CHAPTER 5.

WHAT IS BLACK TWITTER? A RHETORICAL CRITICISM OF RACE, DIS/INFORMATION, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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"I TWITTER, THEREFORE I AM BLACK, OR AM I BLACK AND THEREFORE I TWITTER?"

Black Twitter tells a powerful story about emerging digital racial literacies and their relationship to a long history of anti-Black information warfare. Through a constellation of hashtags, Black Twitter maps onto archived demonstrations of Black cultural discourse. Its users critically exchange stories about bearing witness to the absurdity of race and racism. These include having humorous discussions about shared racial experiences (#Growingupblack and #ThanksgivingwithBlackFamilies), critiquing Black mis/representation in media and entertainment (#OscarsSoWhite and #CNNBeLike], putting racist White folks on blast (#AskRachel and #PaulasBestDishes], and making structural anti-Black racism more publicly visible (#Icantbreathe, #NotJustUVA, #reclaimOSU, and #BlackLivesMatter]. Such hashtags have generated countless conversation threads that appeal to a vast global network of (presumably and predominantly) Black social media users.[1]

Throughout this chapter, I argue that Black Twitter should be read as a text comprised of narratives about digitally mediated Black cultural preservation and expression. I will show how Black Twitter serves as a living archive of collective

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[1]   #BlackLivesMatter has been the most extensively studied hashtag that is associated with Black Twitter. According to one report, "[#BlackLivesMatter] has been used nearly 30 million times on Twitter – an average of 17,002 times per day – as of May 1, 2018." (Anderson et al. Activism in the Social Media Age).

memories of Blackness. It enacts and represents experiences of misidentification, disinformation, alienation, belonging, forgetting, and remembering. These stories represent various forms of testimony that articulate different accounts of how one experiences being Black—our sharing of joy, suffering, and survival through a world that exploits, overlooks, and erases us.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCHING BLACK TWITTER

Although Black Twitter has been researched from various disciplinary perspectives, few studies in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies (RCWS) have examined the significance of this rhetorically complex space. Some notable exceptions include Jacqueline Schiappa's article "#IfTheyGunnedMeDown: The Necessity of 'Black Twitter' and Hashtags in the Age of Ferguson;" Catherine L. Langford and Monté Speight's "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities;" and Elaine Richardson and Alice Ragland's "#StayWoke: The Language and Literacies of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement." As the titles indicate, this body of research connects Black Twitter to social movements and political protest. In addition, scholarship like Pritha Prasad's "Beyond Rights as Recognition: Black Twitter and Posthuman Coalitional Possibilities" focuses on the multidimensionality of Black Twitter by exploring it as a tributary. She argues that "Black Twitter functions not just as a tool or accompaniment to 'real' protests elsewhere, but rather as an alternatively embodied, relational rhetorical imaginary that affords multiple simultaneous spatialities and temporalities" (7). As Prasad claims, Black Twitter operates variously, its multiple purposes leaking out like several tributaries moving from and towards larger streams.

Furthermore, Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks' rhetorical examination of #BlackTwitter demonstrates the importance of Black English and digital publics in their 2018 book *On African-American Rhetoric.* Their focus on language, power, and persuasion as they relate to the process of recognizing Black identity performance online renders Black Twitter a more culturally rich subject of research. Overall, many rhetorical studies about Black Twitter seem exclusively focused on making claims about the political relationship between blackness and protest. Given the popularity of #BlackLivesMatter, and how this movement has been co-opted by Russian operatives like the Internet Research Agency (IRA), such an emphasis is understandable and necessary. However, I integrate critical technological discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis to more comprehensively study how Twitter and its (human and nonhuman) users reflexively mediate the rich intellectual, aesthetic, and ultimately *persuasive* value of Black Twitter (Brock 1017).

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter considers how studies about Black Twitter benefit from "insider knowledge" about Black English (BE), or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The meaning-making breadth of BE could be easily underestimated by researchers who don't know the cultural contexts and references communicated between users (Abreu). Moreover, researchers studying blackness online, regardless of their race, must check their linguistic biases. BE, or AAVE, continues to face ridicule in the public sphere. Journalists, for example, are quick to show screenshots of "funny" or "woke" tweets without crediting authors.

More problematic still, the fact of Black Twitter affects public opinion about "publics," which influences the credibility of Twitter itself—as a media. Some may casually dismiss the space when comical Black tags like #AskRachel or #PaulasBestDishes are used, but take it extremely seriously when they see #BlackLivesMatter or #HandsUpDontShoot. In addition, Black Twitter and its related networks are subject to political sabotage. In 2016, Russian hackers focused primarily on infiltrating and disrupting Black online communities via Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, among several other personal websites, for the purposes of dissuading Black voters from voting for Hilary Clinton, or going to the polls altogether (Carroll and Cohen). Studying Black Twitter, then, offers value to a growing body of scholarship about how social media affects racial identity, political affiliation, and civic engagement. This chapter considers the significance of these contexts through its presentation of a rhetorical criticism of Black Twitter. This method focuses on how Black Twitter functions as a Black rhetorical object, as well as identifies and analyzes key challenges involved in such an investigation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

But <u>*what*</u> *exactly is Black Twitter?* We know it is significant, but the internet scales its categorical multiplicity, affecting the range of its meaning and meaning-making potential. In Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Life,* he argues that we live in an age of "Liquid modernity," in which "the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. [Such a] society, '[. . .] cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long.'" (1). Black Twitter thrives on uncertainty, or the happening, which is why journalists rely on its texts. It enacts the ebb of spontaneous collective response through turbulent forces as movement, place, discourse—sometimes all at once. It is adaptive, dynamic, diasporic, and its traces lead to a stream (Royster). Therefore, I utilize the language of liquidity throughout this chapter to make claims about the "leaky style" of Black Twitter.

To illustrate, Black Twitter leaks on racial injustice and White fragility by starkly representing these realities in virtual and offline worlds. As an alternative media, counter-public, and cultural production happening in real-time, Black Twitter disrupts White hegemony by communicating in Black cultural codes to the masses. It transfers analog cultural practices into memes and messages of up to 280 characters, simultaneously enacting and documenting blackness all up in Twitter. Drawing on Alessandra Raengo's concept of *liquid blackness,* I argue that Black Twitter "emphasiz[es] fluid interchanges between past and current experimentations in the context of transnational artistic and intellectual flows" ("About Liquid Blackness").

On one hand, Black Twitter resists objectification through its liquidity. Its visibility cannot be predicted, nor can the longevity of its content. #BlackLivesMatter, for instance, is a rhetorical statement about how race affects the meaning of political concepts like equality, freedom, democracy, citizenship, and liberation. It articulates that simply inhabiting a Black body constantly puts one at risk of fatal contact with the state. As long as unarmed people continue to lose their lives to police and white nationalist violence, the #BLM hashtag is part of a rich digital media ecology, where the circulation of visual archives produced by citizens and law enforcement influence its significance. As Christopher Carter shows in Chapter 4, discrepancies between citizen and police testimonies are increasingly exposed by the affordances of mobile devices. Feidin Santana made the ethical decision to document Michael Slager shooting Walter Scott in the back (Edwards and Angone; "Michael Slager"; Powell; Helsel).[2] He also testified against Slager in court during a rare instance of a police officer going on trial for killing "on the job." Santana's media intervention strengthened #BLM's persuasive power to verify the truth of injustice. His footage adds meaning to #BLM, which records and contextualizes preventable deaths.

On the other hand, some of Black Twitter's content could be systematically surveillanced and appropriated by organized political agents like the Internet Research Agency (IRA). Blackness, in this virtual public social scene, is just information to weaponize factions among users. The Russian hackers used an assemblage of certain usernames, memes, and hashtags that they imagined represented and signified Black cultural identity (Romano; Starr; U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence). Consequently, Blackness via the internet can be replicated even when it is essentially disconnected from a person who is living while Black. Some have dubbed this practice, and its variations, "digital

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2   See Feiden Santana, "Man Who Taped Walter Scott Murder Comes Forward," WERE-AM 1490 (http://bit.ly/2LKWg7p); AP News Articles about Michael Slager (https://apnews.com/MichaelSlager); "Ex-South Carolina Cop Michael Slager Gets 20 Years for Walter Scott Killing" (http://cnn.it/3ae5D91).

blackface," which I will discuss later in this chapter (Harmon; "Is It OK to Use Black Emojis and Gifs"; Jackson; Sommer). Nevertheless, Black Twitter and its facilitation of Black folks in conversation can give some users life, which Raengo sees as critical for our survival. She claims that "What is at stake for blackness is not simply a condition of vitality but life. Not liveliness but living. Not simply vibrancy but physical as well as social, cultural, and existential mobility—a life, existence, and mobility that might never register as such" ("Black Matters" 259).

My observations about how Black Twitter exemplifies the dynamics of emergent, leaky contexts of cultural production informed my selection of two methods that are informed by antiracism as a methodology: critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) and Black rhetorical criticism. CTDA, a critical approach developed by communications scholar Andre Brock, can be adapted to address intersections between "technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice" (1014). Brock defines CTDA as a flexible method that depends on critical frameworks like critical race theory and Black feminist theory—as well as "queer theory, critical feminism, Latin@ studies, intersectionality, pan-Africanist, postcolonial, or gender and women's studies"—to disrupt research about technology that fails to decenter whiteness and recognize that the design of technology and information architectures aren't neutral or deterministic (1014; 1017). Brock's discussion of CTDA features an analysis of Twitter, in which he takes into account how Twitter's character limits and SMS capabilities enabled Black people to "retrofit Twitter's brevity, ephemerality, and performativity to signifying' discourse" (1025).

Like Brock, I also analyze Black Twitter's numerous implications for scholarly research about race, racism, and technology. His study about CTDA, however, focuses on theorizing CTDA as a robust method that can adapt to a range of critical frameworks and methodologies that facilitate our understanding of how human beings integrate their cultural discourses with an information communication technology's (ICTs) technical affordances. In this piece, Brock's examination of Black Twitter illustrates how cultural expression operationalizes Twitter as a platform, service, archive, artifact, and text—transforming the website's technical design and usability (1023). These functions also serve both Twitter and its users' multiple discourses, which are used for varying (but often dominant) ideological purposes (1024; 1026). My work seeks to demonstrate that RCWS researchers need to develop more language to communicate about the reflexive relationship between racial ideology, language, culture, and technology. Therefore, this chapter builds on Brock's concise, but comprehensive, look at the analytical depth offered by a CTDA of Black Twitter (1017-8).[3]

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3   Brock offers a more detailed textual examination of Black Twitter in his article "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation."

In particular, I extend Brock's CTDA of Black Twitter by using Black rhetorical criticism to further illustrate the importance of resisting characterizations of Black internet users and their discourse as deficient—a point that he discusses in his review of historical literature about the digital divide. As Brock notes,

> These studies reduce the cultural aspects of ICT use to a technologically limited "social" aspect (e.g. "user") while privileging ICT usage of elites as a "norm," leaving unspoken the environmental, social, or cultural ideologies shaping ICT design, expectations, or use. (1014)

In the next few paragraphs, I will discuss how Black rhetorical theory can be incorporated into CTDA for the purposes of studying how Black discourses are performed, preserved, and circulated via Twitter. This analysis will "(. . .) focus[es] on the ways that technology users perceive, articulate, and ultimately define the technocultural space in which they operate and exist" (Brock 1016).

First, the "Black" in Black Twitter is a fundamental characteristic of this phenomenon that warrants further analysis. Black is defined by "Black Twitter" in particular ways that emphasize how the condition of being Black is tantamount to possessing a critical consciousness. This kind of mindfulness is expressed by wit, which must bear weight under the restriction of minimal characters. This digital performance of blackness, as such, suggests that Black Twitter needs to be studied as a rhetorical object, and more specifically, as a *black rhetorical object*. Its racial character affects how it makes meaning and the kinds of audiences capable of understanding those meanings enough to engage in those meaning-making processes, or its discourses. Likewise, technologies mediate this blackness in ways that draw our attention to the meaning of being human, belonging to a community, and innovating language.

Next, it matters that I am a relatively young (mid-30s) queer Black Woman researcher from the South. My cultural identity affects how I understand the power of language and communication. In fact, I grew up very close to Grand Saline, which is at the center of James Chase Sanchez's racial literacy narrative (see Chapter 3). Living in Northeast Texas as an adolescent fundamentally shaped my complicated relationship to Black cultural expression. As a result, elements of autoethnography leak throughout this chapter because I will be illustrating my claims to both my "blackness" and "professional identity" through deliberate stylistic shifts. My positionality, then, provides me with some insider knowledge about Black Twitter. I will take rhetorical risks to animate my personal experience and philosophical understanding of its dynamic life. Towards this end, readers should expect my style to occasionally flow between academic standard edited (White) English and Black English.

As previously mentioned, my use of CTDA occurs alongside Black rhetorical analysis. I build upon Adam Banks and Keith Gilyard's rhetorical analysis of Black Twitter as an illustration of contemporary Black rhetoric. Extending their effort, I will demonstrate how Black Twitter defines blackness as fluid, vital, torrential, ubiquitous, and uncontrollable through an examination of specific cases in which its categorical leakiness resulted in authorial conflicts and/or viral user participation. These instances will highlight how Black Twitter articulates blackness through an aesthetic of flowing analog and digital Black expression. Furthermore, these multimodal streams affect the design of cultural critique, which affects "what" is recognized as Black culture and the human beings who produce and circulate it.

The next section of this chapter will discuss key challenges that face RCWS scholars who study race, technology, and rhetoric. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of recommendations for future research about these topics.

KEY CHALLENGES RESEARCHING "BLACK TWITTER"

DEFINING BLACK TWITTER

A time comes in nearly every Black internet user's life when they must confront their relationship to this nebulous, powerful entity the grapevine calls "Black Twitter." When I heard the term "Black Twitter" several years ago, I was uncomfortable because I knew that even if I wasn't part of whatever it was, the "Black" in "Black Twitter" could have implications for all us Black folks, whether we wanted it to or not. After all, a major aspect of what it means to be Black is to be denied the ability to be judged as an individual outside of an entire cultural group, and thus unable to speak from a universal "default" perspective. Consequently, I needed to see what Black Twitter was about.

I wondered, "What, categorically, is Black Twitter? Is it a person, place, or thing?" It can be referred to in all three capacities:

1. Black Twitter has the agency of a person.

    Example: "Black Twitter said. . ."

2. Black Twitter, or #BlackTwitter, is a location. It is a "place" in which the hashtag marks a textual digital location that users reference to create archives that can be retrieved to discover how folks be talkin about/making/remembering culture.

    Example: "If you go on Black Twitter. . ."

3. Black Twitter is a happening of certain kinds of talk that occurs often

enough that it leads to the creation of a hashtag. The hashtag enables that talk to become recognizable as a thang, or a speech event. It is an unfolding of activity that represents Black interpretations of popular culture (#OscarsSoWhite), current events (#BlackLivesMatter), cultural norms (#GrowingUpBlack), and controversial public figures (#PaulasBestDishes and #AskRachel).

Example: "Black Twitter is blowing up right now. . ."

Investigating Black Twitter was much more difficult than I imagined. Its unpredictable, fluid, and collective nature makes it a bit of a grammatical mess. In addition to its various capacities as a noun, some characterize it as a political movement, a journalistic outlet, and a counter-public (Chatman et. al; Durrani; Freelon et. al; Graham and Smith; Sack). Others denied its existence altogether, as evident in scholarly dialogues and news outlets responding to the question "Does Black Twitter exist?"[4] Categorical debates about whether Black Twitter is real, its agency, and impact reinforced my initial reaction (Neuwitz; Manjoo; McDonald; Mitchell and Hitlin; Opam; Thomas, "Is 'Black Twitter' Dead?"). The fact that Black Twitter is such a virulently contestable rhetorical object reflects that digital performances of blackness intensify similar issues as embodying analog blackness.

For example, one of the primary characteristics of Black Twitter is that it increases the visibility of race, which defies the idea of a post-racial world. The very name "Black Twitter" racializes the entire media of Twitter, as some of its users engage all kinds of public social conversations about race, racism, rhetoric, and culture. On one hand, it functions as a discourse community. "Insiders" seek to make themselves recognizable as Black through symbolic production and exchange with enough layered meanings to differentiate themselves from those who fail to convincingly "pass" as Black because they lack knowledge of this experience. On the other hand, the very fact of its existence invites criticism. Some Twitter users argue that the "Black" in Black Twitter segregates and divides people. This colorblind perspective suggests that talking about race is "racist," or that racial identity has no business in this century.

Other Twitter users, who may also happen to be Black, are concerned that Black Twitter will be misinterpreted as representative of all Black people. These issues align with the offline Black experience as well, since our cultural expression of what it means to be Black via how we talk, dress, wear our hair, walk, create art, consume entertainment, and make a living seems to always be up for a debate. Whether we are too loud, ugly, uppity, unkept, athletic, combative,

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4   This question has surfaced in a number of locations including a University of Michigan virtual chat (Szymanski; http://bit.ly/2Ordcki) and a PBS Digital Studios video entitled "The Reason #BlackTwitter Exists (And is Totally Awesome)" (http://bit.ly/3pi1oO3).

angry, and/or criminal, these signifiers are ultimately racial. Cultural rituals signifying Black identity tend to measure authenticity on a spectrum of extremes: are you too White or too *Black*? These racial markers of difference apply to actual skin tone (too dark or too light), hair texture (too "nappy" or "good hair"), how you walk (too saggy or too stiff), your name (too ghetto or too proper), and, again, especially whether you talk "ghetto," or if you "sound White."

As racism threatens Black lives, some of Twitter's Black users recognize that Twitter can amplify their voices and provide a space to organize and develop their own distinctive discourses (Florini). They have engaged in so much activity that Black Twitter has become a proper noun. However, as the previous examples illustrate, it can also mean any sense of a noun. Certainly, the rhetorical power of Black Twitter results from its leakiness, or its conceptual ability to move through multiple kinds of message forms, channels, etc.

Confusion over Black Twitter's public image provides the existence for these meditations about its definition. Does it exist? How can we know? Stereo Williams, a writer for the *Daily Beast*, reflects, "So is Black Twitter real? Very much so. But it's interesting to see how the mainstream and 'traditional' media spaces have responded to this relatively new, quite active and dynamic voice." Implicit in this definition is an interest in how various media outlets describe and respond to Black Twitter. If it is a voice, whose is it? How should Black Twitter's users be acknowledged, engaged, and credited by traditional journalistic outlets? By researchers like myself? Others?

Global networked platforms reflect and mediate racial differences, as well as influence the meaning of culture. Such transformations warrant rhetorical study. Social media and its online communities are affecting language practices, and even grammar. In particular, these technologies and their collective users are increasingly granted the same linguistic agency as individual human beings (e.g., "Black Twitter says X"). Therefore, we must pay close attention to how we attribute actions to, as well as how we make claims about the persuasive power of the internet and those who "speak" there. Before I present my rhetorical analysis of specific cases about/involving Black Twitter, the next section will provide some background information about the site Twitter to further contextualize major challenges with researching Black Twitter and contemporary media in general.

About Twitter's Technical Features

According to its own website's definition, Twitter is "an information network made up of short messages (including photos, videos, and links) from all over the world" (Twitter Glossary). It is comprised of over 300 million users representing over 40 countries (Molina; Perez). Founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey,

Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams, Twitter has managed to survive well into its adolescence. As of 2018, approximately 24 percent of American internet users are on Twitter (Greenwood et al.; Smith and Anderson).[5] Of this percentage, a disproportionate number of users are young, Black, and/or educated (Wojcik and Hughes). Some reports indicate that a significant number of Black people use Twitter—28 percent of total internet users who use Twitter (Duggan et al).[6] However, reports on userd' cultural diversity are limited and vary widely. For example, Pew's latest reports on social media use do not include demographic information about race or ethnicity.

Arguably, Twitter's demographics have led journalists and researchers to associate the medium with deliberative rhetoric. Some argue that it is unreliable for gauging public opinion because almost half of its users identify as politically "liberal" and/or between the ages of 18-29 (Byers). Nevertheless, news outlets recognize its users as engaged in conversations about political campaigns, elections, social protest (#BlackLivesMatter), and controversial social issues (#MeToo). Twitter transforms journalism because as a platform, it is a publisher that affects the mass circulation of texts. In fact, the Apple App Store has been categorizing Twitter as a "news" app since 2016, whereas it had previously labeled it a "social networking" app (Rashidian et al. 91).

The association of Twitter with news and politics likely influences how "Black Twitter" is interpreted. In particular, Twitter is one of the most marginalized social networks. One study found that Twitter is considered an outlier to the U.S. general public for three reasons: its demographics do not represent the population, less than 15 percent of adults use Twitter, and less than five percent reported that they use it regularly (Mitchell and Hitlin). Furthermore, a small percentage of users can control a major topic. A recent 2019 study estimates that "97% of tweets from U.S. adults that mentioned national politics over the study period came from just 10% of users" ("National Politics on Twitter").
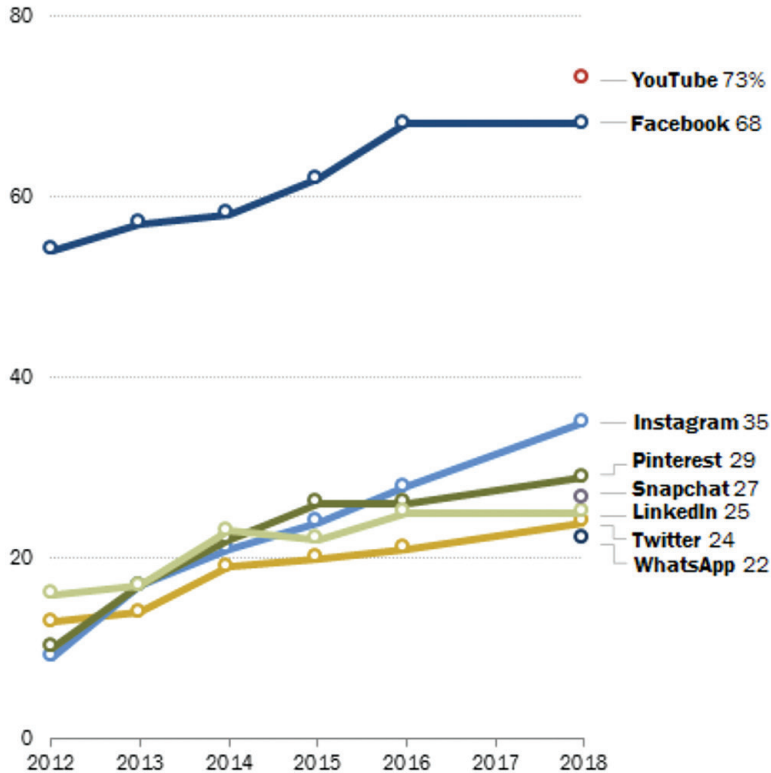
Additionally, Twitter's demographics may contribute to Twitter being associated with radical, progressive discourse. The visibility of Black Twitter as a racialized community that often produces counter-discourses might also account for Twitter's marginalization among similar sites. Although it is a popular social media network, it is the least popular among slightly older networks like Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and LinkedIn (2003), as well as newer platforms such as Instagram (2010), Pinterest (2010), and Snapchat (2011).

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5   See Figure 5.1. It is important to note that these estimates do not include frequency of use. According to one report, "Just 13% of adults said they ever use Twitter or read Twitter messages; only 3% said they regularly or sometimes tweet or retweet news or news headlines on Twitter. [Thus] Twitter users are not representative of the public" (Mitchell and Hitlin).

6   This is the most recent report with demographic information available.

Majority of Americans now use Facebook, YouTube

% of U.S. adults who say they use the following social media sites online or on their cellphone

YouTube 73%
Facebook 68

Instagram 35
Pinterest 29
Snapchat 27
LinkedIn 25
Twitter 24
WhatsApp 22

2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018

Note: Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat or WhatsApp.
Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018. Trend data from previous Pew Research Center surveys.
"Social Media Use in 2018"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 5.1. Social media use in 2018. Source: Smith and Anderson. Screenshot.

Socio-Technical Features of Black Twitter

Black Twitter interacts with Twitter's socio-technical features in various ways. First, Black Twitter's rapid flow of exchange drives its content to the top of Twitter's trending list, despite occurring among small networks (Brock; Guo; Sharma). Therefore, the feed design of Twitter affects the visibility of Black expression. As Twitter notes, "Top Tweets are selected through an algorithm, we do

not manually curate search results" (Twitter Search Result FAQ).[7] The company's response raises questions about how Twitter's proprietary algorithms work. Sanjay Sharma further investigates this problem in his article "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion." He explains that, "[Nonetheless], the *exact* operations of Twitter's *value-laden* algorithm remain hidden by the company, and studies attempting to discover or model its inner-weighting and statistical calculations reveal highly complex computational processes involved in determining which terms trend" (57). Sharma's point is significant because researchers can never be completely sure how users are exposed to different kinds of information. Black Twitter is comprised of a small network of users that are highly networked and very actively engaged for certain durations of time. This means that if the majority of the "Black users" start rapidly talking about a subject at the same time (e.g. #ThanksgivingwithBlackFamilies), the conversation will appear more prominently in their followers' feeds. The more users respond to the content, it will probably start trending—regardless of what other people are talking about on Twitter, and regardless of how many people are talking about those subjects. This affordance of Twitter could play a role in Black Twitter's visibility and presumed popularity.

DISCUSSION OF ADDITIONAL RESEARCH CHALLENGES

Studying race in a place like Twitter presents several additional challenges. First, how do you look for racial identity online? Black Twitter's geography extends beyond the United States since Twitter is a global social network. South Africans could be communicating with Black Twitter alongside African Americans or Puerto Ricans. This potential for international participation inspires diasporic research with a focus on language. For example, some scholars like Taylor Jones and Ian Stewart have used Black Twitter to chart linguistic diversity and location throughout the diaspora (Taylor Jones; Stewart).

Next, RCWS scholars have long needed to innovate the way that our field talks about race, technology, and communication. Claims of a democratic society via a more racially distributed internet were all the rage during Web 1.0 and at the turn of 2.0. Well into the Millennium, internet use was discussed in terms of racial disparities involving access, or the "digital divide" (Banks; Monroe; Wajcman; Warschauer). However, Pew documents that only a marginal gap exists between White, Black, and Hispanic users in the US (Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet 2019).[8]

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7   Twitter Search Results FAQs. (URL: https://bit.ly/3rJGpFw)
8   See http://pewrsr.ch/3vGxQOt.

Demographics and Internet Use

The fact that some of the access gaps between races have nearly closed affects how we ought to be talking about race and technology at present (See Table 5.1). A study of Black Twitter could help fill gaps that were opened by some of this research. Since nearly every racial group in the US is networked, we must broaden what we mean by "access" on the level of how social media transforms its users' relationship to "the news."[9] For example, "One-in-five U.S. adults say they often get news via social media, slightly higher than the share who often do so from print newspapers (16%)" (Shearer). Increased reliance on social media redefines what counts as news and how internet users will interpret its racialized content.

Table 5.1. Demographics of Broadband Access in the US (2000-2019)[10]

Year	White Users (%)	Black Users (%)	Hispanic Users (%)
2000	53	38	(no data available)
2006	72	59	(no data available)
2012	84	77	79
2018	89	87	88
2019	92	85	86

Another issue with place involves the challenge of discovering information within the platform itself. Re-finding what happens on Black Twitter is far more difficult than it may seem. One might imagine that the scale of Twitter's data capacity would serve researchers well when they are investigating its social functions. However, users should be wary of Twitter's capacity to serve as a reliable archival device.

In their study of 606 Twitter users, Meier and Elsweiler discovered that retrieval rates are very poor. They observed, "58.3% (of respondents) reported having been frustrated by challenging or unsuccessful re-finding task in the past" (137). They also noted that "About 70% of our respondents hold the opinion that Twitter's features for returning to previously viewed content should be improved" (138). Indeed, we must keep the limitations of Twitter's own archival capacity in mind when researching its users' social behaviors (boyd).

Meier and Elsweiler's findings suggest that Twitter generates so much data that some of it ends up lost in an ocean of information. The hashtag, which is

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9   See http://pewrsr.ch/3s50qqz.

10   Adapted from data in Pew Research's report, "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," published on June 12, 2019. See http://pewrsr.ch/3vGxQOt.

employed as an index marker for countless taxonomies of convo streams, isn't always going to yield accurate sortable quantities of results. Black Twitter, then, depends on some degree of synchronicity for its life. Black Twitter's users produce discourses that flow within and outside of the Twitterverse, leaking into mainstream news articles, cross-platform posts, and even the Library of Congress. The scaled collective, distributed nature of Black Twitter's knowledge production makes it difficult to attribute authorship to any single user.

The problem of "who" an author is on Twitter is connected to another socio-technical issue that affects researching race and rhetoric online: the matter of human and non-human users. For example, bots introduce the issue of race and reality (Friedberg and Donovan). The report "Bots in the Twittersphere," published on April 9, 2018, by Pew, defines bots as ". . . accounts that can post content or interact with other users in an automated way and without direct human input" (Wojcik et al.). Bots, apparently, are fully integrated with most internet users' experiences via online social environments. An estimated "two-thirds of tweeted links to popular websites are posted by automated accounts—not human beings" (Wojcik et al.).[11]

How much information is produced by online users that are really even people? Can bots go viral? Can they reproduce texts? When are they questioned? As Wojcik et al. argue, bots participate on social media in numerous ways, including "answering questions about a variety of topics in real time or providing automated updates about news stories or events. . . . they can also be used to attempt to alter perceptions of political discourse on social media, spread misinformation, or manipulate online rating and review systems" (Bots in the Twittersphere). Apparently, "500 most-active suspected bot accounts are responsible for 22% of the tweeted links to popular news and current events sites" (Wojcik et al.). Bots can be programmed with racial biases, as well as to post controversial content about race and racism (Benjamin; Daniel, Cappiello, and Benatallah; Garcia; Noble).

When we browse through political coverage that shows up as trending topics and on prominent features of popular news websites' articles and comment sections, we may not immediately know whether a real human person even authored the information (Stocking and Sumida). The fact that bots, which are created by humans to autonomously generate information, compete against the live active human users remediates racial representation in ways that make truth and reality nearly impossible to know. Who is the folk? How much talk emerges from real life users engaged in a moment of spontaneous deliberation about their experiences and interpretations of reality? How much of that talk is facilitated

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11   To conduct their study, Wojcik et al. ". . . used a list of 2,315 of the most popular websites and examined the roughly 1.2 million tweets (sent by English language users) that included links to those sites during a roughly six-week period in summer 2017."

by machines persuasively performing human talk? What kinds of human actions does the bot-human interaction generate?

The problem of bots relates to three additional issues with racial performance online—identity tourism, straight-up fraud, and cyber-security. If bots are indistinguishable from human life to some users interacting with them, profile images and cover photos offer additional ways to manipulate users. A Twitter profile that displays an image of a young Black Woman may not necessarily represent its offline user's identity. Identity politics has been unsettled by convincing performances of marginalized identities being expressed by White male users, such as the notorious case of the blog A Gay Girl In Damascus (Hesse).[12] In that bizarre drama, Tom MacMaster—a straight White man in Georgia—ran a popular blog as Amina Araff, a gay Syrian female (Young).[13] After his offline identity was discovered, he was criticized by Paula Brooks, who was supposedly a deaf lesbian editor of Lez Get Real—another popular website (2008-2014).[14] However, similar to MacMaster, Brooks turned out to be Bill Graber—a straight man living in Ohio (Flock and Bell). The hoax baffled internet users because the persuasiveness of their performance sustained communities with thousands of users for years.

A similar fraud occurred on Facebook with a Black Lives Matter group, but with a more familiar motive—money. The group was being administered by a White man living in Australia.[15] Ian Mackay embezzled over $100,000 from the group's approximately 700,000 members (Lockhart). It was the largest #BLM page on Facebook, even after Patrisse Cullors officially reported that it was fake. In addition, Mackay ran numerous #BLM groups, some of which were also popular (well over 40,000 people). He also bought and sold various domains with "pro-Black" language (e.g. blackpowerfist.com). Mackey attempted to justify his fraud, claiming that online racial performance was simply his "personal hobby" (O'Sullivan).[16]

This case of #BLM organizational impersonation powerfully illustrates that studying Twitter cannot occur in a vacuum. The cross-platformed nature of social media means that users navigate these various platforms simultaneously. Moreover, the hashtag serves as both an archival tool, as well as a powerful sign of intertexting among media networks. For example, the CNN report about this massive fraud mostly implicated Facebook for its structural inability to remove the fake group sooner. Facebook claimed that the page didn't violate their "com-

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12   See http://wapo.st/3c1Y4Dl.
13   See https://bit.ly/3pogm52.
14   See http://wapo.st/3s7qdia.
15   See http://bit.ly/3s9sgCo.
16   See http://cnn.it/3tzMiWM.

munity standards." This inaction occurred alongside Facebook's compliance with Russian hackers' meddling in U.S. elections, as #BlackLivesMatter was one of the hashtags that the hackers frequently employed to troll and generate divisive deliberation. In addition, scandals like the Cambridge Analytica leaks, which revealed that 50 million users' psychographic profiles were sold to this company despite Facebook's claim to protect user information in its terms and conditions, offer a partial glimpse of a much wider scope of the vulnerabilities inherent in social media design (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison). I will analyze these cybersecurity issues in more detail in the next section on specific case studies.

Interestingly, the "woke rhetoric" and movements associated with Black Twitter ended up internationally co-opted in ways that eclipsed the actual size of authentic organizational activity. Who knew the difference between the real/fake, bot/human performances of racial identity and solidarity? How many scholars and teachers were duped into joining Mackay's groups? Dr. Ethan Zuckerman, Director of MIT's Center of Civic Media, further elaborates on this issue: "Tribalism, manipulation, and misinformation are well-established forces in American politics, all predating the web. But something fundamental has changed. Never before have we had the technological infrastructure to support the weaponization of emotion on a global scale" ("Bigger than Facebook.").[17] To illustrate, the Mueller investigation resulted in several indictments of Russian hackers working for the Internet Research Agency (IRA) to interfere in the 2016 U.S. Election through widespread disinformation campaigns via Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. As I will further discuss later in this chapter, the IRA focused most of its energies on systematically targeting online Black communities by using human users to impersonate Black cultural identities. Their hacking methods are part of a much larger ecosystem of political and financial fraud that depends on users' reliance on social media. This scene and its rhetorical power needs to be addressed more comprehensively by RCWS researchers. These platforms are hardly neutral, as their design affects how users participate and their epistemologies about identity, performance, and technology. We need to know more about the extent to which users trust these networks' (to vet its) published content, as well as how much fraud and corruption affects their behavior, attitudes towards truth, etc. The rest of this section further examines how these ethical issues contribute to the leakiness of race online.

In her article "Cyberrace," Lisa Nakamura challenges readers to consider how digital performances of race during Web 1.0 authorized White users to downplay the reality of racial identity. She explains that "The ability to manipulate the 'look and feel' of race by online role-playing, digital gaming, and other forms

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17   See http://cnn.it/3tzMiWM.

of digital-media use encouraged and fed the desire for control over self-construction and self-representation" (1675). The architecture of the internet favored much more anonymity than Web 2.0, which made it easier for users to imagine themselves operating in a democratized space that could work towards destabilizing race and ethnicity.

In Web 2.0, a proliferation of memes and GIFs that present Black people looking "funny" compete for users' attention. Users routinely circulate images of Black celebrities, women, and children showing "attitude"—eye rolling, sucking teeth, and making disapproving glances. This social practice conjures dark memories of the minstrelsy that pervaded the late 19th century throughout the Jim Crow era. Thus, some writers have dubbed it *digital blackface* (Dickey; "Is It OK to Use Black Emojis and Gifs?"; Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface," "Memes and Misogynoir").[18] Memes play a major role in digital identity performances, as their ease of replication and ability to convey memorable "insider" cultural messages make them a very persuasive form of communication. In their report *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*, DiResta et al. claim that not only are memes "the propaganda of the digital age" but that "the Department of Defense and DARPA has studied them for years because they are a powerful tool of cultural influence, capable of reinforcing or even changing values and behavior" (50). Proving the "authenticity" of one's racial identity when online, then, becomes a major burden on historically marginalized populations, as we will observe in the case of the subreddit BlackPeopleTwitter. It would also be problematic for researchers to uncritically assume that users will utilize their "real names" and that profile photos and meme usage will reveal their actual cultural backgrounds.

ANALYZING THE *LEAKY STYLE* OF BLACK TWITTER

Case Study: The Black Twitter Beat

In 2015, the *LA Times* hired Ph.D. student Dexter Thomas to cover Black Twitter. Before I discuss this story, it is worth noting that during this time, "real journalists" questioned the existence and/or relevance of Black Twitter. The fact that the *LA Times* was willing to devote space to Black Twitter sparked headlines like NPR's 2015 story "'Los Angeles Times' Recognizes Black Twitter's Relevance" and had numerous people hopeful (and doubtful) about what the beat could mean (Bates; Black Enterprise Editors; Opam).

But the gig was legit, according to S. Mitra Kalita, Managing Editor for Editorial Strategy at the *Times*. Kalita argues that "Black Twitter is not a standard jour-

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18 See https://techcrunch.com/2017/10/01/thoughts-on-white-people-using-dark-skinned-emoji/

nalistic beat. But over the last year, it has emerged as a force in shaping the national discourse about race. It's truly been an emblem of democracy." She continues her praise for Black Twitter, noting that "If folks on Twitter had not shared the body of Michael Brown lying in the street for hours [in Ferguson, Mo.], would we have seen the mainstream media coverage that we later saw?" (Gourarie).

Of the hundreds of verifiable users that actively engage Black Twitter, who are probably more than qualified to write about Black Twitter for a newspaper, the LA Times hired Dexter Thomas for the scoop. Thomas seemed skeptical of the job. When Chava Gourarie, from the Columbia Journalism Review, interviewed Dexter Thomas about his new gig with the Times, Thomas remarked, "As soon as somebody named Black Twitter, it became a thing that could be exploited." His words culminated in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Thomas' gig with the LA Times was very short-lived. His first (and last) article for the LA Times, "When Black Twitter Sounds Like White Twitter," critiqued the liberatory potential of Black Twitter because numerous memes and tweets mocked the rapper Tyga for having a sexual relationship with a transgender porn actress. Folks clapped back hard at Thomas for oversimplifying Black Twitter as transphobic with evidence that consisted of some bad tweets (Eromosele; Kenneally; Magee).

For these critics, Thomas wasted an opportunity to represent the complexity, depth, and cultural impact of Black Twitter (Bossip Staff; Clark, "The 'Black Twitter' Beat"; Lemieux; Vasilogambros and the National Journal). Even if Thomas would have only highlighted that the fact of his position vividly showed that whatever Black Twitter was, it was a fierce journalistic force, and probably for the better (than the mainstream!). Needless to say, the Black Twitter beat was an example of what academics and journalists ought not do.

One major reason that the LA Times failed to effectively report on Black Twitter is because Black Twitter itself is referred to as a journalistic source. As previously discussed, the popular hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (aka #BLM) continues to drive media coverage about race, culture, and violence. Through #BLM, Black Twitter came to be associated with the torrents of global antiracist protests, which generated considerable news coverage. In their lengthy report *Beyond the Hashtags*, Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark argue that "Black Twitter" is a widely-discussed cultural phenomenon that overlaps with BLM but remains distinct from it" (8). Thus, examining the power of this hashtag enables us to observe how Black Twitter influences racial discourses across platforms and media. For instance, one computational analysis claims that

> #BlackLivesMatter has become an archetypal example of
> modern protests and political engagement on social media: A

new Pew Research Center analysis of public tweets finds the
hashtag has been used nearly 30 million times on Twitter —
an average of 17,002 times per day — as of May 1, 2018."
(Anderson et al.)

Throughout their report, Freelon et al. trace the evolution of #BLM. Tray-
von Martin's death in 2014, alongside the deaths of other unarmed Black
persons, including Renisha McBride and Marlene Pinnock, inspired Alicia
Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors to dub the hashtag #BlackLives-
Matter. Freelon et al.'s study examined 40.8 million tweets happening over
the course of a year—from June 2014-June 2015 (10). They break up their
analysis of these tweets into nine phases that mark major spikes in tweet
activity, which is indicated by the hashtag #BLM and affiliated hashtags like
#Ferguson, #ripericgarner, #mikebrown, #handsupdontshoot, #shutitdown,
#tamirrice, #icantbreathe, #walterscott, #michaelslager, #ericharris, #freddi-
egray, #policebrutality, etc. users.

#BlackLivesMatter appeared in almost 30,000 tweets in the month of June
2014 that year before blowing up to over 200,000 tweets by early August 2014
(Freelon et al. 36-37). Eric Garner's death on July 17, 2014, was intensified by Mi-
chael Brown's death, which culminated in a torrent of tweets about #BlackLives-
Matter. Brown's death on August 9, 2014, inspired over 20,000,000 tweets (42).
After the Ferguson protests, BLM tweets don't spike again until a few months
later when Tamir Rice is gunned down in the park by police officers, an event
which corresponded to the non-indictment of Officer Darren Wilson, who
killed Michael Brown. Almost 10,000,000 tweets emerge during this time, and
of particular note is that the date of Wilson's release "[November 24, 2014] saw
the highest total tweet volume of any single day in the entire dataset: 3,420,934
tweets" (55). BLM activity didn't increase because of police killings again until
Walter Scott was shot in the back in April 2015.

Freelon et al. claim that "BLM is an apt test case for the idea that social
media uniquely benefits oppressed populations" (8). They also argue that "YBT
[Young Black Twitter] serves as young Black people's CNN, to paraphrase Public
Enemy frontman Chuck D" (40). Indeed, several researchers have focused on
the liberatory uses of Black Twitter (Bonilla and Rosa; Chaudhry; Hill; Lang-
ford and Speight; Richardson and Ragland; Schiappa). I hesitate to call Black
Twitter radical, however, because nothing is more radical in offense or detriment
to human survival than white patriarchal cultural supremacy and its norms of
violence, which most intensely coerce compliance—also known as respectabili-
ty—from Black, Brown, Red, and other persons of color. Resisting radical acts
such as racial segregation and colorblindness should not be considered inher-

ently radical, but a logical response to surviving in a racially, gendered, and economically segregated society.

Race and racism are more publicly visible in the past several years than a few decades ago (Horowitz et al.). However, Black people are more likely to connect these issues to their cultural identity (Barroso). As one study notes, "Blacks are especially likely to think social media magnify issues that are not usually discussed in other venues. Fully 80 percent of Black people say the statement 'social media highlight important issues that might not get a lot of attention otherwise' describes these sites well" (Anderson et al. 11). This view of Black Twitter as necessary sharply contrasts with a polling of White users who ". . . are more likely than either blacks or Hispanics to assert that social media distracts people from issues that are truly important or that these sites make people believe they are making a difference when they really are not" (11). Although Black Twitter might inspire political movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName, this communication remains part of the archives of a racially mixed Twitter. As a corporation with an obvious interest in brokering data, Twitter in and of itself liberates no one. Its users participate for all kinds of purposes, enlivening it, which will animate, reflect, and perpetuate all kinds of stratification and resistance to it.

Moreover, the inextricable relationship between journalists and what the general public understands as Black Twitter is critical for the preservation of #BlackTwitter activity itself. Screenshots provide the most reliable method of documenting tweets that recirculated the most during the dialogue life of a given hashtag. The specific hashtags that I have analyzed throughout this chapter were ones that I was personally familiar with. As a Black Twitter user who rarely participates in #BlackTwitter's languaging, I certainly lurk on my feed when a hashtag about Black life starts to trend. My networks may start posting about a trending hashtag, which was definitely the case with #BlackonCampus. As an academic representing historically oppressed populations, I'm especially interested in how we talk about race, oppression, and education. As Carter describes in chapter four, I routinely observed and experienced racism in our shared location of the predominantly white public southwest institution—University of Oklahoma. Our discussion about me being #BlackonCampus occurred before Twitter became widespread. My testimony remained local, and even suspicious, before its plausibility exploded through the imagery of SAE's white male fraternity members joyfully singing in praise of lynching Black people. Researching digital blackness then, or topics involving race and technology, relies on mixed methods of interpretation (Brock, "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis"; Prendergast). On one hand, I need to understand the limitations of Twitter's retrieval mechanisms. Additionally, I need to know a thing or two about Black cultural communication and lived experience.

Case Study: Russians Hack COINTELPRO 2.0

This section briefly explores two major events that will illustrate how being Black online and being Black in real life will subject a person to scaled oppression. First, Russian hackers disproportionately targeted Black online communities during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Second, the moderators for r/BlackPeopleTwitter, a subreddit community of four million members, asked its members to verify their race. During the Robert Mueller investigation, he issued an indictment against the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and twelve of its operatives.[19] The IRA was indicted for multiple counts of fraud and theft (Internet Research Agency Indictment). These include:

1. Conspiracy to defraud the US (count 1)
2. Conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud (count 2)
3. Aggravated identity theft (counts 3-8)

According to the indictment, the IRA successfully infiltrated numerous online communities via social media, including Twitter, and other internet-based media. They began executing their strategy to create discord in the U.S. political system in 2014. This operation included meddling in the 2016 election, specifically for the purposes of supporting then-candidate (now former president) Donald J. Trump. To accomplish this objective, they developed and executed a vigorous anti-Clinton campaign (Mueller 17). Equipped with millions of dollars from organizations controlled by Yevgeny Vitasovic Prigozhin (Пригожин Евгений Викторович) and hundreds of operatives, the IRA's activities were vast.

In particular, some of the defendants lied about their identities to obtain visas to enter the US for the purposes of gathering intelligence (12). These defendants gathered intelligence from Nevada, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Illinois, Georgia, Michigan, Louisiana, Texas, and New York (Mueller 13). All of the defendants directed, developed, and/or administered methods for concealing and inventing identities. They used virtual private networks (VPNs) to conceal their identities, stole social security numbers, dates of

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19   The IRA concealed its political and electoral interference operations through several Russian entities "including Internet Research LLC, MediaSintez LLC, GlavSet LLC, MixInfo LLC, Azimut LLC, and NovInfo LLC" (Mueller 5). Funds were supplied by an organization called Concord Management and Consulting, LLC, as well as multiple affiliates (e.g., Concord Catering) that are "related Russian entities with various Russian government contracts" (6). Concord concealed funds through 14 bank accounts in the names of these affiliates: Glavnaya Liniya LLC, Merkuriy LLC, Obshchepit LLC, Potentsial LLC, RSP LLC, ASP LLC, MTTs LLC, Kompleksservis LLC, SPb Kulinariya LLC, Almira LLC, Pishchevik LLC, Galant LLC, Rayteks LLC, and Standart LLC (7).

birth, and email addresses from real people, as well as created and used fake driver's licenses and email addresses (4-5). This information was used to open social media and PayPal accounts, which were used to purchase ads and maintain accounts (4-5, 15-16). They also coordinated political rallies with real political organizers in New York, D.C., Florida, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania (20, 22-23, 30).

The IRA began targeting Black online communities in 2016. The effort was part of the "translator project," which focused specifically on the U.S. populations on social media. More than 80 employees were assigned to this project.[20] The purpose of this strategy was to "encourage U.S. minority groups not to vote in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or to vote for a third-party U.S. presidential candidate" (Mueller 18). The defendants appealed to expressions of "political intensity"— "supporting radical groups, [and engaging] users dissatisfied with [the] social and economic situation and oppositional social movements" (Mueller 14). For example, some of the ads they purchased featured text such as "You know, a great number of black people support us saying that #HillaryClintonIsNotMyPresident" and "Hillary Clinton Doesn't Deserve the Black Vote" (20). They also created at least a dozen websites "with names like blackmattersus.com, blacktivist.info, blacktolive.org and blacksoul.us" (Shane and Frenkel). In 2017, the IRA shifted its focus on online Black users from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram. "Approximately 40% of its [Instagram] accounts achieved over 10,000 followers (a level colloquially referred to as 'micro-influencers' by marketers); twelve accounts had over 100,000 followers ('influencer' level)" (DiResta et al. 26).

The IRA learned how to cultivate online personas through detailed surveillance. They focused on certain group pages and individualized posts (Mueller 15). The defendants "tracked certain metrics like the group's size, the frequency of content placed by the group, and the level of audience engagement with that content, such as the average number of comments or responses to a post" (12). They also "tracked the size of the online U.S. audiences reached through posts, different types of engagement with the posts (such as likes, comments, and reposts), changes in audience size, and other metrics" (15). Moreover, they relied on human feedback, regarding how to make posts seem more "authentic." They frequently consulted about "[the correct] ratios of text, graphics, and video to use in posts; the number of accounts to operate; and the role of each account

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20   The indictment describes the various defendants' participation in the IRA's targeting of U.S. minority populations. This specific strategy was directed by Dzheykhun Nasimi Ogly Aslanov (Асланов Джейхун Насими Оглы) a.k.a. Jayhoon Aslanov a.k.a. Jay Aslano. and coordinated by Gleb Igorevich Vasilchenko (Васильченко Глеб Игоревич), Irina Viktorovna Kaverzina (Каверзина Ирина Викторовна), and Vladimir Venkov (Венков Владимир).

(for example, differentiating a main account from which to post information and auxiliary accounts to promote a main account through links and reposts)" (15). These methods enabled some of their social media accounts to grow to hundreds of thousands of followers. For instance, @TEN_GOP received over 100,000 followers (15).

Unfortunately, big tech companies did not provide enough information on detailed interactions to draw accurate conclusions about which of the IRA's communication tactics worked best. As DiResta et al. point out, "None of the data sets provided by [the] Facebook, Twitter, or Google included comments, and it is impossible to gauge how many followers the pages attracted— or how many disagreements they provoked—through the strategic use of either inter-linking, or divisive hashtags" (49). Nevertheless, Table 5.2 summarizes some of the impressions the Russian hackers obtained from their racialized disinformation campaign.

Table 5.2. IRA's Targeting of Online Black Communities—Social Media Impressions

Date of Operations	Platform	Accounts/Pages/Personas	# of Followers/ People	# of Engagements
2015-2017	Twitter	3,841 accounts	1.4 million	73 million
2015-2017	Instagram	@blackstagram	300,000	187 million
January 2015-August 2017	Facebook	30 pages Blacktivist	1.2 million	76.5 million
September 2015-July 2017	YouTube	1,063 videos • Don't Shoot • BlacktoLive • Black Matters • Starling Brown • Stop Police Brutality • A Word of Truth (Williams and Kalvin)		

Notes: (1) Adapted from Shane & Frenkel and DiResta et al. (2) Follower totals are approximate.

The IRA's successful cyber-operations resemble a long tradition of the U.S. government's own tactics for disrupting and dissolving "radical" political movements. Their objective of launching "information warfare against the United States of America" was made possible by our own government's historically continuous use of race and racism to create disinformation that destroys trust in communities (Internet Research Agency Indictment; Moore). As of March 1968, at least 41 field offices were directed by J. Edgar Hoover to expand the operations of COINTELPRO (counter-intelligence-program) (Church Committee 87; Federal Bureau of Investigation).

This program sought to destroy "militant," or "extremist," Black organizations, as well as a number of other "subversive" domestic groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Ku Klux Klan. In the letter, Hoover explains that the program's purpose is to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of Black nationalist hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesman, membership, and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder" (Churchill and Vander Wall 58; Federal Bureau of Investigation[21]). According to its final report on domestic spying during the entire 20th century, the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities concluded that "Between 1960 and 1974, the FBI conducted over 500,000 separate investigations of persons and groups under the 'subversive' category, predicated on the possibility that they might be likely to overthrow the government of the United States" (Church Committee 22).

COINTELPRO was atomically destructive to the Black community. It annihilated our ability to organize against the status quo without an extreme state-sponsored retaliation (Brown; Shakur). The FBI approved nearly 40 proposals for their targeting of "black nationalists" (Church Committee 98). The Church Committee argued that "These operations utilized dangerous and unsavory techniques which gave rise to the risk of death and often disregarded the personal rights and dignity of the victims" (98). Alongside the physical "neutralization" of Black Power movement leaders like Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, John Jerome Huggins,[22] and Fred Hampton,[23] Hoover's methods included the most powerful uses of information—discrediting an individual (Shetty). Distorting others' perception of a person's character would enable Hoover to direct the program towards "Preventing groups and leaders (nationalists) from gaining 'respectability' by discrediting them to the 'responsible' Negro community, to the white community and to Negro radicals" (qtd. in Churchill and Vander Wall).

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21   See http://bit.ly/313NdT2.

22   See http://bit.ly/38Zx31F.

23   See http://bit.ly/2Pdp4qI.

Creating intra-racial divides was also a central part of the FBI's COINTELPRO practices—countless examples of requests to write "anonymous" articles to disrupt Socialist Worker Party (SWP) activity are further discussed in Blackstock's *COINTELPRO* and Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall's *Agents of Repression*.

COINTELPRO's tactics have also been utilized by misogynist groups organized across online platforms like 4Chan, Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitter. For example, in 2014, #EndFathersDay was a popular hashtag that originated on 4Chan to create discord within and among Black and White feminists. At the same time as the IRA was in the process of executing its translator project, and several months before Gamergate, Shafiqah Hudson noticed that the #EndFathersDay hashtag was circulating with messages composed in badly written Black English. According to Rachelle Hampton, the post didn't sound like anyone she knew and the account wasn't following anyone in her Black feminist networks or Black Twitter. One read, "#EndFathersDay" . . . "until men start seeing they children as more than just 'fuck trophies'"(Hampton). Fake Twitter accounts included handles like "@NayNayCantStop, @LatrineWatts, and @CisHate, and bios like "Queer + black + angry"" (Hampton; Caldwell).

Hudson organized her efforts to expose these fake accounts with the hashtag #YourSlipisShowing, which is a double entendre that most Black people might recognize as a caution issued to you by your grandmother. Don't get caught slipping cuz you being leaky. In other words, the phrase "refers to something that's meant to be concealed but is, embarrassingly, on full display" (Hampton). Quoting Hudson, Rachelle Hampton reports, "One of my favorite aspects of #YourSlipIsShowing is that it's funny," [she explained.] "It's something that your meemaw would say, it's church. I love that something that your big ma would say to you is essentially weaponized. That's the kind of world I want to live in, where you can combat true maliciousness and racism and ick with good manners and good humor." Indeed, the hashtag also captured the attention of To l'Nasah Crockett, who noticed the #EndFathersDay posts on Tumblr and started searching for the source.

Crockett found and posted screenshots, with the hashtag #YourSlipisShowing, of 4Chan threads describing their info war against Black Women on no uncertain terms (Broderick). Hampton references various examples in the following quote. "Users said things like 'I've had hundreds of nigs chimp out at me over this [fake tweet]. This turned out way better than expected :)'" and "'the more you do it the less effective it is going to be when we launch a proper attack. making them question each other is great but i want to make them hate each other.'" Fortunately, #YourSlipisShowing gained major traction among Black feminists with a popular social media presence (e.g., Feminista Jones and Jamilah Lemieux). It also enabled Crockett and Hudson to connect outside of the Twitterverse. Through Hudson's invention and determination, "[Black fem-

inists] had documented a small army of fake accounts numbering in the hundreds—accounts that users could not only cross-reference with their followers but also mass-report to Twitter" (Hampton).

The #EndFathersDay hoax provides a useful case for further study about how racism and sexism are exploited as a rhetorical and political strategy. However, these same systems are a liability. The trolls revealed their disdain for Black Women through their poor imitation of them. It was their reliance on stereotypes that alerted and appalled Hudson, Crockett, and others who knew full well that they were being attacked. Meanwhile, Hudson credits her academic training for enabling her to exhaustively research #EndFathersDay and establish links between the fake accounts. Unfortunately, Hudson has mixed feelings about the exigencies for creating the hashtag and being erased for her digital labor—work that misogyny and racism compelled her to do for free as a matter of survival. Although #YourSlipisShowing received some national attention through celebrities like Samantha Bee, who only acknowledged the hashtag—not its founder, Hudson felt "sadness . . . and vindication . . . as well as 'extra broke' and at a loss as to how to turn this work into income" (Hampton).

Black feminists like Hudson and Crockett should be credited with the massive amount of work they do to correct misinformation. Despite their coverage in Hampton's article, "The Black Feminists Who Saw the Alt-Right Threat Coming," Black feminists lack positive and significant mainstream attention. As the scope of data warfare includes more and more globally distributed and expansive campaigns, however, Black Women's experiences are fundamentally shaped by being routinely subject to surveillance and harassment in any digital or analog environment (Barlow; Sherri Williams). Black feminists have always had to use emerging media to labor over counter-strategies to combat both physical and informatic violence, especially negative representations of Black Women (Davis; Lockett; E. Richardson; Royster). Our critical perspective derives from being forced to consciously protect ourselves at all times, which prepares us to defend ourselves against anti-Black Woman data.

The vitriolic speech of radical conservative online groups has been downplayed for years. Arguably, the IRA's strategy was made possible by the silence surrounding the large and disproportionate amount of harassment experienced by women and racial/ethnic minorities via social media. In addition, examining the IRA's disruptive tactics within the context of COINTELPRO's history reminds us to recognize how racial division has long been institutionalized by the U.S. government's defense policy (Blain; Harriot; Mock; Starr). If living under the heavy weight of racial tension were not Americans' sociopolitical reality, the IRA would not have been able to secure large audiences that distrust the government enough for their hackers to leverage users' suspicion of "others." The

IRA's intense focus on destroying Hillary Clinton's reputation, combined with its impersonation of Black internet users, builds on a surveillance paradigm from the auction blocks of the 18ᵗʰ century to COINTELPRO of last century. The problem of misinformation has long made Black people suspicious of the political system and each other. In the 21ˢᵗ century, Black internet users must face the general challenges of discovering truth while drowning in oceans of data. However, they are also subject to systematic manipulation that amplifies the global scale of anti-Black violence. In the next example, I'll examine another instance of how Black users have resisted information warfare.

Case Study: Digital Skinfolks, Race, and Online Spaces

Similar to Hudson and Crockett, many Black Twitter users have been critical of how White Twitter users appropriate Black Twitter's language practices—of "talking back and talkin' Black." It frustrates them to spend time and energy doing emotional and intellectual work such as entertaining trolls, bots, and fake user accounts. Moreover, it is exhausting to engage and avoid people who casually use BE and express themselves with Black people in memes even though their experiences with Blackness may solely be digital. On Reddit, a large Black community had absolutely had it. r/Black People Twitter is Reddit's 59ᵗʰ most popular subreddit—consisting of approximately four million users—that "relies on a simple idea: screenshotting tweets, usually jokes, from black Twitter users" (Sommer).[24]

As an April Fool's joke, in 2019, the moderators of the group asked users to verify their race by sending in evidence of their skin tone by taking a photo of their forearm with their Reddit username and a timestamp. Users were told that they may also include certain food, educational, household, and personal items in their photos to prove that they are Black in offline reality (/r/BlackPeopleTwitter is Open).[25] The joke did its critical work, receiving outcry from White Reddit users who quickly commented that the moderators' actions were racist, even as it sparked the creation of the (now deleted) group /r/SubforWhitePeopleOnly.[26] However, the moderators defended their actions, claiming, "We cannot turn off the screens of our blackness or unsubscribe from racism" (/r/BlackPeopleTwitter is Open).[27] In response to the call to prove their analog Black identities, thousands of Black Reddit users sent in pictures of their forearms for verification. The moderators put a checkmark beside the users' names to confirm their identity and make it easier for users to filter their online experience. Users with a checkmark are per-

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24   View the subreddit at https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackPeopleTwitter/

25   See http://bit.ly/3skEUi1.

26   See http://bit.ly/3r7X3hw.

27   See http://bit.ly/3skEUi1.

mitted to participate in restricted forums via the r/BPP's Country Club—named after a space that has historically excluded Black people and continues to do so.

The moderators' controversial surveillance practices attracted some national journalistic coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Daily Beast,* as well as the conservative blog *Pluralist.* The headlines illustrate the writers' discomfort with the idea. Amy Harmon wrote two articles about it: "Discussing Blackness on Reddit? Photograph Your Forearm First" and "Prove You're Not White: For an Article About Race-Verification on Reddit, I Had an Unusual Request." Will Sommer composed "Reddit's BlackPeopleTwitter Forum Wants to Know If Its Users Are Actually White," and the *Pluralist* published "Anti-Racist Reddit Forum Asks Users to Send in Photos to Prove They're Not White." Harmon's and Sommer's articles discuss the racism that drove the moderators' willingness to take dramatic measures to express its users' refusal to continue being digitally "gaslighted" (language used by former moderator Wesley Moreno) by scores of White users who would belittle the Black experience (Harmon).

For instance, "The forum's millions of subscribers have been able to stay friendly in the comments on a post about cooking or dating, but if someone mentions a political issue like racial profiling, white people have flooded the comments to say they didn't see what the big deal was" (Sommer). Harmon offers more specific examples:

> A comment on a post about a first-generation black college student's entry to Harvard Medical School—"you'll be attending thanks to affirmative action"—received hundreds of "upvotes" before it was removed by a moderator. In conversations about police violence, allusions to "black on black crime," carrying the false implication that black people break the law more often, would float to the top. ("Discussing Blackness on Reddit"[28])

The *Pluralist* acknowledged, but minimized, the moderators' concerns, focusing on how "everybody" finds the policy to be too exclusive. They reported that "The decision has sparked heavy backlash from Reddit users—Black and white—who feel that the policy exemplifies the same type of discrimination the moderators are protesting."

The nature of the r/BlackPeopleTwitter policy, and the moderators' desire to provide a "safe" space for the group's users in the absence of a site-wide policy against hate speech, exposes numerous issues that summarize the key challenges discussed in the prior section of this chapter. Black internet users must put in a considerable amount of unpaid cultural, intellectual, and emotional work

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28   See https://bit.ly/3rbOv97.

into how they communicate in predominantly White platforms like Reddit and Twitter. Moderators spend hours and hours removing inflammatory posts. Fortunately, r/BlackPeopleTwitter illustrates that social media ecologies integrate platforms in ways that help us retrieve data. The group consists of Twitter screenshots, offering a record of what Black Twitter be doing. Without the group, amid Twitter's imperfect retrieval capacity, we'd have to rely on even more limited representation of "Black Twitter" via anonymous handpicked lists and blogs (66 Most Hilarious Posts; Arceneaux; Lewis; OMG Black People).

The desire to connect with other Black folks and allies situates many Black users in a conflict between online and offline racial embodiment. The fact that hundreds of users were willing to sacrifice their anonymity and privacy in exchange for "real" communication online illustrates that we have hit a critical impasse for reckoning with the realities of living in Marshall McLuhan's "global village," or what Martin Luther King Jr. dubbed the "world house." King recognized that racism and technological "progress" could not co-exist and lead to integration and liberation. He argued, "Our hope for creative living in this world house that we have inherited lies in our ability to re-establish the moral ends of our lives in personal character and social justice. Without this spiritual and moral reawakening, we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our own instruments" (*Where Do We Go from Here*). King further claimed that "As early as 1906 W.E.B. DuBois prophesied that 'the problem of the twentieth century will be the problem of the color line.' Now as we stand two-thirds into this exciting period of history we know full well that racism is still that hound of hell which dogs the tracks of our civilization." At present, we are over twenty years into a new century, and information warfare based on racial divisiveness has scaled to match the nuclear power from which contemporary information communications technologies emerged.

Overall, each of these case studies exposes the precariousness of our economic position and anxieties induced by internationalized digitally networked racism and military missions. Thomas took on a journalism hustle as a Ph.D. student in an unfamiliar industry and disparaged Black Twitter's character to distance himself from being associated with its "foolishness." Russian hackers took advantage of the problem of digital blackface and cyber-minstrelsy by weaponizing conspiracy theories, Black solidarity (e.g., to support Black-owned business), and data illiteracy. Black feminists exposed how racist sexist web communities have been weaponizing information against Black Women years before the 2016 U.S. election. Their experiences foreshadowed the potential of an organization like the IRA to launch its comprehensive attack against U.S. internet users. Moderators of r/BlackPeopleTwitter deviated from web 1.0's most sacred values of anonymity and "free speech," creating their own rules for antiracist space that would offer users an opportunity to take pleasure in and celebrate the humor, beauty, and overall brilliance of Black culture.

Case Study: Black Twitter and the Black Rhetorical Perspective

This chapter has explored some of the fascinating problems of studying Black Twitter: how is new media shifting relationships between bots and humans, researchers and journalists, cultural critics and activists, intelligence organizations and the public—all of whom rely and compete with one another to shape the terms of conversation about the subject? In this section, I'll shift from these macro-level issues and focus on some specific examples of Black Twitter communications, demonstrating an analysis that showcases a Black rhetorical perspective.

Web 2.0 technologies' advancement of ubiquitous surveillance remediates the historical relationship between surveillance and Black people. Within this scene, in which a proliferation of platforms exists for billions of internet users to share information about their personal lives and cultural affiliations, Black expression continues to be scrutinized. Black Twitter complicates post-racial narratives of a colorblind society because its primary speech acts revolve around the speech event of how to eloquently demonstrate (authentic) blackness. This network takes advantage of racialized surveillance politics to expose aspects of Black collective intelligence.

Black Twitter's politics of race and location are an extension of offline embodied blackness. Digital blackness can be recursively retrieved via Twitter and a search engine like Google if users are familiar with any of its codes, courtesy of a hashtag. Black Twitter's contestable classification tells a story about the racial politics of its very existence in a White-dominated cyberspot like Twitter. To be such an obviously raced phenomenon within the context of Trump's America signifies a straddling of American legacies—the persistence of segregationism through boutique multiculturalism on one hand and colorblindness as a consumer culture's pitiful vision of antiracism on the other. Clay and Evans describe this context in the chapter "#Blacknessbelike: White Racial Framing and Counter-Framing on Twitter's Digitally-Contested Cyberspace." They argue,

> Perceptions of race neutrality and colorblindness permeate mainstream thought and mask racial framing, discrimination, and experiences with oppression, and thus construct race inequality as the result of non-racial politics. This powerful ideology of colorblindness attempts to remove the significance of race and racism by framing race-related issues as resulting from a natural tendency to segregate, individualism, and the belief that things have greatly improved in the lives of black people. (217)

Indeed, the very existence of a Black Twitter illustrates how distributed networked

users connect over rhetorical displays of blackness. Hashtags like #WhiteFeminism, #ThanksgivingwithBlackFamilies, #BlackHogwarts, #IfIdieinPoliceCustody, #BlackonCampus, and #HandsupDontShoot do not require a user to be part of Twitter to quickly recognize these assertions as "keeping it all the way real" about the fact of a racial narrative animating BIPOC lives. The critique may be a "call out" like Mikki Kendall's creation of #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen, which provides countless examples of how gender solidarity has long been compromised by racism. Being a so-called "woke White woman" doesn't mean that you will be capable of recognizing when your best interests don't serve non-White women or how all women's oppression ought to be acknowledged *as both raced and gendered* when oppression is theorized and discussed. (See Figures 5.2 and 5.3.)

Figure 5.2. Example of a popular Black Twitter user critiquing White feminism with a hashtag that she invented that spread to mass audiences and obtained global coverage.

Figure 5.3. Example of a Twitter user critiquing #whitefeminism in mainstream media coverage.

#IfIdieinPoliceCustody, #HandsupDontShoot, and #BlackonCampus are part of a stream of hashtags about the problematic relationship between police brutality and race. #BlackLivesMatter, which I analyzed in detail in the case study of Thomas and the *LA Times*, organizes the rhetorical purpose of these hashtags because they name the state as a causal force in the annihilation of Black people. Survival as an exigence of racialized talk moved these hashtags outside of the Twittersphere and into paperwork for 501(c)(3) organizations (e.g., the Black Lives Matter Global Network and #SayHerName).

However, the survival of Black culture depends on disputing the myth of a post-racial US. Although the popularity of #BlackLivesMatter associates Black Twitter with identifying anti-Black violence as an unfortunate consequence of being Black in the world, it is also defined by comedy (Sicha). #ThanksgivingwithBlackFamilies offers a self-deprecatingly humorous examination of Black life. These GIF-driven memes (the most popular ones show moving images, which is not conducive to a text-format essay), verify the idea of CPT (colored people time), the centrality of mac and cheese in the Thanksgiving Day menu in most Black households of various social class statuses, as well as how prone we are to mismatched Tupperware. (See Figures 5.4-5.6.)

Figure 5.4. Reference to Will Smith, known for his dramatic facial expressions and humorous personality, in the popular 1990s sitcom The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

Figure 5.5. Reference to Tiffany "New York" Pollard, known for having an attitude and endlessly waiting on her unrequited lover Flavor Flav on the popular reality show Flavor of Love (2006).

Figure 5.6. How lots of Black folks' refrigerators be looking during the holidays.

Other hashtags that tap into a user's identification with Black culture include visualizing representations of Black people in predominantly White popular media. #BlackHogwarts eloquently re-imagines J.K. Rowling's Potterverse in ways that highlight the role of racial critique in Black cultural life. Harry Potter has its own raced narrative of wizardry through the battle between pure-bloods—natural born witches—and those who lack this ancestry—the muggles (or mud-

bloods if you want to be the most offensive about it). Most folks in this world are mixed blood, including Harry Potter, but pure-blood remains a sign of the elite in the HP world. An analogue to Nazis or the KKK, a not-so-secretive, but underground, organization of pure-blood supremacists called the Death Eaters inevitably chart HP's final battle to defeat Lord Voldemort. Of course, seeing HP readers weigh in on what a #BlackHogwarts would be like constitutes the kind of rhetorical action that defines #BlackTwitter as a site of Black cultural memory that is linked to but not segregated from the mainstream. (See Figures 5.7-5.9.)

Figure 5.7. Another Reference to Will Smith (See figure 5.4), known for his confidence and humor in the popular 1990s sitcom The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

Figure 5.8. Images of globally impactful, and untimely (and unfortunately) deceased rappers Tupac Shakur (left) and Christopher George Latore Wallace, also known as Notorious B.I.G, Biggie, or Biggie Smalls. Screenshot.

Figure 5.9. Another reference to Tiffany "New York" Pollard (see figure 5.5). In this image, she's gratefully accepting a clock that will allow her to fight for love with Flavor Flav another day on the popular reality show Flavor of Love (2006). Screenshot.

Collectively, these iconic Black Twitter-associated hashtags function as a comprehensive archive of both Black cultural life, as well as the functions of digital blackness. In these contexts, and others like #IamJada and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, certain hashtags are testimony. In *Traces of a Stream*, Jacqueline Jones Royster points out that "Testimony, as it credits proximate experience, sets in motion the opportunity and obligation to actually give testimony, or as typically phrased, to bear witness" (67). The scaled documentation of Black people's lived experience with oppression is an affordance offered by Twitter that is part of a long tradition of Black media participation. In addition to slave narratives, Black people across the diaspora have been publishing about aspects of our experience since at least the founding of *Freedom's Journal* in 1827.

The explicitly political hashtag #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen enters a 19th century conversation about how White suffragists deliberately excluded Black Women from their movement. This hashtag testifies that Black Women continue to experience multiple oppressions, but our voices are frequently ignored and erased through language that defines racism and sexism as oppositional, either/or phenomena. Humor, fortunately, offers healing that helps us keep going. #ThanksgivingwithBlackFamilies is also testimony, and the

deluge of user responses confirming certain kinds of Black cultural norms during the holidays offers a rich anthropological archive that also hosts a memory of influential pop cultural references almost exclusively of Black celebrities/shows.

As I pointed out earlier, memes are a powerful method of communication that can convey multiple meanings in a seemingly simple way. #ThanksgivingwithBlackFamilies pays homage to our shared traditions in ways that affirm our analog lived cultural experience. The memes show that Blackness has been remediating with popular culture media in ways that remix our family traditions with our favorite fictional "fam." Shows like *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* helped raise generations X and Y, and *Flavor of Love* was the genesis for many of the "ratchet" competition reality shows of today. Memes conjure the processes of reminiscing and passing this historical knowledge to young people in the community. Black identity reflects a complex construction of human and media discourses that are delivered through the meme's ability to provide multiple cross-generational references through a single image.

Through humor, Black Twitter enables us to observe the absurdity of being Black and flowing through online and offline worlds. It produces signs and symbols of blackness, which signify a cultural identity through linguistic performances. After all, Twitter users must construct an "authentic" representation of "being Black" beyond the use of a profile photograph or avatar of a person with melanated skin (Marwick and Boyd). However, as the moderators of r/BlackPeopleTwitter have discovered, verifying "real users" requires a tremendous amount of labor. Similar to offline, race must be made visible online through various acts of language. Demonstrating blackness relies on both Black English (BE), or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and a myriad of speech acts that constitute BE. This insider knowledge empowers r/BlackPeopleTwitter and online Black feminists to detect fake accounts and posts that spread disinformation campaigns.

Public performances that illustrate the depth of eloquence of BE, such as #YourSlipisShowing, are worth examining, given the stigma associated with talkin' Black. As Keith Gilyard argues in his book *True to the Language Game*, "The very existence of African American Vernacular inscribes a significant rhetorical situation, and the prevailing functional character of African American artistic expression renders problematic any move to divorce its production and any criticism thereof from the realm of rhetorical inquiry" (209). Gilyard's critique aptly describes what is powerful about Black Twitter: we need to pay attention to how its users be talkin' and especially how they talk back. Rhetorical studies about Black Twitter and online racial identity must account for how BE contributes to its persuasive uses.

Ultimately, Black Twitter vividly rejects the colorblind society. Through naming and archiving (hashtagging), intertexting, and retweeting, some Twitter users expose how powerful racist ideologies continue to marginalize "race stuff." Black Twitter hosts a plethora of dynamic communication acts that focus on whiteness and specifically, white supremacy as "the problem." For example, when users claim the merits of Black culture, critique its appropriation, as well as inspire other members with happenings and objects that represent "insider" knowledge of cultural significance. Unfortunately, public Black cultural expression is not without its problems.

Analog blackness had different rules of secrecy. Being Black, especially talkin' Black and clapping back, has traditionally taken place away from the gaze of White folks. Clay and Evans further elaborate on this point, as follows: "In a society that remains physically and racially segregated, and where black communities remain hyper-surveilled, the technological advances of the internet have allowed global access to aspects of black culture without requiring that non-blacks have even superficial interactions with black people" (216). This observation is worth ongoing analysis because it raises questions about how digital environments scale the possible manifestations of Black cultural expression. In fact, as I discussed earlier in the case studies about r/BlackPeopleTwitter, 4Chan trolls, and the IRA's use of COINTELPRO infiltration tactics, some users engaging Black Twitter may not be Black at all. Or human, as in the case of bots.

Nevertheless, I contend that "#BlackTwitter is one of the most promising spaces for understanding the combinations and intersections at work in African-American digital rhetoric" (Gilyard and Banks 85). Similar to Gilyard and Banks, I have sought to demonstrate the persuasive potential of Black Twitter. They explain that "It is a space that is at once amorphous yet clearly discernible. It is public, counterpublic, and underground. It crosses the entire continuum between public address and deliberation for broad communal goals and the everyday and vernacular kinds of communication" (85). Gilyard and Banks' comprehensive taxonomy syncs many different studies that fail to acknowledge Black Twitter's rhetorical agency.

Whether we categorize Black Twitter as a site of Black rhetorical practice, the news, a counter-culture community, or as a sociopolitical movement, it warrants some degree of autoethnographic examination. Arguably, some personal and/or historical knowledge about Black cultural expression and folklore would be useful. In fact, many researchers struggle with articulating the dynamic history of Black cultural life in language. For example, Farhad Manjoo seems to struggle to understand the various kinds of cultural rituals that are being enacted by Black Twitter. With the assistance of Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin*,

he may have been able to document the dozens as part of a host of speech acts—
bragging, jiving, talking shit, one-upping, insulting, and *affirming.*

Furthermore, researching race and Twitter requires a certain technical famili-
arity with the platform. I need to know what a hashtag is, how users interact,
the role of retweeting, etc. I need to have heard about it through the grapevine
to know how to search for a particular tweet. This kind of awareness stems from
"insider knowledge," and there are a number of ways to use Black literacy to
decipher the significance of #BlackTwitter happenings. I know about trending
hashtags and their subsequent popularity because I am a (Black) Twitter user
myself who has encountered the most widely retweeted material. Moreover, I
have to rely on some journalists to cover trending topics emerging as #Black-
Twitter. Both of these approaches could be historically problematic in academic
space. Certainly, researchers are trained to be suspicious of bias, which has pre-
sented challenges to autoethnographic research. Furthermore, researchers aren't
reporters, yet both researchers and journalists produce work that informs. To
situate Black Twitter or #BlackTwitter within the interdependent categorical
boundaries of a Black rhetorical object, digital media, and an archive offers re-
searchers a wide range of ways to make meaning about this phenomenon.

Some reporters, such as Donovan Ramsey,[29] Stereo Williams,[30] and Jenna
Wortham,[31] recognize that Black Twitter is a plurality of its own sub-commu-
nities. This mass-distributed nature of the entity contributes to the challenge of
re-finding hashtags and threads; neither Black Twitter's history nor the total sum
of its participants (and their identities) can be easily known. Moreover, scholars
like Anjali Vats pay attention to Black Twitter as a particularized distributed ex-
pression of blackness within a novel social conflict about how blackness is, can,
and ought to be performed online:

> Black Twitter does not reference a monolithic black voice;
> rather, it refers to **racialized content and practices**, often
> marked by "ambiguous racialized humour," which works to
> resist dominant narratives of race and disrupt Twitter's **usual
> whiteness**. It is also emblematic of a relatively new mode of
> activism through which politics and identity are negotiated
> via hashtag. (Vats, emphasis added)

As Vats' definition shows, the hashtag serves as a call and response mecha-

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29   See http://bit.ly/3vUOEBN.

30   See http://bit.ly/314c0Xi.

31   See https://bit.ly/37knNUL.

nism. Regardless of quantity, hashtags testify. Hashtags originate from narratives about Black survival via Twitter. Users wield the hashtag to assert a collective witnessing. The hashtag, both a declaration may also serve as a revelation. As revelation, if #BlackLivesMatter was true, we would not to be forced into a daily routine of bearing witness to seeing unarmed Black people being killed by the state and those claiming to be operating on its behalf (e.g., George Zimmerman). Reflecting on the absurdity of the constant need to confront threats to Black life, Cullors, Tometi, and Garza stated an assumption that has come to signify a conclusion that would only need to be said in a social scene that disproportionately devalues life: Black lives *matter*. They testified that what we were seeing was jacked up and unnecessary. Millions agreed.

The scaled recirculation of #BlackLivesMatter generated and amplified countless threads about violence against unarmed Black persons. In addition, the unanticipated virality of the hashtag became associated with activism and Black Twitter. Without network contagion, a hashtag could simply be part of some users' quasi-public conversation. However, when the hashtag scales enough to sustain its own life, users can't control who or what will be erased. Researchers bear the responsibility of attributing knowledge to its creators, but who (or what, if we give agency to bots and platforms) gets credit for appropriating Black Twitter or who should be trusted to understand it?

The categorical issues with Black Twitter coincide with the problem of authorship and attribution. When intellectual herstories are generated via Twitter, giving Black Twitter the agency of persons erases individual contributions to the space and absorbs the weight of their distinctive voice under the general banner of "activism," which makes the (uncopyrighted) expression part of a public domain that makes its reclamation fair game for any group or individual. How much money are Cullors, Tometi, and Garza making from that hashtag they generated? Hudson? I'm certain it wasn't as much as the White Australian Ian Mackay, or any of the countless sales of shirts, bags, pins, and posters. Will Hudson's or Crockett's organizing work ever be considered in their future hiring, promotion, or other types of financially valuable recognition?

In fact, the re-circulation of hashtags associated with Black Twitter does not necessarily benefit their authors. Stereo Williams insightfully critiques mainstream media outlets for thieving Black Twitter's content and not providing attribution to those sources that they re-publish on their own media. For example, April Reign (@reignofapril) composed #OscarsSoWhite, but CNN failed to credit her or hire her despite their shameless appropriation of her hashtag to cover the problem of diversity and Hollywood. Williams passionately argues that this kind of cultural theft leads to erasure:

> What has happened with Black Twitter is another example of how white marginalization leads to ingenuity in black people; so many have been able to fortify black professionals via networking and symposiums like Blogging While Brown, or organized events like the Black Brunch. That has been facilitated through relationships cultivated via the community of Black Twitter. And that in and of itself is a powerful resource—but it doesn't change the fact that the platforms that have the widest reach are still virtually ignoring a wealth of black talent and creativity while pilfering from that very same well.

Williams' quote applies to various contexts in which journalism shamelessly appropriates from the Black counter-public (Graham and Smith; Hill).

CONCLUSION: RACE AND POSITIONALITY

As a cultural phenomenon, Black Twitter simulates the distinctive behavior of Black intelligence by pushing the racialized linguistic territories that diminish the visibility of creative Black cultural expression. Black Twitter is what happens when knowledge-making is both distributed and visible. Thus, Black Twitter refers to a declaration of Black intelligence which is being archived and tagged through algorithms processing and assembling codes for blackness. On the other hand, as with offline blackness, Black Twitter derives its meaning from those who do not want to be associated with the media such as those who think it's silly or "ignorant," and/or people who undermine its significance by not acknowledging it at all. Black Twitter, then, generates a great deal of encomia.

As a storytelling place, Black Twitter's production will display the collective cultural intelligence of blackness. It shows how blackness moves through the space as a familiar image and unfamiliar information, especially as it is objectified as an topic of discussion. It is a memory of the analog world that also constructed racial identities through its emerging technologies, and Black engagement with cultural objects indicates "cool" stuff from the stuff that ain't. "Cool performance," or the value of wit, drives rapid sharing within smaller networks. As they delight in its exchange, the act of identifying with its "read" on any kind of cultural exchange, whether intra or inter-racial, invites encomia. This ritual of praising Black Twitter occurs during moments in which it captures the "ether" and represents some meaningful take on something we all should be looking at. And "we" usually ain't the majority of White people, but the "cool" ones who know "what's really going on" rely on information from Black Twitter. Network analysis enables us to measure Twitter traffic, which may offer a clue about the reach. Regardless, as an archival tag, #BlackTwitter categorically exists as a re-

trievable subject that has been identified by somebody taking up space. Thus, any construction of Black Twitter must be invented by some user and recognized by another through that tag.

One of the most interesting aspects of discovering #BlackTwitter is that those who identify with this phenomenon have created a large archive of its intellectual history. In other words, you may find "traces" of Black Twitter by examining how it has been tagged and archived as part of a database that may be retrieved by an algorithm capable of "reading" all things explicitly referring to "Black Twitter." The users who recognize its power even create meta-tags like #GreatestMomentsinBlackTwitterHistory. Its recognition, ultimately, is all that matters, and we are uniquely positioned to study Black Twitter as a *discourse*, not a stable cultural group. The communication opened up by the performance is a causal gateway to one of the most important rhetorical canons—invention.

In sum, Black Twitter has an effect on language. To a large extent, this impact is recognized as a transhuman speaker. It is not uncommon to hear news reporters using expressions like "The internet says" and "Black Twitter thinks." To bestow networked media with the agency of "symbol-using animals" raises critical questions about the technological politics of race vis-a-vis social media (Burke). If researchers are not insiders/contributors to this vast, distributed assemblage of linguistic resistance, they will be unlikely to participate in effective research about it. Thus, Black Twitter is simultaneously personal and detached, fundamentally human and transhuman, elusively retrievable.

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