Introduction

On the night of November 24, 2014, St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCulloch announced the grand jury’s decision not to indict Police Officer Darren Wilson for the shooting death of unarmed Black teenager Mike Brown. I was in a car on I-64 driving through West Virginia, listening to a live stream of McCulloch’s press conference provided by the independent media company This Week in Blackness (TWiB!) via their custom mobile app. After the press conference ended, the hosts of TWiB!’s flagship podcast TWiB! Prime—TWiB! founder and CEO Elon James White, TWiB! Senior Legal Analyst Imani Gandy, and TWiB! sound engineer Aaron Rand Freeman—discussed the verdict and took listener phone calls. While unrest gripped Ferguson, Missouri that night, I watched events unfold on Twitter, as information from journalists, activists, and local Ferguson residents circulated through my social media networks.

I had relied on the same digital networks for information the previous August, when protests broke out in Ferguson in the immediate wake of Brown’s death. On August 9, Brown’s name, in hashtag form, had appeared on my Twitter timeline within hours of his death. Before long, many Twitter users whom I follow had begun retweeting information from Ferguson locals who were on scene. Retweets of Hip-hop artist and Ferguson resident Tef Poe brought me the image of Brown’s step-father, Louis Head, holding a makeshift cardboard sign reading, “Ferguson Police just executed my son!” Other tweets contained links to Alderman Antonio French’s Vine account, where he was recording and sharing six-second videos of the protests and the police response. In the days that followed, as local leaders and citizen journalists emerged on the streets of Ferguson, users in my Twitter network crowdsourced and compiled lists of reliable sources of information. Users also created the hashtag #IGotTheTalk to organize discussions of the conversations parents must have with Black children about how to safely interact with
police officers. Meanwhile writer, activist, and mental health social worker Feminista Jones used her well-established social media presence and the hashtag #NMOS14 to organize a National Moment of Silence on August 14 in over one hundred locations across the United States to honor Brown and other victims of police violence.

As the protests unfolded in Ferguson, TWiB! and many other Black podcasters provided information and commentary. On August 10, the day after Brown’s death, *The Black Guy Who Tips* (*TBGWT*) podcast made the hashtag #IGotTheTalk the title of that day’s show, which continued the conversations taking place on social media. Based in the St. Louis area, the podcast *Straight Outta LoCash* recorded an episode on August 14 titled “We ARE ALL #MikeBrown, We ARE ALL #Ferguson,” contextualizing Brown’s death and the subsequent protests within the local political climate and the area’s history of racial tensions. These and other podcasts such as *Insanity Check* and *Where’s My 40 Acres? (WM40A?)* discussed the emotional and psychological impact of Ferguson. Such talk-radio-style podcasts, with their multiple channels for audience participation, including live chatrooms and active social media engagement, allowed listeners and hosts to come together and analyze and interpret the events as they transpired.

TWiB!, at the behest of their audience, made trips to Ferguson on August 13–16 and 18–23 to report live. Once in Ferguson, TWiB! used its existing broadcast-style podcast network and robust social media networks to give voice to local accounts of the events, offering a narrative that stood in opposition to that created by much of the cable news media. When, in the early morning hours of August 19, White and several others were tear-gassed by Ferguson police in a residential area, I listened helplessly to TWiB!’s live stream as they ran and hid. The following day, White released a recording of the incident through his social media networks. Eventually, both the clip and White made their way to the *Melissa Harris-Perry Show* on MSNBC, where he broke down as he relived the trauma of the experience.

The way information circulated through these digital media networks during the events in Ferguson encapsulates many of the issues at the heart of this book. It exemplifies how Black Americans have been able to create and use multimedia, transplatform digital networks to articulate their experiences, cultivate community and solidarity, mobilize political
resistance, and both bypass and intervene in legacy news media coverage. Though Ferguson and the subsequent protests made such Black digital networks more broadly visible, these networks did not coalesce in that moment. They were built and maintained over the course of years through much less spectacular, though no less important, everyday use, including mundane social exchanges, humor, and fandom. Moments like Ferguson provide important and compelling examples of how such networks can be leveraged at times of turmoil and political crisis. But this is only one way these networks serve as a resource for participants, who make use of the flexibility offered by a multiplatform network to address issues throughout their day-to-day lives.

This book explores these everyday practices and their relationship to larger social and cultural issues through an in-depth analysis of a multi-media, transplatform network of Black American digital and social media users and content creators between 2010 and mid-2016. In these crucial years, leading up to and including the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives, Black Americans used digital networks not only to cope with and challenge day-to-day experiences of racism, but also as an incubator for the discourses that the movement propelled onto the national stage.

The network at the heart of this project has three anchoring elements—the independent media company This Week in Blackness, an informal network of independent Black podcasters, and the network known as “Black Twitter”; these form the core of the network analyzed here but are not coterminous with it. Using an interdisciplinary approach that draws from critical digital studies, media studies, cultural studies, African American studies, and critical race theory, I examine this digital assemblage and interrogate how Black Americans use it to create a space of distributed sociality and discourse production. In this networked space, participants blend elements of mass communication and sociality to reject dominant racial discourses, reassert and redefine their racial identities, forge community, organize politically, and create alternative media representations and news sources.

Digital networks are most often visualized as linear connections between a series of nodes. While this approach is an effective way of mapping the structure of a network, it fails to represent the dynamic and complicated social and cultural practices that both take place in and
shape digital networks. My wish to emphasize the latter is reflected in the selection of Shinique Smith’s “Out of Body” as the cover art. Her work conveys the vibrance and complexity of the network I write about in this book. “Out of Body” is alive and energetic, complex and multilayered. The lines, materials, and colors are interconnected, forming a cohesive whole, Yet, they are also varied and heterogeneous—a mix of colors, materials, and textures. It captures the kind of fluid beauty—chaotic yet intentional—that I have observed in the contingent and creative practices of the Black digital network that is the focus of this project. The bright colors, sweeping calligraphy and graffiti inspired lines, and multimedia materials represent the energy and creativity of the network described here in a way that standard network maps erase. It is the visualization of this network that I hope to instill in readers as they come to know it through the pages of this book.

I make three contributions to the field of critical digital studies. First, I emphasize the multimedia and transplatform character of this network, exploring how users employ platforms and technologies simultaneously and in tandem. I examine how users participate in debates, discussions, and sociality within the network by moving across platforms and employing combinations of text-based, audio, and visual media. Much critical digital studies research focuses on one particular technology or platform. Research on Black American digital media use in particular tends to be bound by platform, with great attention devoted to Black Twitter. Despite the inarguable value of such scholarship, it obscures an important element of digital practice—namely, the simultaneous and integrated use of multiple media and platforms.

Media studies scholars focusing on digital cultural production have long recognized the need for such analyses, given that convergence culture is characterized by the unexpected ways media move across platforms and devices. Much research has been produced about transmedia storytelling, fandom, and branding. Scholars have noted the way content creators, both independent and within the media industry, rely on a range of platforms to create their star images, gain audience support for independent projects, and do the now-essential work of connecting with audiences to generate sales. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig have examined the rise of what they call “social media entertainment” (SME), which they define as “an emerging proto-industry fueled by the
professionalization of amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats, including vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-yourself (DIY), to develop potentially sustainable businesses based on significant followings that can extend across multiple platforms.” SME creators produce a range of content across platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, choosing how to use each based on the affordances it provides. However, such scholarship examines these practices predominantly through the lens of the production, consumption, and circulation of mass media–style texts, leaving how these processes are imbricated with larger patterns of transplatform sociality relatively unexplored.

André Jansson and Karin Fast have pointed “to how social practices (in addition to texts per se) are molded by and negotiated through different platforms and devices.” Jillian Baez’s work on DREAMers’ use of digital media to construct alternative understandings of citizenship examines how they create visual, aural, and textual discourses, which are then spread through social media channels. This, combined with DREAMers’ offline direct action, allows them to use multiple digital tools in tandem to express themselves and connect with one another. Here, I undertake an analysis of how different media and platforms are used strategically in ways that best suit the exigencies facing the network of Black Americans described earlier in this chapter.

The second contribution of this study is how it foregrounds the value of cultural specificity in understanding emerging media. Networks are not just technologically but also culturally “programmed”—imbued with certain goals, values, and normative practices generated from “ideas, visions, projects, and frames” shared by members of the network. Yet, the role these cultural values play in shaping users’ practices is often overlooked. As Miriam Sweeney points outs, “Hardware, software, content, representations, user practices, and interpretation are all the outcome of complex social processes shaped by cultural values and ideology.” She argues that each interface is “a cultural point of contact shaped by ideologies that are manifest in the design, use, and meaning of the technology.” Often scholarly attention to technological affordances focuses on how the materiality of technology—such as interface or design choices—shapes user behavior, an approach that has been criticized by some as verging on technological determinism. I embrace Peter Nagy
and Gina Neff’s concept of imagined affordances, which highlights how affordances arise “between users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers.” The term thus captures the contingent and shifting nature of affordances as well as the influence users have in the emergence of affordances. This conceptualization of affordances foregrounds the importance of cultural specificity in digital media research. Without the requisite cultural competencies, researchers are ill prepared to understand users’ practices or their role in shaping the affordances of a given technology. At a moment when academics, journalists, and tech developers are intrigued with the possibilities of “big data,” the kinds of “deep data” or “thick data” offered by critical/cultural studies analysis and ethnography are essential.

Third, and most important, I make the aforementioned interventions while centering Black users. With a handful of important exceptions, it has only been in the last four or five years that scholars have devoted sustained attention to Black users, who had previously been mostly erased from discussions of technology due to a general presumption of non-participation. When Black users have been the focus of analysis, such work is often taken up in the academic world for its insights into race or Black culture, ignoring the insights about technology that are offered through consideration of Black users’ practices. The network at the center of this study is comprised predominantly by Black people and shaped by their perspectives and experiences and, therefore, certainly has much to teach about the contemporary issues surrounding race. However, it is of interest not solely for this reason. If affordances are imagined through the interaction between users’ understanding and practices, designers’ intentions, and the materiality and functionality of technology, then a consideration of marginalized users’ practices can yield diverse and innovative ways of imagining affordances and, thereby, understanding the possibilities of technology. Though the intersection of racial politics and technology is central to my research, I also use the analysis of Black networks to demonstrate that marginalized users have much to teach us about technology, and not simply about marginalization.

The following sections begin with an explication of the contemporary US racial landscape that outlines the dominant discourses within which the network at the center of this project operates. I then explore how the
same neoliberal discourses that have shaped racial ideologies have also influenced the development of digital and social media technologies, thereby necessitating negotiation by the Black users who traverse this technological terrain. Next I highlight how longstanding Black epistemologies, communicative practices, and aesthetics map easily onto the digital landscape, despite having different underlying logics and values. I offer a brief description of the network that is the focus of this book and my rationale for carving out this specific digital assemblage for analysis. After a brief discussion of methodological and representational issues, I conclude with an overview of the remainder of the book.

Technology and Neoliberal Racial Regimes

Contemporary US racial formations are characterized by the contradiction between discourses of progress and the persistence of structural racial inequalities. While a Black man was elected to the highest office in the land (twice), simultaneously there remain race-based disparities in educational attainment, health outcomes, unemployment, incarceration, and even infant mortality. This incongruence is obscured, however, by neoliberal racial discourses such as colorblindness that proffer nonracial explanations for racial outcomes. Further, the current technological landscape is one in which convergence and participatory media are more prevalent than ever and social media connect and circulate information at unprecedented speeds. This presents powerful opportunities for people of color and other marginalized voices, while simultaneously allowing existing mechanisms for erasing, silencing, and denying those voices to be adapted and extended into the same technological terrain. The emancipatory possibilities of digital and social media are constrained by the ways these technologies were shaped by the same neoliberal values that produce and maintain colorblindness as the dominant racial discourse.

With the rise of neoliberalism in the latter half of the twentieth century, race has been recast as a solely personal, rather than social, identity. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free
markets, and free trade.” Neoliberalism has rearticulated the liberal humanist discourses of individualism and egalitarianism, intensifying the longstanding prioritization of individual freedom and autonomy in US culture and harnessing these discourses to free market logics. This shift has led to the development of the discourse of colorblindness, which valorizes the idea of “not seeing race” and conflates the obscuration of difference with the achievement of racial equality. Colorblindness, while doing little to remove structural causes of inequality, allows racial disparities to be explained through nonracial mechanisms that focus on individual shortcomings, rather than systemic inequalities. Refracted through the lens of neoliberalism, racial identity has been divorced from politics, histories of oppression, and economic opportunities and transformed into an individual characteristic. Race has effectively become “privatized,” shifted from the public to the private realm of social life. Neoliberal racial discourses inhibit political uses of race while encouraging “citizens to ‘do’ race through market consumption and interpersonal relationships.” Rather than being a legitimate basis for political action or collective identity, racial difference becomes “emptied out and resignified as cultural commodities indicating mere ‘lifestyles,’” as racial and ethnic identities become recast as simply niche markets or taste cultures.

While it is still possible to acknowledge race in a superficial way, using race to assert collective identity or to articulate group demands “violates the cherished notion that as a nation we recognize the rights of individuals rather than group rights.” Racism and discrimination have become “problems to be confronted only at an individual level.” Thus, policies meant to ameliorate racial inequalities can now be opposed because they are “group based” rather than “case by case.” Race is understood as an insignificant social force and reframed as a “category at odds with an individualistic embrace of formal legal rights.”

Starting in the 1980s, neoliberalism attacked all forms of social solidarity. Framing collectivity as a problem, it instead asserted the importance of “individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values.” Neoliberalism imbricated individualism with market logics, redefining individual freedom as synonymous with the freedom to compete in the market. Consequently, “Any political movement that holds individual freedom to be sacrosanct [has become] vulnerable to
incorporation into the neoliberal fold.” Thus, neoliberal individualism has been central to reimagining race in the post–Civil Rights era. Civil Rights Movement language and discourses—such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonition that people should be judged “not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”—have been rearticulated by conservative forces as mantras of neoliberal individualism. Imbricated with a prioritization of individual freedom and autonomy, the egalitarianism advocated by King has been transformed into a means of sustaining white privilege and power in seemingly race-neutral ways.

The obscuration of structural racism and the individualization of race, racism, and racial identity have resulted in a variety of discourses that allow Americans to understand racial issues as the result of nonracial mechanisms. Colorblindness conceals the role of race in structuring our social world and explains events and patterns using any cause possible other than race. Such nonracial explanations usually have their roots in core beliefs of US national identity, such as meritocracy and rugged individualism. Notions that Americans can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and earn success through hard work recast racial inequalities as the result of individual failures. These supposed individual shortcomings on the part of people of color are often seen as deficiencies that they themselves can rectify simply by working hard, being respectful, and always having their “superior humanity on display for whites to observe.”

But even as the space to acknowledge and challenge racism has been eroded, racial inequalities have not. Americans of color born and raised after the sociopolitical movements of the mid-twentieth century are told that their quality of life and access to opportunity are better than that of previous generations. White Americans increasingly deny the very existence of racism, even going so far as to claim that they are now a victimized population. Yet, only 67 percent of “Hispanic” Americans over the age of twenty-five have high school degrees, compared with 93 percent of white Americans, 89 percent of Asian Americans, and 88 percent of Black Americans. Less than 50 percent of Native American students graduate from high school. The median adjusted income for Black and “Hispanic” households is $28,000 below white households and $34,000 below Asian American households. Both Black and “Hispanic” Americans are twice as likely as whites to be poor, and one in four Native
American and Alaska Natives live in poverty. The Black unemployment rate is double and the “Hispanic” unemployment rate one and half times that of whites. Of Natives living on tribal lands, the unemployment rate is near 50 percent. Both Black and “Hispanic” populations are significantly overrepresented in the US prison population. Though data shows Asian Americans meet or outperform whites when it comes to education, employment, and income, when this demographic is broken out by subgroups, it is clear that this prosperity is not evenly distributed. Household incomes of Burmese ($36,000), Nepalese ($43,500), Hmong ($48,000), and Bangladeshi ($49,800) are near or below those of Black and Hispanic Americans. Unemployment for Asian Americans in the aggregate is 3.6 percent—lower than white (4.5 percent), “Hispanic” (7.2 percent), and Black (10.3 percent). However, unemployment for Hmong and the Burmese is 28.3 percent and 35 percent, respectively. Simultaneously, highly visible high-achieving people of color such as Barack Obama, are held up as examples of the success possible for those who work hard and make “good” personal choices.

The discursive constraints created by neoliberal racial paradigms around issues of race were clearly illustrated by many of the responses to the tragic shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. On Wednesday, June 17, Dylann Roof attended a Bible study in the historic Black church, at the end of which he murdered nine people. According to a survivor, Roof explicitly stated that he was there to “shoot Black people,” and during the executions, he said, “I have to do it. You rape our women, and you’re taking over our country. And you have to go.” Within twenty-four hours, images emerged of Roof posing with a gun and the Confederate battle flag and of him wearing a jacket bearing the former flags of South Africa and Rhodesia, both symbols of white colonialist domination. As the country dealt with the tragedy, the national discourse grappled with how to understand this overtly racist act through the interpretive lens of colorblindness.

The following day, several elected officials and political commentators proffered a colorblind explanation of the massacre, seemingly seizing on any nonracial explanation for Roof’s actions. Several conservative politicians, such as South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, suggested anti-Christian sentiment as the reason for the murders. Similarly, the morning show Fox and Friends and television personality Elizabeth Has-
selbeck both referred to the shootings as an “attack on faith.” As time passed, Roof’s racist motivation became undeniable and colorblindness became an unworkable interpretive framework, the analysis shifted to reassert race and racism as individual, not collective, traits. Roof was cast as an individual racist who was unrepresentative of the larger culture. Fox News personality Bill O’Reilly minimized the impact of the ideologies Roof professed, calling Roof a “sick terrorist” and an “idiot,” who “represents 0.001% [sic] of the population.” His guest, Fox News contributor Juan Williams, pointed to discussions about white supremacy as “cheap rhetoric,” which was “taking advantage of a very emotional and upsetting moment in America.” These sentiments permeated Fox News’s coverage and were not limited to the conservative-leaning news channel.

While the aftermath of the Charleston massacre is a heightened example, it illustrates the sociocultural context Americans of color must struggle with daily. From police brutality and racial profiling to day-to-day microaggressions, people of color are faced with navigating a society so heavily invested in obscuring racism that the clearly stated racial motives of a self-proclaimed white supremacist are viewed with skepticism. Within this sociocultural context, merely making structural racism visible is a significant challenge, as racial discourses keep power structures intact by limiting possibilities for critique.44

Neoliberalism and Technological Ambivalence

Thus, fighting racial oppression in the contemporary neoliberal context requires strategies for making race and racism visible, not merely as an individual trait, but in ways that refuse the erasure of the collective racial categories that profoundly shape our social lives. Media can be a potent terrain for such endeavors. Lori Kido Lopez demonstrates how Asian American media activists are engaging with media industries and creating independent media as a means of claiming both Asian American collective identity and cultural citizenship. She argues:

Asian American media activists view cultural citizenship as a collective endeavor that cannot be accomplished at the level of the individual. This pushes back against assumptions that our neoliberal media landscape is inexorably moving citizenship toward the individual, and opens up space
for exploring the way that Asian Americans in particular are using media to create networks of cultural citizenship that seek to impact their broader community. . . . This perspective on the way that Asian Americans are responding to media representations also serves to challenge a ubiquitous postracial media discourse that insists upon race as merely an individual quality.  

Digital media are often praised as potential spaces for resistance, counter-discourse production, and the dissemination of alternative information. Much has been written about the possibilities of digital and social media for allowing marginalized users to bypass traditional media outlets and to create and circulate their own content. Convergence culture has led to the blurring of distinctions between media producers and consumers and given users more control over how they interact with media. Digital networks facilitate the spread of media content, and social media allow for a range of peripheral participation that includes users’ roles in sharing, and thereby curating, media content.

Despite the undeniable possibilities created by digital media technologies, their potential is tempered by the ways neoliberal discourses have impacted the development of technology. André Brock has pointed to the ways that the internet is “constrained by the values of individualism and articulations of ‘color-blind’ ideology.” This is in large part because neoliberalism and its attendant form of individualism were central in shaping the development and growth of digital media technologies and creating a digital and social media landscape that emphasizes the individual and reproduces colorblind discourses. Thus, despite digital media’s potential to provide a space for the experiences of people of color, such media are still shaped by the same logics that silence and erase those experiences. Consequently, using them to construct counter-discourses around race is not an uncomplicated endeavor.

The same neoliberal discourses that reshaped US racial paradigms have also been important in the development of digital technologies, helping shape the fundamental organizing logic of digital media. Neoliberalism was integral to technological development, yielding digital media architectures and modes of sociality that bear the marks of neoliberal discourses. Thus, these racial discourses map comfortably onto
digital networks because normative imagined affordances replicate larger social formations.

Technological development was shaped by neoliberal values. Wendy Chun argues that the personal computer has been central to the process of “individualization and personalization” and that the development of user-friendly interfaces has been important in “empowering and creating ‘productive individuals’” in line with neoliberal ideals. The internet became mainstream in the 1990s, concurrent with the solidification of neoliberalism as the dominant discourse in the United States. Neoliberal individualism was a key force in the development of the internet in this period, both technologically and discursively, and the “California Ideology” that emerged among Silicon Valley tech developers embraced the free-market entrepreneurialism and of neoliberalism. Neoliberal impulses to privatize led to the strengthening and expansion of intellectual property rights with a focus on online piracy and the creation of digital rights management technology. In the twenty-first century, neoliberal individualism has been an important element in shaping social media platforms. Alice Marwick’s ethnographic study of the California tech scene highlights how it embraces neoliberal individualism and adheres to neoliberal philosophies of deregulation and free-market economic policies. The affordances intended by the designers and therefore reflected in the materiality and functionality of the social media platforms developed in this milieu have been shaped by this value system and have thereby allowed for the infiltration of market logics into everyday digital social relations.

Digital media sociality has also developed to foreground the individual, allowing neoliberal individualism and related racial discourses to graft easily onto social media networks. Scholars such as Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman have argued that digital, social, and mobile media have facilitated and accelerated a shift away from clearly bounded groups or communities to loose and shifting networks of individuals, a phenomenon they’ve termed “networked individualism.” Instead of the group being the center of social life, the autonomous individual is at the center as she reaches across geographical and temporal distances to form complex networks with others around similar interests or beliefs. Marwick argues that “social media is intrinsically focused on individuals” and that the organizing logic of user-generated content “models ideal neolib-
eral selves” and “rewards those who adopt such subjectivities.” When it comes to the use of social media for politics and activism, Lance Bennett and Alexandra Sergerberg have noted a similar move away from collective logics—with their reliance on collective identities—to “connective” logics that are based on “personalized content sharing across media networks.” Thus, the prioritization of the individual is inscribed into the very structure of our digitally mediated interactions.

Within the paradigms of both networked individualism and contemporary racial discourses, race can be reduced to a personal characteristic around which an individual user can shape her network. Black users might create predominantly Black networks or networks that explicitly center on race, but without these being necessarily indicative of the existence of any community or collective identity. Racial identity instead functions more akin to a taste culture than a sociocultural group, reconstituted in a way that is compatible with individualist market-driven logics.

Moreover, notions of virtual disembodiment that suffused late twentieth-century technocultural discourses aligned closely with discourses of colorblindness. In the 1990s, technological utopians argued that digital interactions could lead to a new era of increased democracy and the obsolescence of power hierarchies based on identity categories as users “cross-dressed” and played with identity, leaving their bodies and thereby their embodied identities behind. In 1996, responding to such rhetoric, Kali Tal provocatively asserted, “In cyberspace, it is finally possible to completely and utterly disappear people of color.” She argued that obscuring corporeal markers allows discussions of the internet to “elide questions of race” and reinforce whiteness as normative. Such erasure was demonstrated quite clearly by Lisa Nakamura’s ethnographic work on the text-based virtual world LambdaMOO. Nakamura argues that in the absence of corporeal signifiers of race, users were assumed to be white unless otherwise specified—an assumption that effectively reaffirmed whiteness as the invisible unmarked norm. Additionally, she noted that though participants were seemingly able to create any virtual embodiment they desired, this was largely an illusion. Participants of color who constructed their characters in racial terms were received with hostility for bringing the “divisive” issue of race into the digital space. Only performances of race that reified longstanding
racial stereotypes, reinforcing rather than challenging racial hierarchies, were accepted.62

Tal and Nakamura were writing of the early text-based internet. With its limited graphics capabilities, users were required to literally write their identities into existence via text. Today, the increased prevalence of images and videos online, while still making it possible to obscure identity markers, reinserts the body back into online interactions in ways that change the racial dynamics of digital spaces. However, though corporeal signifiers of race are more visible than on the text-based web and racialized bodies may have gained visibility via Instagram, Vine, YouTube, and other such platforms, the construction of race as a personal trait rather than social category allows colorblindness to continue to function without necessitating the disappearance of racialized bodies.

Users of color seeking to intervene in dominant racial discourses via these technologies must find ways to negotiate this terrain, a task that is often deeply ambivalent and rarely uncomplicated. For example, Lopez notes that while Asian American YouTube celebrities use the platform to create media that “renders Asian American identities legible and disseminates Asian American narratives and voices” that are rarely represented in legacy media, despite their contributions to the overall visibility that is at the center of claims for cultural citizenship, these creators are motivated more by the desire for individual personal success than for social change. Careful not to alienate any of their core audience with anything too controversial, they largely avoid explicitly addressing race or even Asian American identity.63 As such, these creators employ what Ralina Joseph has termed “strategic ambiguity” as a means of resisting discrimination within the codes of neoliberal colorblindness. This involves “foregrounding crossover appeal, courting multiple publics, speaking in coded language, and smoothing and soothing fears of difference as simply an incidental side note.” Thus, the “failure to name racism” is used to claim inclusion. While Joseph frames strategic ambiguity as a means of achieving individual success, she asserts it is not “simply the safe choice,” but “a subtle form of resistance that balances on an escape hatch of deniability” and that allows the oppressed to “gradually chip away at hegemony” while seeming to acquiesce to it.64 Lopez asserts that, despite their personal entrepreneurial approach and conservative approach to issues of race and identity, the Asian Ameri-
can YouTube celebrities she analyzes still contribute to “the larger project of Asian American media activism and a collective form of cultural citizenship” through their collaboration with and cultivation of Asian American audiences. These audiences not only makes Asian Americans intelligible in the larger media landscape, but also do so in a way that reifies Asian American identity, a collective and politicized identity that did not exist before the 1970s, prior to which Asian immigrants identified with their individual ethnic identities.  

Though less interrogated than visual media, sound technologies have also historically worked to reify colorblindness in the United States. While race is associated with the visual, Jennifer Stoever’s work on the sonic color line details the aural equivalent to the white gaze, the listening ear. She demonstrates that whiteness is in part an auditory construction, constituted through sonic markers and “sounded exclusions.” She details the role sound played in the racial regimes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as Americans were disciplined to “match” certain sounds, voices, and [sonic] environments to visual markers of race. Stoever asserts that radio was particularly important in the emergence of colorblindness, because during its Golden Age it was “uniquely suited to make the optics of race disappear through omission.” However, as with colorblindness writ large, this served only to obscure, rather than undo, racial discrimination. The racialization of sound “continued to make the abstraction of race palpable—both blackness and whiteness—even when it could no longer officially be ‘seen,’” and this in turn allowed “conservative, liberal, and progressive whites a method of continuing to perceive race and enact discrimination without seeming to do so.” The recognition of aural signifiers of race continues in digital terrains, as demonstrated by Kishonna Gray’s work on linguistic profiling on Xbox Live. Podcasts—as both sound media and products of the networked digital landscape—are doubly embedded in the logics of neoliberal colorblindness.

However, despite the imprint of neoliberalism on digital architecture and modes of sociality, digital networks are discursive formations as much as they are technological ones. Thus, though users of color exist within the technological structures that promote networked individualism as the primary social “operating system,” these users can program their digital and social media spaces with cultural logics and communi-
cative strategies that negotiate and, to varying degrees, resist neoliberal regimes of race and technology.

**Black Americans, Race, and Technology**

The network at the center of this project draws on traditions of Black expressive culture, cultural production, and sociality to reimagine the affordances of digital technologies in ways that negotiate and sometimes resist normative imagined affordances and the way they reinscribe neoliberal logics of race. Black American users are particularly adept at such reimaginings because much of Black epistemology, communicative practices, and aesthetics have characteristics that are well-suited to digital terrains, though with different underlying logics. Black culturally inflected imagined affordances have the potential to create a networked space that resists and undermines dominant neoliberal racial discourses—particularly individualism and colorblindness—despite how those discourses are endemic to the normative imagined affordances of technologies.

Technological adoption and innovation has long been part of Black cultural practice, and many Black epistemologies and expressive cultures closely mirror those of contemporary digital culture. This is perhaps because, as Marisa Parham argues, there “is something endemic or inherent to diasporic experience itself that reproduces some of the technical structure of what we otherwise call the digital”; in other words, “Black diasporic existence is a digitizing experience.”69 The people of the African Diaspora developed many of the philosophical orientations and expressive practices associated with digital culture at least a century before digital technologies existed. Because of the trauma of enslavement, Black Americans developed many of the theoretical concerns associated with postmodernism as early as the nineteenth century, producing intellectual frameworks that closely resemble those of European thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida.70 Thus, as Tal observes, Black critical theorists were grappling with “the problem of multiple identities, fragmented personae, and liminality,” anticipating the major theoretical questions of the digital age by over a century. By the twentieth century, Black thinkers had already long grappled with the problems raised by the emerging digital landscapes. She points to W.
E. B. DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness and the work of Black intellectuals such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Toni Morrison as offering fruitful paradigms for analyzing the digital.  

Further, Black communicative practices and expressive cultures are well suited to digital environments. Catherine Knight Steele notes how the historic importance of orality in Black American culture aligns with the secondary orality—that emerges from and is dependent upon literate culture and writing—that characterizes patterns of online communication. Electronic media signaled a shift back to orality in the dominant US culture, and that shift intensified with the internet. The “additive, redundant, and polychromic nature” of blogs and social media are hallmarks of the ongoing importance of orality online. Thus, Steele argues, “Given the continuing significance of orality among those of African descent, it is not surprising that African Americans readily participate in social networking and blogging.” Moreover, Black Americans who participate in such digital spaces already possess longstanding and sophisticated strategies for communication grounded in the logics of orality.

Moreover, for centuries, Black Americans have cultivated complex processes of cultural expression grounded in principles that have become central to digital media use. Participation, remediation, and bricolage, hallmarks of digital cultures, have historically been central to the expressive cultures of Black American communities. Black American musical traditions are an illustrative example. In Black American communities, music has always functioned as a participatory group activity with a fluid boundary between performer and audience, who were expected to engage and contribute. Repetition, revision, and recontextualization have always been integral to Black musical genres like jazz and Hip-hop. Thus, Black cultures have long been characterized by the participatory impulse attributed to contemporary convergence culture and the recombinant meaning-making processes central to digital vernaculars like memes. Parham, who describes turntablism as an example of these predigital practices, asserts that early Hip-hop pioneers found ways to make an analog technology behave as if it were digital.

It stands to reason that Black Americans would be innovators in digital environments that facilitate these communicative and expressive strategies. However, while Black American practices may be congruous with the materiality and functionality of the technologies they use...
and may even resemble normative practices, they are often grounded in epistemologies, assumptions, and intentions that differ from and even directly conflict with the understandings and intentions of designers. Thus, the imagined affordances produced in the network discussed here work to reaffirm Black subjectivities, validate Black experiences, and enable forms of Black sociality that resist the ways dominant racial paradigms are reproduced by emerging media technologies. Given that Black American cultures have, over the course of centuries, developed complex practices of participatory creativity, remediation, and remix, the culturally specific and historically grounded modes of interaction and meaning-making that Black users bring to their online practices are particularly well suited to digitally networked contexts. While digital cultures produced by hegemonic whiteness often deploy such practices in ways that reproduce networked individualism, connective logics, and a colorblind erasure of race, Black users in this network employ similar practices, but with different underlying logics of community, collectivity, and color-consciousness.

This book explores the strategies through which Black users of digital networks deploy norms and cultural practices that allow them to contest the rearticulation of race and racism as merely individual personal phenomena. They resist colorblindness and instead foreground and celebrate complex and heterogeneous Blackness. Drawing on longstanding traditions of Black media-making, expressive culture, and communicative practices, these users contest dominant racial discourses and claim the networked space to replicate and circulate Black epistemologies.

The Network

This book focuses on a digital assemblage comprised of three overlapping but distinct elements—a large informal network of Black podcasters, the independent media company This Week in Blackness (TWiB!), and the related subgroup of the predominantly Black network of Twitter users known as “Black Twitter.” These serve as core communicative sites for the network, but do not comprise its entirety. Users also employed platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Vine, YouTube, Google+, email, and instant messaging. Thus, I do not limit my analysis to the three core elements, but have used them to anchor and establish
the parameters of my research. Below, I briefly describe each of these three constitutive components of the network.

In recent years, Black podcasting has flourished. When I began this project in 2012, my searches yielded only about ten Black produced podcasts. Between 2012 and 2014, there grew to be more than I could keep track of. By the time *Serial*, the podcast that is credited with kicking off the current podcast boom, debuted in October 2014, Black podcasters were already well ahead of the trend. Because I seek to analyze a specific transplatform network, however, I limit my project to podcasts that are part of the specific network I analyze here. This narrows my focus to a collection of independent podcasts based in the United States, which have some sustained interaction with one another and with the other elements of the network examined in this project.

For this reason, I do not include podcasts that are not independent, that have no sustained relationship to the larger network, or that began in 2015 or later. By “independent,” I mean podcasts that are not produced by a media company or created by an established legacy media personality. Thus, I do not include *The Combat Jack Show*, which began in 2010 and was a pioneering podcast, or *The Read* because they are properties of The Loud Speaker Network. Similarly, I exclude *Two Dope Queens* and *Another Round* because they are produced by WNYC and Buzzfeed, respectively, and because they have no consistent connection to the other elements of the network examined here. Given my focus on US racial politics and US-produced podcasts, Canadian-based *Cho-nilla*, a popular and long-running podcast, also falls outside the scope of the study. The parameters of the study result in a predominantly male cohort of podcaster, though Black women do have a prominent voice. While there is a sizable number of LGBTQ people in the audience and the network more broadly, with a few exceptions, the podcast hosts skew strongly straight and cisgender. If I were I seeking to do a series of case studies of Black-run podcasts, I would have a more inclusive selection of shows. Because I seek to focus on interconnected networks, many such podcasts were excluded—a fact that is worth noting and that represents a limitation to this research.

Some of the first podcasts in the network I study—*Blacking It Up!* (now *TWiB! Prime*), *Insanity Check*, *The Black Guy Who Tips*, and *Where’s My 40 Acres?*—began between 2008 and 2010. All of the pod-
casts in the network produce talk-based programming, though they vary greatly in their production value and the regularity of their output. The podcasts range in size from *TWiB! Prime*, the flagship podcast of This Week in Blackness, which averaged between 1 and 1.5 million downloads a month by 2015, to smaller shows with audiences in the hundreds. This network of podcasters is held together by informal affiliations and reinforced by social media interactions. The podcasters frequently collaborate and share heavily overlapping fan bases. However, the network is neither monolithic nor univocal.

Three of the oldest podcasts in the network—*Insanity Check*, *The Black Guy Who Tips*, and *Where’s My 40 Acres?*—used the term “Chitlin’ Circuit” as early as 2010 to describe their then-small cohort of Black podcasters, and I use it to refer to the podcasts discussed in this book as well. The podcasters’ choice of this term reveals much about how they conceptualized their practices. During the era of segregation, the name “Chitlin’ Circuit” referred to venues that allowed Black musicians, comedians, and actors to perform, and it continues to be used by some comedy clubs and theaters that market themselves for Black audiences. While the term “Chitlin’ Circuit” had largely fallen out of use among these podcasters by 2015, I have chosen to retain it because of its historical connotations. It positions the podcasts and their audiences in a long history of racial exclusion and resistance and highlights the legacy of Black entertainers creating for Black audiences outside of the white gaze. Additionally, the word “circuit” emphasizes the paths along which materials travel, making the term appropriate for describing the digitally networked nature of these podcasters and their audiences.

The second anchoring point of my analysis is the independent media company This Week in Blackness. While TWiB!’s primary content is podcasts—thereby imbricating it with the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts described above—it produces a range of other media and also serves as a professional news organization, making it distinct from the other Black podcasters discussed in this book. White started TWiB! as a web video series in 2008, and by the end of 2015 TWiB! had grown into a multimedia company producing the original video series, seven different podcasts, a blog-style website, and an eight-episode run of *A Black Show* for Free Speech TV.
TWiB! also differs from the other podcasts in its connections to both large-scale corporate news media and independent progressive media outlets. White has made appearances on MSNBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and Current TV and written for the *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, the *Root*, and the *Grio*. Other TWiB! personnel, such as Gandy and L. Joy Williams, maintain professional connections to political and activist organizations. Thus, TWiB! forms an important point of articulation between the digital network at the center of this book and established legacy media, mainstream politics, and activist organizations.

The final focal point of my analysis is Twitter, specifically a subset of the network that has come to be known as “Black Twitter.” Black Twitter can be thought of as a meta-network, comprised of smaller subnetworks that emerge from interpersonal connections and shared interests. Black Twitter has evolved into a dense and active network that has been leveraged to mobilize users around various political and cultural issues. It has also become an important resource in circulating information and mobilizing political action in recent years. It was a key force in bringing Trayvon Martin’s death into the national news cycle, and, as Martin’s death and the subsequent acquittal of his killer became galvanizing moments, Black Twitter emerged as an important element of the movement commonly referred to as “Black Lives Matter.” In fact, the iconic hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of Martin’s killer.

The Black Twitter network is too vast to be fully addressed here. Thus, I limit my purview to subsections of the network that are in some way connected to the podcasts discussed above or to TWiB!. This includes the podcasters, their listeners, their guests, and those with who they interact in publicly available social media. Many of the podcasters, such as White and Gandy from *TWiB! Prime* and Rod Morrow from *TBGWT*, are also high-profile participants in the Black Twitter meta-network. They have significant visibility because of their high follower count and have often been responsible for creating hashtags that organize conversations within the larger Black Twitter network. Additionally, this visibility has allowed their Twitter accounts to serve as points of articulation between the network and those outside it, including media industries, politicians, and advocacy and activist groups.
Black podcasters and their listeners sit at the intersection of two groups that use social media, particularly Twitter, at higher rates than the general population. Podcast listeners spend more time online and engage with social media more than nonlisteners.\(^{82}\) Similarly, Black Americans have higher rates of social media use on many platforms. While 23 percent of all internet users and 21 percent of white internet users are on Twitter, 27 percent of Black internet users are on the platform.\(^{83}\) In the eighteen-to-twenty-nine year-old demographic most likely to listen to podcasts, 40 percent of Black users are on Twitter, compared to 28 percent of their white peers.\(^{84}\)

Additionally, Twitter functions as a central clearinghouse to circulate materials posted on other platforms. Users rely on Twitter to share and circulate links to blog posts and news coverage as well as posts on Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and Vine. It is standard practice for podcasters to tweet links to their latest episodes. Thus, in many ways Twitter serves as a hub connecting the three anchoring elements of the network to each other and to other social media platforms.

In many ways, this network is an iteration of the participatory media-making that characterizes the contemporary digital landscape—as people express their frustration with or resistance to mainstream corporate media through more independent and collaborative media creation.\(^{85}\) It has become common for communities and social networks to form through and around such media. YouTube, for example, has long been a site for participatory culture, with users “contributing content, referring to, building on and critiquing each other’s videos, as well as collaborating” and using the interactive commenting features to build community.\(^{86}\) Similarly, independent online content creators often use social media networks to connect with current and potential audiences and to generate support for their projects.\(^{87}\) While the network explored in this project does integrate content creation with interactive affordances and social media platforms, it did not coalesce around the content creators nor does it operate primarily in the service of audience creation and content circulation. In 2010, when my analysis begins, TWiB! and a handful of podcasts were the only content creators in the network. The majority of the podcasts began between 2012 and 2014, and many of these podcasters attribute their interactions in the network with inspiring them to become creators themselves.
The network combines much of the ethos of noncommercial community-based media with the practices, though not always the intentions, of entrepreneurial media creators. With its emphasis on creating a Black cultural space, the network falls within the tradition of what Clemencia Rodríguez has termed “citizens’ media,” which she defines as a collective enactment of citizenship that seeks to actively intervene and transform the established mediascape by contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations in ways that empower the community involved.88 The network at the center of this book combines this underlying ethos with the interactive transplatform practices of creators of SME and other aspirational uses of digital media. Some participants in the network, particularly TWiB! and some of the more visible Twitter micro-celebrities, fall more on the entrepreneurial end of this spectrum. But across the entirety of the network, the goal diverges from neoliberal practices that are common among SME and other digital content creators.

While Cunningham and Craig’s description of SME captures the transplatform nature of the network discussed here and points to the same kinds of conflation of content production and sociality, they focus mainly on SME as a developing industry and its relationship to capitalist media markets. They understand SME as a “huge experiment in seeking to convert vernacular or informal creativity into talent and content increasingly attractive to advertisers and brands.”89 They point to a recurring career trajectory from hobbyist to professional among SME creators. However, many of the participants in the network analyzed here, particularly among the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts, have not pursued such a transition, and those who have, such as TWiB! and some Twitter micro-celebrities, have done so in ways that overlap heavily with SME but do not fully share emphasis on entrepreneurialism. Additionally, while SME entails the absorption of social networks into the creation of mass media–like entertainment, the network at the center of this project uses mass media–style content creation as part of sociality. The broadcast-style content operates as both media text and utterance within ongoing social interactions.

As a result, many theorizations of digital labor—such as venture labor, hope labor, and aspirational labor, in which unpaid and underpaid labor are common—cannot fully explicate this network’s dynamics.
Though each is distinct, these forms of labor all emerge from neoliberal discourses that prioritize individual self-expression, self-branding, self-sufficiency and shift risk from the employer to the individual. Additionally, they share a forward-looking orientation, in which productive work is undertaken with the anticipation that it will yield future professional or financial benefits. While the forms of labor that power this network’s content production are often un- or under-compensated, they frequently lack the temporal orientation of the above forms of digital labor. Further, when participants in the network do undertake creative labor with the intention of generating a future benefit, individual aspirations are inextricably bound with collective benefit. They engage in this labor with the hope of personal success and of doing something positive for Black people in general.

While scholars of online cultural production have highlighted the ways that creators utilize the interactive affordances of various platforms, these discussions have been largely limited to asynchronous interactivity. Lopez writes of the comment function of YouTube as a place that allows the audience’s ideas to coexist with that of the creator. Even Cunningham and Craig’s description of SME is focused largely on interactivity that does not take place in real time. They conclude their book by predicting the rise of a new phase of SME, enabled by “synchronous interactivity between social media users appearing in and commenting on video.” Here again, the network discussed here has been ahead of the curve. TWiB! and many of the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts avail themselves of various platform affordances that allow real-time participation from their audience, often by cobbling together platforms that are used simultaneously.

Finally, though this book focuses on Black Americans, the network discussed here articulates and interacts with larger global networks. Black Twitter, in particular, includes a significant number of users from Africa and across the African Diaspora. Further, these transnational networks often function as spaces for solidarity between Black Americans and the Global South. Throughout the twentieth century, Black American radical movements in the United States formed alliances with anticolonial movements across the Global South. This solidarity was predicated on an understanding of a shared source of oppression—namely, imperialism and colonialism. Such transnational solidarity can
be seen in the connection between the Movement for Black Lives and Palestine. In the mid-twentieth century the Black Power movement—including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party—aligned with Palestinians, viewing the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through an anti-imperialist and antiracist framework. Contemporaneously, when unrest spread across Ferguson in August 2014 and police began to teargas protestors, Twitter users in Palestine tweeted both messages of support and practical advice on coping with tear gas. During the Ferguson October protests that followed that year, a group of Palestinians traveled to Ferguson to participate, marking their actions via social media and protests signs with the hashtag #Palestine2Ferguson. There they were welcomed by the Organization for Black Struggle (OBS) because of the ongoing work of the St. Louis Palestine Solidarity Committee (STL-PSC). These transnational relationships, while not explored in depth here, should be kept in mind as part of the broader context in which this network operates.

Methodology and Terminology

This book is based on thousands of hours of podcast listening and on participation in social media networks between 2010 and 2016. I ground my analysis in podcasts, videos, blogs, and social media timelines as well as in ethnographic data drawn from participant observation and interviewing. I have worked closely with TWiB! since 2012 and have spent a week with the company in-studio in Brooklyn in March 2013 and at its Berkeley studio in March 2014. I also attended Netroots Nation, an annual progressive grassroots organizing conference, with TWiB! from 2013 to 2016 and traveled with the company as it covered the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia.

Though I am a long-time fan who has participated in the network as it has grown, as a white woman operating in this explicitly Black social space, I remain an outsider in ways that implicate my work within a troubling history of white scholars writing about Black cultural practices. My whiteness brings with it a number of ethical issues I have attempted to address through a self-reflexive methodology and a collaborative relationship with those I write about, including providing them with drafts for feedback prior to publication. In the appendix, I
have outlined these ethical concerns and the collaborative methods I employed. My choice to place this discussion in the appendix derives from my efforts to navigate these ethical challenges. This network is a Black space, and my participation is contingent on my understanding and accepting that my perspectives, communicative norms, and opinions will not be prioritized. While I do not deny, nor do I wish to obscure, the complex ways that subjectivity and positionality function in my research, I also seek here to honor a very simple core tenet: this is not about me. Though I believe in the value of highly situated and reflexive research, I have chosen to foreground the voices and practices of the participants in this network and relegate my methodological reflections to the periphery of this text.

In seeking to foreground the voices of the members of this network, I have made several representational choices. First, I use the term “Black,” which I capitalize, rather than “African American.” This choice mirrors a preference for the term “Black” within the network I am writing about. Further, when I mention someone by name, it should be presumed that he or she is of African descent unless otherwise specified. In dominant US culture, whiteness is invisible, and individuals are presumed to be white unless otherwise specified. I invert this hegemonic norm, and, because the network is an explicitly Black space, take Blackness as normative. I indicate an individual’s race in only two situations: (1) when the person is not of African descent and (2) when the person has asked to be identified in a specific way, as when a biracial person who is Black and Native American prefers to be identified as such.

Second, I use direct quotations whenever possible to highlight the voices of the participants in the network. In doing so, I am faced with orthographic choices about how to represent speech. Many of the individuals I quote use a vernacular, and I have opted not to change their language to conform to Standard English. I retain the original grammatical structures and elements of pronunciation, particularly the shortening of multisyllabic words (such as “e’rybody” as the pronunciation of “everybody”) or when speakers leave the letter “g” off of the end of words. However, because this is not a linguistic study, I do not attempt to capture accents, tonal inflections, or other such elements. Additionally, for the sake of clarity, I have removed vocalized pauses (such as “um”
and “uh”) and stutters or false starts from some quotations taken from spoken communications, including podcasts and interviews.

I refer to individual users by the names they have chosen to employ online, be that a legal name, a first name only, a pseudonym, or a username. While some of the participants in the network use their legal names, particularly those working for or with TWiB!, the majority use pseudonyms, which are often also their usernames on social media platforms such as Twitter. Frequently, privacy concerns drive the choice to obscure one’s identity. Many of the participants in the network have “day jobs” and have employers and colleagues who might not look favorably on the opinions they express or the tone with which they express them. To avoid jeopardizing their livelihoods, they choose to remain identified by only a pseudonym. Additionally, given the frequency and aggressiveness with which marginalized people are harassed online and the increasing commonality with which such harassment follows users into their offline contexts, many of the participants see anonymity, or at least pseudonymity, as important to their personal safety and well-being. Thus, I refer to participants in the network by their chosen public name, adopting their strategy for maintaining their privacy as the standard for this project.

Finally, for the sake of clarity, I distinguish between Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives. Black Lives Matter is the name of the official organization founded by Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The phrase “Black Lives Matter,” was coined by Garza after the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin as part of what she called “a love letter to Black people,” which she posted on Facebook. Cullors turned the phrase into a hashtag on Twitter, and Garza, Cullors, and Tometi went on to found an organization by that same name. But the phrase and hashtag were relatively unknown until the unrest in 2014 in Ferguson following Mike Brown’s death, when local residents, many of whom are now activists but had no prior experience with organizing, took to the streets. The protests initially embraced the chant and hashtag “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” referencing reports that Brown had his hands up at the time he was killed. Gradually, as the protests went on, the phrase “Black Lives Matter” came to more prominence and became a short-hand for the larger ongoing movement that was born in Ferguson. Since then, any contemporary collective of Black
people protesting or organizing is now often referred to, particularly in the press, as “Black Lives Matter.” However, the movement writ large includes a number of organizations—Black Youth Project 100, the Dream Defenders, the Organization for Black Struggle, Hands Up United, Millennial Activists United, and Lost Voices, to name a few. Other activists who are not affiliated with any organization, often deliberately as a matter of principle, see themselves as part of the movement and are often also referred to as “Black Lives Matter” activists, despite having no connection to the organization.

A fair amount of confusion has ensued as a result. For example, in October 2016, several news outlets reported a meeting between Hillary Clinton and “Black Lives Matter” activists. Members of the Black Lives Matter organization made a clear public statement that “Black Lives Matter,” meaning their organization, did not meet with Clinton. Meanwhile, people who identified as part of the larger movement, who had in fact met with Clinton, responded by asserting they felt excluded by the conflation of the movement and the organization. Members of the broader movement have tried to change the name of the movement to the Movement for Black Lives or revise the acronym BLM to stand for Black Liberation Movement. To avoid confusion here, I refer to the movement as the Movement for Black Lives, reserving Black Lives Matter for the organization of that name.

Structure of the Book
Each chapter illustrates the strategies users in this network deploy to address and navigate the challenges of being Black in the United States in the age of colorblindness. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on mapping the network and foregrounding how participants reimagine the affordances of the technologies they are using. The first chapter outlines the structure of the network and its discursive construction as an explicitly Black space. I argue that its multimedia, transplatform character allows it to function as a “network” in the dual sense of the term—as a broadcast-style network and as a digital social network—making it a flexible, multilayered space in which to negotiate racial discourses. I then analyze an exchange between TWiB!’s White and the Harlem-based Reverend James David Manning to demonstrate how deeply interconnected the
elements of the network are and how conversations move across the network via a range of platforms and media.

Chapter 2 argues that the network functions as an oscillating networked public. I draw on the work of Catherine Squires and danah boyd to examine how different affordances of the network allow, and sometimes force, users to shift between creating digitally enabled enclaves and directly debating dominant discourses forwarded by those outside the network. I contextualize the network in the history of Black alternative media production, particularly radio, as well as within the tradition of Black social enclaves such as barber and beauty shops and churches. Because digital media often blur mass and interpersonal communication, these different traditions are intertwined in the context of the network. I argue that the intimate qualities of radio-style audio combined with a conversational style and the use of Black vernaculars and Black cultural commonplaces evoke and reproduce a sense of being in Black social enclaves and allow podcasts to serve as important resources for listeners as they navigate a hostile racial landscape. I then move on to explore moments when the more visible elements of the network, particularly TWiB! and Twitter micro-celebrities, serve a counter-public function to directly challenge mainstream legacy media and elements of the political establishment. I analyze three examples—debates over the racial dynamics of the Occupy Wall Street movement, *Game of Thrones* fandom under the hashtag #DemThrones, and criticism of some of Senator Bernie Sanders’s supporters’ desire to minimize the importance of racial issues in the candidate’s platform during the 2015 presidential primary, expressed by the #BernieSoBlack hashtag. Each example demonstrates how the participants exploit or work around platform design and functionality to shift the network between enclave and counter-public.

Chapters 3 and 4 then examine how this transplatform digital assemblage gets utilized in specific situations or in response to specific exigencies, with particular attention to the discursive work that takes place in the network. Chapter 3 examines roles of memory and history in the network. Remembering is never an end in its own right; rather, it is a means of asserting power, legitimizing social relations, and validating political traditions. Because it is generally the powerful in a society who make the choices about what is remembered and what is forgotten, the dominant US history has been constructed in ways that gen-
erally leave the mechanisms of racial oppression intact, ensuring their continuation while asserting their disappearance. This chapter explores how participants in the network actively resist these dominant historical narratives and reassert accounts of the past that highlight ongoing racial oppression and resistance. I examine how the TWiB! podcast Historical Blackness hosted by Dr. Blair L. M. Kelley uses history as a resource for reinterpreting the present in ways that undermine dominant racial discourses. The remainder of the chapter then focuses on complex ways in which the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. is deployed for neoliberal political ends. The network has developed three metaphors to encapsulate these strategies—the idea of “MLK fan fic,” MLK as Pokémon, and MLK as the “Big Joker” in the card game Spades. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how King has been invoked to condemn the tactics of the Movement for Black Lives and how the movement has reclaimed and re-remembered King in ways that position its members as the inheritors of his legacy.

While the events of Ferguson in the summer of 2014 sparked the national protest out of which the Movement for Black Lives emerged, the digital and social media networks that became of great importance to the movement coalesced years earlier. It was the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of his killer in 2013 that prompted existing Black digital networks to deploy their connections around political issues. Chapter 4 explores the role these networks played at moments of racial trauma, particularly the Zimmerman acquittal, the death of Mike Brown, and the subsequent unrest in Ferguson. I argue that the flexible, malleable character of the network allowed it to be deployed for a number of simultaneous, overlapping, yet distinct activities, including creating community and solidarity through catharsis and collective grieving, circulating oppositional interpretations of events, organizing responses and political engagement, and both bypassing and directly intervening in mainstream corporate media narratives.

Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the radical changes that have taken place since mid-2016, several months before the presidential election, when I stopped gathering data. Since then, many of the phenomena I analyze have shifted dramatically. In the conclusion, I explore the current state of colorblindness, including the changes to the dominant racial discourse that seem to be underway. I then address the
decreased visibility of the Movement for Black Lives. Black Americans are still being shot and killed by law enforcement, and activists are still protesting and organizing. But the movement has largely fallen out of the news cycle, largely to make way for the constant coverage of Donald Trump’s presidency and his unprecedented violation of US political norms. Finally, I end with a discussion of the interstitial mode of production used by most of these podcasters in my study, touching on issues of sustainability and monetization.