashtag practice (figures 4.2 and 4.3). Notice the pungent yet affectionate tone of these tweets. I argue that they should not be understood as ratchet digital practice even though they expose elements of Black culture that are unfit for respectability paradigms to the mainstream gaze. Instead, these tweets are an exercise in Black interiority—a celebration of Black everyday life that is rarely captured on the screen or stage. Moreover, consider the responses in figures 4.4 through 4.7:

Figure 4.2. "What you ain't gon do." Tweet by @Blike_Dante, January 5, 2017. Screenshot by author.

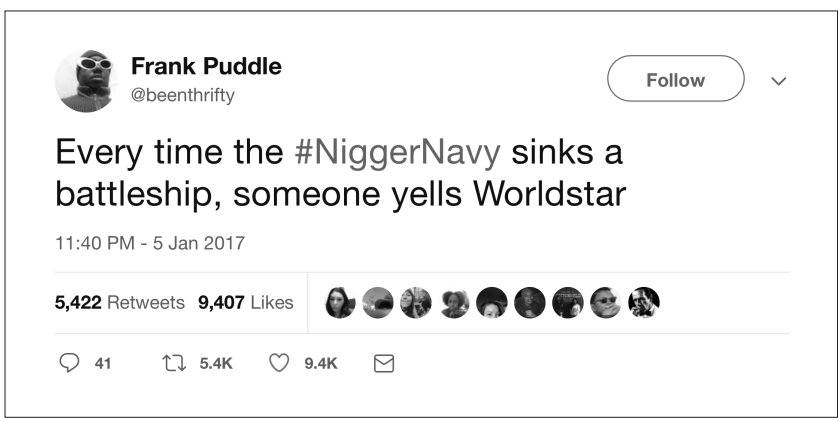

Figure 4.3. "WorldStar!" Tweet by @beenthrifty, January 5, 2017. Screenshot by author.

Figure 4.4. "White people react to #NiggerNavy." Tweet by @tuckerfooley, January 6, 2017. Screenshot by author.

Figure 4.5. "Trending for what?" Tweet by @jadande, January 6, 2017. Screenshot by author.

Figure 4.6. "Token labor." Tweet by @Keelectric_Lady, January 5, 2017. Screenshot by author.

Figure 4.7. "The only thing." Tweet by @CamJugg, January 6, 2017. Screenshot by author.

This image macro originated from the "BlackPeopleTwitter" subreddit, but it was soon joined by Black Twitter reflections on the intersection between white and Black social media propriety. This is also Black interiority as reflexive digital practice—where the reclamation of a disparaged word, *nigger*, becomes discursive agency through digital practice, inventiveness, and humor. As a moment of Black digital practice, #NiggerNavy is a demonstrative moment about the complexity and joy of Black culture in response to a machinic generation of racist ideology. Black online practitioners refused to be rendered invisible by weak-tie racism or the white racial frame. They did so using absurdity and empathy, which supports my claim that reflexivity powers resistance.

Reflexive Digital Practice: Communitarian

As I wrote earlier, pathos can be sensual, joyful, or erotic. Reflexive digital practice allows for the addition of another characteristic: communitarian. A final example of communitarian pathos can be found within one of the gentler instances of reflexive digital practice. In November 2018, the hashtag #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies (#TBF) became a widely discussed topic across my section of Black online culture. The hashtag evoked humor about kinship, holidays, and food culture. It was contextualized by photos of Black celebrities and Black media culture, mediated by the call-and-response functions of Black Twitter. Although much of this activity took place on Twitter, the hashtag was picked up by other Black online media outlets who curated "best of" moments. In doing so, they facilitated additional social media sharing (e.g., on Facebook), opening up the conversation for their commenters and allowing their readers to participate at their leisure (figure 4.8).

But you may ask, How is the reflexivity articulated in #TBF related to racism? Returning again to the concept of weak-tie racism, I ask you to consider the online (and offline) media barrage about the "values" of Thanksgiving in America. Depending on one's online media habits (and habitats), visual representations of Thanksgiving center on portrayals of white families in middle-class contexts gathered around a large table preparing to dine on clichéd food items. Multiply these media representations times the advertiser-sponsored content, and these portrayals are easily understood as the default cultural vision of

Figure 4.8. "You better speak." Tweet by @_JTHenderson, November 24, 2015. Screenshot by author.

a problematic American holiday. Prior to digital media, representations of Black folk celebrating the holidays were primarily relegated to Black print and televisual media. These depictions drew heavily on respectability politics, showing "ideal" Black families as a way to counter mainstream narratives about Black deviance (figure 4.9).

#TBF serves as a riposte to these early representations across multiple dimensions. It is simultaneously

- a response to erasure (the implicit racism inherent in representing Thanksgiving as a white holiday),
- a response to the effects of racism without having to go full ratchet,

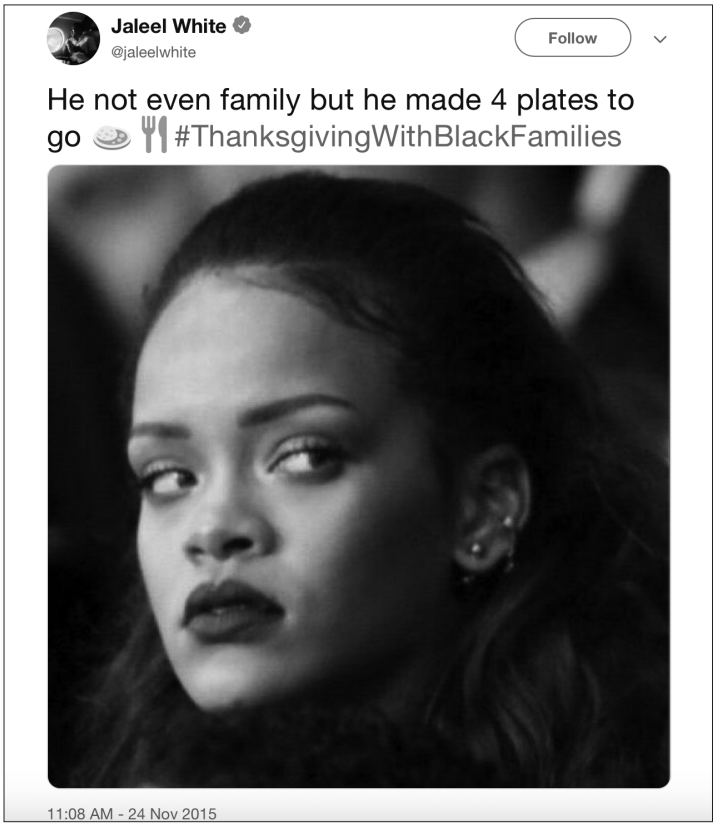

Figure 4.9. "Taking a plate!?" Tweet by @jaleelwhite, November 24, 2015. Screenshot by author.

- an empathetic representation of an event from a Black cultural perspective without actually displaying the typical iconography of the event as offered by the mainstream media, and
- a response that was only possible through digital media's affordances of media display and distribution plus social media's affordances for sharing.

As a moment of Black digital practice, #TBF is an example of the complexity and joy of Black culture amid the reductiveness of American racial ideology. Its practitioners recast the mainstream representation of Thanksgiving as a nuanced libidinal enactment of extended family

relationships, Black food culture, and the clash of class status endemic to limited opportunities for economic success. As opposed to the #NiggerNavy participants, these practitioners rebuff the mainstreaming of Black culture through the respectable depictions endogenous to Black media outlets. Both efforts are accomplished through humor and empathy, leading to my claim for reflexivity powering resistance.

On to the Next One

At the beginning of this chapter, I argued that ratchetry and racism should be considered in concert rather than separately. In doing so, I wrote this chapter to decenter Black resistance as the appropriate manifestation of Black online identity. Linking ratchetry and racism as a facet of double consciousness highlights that Blackness employs multiple, interlocking strategies to manage the matrix of American white supremacist ideology. Without the environmental context of racism, the visceral yet banal energies of ratchet digital practice would simply be considered digital practice. Similarly, the interiority performed by reflexive digital practitioners demonstrates a hyperawareness of public perceptions of Blackness, leading to a deliberate eschewal of the discursive register of ratchetry to articulate the libidinal effects of online racism.

This chapter essayed the complex task of describing the confluence of ratchetry and racism and identified aspects of "appropriate" beliefs of Black culture affecting digital practice. I now turn to the frame of respectability on Black digital practice to examine the effects of that ideology on the politically and economically able Black folk who believe they must coexist within its confines.