The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere

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Introductions sketch the discursive framework for what follows, and what follows immediately are prefatory remarks that speak to my ambivalence about the evolution of digital culture and race. The focus of this project is on early instances of African diasporic engagements with cyberspace. I begin by acknowledging my ambivalence about the rhetorical terms of the nascent technocratic order, an ambivalence that seems justified each time I boot up my personal computer to compile my years of research into this topic. In powering up my PC, I am confronted with DOS-based text that gives me pause. Before access to the MMX technology powering my system is granted, I am alerted to this opening textual encoding: “Pri. Master Disk, Pri. Slave Disk, Sec. Master, Sec. Slave.” Programmed here is a virtual hierarchy organizing my computer’s software operations. Given the nature of my subject matter, it might not be surprising that I am perpetually taken aback by the programmed boot-up language informing me that my access to the cyber frontier indeed is predicated upon a digitally configured “master/slave” relationship. As the on-screen text runs through its remaining string of required boot-up language and codes, I often wonder why programmers chose such signifiers that hark back to our nation’s ignominious past. I doubt that the Hegelian master/slave dialectic is the referent to which these programmers allude. Even though I do not assume a racial affront or intentionality in this peculiar deployment of the slave and master coupling, its appearance each time I turn on my computer nonetheless causes me concern.

**Historicizing African Diasporic Consciousness**

African diasporic consciousness originated in the darkened abyss below the decks of European ships during the infamous middle passage of the transatlantic slave trade. Severed from the familiar terrain of their homelands and dispatched to the overcrowded bowels of slave vessels, the abducted Africans forged out of necessity a virtual community of intercultural kinship structures and new languages in which to express them. During the first half of the twentieth century, African diasporic scholar-activists W. E. B. DuBois and C. L. R. James argued that these historical
events created the preconditions for Africans in the New World to be among the first people to experience modernity. In 1969 James asserted that:

The vast change in human society came from the slave trade and slavery. All the historians tell you that. . . . It was slavery that built up the bourgeois society and enabled it to make what Lévi Strauss [sic] thinks is the only fundamental change in ten thousand years of human history. The blacks not only provided the wealth in the struggle, which began between the old [aristocratic] society and the new bourgeois society; the black people were foremost in the struggle itself. (James 1992, 396)

Other contemporary theorists, such as Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, echo James and DuBois’s positions to elaborate that the transatlantic African diasporic consciousness of African Americans, African Caribbeans, black Britons, and others is directly attributable to the post-Enlightenment demands of a modernity that followed the invasion of the European body snatchers into Africa seeking black bodies to power the impending industrial revolution. Despite the well-documented dehumanizing imperatives of the colonial encounter, the ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentations. The formation of these new African-inflected communications strategies enabled this heterogeneous mass of people somehow to overcome their profound dislocation, fragmentation, alienation, relocation, and ultimate commodification in the Western slavocracies of the modern world.

This brief overview is necessary to contextualize the ideological primacy and the historical development of an African diasporic consciousness in oppressed New World Africans whose decolonizing movements and struggles ushered in what is termed the postcolonial era. Many, including this writer, are not convinced that colonization is over. For us, the socioeconomic institution has morphed effectively into the thriving new global oligopolies of our post–Cold War, postmodern era. The point here is that without such an overview and context, it becomes a near impossibility to understand and fully account for the historical and epochal shifts as well as mutabilities in the ideology of African diasporic consciousness motivating the black nationalist ethos spanning the nineteenth-century African colonization societies on through the twentieth-century black nationalist or Afrocentric movements of the 1960s to the present day.

This essay distills some key findings of my larger study that considers the persistence of African diasporic consciousness in cyberspace and the
digital age. Among the areas of concern here are the often overlooked or unacknowledged fact of historical and contemporary black technolust and early technology adoption and mastery. Additionally, this work theorizes African diasporic issues vis-à-vis the discourse of the superinformation highway, digital media technologies’ impact in the areas of education and politics, and questions of race and representation in new technologies, such as the Internet.

Toward a Theory of the Egalitarian Technosphere; or, How Wide Is the Digital Divide?

In the early 1970s, a new communications network began to take off in America. . . . Visionaries saw it unleashing creativity and opening the door to an egalitarian future. It was CB Radio. By 1980 it was almost dead; it had collapsed under the weight of its own popularity, its channels drowned under a sea of noise and chaos. Could the Internet go the same way?
—Christopher Anderson

Since the early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, home pages, listservs and electronic directories on the Internet and the World Wide Web that are specifically targeted at African and African diasporic net users. My studies of the African diasporic presence on-line suggest that 1995 is a watershed moment in the transformation of the Internet from a predominately elite, white masculinist domain to a more egalitarian public sphere. Although there are a number of African American early adopters who infiltrated this would-be gated cyber community prior to this benchmark, black connectivity on-line seems to have achieved a critical mass in 1995 when the Yahoo search engine initiated a separate category for Afrocentric content on the World Wide Web.

Significantly, the separate category for Afrocentric content on the Yahoo site coincided with a more general growth in the massification of the World Wide Web. In his study of the Internet for the Economist magazine, Christopher Anderson (1995) gives an indication of the magnitude of its unprecedented growth. His estimation of the World Wide Web’s massive expansion is particularly revealing. Anderson notes that the Internet had doubled in size since 1988. “At the same time,” he observed, “the Web grew almost twenty-fold; in just eighteen months users created more than three million multimedia pages of information, entertainment and advertising” (3). Although he concedes that exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, he calculates that at least twenty million “users” were on-line as early as October 1994. If we accept his evocation of Moore’s
Law, a phenomenon named after Gordon Moore, founder of the Intel Corporation, “which says that computing power and capacity double every eighteen months” (4), then the unwieldy nature of any attempt to survey the contents of the Internet after 1995 is apparent.

The difficulty of delimiting what I am calling the cybertext (cyberspace as a textual object of study) for analytical purposes in many ways replicates problems encountered by early analysts in their formulation of a critical hermeneutics of television. Like television, the dynamic and fluid nature of the Internet makes it “too big and too baggy to be easily or quickly explained. No single approach is sufficient to deal with it adequately” (Newcomb 1987, ix). With this in mind, I have opted to frame my own findings on the African diasporic niche within the Internet in terms of a snapshot or moment-in-time approach so that some useful perspective on this difficult moving target of analysis might emerge.

In the years since I began this brief history of a new media technology in a state of becoming, I have discovered some important and quite intriguing methodological and theoretical problems. My previous research on early-twentieth-century black print publications did not prepare me for the hyperephemerality of the cybertext. What this means is that conducting Internet content analysis presents its own set of problematics involving access to and availability of the material under scrutiny. The fleeting nature or short shelf life of most individual, grassroots, and private non-profit Web sites necessitates the immediate downloading of those sites that might be considered worthy of study because, as I have learned the hard way, to attempt a second page or site view may not be possible. Too many of these sites disappear without a trace, or they are upgraded to the point of unrecognizability. These are the challenges of conducting what Michel Foucault might consider a history of the present.

**Forging a Digital Black Public Sphere**

The Internet was definitely a factor in helping to get the word out to Sisters about the [Million Woman] March. From August 10 1997 until 12:01 AM, October 25 1997, the official web site took 1,010,000 hits from around the world. . . . This doesn’t take into account the number of hits or e-mail at the regional MWM Web Sites across the country.
—Ken Anderson, march Web master

Historically . . . nothing might seem less realistic, attractive or believable to black Americans than the notion of a black public sphere. . . . [Blacks] are drawn to the possibilities of structurally and effectively transforming the
founding notion of the bourgeois public into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning.
—Houston A. Baker Jr.

[T]he contemporary black public sphere is partly the creature of the political economy of a global, advanced capitalist order, but in the past it has offered—and may yet again offer—a space for critique and transformation of that order. If not, then all this is only idle talk.
—Thomas C. Holt

As I watched in amazement the incalculable stream of orderly black female bodies (and their supportive male counterparts) that swelled the streets of Philadelphia on 25 October 1997, my overwhelming feelings of jubilation, incredulity, pride, and optimism soon gave way to fear, concern, and pessimism. Driving my ambivalence about even the scant network and cable TV news broadcasts of the phenomenally successful Million Woman March was my understanding of how televised coverage of the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath in the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed to a national backlash against African American aspirations for social, political, economic, and educational equity from the 1970s to the present. California voters’ more recent approval of several anti–affirmative action propositions, including #209 (the anti–affirmative action measure), #187 (the anti-immigration ruling), and the 1999 passage of a juvenile justice initiative that sentences minor offenders as adults, are legacies of this history. Moreover, today’s precipitous and steady decline in African American and other racial minority students’ enrollments at prestigious universities nationwide clearly attests to the regressive consequences of the legal deinstitutionalization of these underrepresented groups’ access to elite higher education in the nation since the 1978 University of California Regents v. Bakke decision.2

Despite this recent history’s profound influence on today’s racial and political economies, the role of the Internet in the undeniable success of the Million Women March may allay, for the moment at least, fears that the nascent technocratic order will automatically exclude the marginalized black masses from the still-evolving information infrastructure. In fact, my project of tracking and analyzing black homesteading on the electronic frontier, to borrow an apt phrase from Howard Rheingold, is optimistic in its suggestions for the democratizing potential of the Internet, especially given its demonstrably pivotal role in mobilizing a throng of grassroots activists in the 1997 Million Woman March on Philadelphia.

In his 1993 book The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier, Rheingold observed that “computer-mediated communi-
cations” technologies owe their phenomenal growth and development to networking capabilities that enable people “to build social relationships across barriers of space and time” (7). It is specifically to this point of spatial and temporal ruptures produced by recent technological advances that the present study of the Internet as a promising site for the establishment of an egalitarian technosphere is initially directed. First, it is useful to emphasize an important lesson embedded in Rheingold’s ethnographic informant account of the “computer-mediated social groups” he has dubbed “virtual communities” (1). Of the myriad ways that grassroots groups adapted the inchoate Internet technology “designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different communication needs” (7), none is more symptomatic of technology’s overall elasticity and unpredictability than the rapid and unanticipated growth of the “Internet Relay Chat (IRC)” phenomenon among non–computer experts. Rheingold sees the lure of the IRC as being inextricably bound up with its recombinant nature as an interactive medium that conjoins “the features of conversation and writing” (3). Second, this technological hybridization of speech or orality (conversation) and literacy (writing), which privileges neither, not only furthers the Derridian project of negating epistemological exaltations of logocentrism (privileging speech) over techne (writing), it also suggests a parallel or affinity to various traditions of black technocultural syncretisms. For example, much has been written about black appropriation and mastery of Western musical technologies and instruments to craft and express such uniquely black musical idioms as jazz and the blues. As Bruce R. Powers puts it in The Global Village, “unlikely combinations produce discovery” (McLuhan and Powers 1989, ix). Thus the seamless combination of conversational strategies and writing on the proliferating IRC channels has produced for both black early adopters of and black latecomers to the Internet and other digital media technologies a discovery of the latest inchoate mass medium to be appropriated for unfettered social and cultural expressions. This is possible, of course, because their complete domination by the interests of corporate capital remains somewhat elusive, for the time being at least. It is my contention that the recent “dot-com bust” or “meltdown” occurring in the high-technology sector of Wall Street represents an important reprieve for the grassroots’ organizing efforts aimed at democratizing the Internet in ways that existing mass media corporate interests disallow. Meanwhile, it appears that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is refashioning the concept and utility of a viable black public sphere in the new millennium. For example, while much has been written about the “digital divide” and the “information have-nots,” too little attention has been paid to the remarkable and unintended uses to which the digitally disadvan-
taged have put the technology. As Ken Anderson noted in discussing the role of the Internet in the phenomenal success of the 1997 Million Woman March (MWM), working and so called “under-class” black women made ingenious uses of the new technology to further their own community uplift agendas. Despite their relegation to the realm of the information have-nots in the information economy, those members of the MWM organization who worked with computers in their jobs downloaded the entire contents of the national and the regional MWM Web sites from their work computers for print copying. In circulating numerous paper copies of the MWM Web sites for their unconnected sisters in the ‘hood, these computer literate and connected black women march members enacted their own brand of universal access to the technology. In effect, they deployed the traditional tactics of grassroots organizing (mimeographing and Xeroxing) to make the new technology (computer-generated content) responsive to the changing demands of community empowerment in an information economy. In this way, all the MWM sisters were provided with virtual computing power. Equipped with both print and on-line march instructions and specified platform issues, these inventive women, otherwise known as the information have-nots, nevertheless utilized the new information technologies to mobilize throngs as they marched on the streets of Philadelphia, upwards of a million strong, reclaiming their rights to participation in both the digital and material public spheres.

**On Democratic Turf Wars and the Privatization of the Public Sphere**

The problematics of space and place in American culture have been thoroughly addressed by legions of African American and feminist cultural workers in and outside the academy. Literature produced by blacks and women across decades has served to denude past and present attempts to yoke social relationships based on race and gender to highly repressive structures of public and private spheres of influence. While an extensive survey of this vast data does not bear reduplication here, a sketch of certain historical struggles over access to the public sphere is necessary to our appreciation of the democratizing possibilities of postindustrial society’s emergent information technocracy.

For starters, it is instructive to recall how the historical subjugation of racial minorities and women by means of the politicization of space and place in American civil society spurred frequent mass mobilizations by these groups to take their long-standing grievances to the streets. As the measured social gains of the 1950s civil rights movement begat the second
wave of the women’s movement in the 1970s, the goals of social and political equity that eluded the post–Civil War Reconstruction and suffragists’ voting rights efforts a century earlier became increasingly difficult for the white male-dominated power structures to withhold. Indeed, a century of violent protests against American racism and patriarchy had borne out Frederick Douglass’s truism that “power concedes nothing without a demand.” Acknowledging this fact, there can be little doubt that blacks and women adroitly seized temporary and limited access to the public sphere to voice dissent over their relegation to places of powerlessness in domesticated private spaces. Although the once ever-present dangers of lynchings and rape posed a real threat for transgressing this rigid public-private divide, blacks and women refused to be deterred from their demands for unrestricted access to the public portals to power.

If such epoch-making nineteenth-century demands as Reconstruction, the suffrage movement, and the passage of the Fourteenth and the Nineteenth Amendments proved insufficient to the task of opening up the public sphere to genuine attempts at resolving the Negro and woman “questions,” how, then, do we account for those grudging concessions to similar demands brought by the generation of the 1960s? While the uncomplicated view might suggest answers attributable to a natural or historical evolution of public attitudes, a more probing analysis uncovers the central role of less passive determinants at work. The persuasiveness of new telecommunications technologies such as the telephone, radio, film, and television inaugurated new technological methods of social arbitration that factored greatly in this historical contest of wills.

Black Technophiles Are in the Virtual House: The Phenomenal Rise of Black Participation On-Line

In the cacophonous rush to judgment by new media technology gurus, academics, politicians, and cyberpunk novelists divining the eventual contours of the coming information society, concern over issues of racial equity or the impact of the growing black presence in cyberspace has been conspicuously muted until now. This deafening silence in evolving discourses on new information technologies during the mid-1980s on through the late 1990s, what Theodore Roszak (1994) terms “the cult of information” (xxi), might be owing to a general presumption of black nonparticipation in the incipient technosphere or perhaps to a belief in something akin to what I am calling “black technophobia.” After all, the recursiveness of theories claiming “scientific” evidence of black intellectual inferiority manages to find new means of attaining cultural currency,
as Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein’s 1994 book *The Bell Curve’s longue durée* on national bestseller lists illustrates. Consequently, the overwhelming characterizations of the brave new world of cyberspace as primarily a racialized sphere of whiteness inhere in popular constructions of high-tech and low-tech spheres that too often consign black bodies to the latter, with the latter being insignificant if not absent altogether. Any close scrutiny of early editions of specialized computer magazines, such as *Wired* and *Mondo 2000*, mass-market advertisements for computer products in both print and electronic media, cyberpunk novels, and even scholarly treatises on the intersections of technology and culture bears out this troubling future vision, although in the last year or so blacks have become increasingly prominent as consumer-users of computer products in both television commercials and print advertisements. Nonetheless, in the wake of many mainstream cybercritics’ and cyberpunk subcultural elites’ imaginative figurations of a cybernetic future untroubled by the complication of blackness, black people have forged a more expansive view of technological progress.

From 1995 to the present, the swelled ranks of black people throughout the African diaspora connecting to the Internet, particularly to the World Wide Web, have forced a new reckoning with the rapidly changing configuration of the new electronic frontier. For a time, the structured absences of black bodies that have marked most popular imaginings of the brave new world order were in danger of reifying an updated myth of black intellectual lag, or black technophobia. Instead, I want to suggest an alternative scenario—a myth of black technophilia. In fact, the unanticipated dramatic upsurge in black participation on the Internet from 1995 onwards captured the imaginations of print headline writers across the country. The headlines are suggestive of a black technofuturist enthusiasm that harkens back to the celebratory discourses of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian poet, novelist, and critic of the industrial age, widely regarded as the founder of a pro-technology sentiment termed *futurism*. Consider this sampling of sensational headlines: “Revving Up Their Computer Power: Now Black Americans Are Outpacing Whites on Online Services” (*Washington Post*, 19 September 1997); “Suddenly, a Boom in Sites Geared toward African Americans” (*Boston Globe*, 2 January 1996); “Laptop over Hip-Hop: The African American Pocket-Protector Crowd Upgrades to the Next Generation” (*San Jose Metro Paper*, 6–12 November 1997); “The Virtual Pie Shop and Other Cyber Dreams: The Inner City Computer Society Promotes the Practical Applications of Technology and the Wonders of the Internet” (*Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1995); “For the Kids’ Sake: Turn off TV, Turn on PC” (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 8 August 1996); “Getting Plugged into the Computer Age” (*Los
As the race for cyberspace began revving up for what may well be its determining lap, the forceful entrance of a black Marinettian contingent at century’s end signaled African diasporic peoples’ refusal to be excluded from this all-important running. And while the mainstream press did take notice of this emerging black cyberfever, the sporadic nature and incredulous tone of much of the coverage betrays a sense of condescension, ghettoization, trivialization, and a general air of dismissiveness. For example, Dana Canedy’s 8 October 1998 *New York Times* full-page feature article highlighting “black oriented sites,” entitled “Virtual Community for African-Americans,” exemplifies many of these tendencies. In one discussion, subheaded “A Contemporary Bookstore,” Canedy describes the site of a black retail partner of Amazon.com in this way: “The problem is that it could be so much more. Mosaicbooks.com bills itself as a showcase for ‘the latest in black and Hispanic literature,’ so beyond the Book of the Month picks, you won’t find much of the classic work of authors like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes.” Now, given the fact that the late Baldwin and Hughes are not likely to be producing “the latest in black and Hispanic literature,” no visitors to this site should expect to find the best of Baldwin and Hughes’s oeuvres. So where is the problem here? Similarly, in his critique “For Buppies with a Capital ‘B,’” Canedy takes Buppie.com to task for being not quite good enough:

Even some of the more current information seemed forced into categories that don’t quite fit. This past summer, for example, under “Issues Affecting Us,” there was an article in [sic] about President Clinton’s top Secret Service agent being forced to testify before the grand jury in the Monica Lewinsky matter. First of all, the account never clearly stated whether the agent is black, which is relevant only because the article was included on a black-oriented website. More to the point, the site never addressed the issue of how this article would affect African-Americans.

Again, where is the problem here? Most of the issues and circumstances that affect African Americans are not determined or influenced by black agents or black participation no matter how organized and valiant efforts are to the contrary. Nonetheless, their impact on black lives is no less significant or deterministic as far as the fate of this community is concerned. The assumption that African Americans should only care about so-called...
black issues has its corollary in the racist presumption that nonblack people would or should not be interested in “black” issues.

Despite a generally dismissive tone, Canedy singles out one black Web site on which to heap measured praise. The feature’s lead article, entitled “Library/Black Oriented Sites,” provides capsule descriptions of nine specified sites ranging from the highly specialized, such as the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, to the more familiar, namely *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines’ on-line editions. What Canedy finds is that “overall, black-oriented sites have a lot of the same information, although Net Noir, for one has worked hard to be more comprehensive and is designed so well that it stands apart from the pack.” I offer these observations even though Canedy’s equivocating feature story does what few popular press journalists had by 1998, and that is to acknowledge, promote, and qualitatively consider the fact and diversity of black on-line engagement. Still, the diminution of these black-oriented sites betrays arbitrary evaluative criteria. More typically, however, black homesteading on the electronic frontier gets discussed with a focus on individual Web sites and net users in isolation and figured as anomalous.

Consider two other examples of rhetorical incredulity over black Internet use. One centers on a valiant struggle for computer literacy in a Harlem housing project. The other spotlights one woman’s discovery of the joys of e-commerce for her small pie shop in Compton, California. The problem with the first article, a 29 July 1997 *Village Voice* article entitled “Tech Tyke: A Six-Year-Old Brings Computer Education to the Projects,” is, yet again, one of narrative emphasis. Athima Chansanchai’s laudatory report on six-year-old Jerra Bost’s prodigious feat of teaching in her father’s after-school computer program, which “attracts anywhere from forty to sixty kids,” is undermined by the stress on the program’s only two working computers that were salvaged, “four primitive software programs, which have been eclipsed by a decade’s worth of progress,” the center’s sweltering heat, Jerra’s father Jerome Bost’s fifteen unsuccessful grant proposals for funding support, and a familiar disparagement of the Harlem neighborhood.10 Plucky survivalist narrative frame aside, the prospect of future success as conveyed here is negligible at best, and impossible at worst. A similar discursive thrust problematizes the 12 November 1995 *Los Angeles Times* feature story “The Virtual Pie Shop and Other Cyber Dreams.” Confounding the four-column-width photo of four capable-looking black members of the Inner-City Computer Society posed in front of a computer screen displaying a member Web site is Randal C. Archibold’s color commentary. From his story introduction and throughout, Archibold positions Raven Rutherford, her midtown storefront pie shop, and the Compton neighborhood far behind and even outside of the
technological norm and its concomitant adoption curve. He writes, “Just a year ago, the only bytes Rutherford understood were the ones taken from her blackbird pie or oatmeal cake. . . . Members like Rutherford show what the society is all about . . . sparking awareness of computer technology and the Internet among those who never thought it could do anything for them.” Highlighting the effectiveness of the computer society need not hinge on negating African American small business owners’ familiarity with and routine usage of computers in business. The article quotes one group member as saying, “Our biggest obstacle is fear of the technology.” A professor at Florida Atlantic University claimed in the article that “it’s extra difficult to write something for the inner city. . . . The inner-city people I have dealt with really want to know where the business loans and jobs are. . . . People have asked me, how does my page on the Internet show how to get a bank loan? The Internet doesn’t answer immediate needs.” If we accept this professor’s characterization of what black people wanted and expected from on-line services, and given that these desires were expressed in 1995, then it appears that writing for the inner city was “extra difficult” because these black people were ahead of the curve. We can make this assertion because these “immediate needs” and more are indeed answered on the Internet as traditional businesses such as banks and loan services have rushed to embrace e-commerce. As with the Village Voice article, this story concludes somewhat pessimistically: “But few novices seem to have Rutherford’s zeal. Sure, she has found frustration: Her modem doesn’t always work, and the other day she was trying to figure out how to type commands into her machine without the aid of a mouse. Nevertheless she speaks effusively about the possibilities of a virtual pie shop.”

No wonder the rhetoric of “the digital divide” functions to obfuscate a parallel “digital delirium” reality as descriptive of blacks’ relationship to the digital revolution.11 The situation of mainstream coverage of this virtual community’s on-line activity parallels mainstream press coverage of violence and crime, wherein an overemphasis on sensational and unusual criminal acts occurs simultaneously with a de-emphasis on the declining rates of crime. In both cases, the impact of the information disseminated is often heightened or blunted by the proportion and tone of the issue’s presentation. It is for these reasons that Canedy’s and other popular press accounts of black technolust serve to contain and marginalize the impressive fact of black early adopters in the once superelite culture of the embryonic information age. Perhaps our nation’s ongoing ignorance of African American early adoption of and involvement with prior innovative media technologies, such as the printing press, cinema, radio, and, to a
lesser extent, video, authorizes much of today’s myopic consideration of black technological sophistication.

**Geopolitics in the Digital Age**

The hyperbolic rhetoric designating the Internet and the World Wide Web as “super information highways” and as the gateway or on-ramp to the information age did not go unnoticed by the African diasporic community. While some remained skeptical of the discursive onslaught of utopic claims for the revolutionary digital democracy, many were affected by the gold rush mentality that seems to have triggered a bout of global cyber-fever. It is important to understand that the current scramble for domination and domestication of the Internet and the World Wide Web is not unlike that unleashed on the African continent by the West in the nineteenth century. This “scramble for Africa” analogy as a narrative frame for contextualizing the stakes involved in the Internet revolution was dually inspired. One inspiration was the spate of newspaper articles covering the speed with which African Americans were entering the fast lanes of the global infobahn discussed earlier. Another suggested itself as news surfaced of the global media corporations’ scramble to colonize the Internet through their highly publicized strategies of merger mania and media convergence rhetoric. And while print reports detailing an unanticipated surge in black on-line connectivity only hint at what any netizen (virtual citizen of the Internet) or Net novice today who types in the keywords “black” and “African” as any portion of a keyword search quickly discovers: these search commands yield hundreds to hundreds of thousands of “results,” “hits,” or “category matches” (in the argot of Internet search engines Lycos, Yahoo, and many others). This study reveals that since 1991, black people throughout the African diaspora have mounted their own scramble for a secure share of the Internet spoils in the intensifying global grab for Internet dominance.

As one of history’s most profound and far-reaching cycles of corporate expansion and domination since the industrial age’s robber barons and corporate trusts, today’s megamedia mergers threaten to obliterate any remaining optimism about preserving the last vestiges of a viable and unsponsored public sphere. Indeed, the political engine of deregulation responsible for powering the economic force of the ascendant global media behemoths has the capacity and intent now to rock our worlds. No sooner had the centripetal forces of technological innovation produced newer, democratizing models of mass media diversity such as cable, satel-
lite, Internet, wireless, and other wide-ranging digital communications systems, than the older media concerns set in motion a centrifugal countermodel of mass media monopolizing and reconsolidation, better known as convergence. Because these newer media were poised to undermine what Ben Bagdikian calls the media monopoly, many believed the decentralized nature and transnational reach of these new media industries signaled a new age of participatory democracy and by extension progressive social equity and creative cultural rejuvenation. It seemed that finally new multimedia forms might function to serve and promote the diverse communicative needs of a changing, multicultural world. The arrival and rapid diffusion of the Internet and the World Wide Web were central to this vision of inevitable global transformation, as the Internet’s role in pro-democracy movements in several developing nations attest. One contemporary critic, who underscores the connection between the Internet and geopolitical change, is Ingrid Volkmer. In Volkmer’s estimation:

the Internet can be regarded as an icon of a globalized media world that has shifted global communication to a new level. Whereas television was a harbinger of this new era of global communication by reaching a worldwide audience with worldwide distribution and innovative global programming (such as that of CNN and MTV), the Internet reveals the full vision of a global community. . . . the implications are obvious: national borders are increasingly disappearing within cyberspace. (1997, 48)

Not only do national borders increasingly disappear in cyberspace, they are replaced by new kinship structures now predicated on the fluidity of cybernetic virtual communities and homelands.

In his influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (1993) reminds us that “nationality, or . . . [the] world’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (4). It is essential to Anderson that we understand how “nation-ness” is often historically determined and its meanings subject to change over time (4). And yet for Anderson it is crucial to recognize the profound emotional legitimacy of nationalisms despite the challenge of subnationalisms within many tenuous nationalist borders, as the recent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the bloody coups responsible for reconfiguring many “Third World” nations clearly attest. “Nation, nationality, nationalism,” as Anderson points out, “all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse” (3). Clearly then, the historical changes and technological innovations responsible for the Internet threaten to exacerbate the slippery and increasingly fragile traditional nationalisms while simultaneously strengthening the affective dimensions of a newer
virtual or cybernationalism now unbound by traditional ideological, political, economic, geographical, and even temporal boundaries and limitations. Moreover, we must now work to proffer new definitions and analyses of these new brands of African diasporic cybernationalisms as they existed in the early years of the Internet’s global formation.

As early as 1992 the African diaspora was willfully and optimistically dispersed into the transnational ether of the Internet by many tech-savvy African nationals and expatriates living and working abroad. For these black geeks the lure of cyberspace represents “the possibility of vast, unexplored territory” (Balsamo 1996, 116) capable of sustaining new modes of postcolonial African unity, of sorts, often untenable on the continent given the political and military economies of “real” space. Among African early adopters of the Internet and the World Wide Web were those visionary tech-evangelists—or cyberwitchdoctors, if you will—who conjured such new Africanities on-line as Naijanet, the Association of Nigerians Abroad, the Buganda Home Page, the African National Congress Home Page, and others. By 1997 more black diasporic Web sites began appearing, including ones for the Republic of Ghana, the Afro-Caribbean Chamber of Commerce, Camden (UK) Black Parents’ and Teachers’ Association, Canadian Artists’ Network: Black Artists In Action, Egypt’s Information Highway Project, and Africa Online, among others too numerous to consider here.

The first steps “toward developing a Nigerian online network took place in 1991” when a Nigerian at Dartmouth College began forwarding to select friends e-mail news about the home country (Bastian 1999). From this inauspicious beginning sprang Naijanet, one of the Internet’s most robust and enduring Afrocentric virtual communities. Bastian reports that since 1992 “Naijanet has spun off at least six related online networks,” and that at its height of influence and popularity in 1995 “Naijanetters” numbered approximately 750. We begin by considering what this phenomenon portends for rethinking issues of postcoloniality. One of the more recognizably transformative aspects of postcoloniality being wrought by the digital age is a new, discursive Africanity visible in chat rooms and listservs of several Nigeria-centered subnets engendered by Naijanet. This postindependence conceptualization of a virtual Nigerian consanguinity is remarkable because, as Emeka J. Okoli reminds us, “the British arrogantly realigned Nigerian political structures to serve their own interest at devastating consequences on relations between Nigerian ethnic populations, which include between 178 and 300 languages and more than 250 cultures, each having its own customs, traditions” (1999, 32–33). Nigeria’s so-called “independence” in 1960 has been ineffectual in bridging the bitter divisions between such major ethnic groups as
Housas, Igbos, and Yorubas. Neither has it alleviated their mutual suspicions (33). Sandy Stone points out that usenets and e-mail networks are new spaces that instantiate “the collapse of the boundaries between the social and technological, biology and machine, natural and artificial” (85). Thus, Naijanetters used the new spaces of the Internet to refuse crucial elements of this debilitating colonialist legacy and through CMC to re-image a new Africanity in cyberspace. Because the digitized postcolonial condition forestalls the necessity of putting real flesh and blood bodies on the line in service to the nation-state—taking primacy over ethnic group allegiance—Naijanetters used their virtual bodies regularly to challenge and contest one another as well as to amplify problems in their homeland. One challenge that simultaneously embodied and threatened the “true spirit of Naija” was the insistent articulation of African women’s long-standing discontent vis-à-vis gender oppression. Just as Naija’s free speech ethos helped foster painfully honest dialogues and vigorous debates about the politics of language-chauvinism and ethnic “tribalism,” so too were grievances and recriminations about the persistence of women’s “double colonization” given voice—at least for a time.

**The Black Press in the Age of Digital Reproduction**

We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us.
—John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish

Since John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish’s 1827 founding of *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African American-owned and -controlled newspaper, the black press has functioned as a reliable register of African American struggle and progress in the United States. At the same time, it has served as a potent political and ideological force in galvanizing mass support for a wide array of black protest and cultural movements. Conceived from the outset as both a political and ideological weapon for the eradication of slavery and other antebellum atrocities, the earliest black political pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, and other forms of black writing established a tradition of protest literature that has been a prominent feature throughout the history of the press’s “uplift” mission, or journalistic freedom fighting. Equally important as its struggles for racial justice, particularly during heightened moments of political and economic crises, was the press’s role as cultural arbiter and promoter. African Americans’ long-standing quest for racial equity and due process in the United States is marked by a series of epochal migrations. In charting the contemporary black press’s migratory patterns to cyberspace, it becomes abundantly
clear that predictions and lamentations about the inevitable demise of the nation’s black newspapers continue to prove unreliable.

In 1995, when the *Afro-American* newspaper began its “homesteading on the electronic Frontier,” it was the first of the established black newspapers to do so. It even predates most mainstream establishment papers’ notice of the nascent technology’s imminent threat and competitive positioning, not to mention these entrenched media’s delayed plunge into this new media abyss. What the *Afro’s* early presence in cyberspace recalls is earlier instances of vital and significant black involvement with former new media technologies such as film (before the advent of sound), radio, and TV.

My survey of select historic black presses’ migration to the Internet clearly reveals their commitment to continue the struggle for black political, social, cultural, and economic survival and prosperity well into the digital age. What the on-line incarnations of the *Afro-American*, *Indianapolis Recorder*, *Charlotte Post*, and *Philadelphia Tribune* newspapers represent, besides a corrective to a presumption of black technophobia, is African Americans’ robust technological participation in the nation’s postmodern public sphere, or what Nancy Fraser (1990) more accurately sees as an agglomeration of many “counterpublics.” These presses, in print and on-line, exemplify Fraser’s challenge to Marxist critic Jurgen “Habermas’s account of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere [that] stresses its claim to be open and accessible to all,” when “women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds” (63).

Moreover, they seem to confirm Houston Baker’s (1995) black revisionist notion of the Habermasian public sphere ideal. For Baker, the fact that blacks might find attractive or believable the notion of a public sphere that had its origins in a system of property ownership and literacy from which blacks were excluded by law is difficult at best. But, following Fraser, Baker sees the potential for transcending these limitations, specifically for black communities. Baker recognizes that African Americans are drawn to the possibilities of structurally and affectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeois public sphere into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning. Fully rational human beings with abundant cultural resources, black Americans have always situated their unique forms of expressive publicity in a complex set of relationships to other forms of American publicity (meaning here, paradoxically enough, the sense of publicity itself as authority) (13). And it is the expressive, self-fashioning, and emancipatory potential of the Internet, at this still-nascent moment, that enables the historic black press to affect a structural transformation of publicity to disseminate widely black counterhegemonic
interpretations of local and global events, thus bearing out Baker’s black public sphere thesis. With the growing power and dominance of global media conglomerates, it is evident that the revolutionary digital public sphere developing in cyberspace represents the hope and promise for the ongoing survival of the independent black presses, established ones and upstarts alike.

Where established black cyber presses such as the Post, the Recorder, the Afro-American, the Tribune, Ebony, and Jet (among others) provide a necessary link to the past and its lessons, newer ones like the Capital Times, the Conduit, One Magazine, and even the journal Callaloo become beacons lighting the pathways of progress to the future. As it stands currently, the black press presence in cyberspace is promising indeed; it remains to be seen, however, whether the Internet and this counterpublic will continue to coevolve as the World Wide Web matures. If the history of the black press is its prologue, then we can be confident that the story of the black press in cyberspace will be epic and regenerative. Epic too will be the story of the African diaspora in the coming era of ever-newer migrations.

Notes

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1. Apparently, for Yahoo the term Afrocentric is interchangeable with black, and it functions more generally and descriptively than philosophically or ideologically as Molefi Asante uses the term.

2. The Bakke decision became the legal watershed event that set the stage for the successful passage of Proposition 209 and the rest. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled on 3 November 1997 that Prop. 209 would stand and that appeals against the measure would not be heard. The New York Times reported on 2 November 1997 that “the number of minorities entering U.S. Medical schools dropped 11% this year, most drastically in states affected by affirmative action rollbacks. . . . Some educators . . . fear the figures show that actions of a federal court in Texas and the voters of California to end educational preferences for minorities are echoing through the nation.” The report cites medical schools in California, Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana as particular cases in point (A-23).

3. See Roszak (1994) for an insightful discussion of the symbiosis of the 1948 discovery of cybernetic information theories and microbiological research into cracking the “genetic code” of DNA. According to Roszak, Norbert Weiner’s “too esoteric” work on cybernetics “found its most dramatic support from another, unexpected quarter: Biology—or rather, the new biology, where the most highly publicized scientific revolution since Darwin was taking place. In 1952, microbiologists James Watson and Francis Crick announced that they had
solved the master problem of modern biology. They had broken the ‘genetic code’ hidden deep within the molecular structure of DNA. The very use of the word ‘code’ in this context is significant. . . . It immediately seemed to link the discoveries of the biologists to those of the new information theorists, whose work had much to do with the ‘encoding’ of information. . . . Since its inception, the new biology has been so tightly entwined with the language and imagery of information science that it is almost impossible to imagine the field developing at all without the aid of the computer paradigm” (16–17).

4. These ideas are found throughout Jacques Derrida’s writings, including his books Of Grammatology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and Writing and Difference (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

5. For a thorough treatment of the confluence of African and European musical traditions, see Jones 1963.

6. I learned of the Million Women March organizers’ use of the Internet in telephone and on-line discussions with Ken Anderson, the march Web master, in 1997.

7. For discussions of race, gender, and public spaces, consult, for example, such works as hooks 1989; Locke 1992; Smith 2000.


10. The conclusion of Chansanchai’s article includes the following quote from a 131st Street Block Association administrator: “The idea behind Jerra’s self-esteem is that she knows she is somebody, that she is a leader in her own right and not a struggling kid. On 110th and Lexington, when she walks out, the whole path from here to the school is negative. The whole environment is negative.”


12. In 1987 Ben Bagdikian commented on the role of big media corporations in narrowing the information spectrum of American citizens. Bagdikian writes: “Each year it is more likely that the American citizen who turns to any medium—newspapers, magazines, radio or television, books, movies, cable, recordings, video cassettes—will receive information, ideas, or entertainment controlled by the same handful of corporations, whether it is daily news, a cable entertainment program, or a textbook. Any surprise of a few years ago is replaced by the demonstration that media giants have become so powerful that government no longer has the will to restrain them. Corporate news media and business oriented governments have made common cause. The public, dependent on the media giants for its basic information, is not told of the dangers” (ix).
13. Pride and Wilson (1997) make the important distinction between “a strictly Negro newspaper,” which *Freedom’s Journal* initiated, and an “abolitionist newspaper run by whites with Black assistance” (9). Apparently, the distinction turns on the fact of black fiscal and editorial control over all aspects of the newspaper in question. In this case, of course, the model is Cornish and Russwurm’s weekly newspaper, the *Freedom’s Journal*.

14. It is true that without black press venues the literary careers of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and George Schuyler, among many, many others would likely have been impossible given the racial chauvinism of the white literary establishment. In fact, the remarkable science fiction texts *Black Empire* and *Black Internationale*, written as novellas by Schuyler and appearing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the mid-1930s, were nearly lost to us until their recent republication by Northeastern University Press. According to the editors of the recent edition of *Black Empire*, Schuyler wrote more than four hundred pieces of fiction for the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the thirties alone (Robert A. Hill and Kent Rassmussen, eds., *Black Empire* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991], 259–60).

15. Another black press entity on-line, the *Network Journal*, boasted of its early adopter status on its Web site in July 1997. In the article “The Network Journal Celebrates a Successful First Year on the Internet,” the editors announce: “The *Network Journal* was one of the first African American publications to have an online edition and still one of the few where you can read the entire stories that are in the print edition. The *Network Journal*’s website is a pioneer that blazed the Internet trail before *Black Enterprise*, *Essence*, *Emerge*, and *YSB*, among others and had established an Internet presence before the *New York Times*, the *Daily News* or the *New York Post*” (www.tmj.com/birthday/htm).

16. For example, the *New York Age* newspaper had its own weekly radio show on the WOV. The *Age*’s “radio:-: drama” columnist, Vere E. Johns, was the host of the radio program as well; see front-page advertisement for the show, *New York Age*, 14 May 1932. In “Negro History Week Radio Shows; Other Coming Events,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 February 1949, 24, there is a catalog of black programs to air over various radio stations, national and local. The *New York Amsterdam News*’s special “Television Section” contained this optimistic view of TV: “Most of our readers probably want to know, how do Negroes fit into this TV picture? They have a fair start, and should go much further—especially so, if the public demands such. At present the following Negroes have their own TV shows. Bob Howard is heard daily over CBS-TV . . . . The Three Flames, instrumental group, is heard and seen four times each [sic] over WNBT. Amanda Randolph has her own unusual show over WABD each weekday. She plays piano, talks chatter and interview[s] guests—not the big names but little people” (“TV High Spots for Your Daily Entertainment,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 February 1949, 19). What is interesting about the *Amsterdam News*’s supplemental section on television is the half-page–sized advertisements for the General Electric televisions sets. It seems that there is no concern about the competition this new, rival medium posed at that time.
References


