DATA&
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Databite No. 132: On Race and Technoculture

André Brock

Recorded: 05/13/2020

Sareeta Amrute:

Hello everyone, welcome to Databite Number 132, on Race and Technoculture featuring André Brock. My name is Sareeta Amrute, I am Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Washington in Seattle and Director of Research here at Data & Society.

I ask you to join me in acknowledging the Lenape community, and the exclusions and erasures of many Indigenous peoples, not just the Lenape community, on whose lands Data & Society is located, in what we now refer to as New York City. This acknowledgement demonstrates a commitment to beginning the process of working to dismantle the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. Acknowledgments invite us to ask, What does it mean to live in a post and neo-colonial world? What did it take for us to get here? And how can we be accountable to our part in this history? Today I'd also like to take a moment to acknowledge the ongoing work being done to reclaim these lands for black and brown people, wherever that work is happening, in the streets, from the podium, everywhere. And I'd like to invite all of you now to use the Q&A function to acknowledge the lands that you're on, the traditional stewards of those lands, and also any other people who you want to acknowledge today in particular.

And now I'd like to turn it over to our featured presenter, André Brock, an associate professor of media studies at Georgia Tech. His scholarship examines racial representations in social media, video games, Black women and weblogs, whiteness, and technoculture, including innovative and groundbreaking research on Black Twitter. His first book, titled "Distributed Blackness, African American CyberCultures," which just came out from NYU Press in February, theorizes Black everyday lives mediated by network technologies. Welcome André.

André Brock:

Thank you for having me. Before I begin, I'd like to thank Sareeta Amrute for the invite, CJ Landow and Rigoberto Guzmán for their impeccable stewardship of this event, and danah boyd for encouraging me to give this talk to Data & Society. Virtual greetings to you all. This talk is drawn from my NYU Press book, "Distributed Blackness." As CJ mentioned, it just came out in February with NYU Press. It is available for purchase but because I love you all it is also available in open access and I'll share that link on my final slot.

So let's get started. My work on race in the digital is grounded by a three-part formulation of technology: that technologies must be understood as an artifact, the practices associated with that artifact, including the organizational aspects and belief. The digital is often only understood as artifact and practice. That is, what the technology is and what the technology does, leaving uninterrogated our beliefs about whiteness and technology, or Western technoculture which pervade the design of both. These beliefs are often presented as hosanna's to the twin deities of innovation and disruption, masking their very real destructiveness to our social fabric. Belief about technology is very much grounded in culture but it is as difficult to apprehend as water is to a fish because technologies are an extension of ourselves, how we perceive and control the world around us. To make the role of culture and technology practice visible, I needed to find a way to systematically investigate how belief manifests before technology use, within technology artifacts and technology practices, and after technology diffusion and deployment.

When it comes to technology practice, I have long been bemused by the connotation of race with respect to information technologies and communication. In social science and indeed in society, race is primarily ascribed to nonwhites, leaving whiteness and masculinity to embody an unmarked humanity and a default person or digital practitioner. With respect to Blackness and white racial ideology, Blacks are marked as primitives, and here I'm citing Ron Eglash of the University of Michigan, "Blacks are considered beings of uncontrolled emotion and direct bodily sensation, rooted in the soil of sensuality." And this can be seen in recent videotaped encounters between whites and police, and blacks and police, where the whites were armed in confronting police directly, shouting in their face, yet were unmarked and untouched, while blacks were assaulted with tear gas, rubber bullets, and in some cases, arrest. These attributes of uncontrolled emotion and direct bodily sensation render Black folk incapable of the rationality and objectivity apprehended as virtues of white masculinity and of technical institutions.

This apprehension, or capture, is far from accidental. Whiteness draws its energies, or libidinal tensions, from its fraught relationship with anti-Blackness. The carceral fixity of Blackness allows whiteness to possess what Richard Dyer calls "interpretive flexibility," where white racial identity can be highlighted as individualism, even as it recedes into the background to become universal. Every other group is marked by its differentiation from that norm. In "Distributed Blackness" I argue that the digital has a similar interpretive flexibility, thanks to its characteristics of virtuality and simulation. For example, consider your experiences using someone else's phone. It's often a familiar device because they're all shaped the same, but everyone configures their phone according to their own needs and desires, rendering them hard to navigate once you're holding someone else's phone in your hand. From this perspective, you should understand the internet as an unmarked yet individuated common space. At least until you get to spaces like Pinterest or BlackPlanet. These spaces, where marginalized digital practitioners congregate, are marked as niche online destinations, never universal destinations. From this perspective, I argue for something that I love to call technoculture. One way to define it is, "the beliefs, the relations

between, and the politics of culture and technology." And Joel Dinerstein argues that technology is how America understands itself; an American mythos. And this slide lists his excellent Western technocultural qualities that describe the libidinal tensions powering belief about technology in the West: progress, religion, whiteness, modernity, masculinity, and the future. Strangely, these tensions trick off of the racial formation of whiteness as civilization. That is, these qualities could easily be substituted as the characteristics of white folk as Du Bois argues as much in his book "Dusk of Dawn."

When tied to technoculture, white racial ideology reserves the quality of control over enterprise, over the spirit, over the future, the world and other bodies, and deems them as norms for "their" technology use. In this simulation of a technocultural world, Black bodies are objects to be acted upon, rather than as agents or people with subjectivity. And that obviously wouldn't do for a book on Black technoculture. For me to argue for Black technoculture, it became necessary to interrogate how Black culture makes sense of itself as agents and subjects in their own right. Utilizing technical artifacts, services and platforms in the social-historical context. Those who are familiar with my work will understand this framework as originating from a method that I devised called "critical technocultural discourse analysis," which argues that you must understand technology use from the perspectives of the users, rather than the designers or a society which doesn't regard them as human beings.

Reorienting technoculture to incorporate Blackness invites an inquiry into the possibilities of Blackness as technology. But how to articulate a Black presence in the technoculture designed around their chattel origins and political death? One way to begin answering this question starts with a callback to a seminal print culture artifact, "The Green Book." As you may remember, this critically-acclaimed movie featured a white protagonist helping a black man discover his Blackness on a road trip through the South. Oh wait, that's not the right "Green Book." I am referring instead to Victor Green's "The Negro Motorist Green Book" which was the inspiration poorly drawn upon for the movie I just showed a screenshot of. For those who are interested in exploring it further, several scanned editions are available for free on the New York Public Library website. At first glance, the NGB is just a book; a directory of Black businesses published by blacks for blacks, or the original FUBU long before the internet. Some argue for the NGB as a tool to resist postcolonial and postbellum legacies of white racial violence and hegemony, and I agree, but I insist that the NGB should also be viewed as one of the first cultural-oriented network browsers. The network in this instance was a United States Highway System, a developing infrastructure tailored for the exponentially growing numbers of automobile owners.

As early as the 1910s, black drivers saw automobile ownership as a pathway to personal mobility, technological expertise, and a signal of having made it, or attaining the newly-formed American middle class. Arguing for the NGB as Black technoculture, an informational artifact linking black information-seekers to Black cultural resources seems like a no brainer. For you old heads, the NGB was the Yahoo open directory of its time. A

human-powered search engine for those seeking culturally vital, protective, and vivifying information. The NGB imagine the United States Highway System as a black technological apparatus. Not as an Afrofuture, but as a modern marvel, containing possibilities for spanning time and space while experiencing joy and limiting, but not erasing, possibilities for violence. Reorienting technoculture to incorporate black agency then, invites an inquiry into the possibilities of Blackness as technology. Shout out to Wendy Chun. Not Black bodies because we've been there and done that, but Black folk as technical experts, employing an ethics of care and self-repair to make a dollar out of 15 cents. While the information doesn't offer the same physical potential for discrimination and racist violence against Black bodies, there is still a pressing need for the curation of digital and online resources for Black folks seeking information or even safe spaces.

Today the need for casting internet spaces as refuge has become hardly evident with social media's capacity to publish and redistribute images of Black death at the hands of the state. So in short, network cultural information, or as my book is titled, "Distributed Blackness," is essential to Black identity in the form of resources for identification, community, self-defense, joy, resistance, aesthetics, and more. So I've named-dropped the libidinal, and let me tell you why. Libidinal economy offers a powerful counter to cultural-theoretic, social-scientific, and political-economic theories used to understand both Black agency and information technology use. The sociologists among you may recognize the reference here to Oscar Lewis's "Cultural Poverty" as popularized by Daniel Moynihan's report. For example, social scientific analyses of the internet are often beholden to concepts of objectivity and rationality, even as they are undergirded by Western beliefs about Black folks perceived capacities for deviance and deficit, or conversely to glorifying Black capacities for labor and political resistance. Libidinal economy makes clear the effective tensions undergirding modernity and Western technoculture, while providing a path towards conceptualizing black technology use as a space where the mundane, the banal, and the celebration of making it through another day.

The libidinal is not pre-cognition, nor is it pre-intention. And instead, it can be understood as the combustion powering the engine. A visceral, powerful, and necessary component in any figuration of social design. It is infrastructure invisible to our perceptions just like the materials and processes that we pass by or utilize every day until a rupture occurs. I'm going to interject on my own presentation. Someone posted a Tweet talking about how Spike Lee received a lot of criticism when "Do the Right Thing" was screened in the 1980s because people were upset that he depicted someone throwing a trash can through the window of Sal's Pizzeria as the riot. And he said it's so fascinating to them that they were worried that that image of starting a riot would be destructive of racial relations but very few people seem to comment on the fact that Raheem was choked out by the police. That was a norm, where the riot, where white property and white perceptions of civility were threatened, was considered a rupture.

André Brock:
So libidinal economic perspective on Black technoculture allows for the teasing apart of multi-layered reasons behind Black practices, distribution, performance, and aggregation against digital and material social structures. While Black folk are indeed American, and use technologies not designed for them to make money and to get over, they also use them in ways that confound traditional technology analyses. And this approach is intended to readdress that shortcoming. This approach offers multiple beneficial outcomes. One is the aforementioned disinvestment and technoculture substrate of logic and rationality. Logic and rationality are invested with libidinal tensions. They require divesting emotion from cognition in order to achieve an objective decision. Libidinal economy and its formulation as 'an excess of life,' expands my inquiry into digital distributed Blackness from productivity or efficiency, to incorporate analyses of Black digital practice engendered by joy. Or by playfulness. Or by anger. Or ratchetry, racism, and respectability.

Another is the acknowledgement and the theorization of Black communal identity as a meaning-making strategy for information use. This allows for understanding Blackness as a discourse in conversation with, but not wholly subject to, white supremacist ideology and a refutation of the category on nature of capitalist identity. So the beliefs about Blackness as deviance and deficit I mentioned on the previous slide, can be understood as anti-Blackness. And as a significant aspect of white racial ideology, anti-blackness is a carceral attitude towards Blackness, Black bodies, and Black culture. From this position, Blackness in America is lived as social, political, and occasionally even physical death. And one way to understand this ongoing state of affairs is the powerful theory of Afro-pessimism. Frank Wilderson argues that because Black folk have no legible stature in the West as political or civil agents, they have no inalienable rights to Black cultural production, Black labor, or even their own Black bodies. Thus, Blackness and online spaces and elsewhere, is immediately captured and occasionally commodified by others, leaving little possibility for blacks to have agency, much less emancipation, from Western culture.

I agree, but instead of going fully towards Afro-pessimism, I instead adopt an Afro-optimist perspective. That is, my pressing concern for Black technoculture is to reinvision agency. That is, to express the vitality and joy. A libidinal economy of Black uses of information technologies and all other technologies of the everyday. While these libidinal impulses may become commodified or surveilled, they are para-ontological in that the embodied cognition they expressed preexists the platforms upon which they are published, visible, and deemed appropriate for consumption. Usually I try to lighten it up at this point, but there's some things going on that I felt the need to address in this presentation. So let me skip a little bit. I mention earlier that in "Distributed Blackness" I explore three libidinal frames of Black digital practice, and those three again are: racism, ratchetry, and respectability. By libidinal frame, I mean that beyond productivity or commodification, there are underlying tensions that also contribute to the content and behaviors that you see online.

I want to turn briefly to the one frame describing an external influence on Black digital practice. Racism. I argue, and feel free to debate, that racism is a set of external practices, institutions, and beliefs, that deprecate and delineate, but do not overdetermine. Thank you for the use of alliteration at that moment. Or is it continence? We'll figure that out. They delineate but do not overdetermine Black identity. That is, not every black activity is determined by the racism Black folk experience through daily or systemic micro and macro aggressions. But, some of it is. And while the practice of online racism has received enormous attention, the effects of online racism on Black folk have not been as thoroughly researched. In "Distributed Blackness" I argue that racism implicitly and explicitly compels Black interiority through the libidinal frame of reflexivity. While the explicit is agregious, the implicit is more damaging over time.

Black folk can, and do, build a communal identity over their awareness of racism, their positionality to racist and racist acts, and through their responses to racism, whether it's immediate outrage like getting a new TV from Target, or whether it's posting online, please don't repost those pictures of Black death. Libidinal Black digital clapbacks, to weak-tie online racism, and we can discuss that in the Q&A, create an affective and intimate and in-group bonds that are responsive to racist ideology, but not solely constituted by racism. These acknowledgements are what I'm calling black interiority. Where they repost or respond to racism as a hail, or the capitalist for a cathartic or emotional rejoinder. Remember I said libidinal clapbacks. This is a libidinal clapback to the effects of racism, the pandemic, this photo that I have on the screen.

In experiencing racism, Black folk must evaluate both the ontology and epistemology, the what and the why, of white supremacy as well as how it affects them. Those of you in the know understand that microaggressions require daily vigilance to assure that one's sanity has not been compromised. In online spaces, network libidinal tensions arise from the diffusion of racist and racialized content through social media practice, connectivity, and algorithmic publishing. I call this phenomenon weak-tie racism; where racism manifests through digital media's affordances for sharing information. These microaggressions have no author and are not individually performative. It is Bonilla-Silva's "Racism without Racists." Instead, the algorithm serves them up as the reproduction of banal social signals deemed important through the commodification of minute traces of social interaction, leading to an anti-Black libidinal effect on Black digital practice.

The algorithm is the catalyst and weak-tie relationship between content and node, demanding as it does its own interaction and reciprocity to sustain this inimical relationship between user and network. Weak-tie racism is nebulous and draining. Its injury accretes over time. A slow violence that is dispersed across time and space, and an attritional violence that is typically not viewed by the network as violence at all. It is the hate speech act, rather than the hate speech itself. Switching gears slightly, actually not slightly, I'm going from two to four. But I wanted to talk briefly about another way of trying to understand what black interactions with technology could look like. And one of those is

Afrofuturism. We can talk about it in the Q&A but to briefly describe, Afrofuturism is a marvelous construct in which to examine black engagement with and through technology, past, present, and future. But Afrofuturism I argue is more concerned with Black futures. And Black cyber culture, or technoculture, is better argued for the post-present. Particularly as constructed and contested through the mundane digital practices in Black cultural digital spaces and the like. By post-present, I mean that Black folk in digital spaces are constantly engaged with the moment, or kairos. And by kairos, let me offer an example. If you've ever tried to enter a group chat after an event has been discussed, you already know what it means.

André Brock:
I deploy kairos here to articulate Black digital practice as a celebration of the now, one that incorporates past inequities and future imaginings. Black kairos is simultaneously racial performance, discursive invention, and appropriate, timely engagement within communicative and cultural context. Timeliness, or the lack thereof, is a significant aspect of Black discursive identity. For example, the concept of colored people's time describes a joyous disregard for modernity and labor capitalism. Or I might be late, but I'm always on time. Kairos as deployed here, refers to the temporality afforded Black discourse by network protocols, communal structures, and the instantaneity in archival capacity of information networks. For example, showing the receipts is one black discursive digital practice situating past transgressive behaviors. You know, that blackface photo that you had Ralph Northam when you were in high school, or college, right? Often in the form of digitized documents, but occasionally in visual or multimedia testimony in the now, usually via social media to become into the pond and read, as evidence in the moment.

There are other practices that we can talk about during the Q&A but I'm running short on time so let me skip. So, in the process of claiming that Blackness should have agency in technoculture, and trying to understand what the aspects of that agency would look like, I constructed a Black technocultural matrix. It is similar to the Western one. I was strongly influenced by it, but it has its own qualities and these are: blackness, intersectionality, invention/style, "America," modernity, and the future. And I wanted to briefly touch on the reason why I have America in asterisk. And I do that because I am specifically referring to the African diaspora although Africa itself, the very nations over there, have their own forms of African technocultures. I wanted to separate out the ways that the middle passage in some ways, but also interaction with indigenous and white colonial enterprises has changed the way that black folk in the New World respond to and understand themselves through technology.

The thing I want to focus on here though, is Blackness. Blackness for this matrix stands for the embodied and critical valances of Black cultural identity revolving around subjectivity, cultural performance, and communal identification. So Rachel Dolezal can do subjectivity and cultural production, but she won't be accepted by the community. Right? For those of you who might want to try to throw a transracial at me later on. One reason a theory of

Black technoculture is necessary is for the articulation that information, communication, and technology afford's Blackness space within which. Pause. One reason a theory of Black technoculture is necessary is because it articulates Blackness a space within which it can luxuriate and grow, enclave from, but never free from, white racial ideology. This possibility exists because of the disembodiment enabled by virtuality and simulation. That is, when participating in an online space, Blackness lives as an existential here, largely unrestricted by the fixity and pejorative reduction of the Black body that occurs offline.

 It's not that the Black body is left behind, assembling that it is not as easily available to be criticized or commented upon in online spaces. So online I am not only a point of view, but I am also a point that is viewed. The matrix category of Blackness then, is a communitarian enactment of intentionality across cultural aspects of Black culture, or that Blackness is irreducibly social. Along the way, Blackness highlights how the white Western libidinal economy of anti-Blackness structures the world that Black Americans find themselves at. And as a counter, the Black libidinal economy, or Black pathos, begins with the celebration of Black thought. Not solely as joy, but in its embodied Black existence. It is at once a response to the effects of modernity and white supremacy on the Black psyche, and a politics of the erotic engaging with honest bodies that like to also fuck.

Shout out to Dr. Joan Morgan. Where whiteness gains power from obscuring its internal differences, Blackness is a recognition of that which makes black folk different. In closing, my claims for informational Blackness and Black cyber culture are indebted to Gilroy's "The Black Atlantic," where he argues that analyses of Black modernity require attention to the formal attributes of expressive culture and a distinctive moral basis. The aesthetic which the continuity of expressive culture preserves, derives not from a dispassionate and rational evaluation of the technical object- Gilroy says artistic, but I'm taking a little liberty- right, but from an inescapably subjective contemplation of the mimetic functions of technical performance. I read this in the context of technoculture, Black and other, as a plea for researchers to interrogate the meaning-making functions of digital media and information technology. Both the artifact and the culture. They do not just serve as conduits for expression but are inextricably linked through enactment as part of the performance of identity itself. Similarly, information and communication technology serve as conduits and enactments of white identity as well. This is never been more clear since the ascendancy and impeachment of the 45th president, whose Twitter activities have been translated into executive orders, employment mandates, domestic and foreign policy, and even injunctions to the legislative and judicial branches of the government. As with other expressions of whiteness, xenophobia, classism, racists, and misogyny, it's tempting and depressingly common to attribute 45 social media activities, to the actions of a deviant individual. However, as the public intellectual and activist Alyssa Milano recently learned, this is the America she grew up in. Apart from the election of a black president, little has changed.

Sareeta Amrute:
Thank you so much André. That was really fantastic. I am going to take the presenter's liberty of asking you a few questions to start us off. Then I will just some questions from the Q&A. So first off I want to frame a question based on some of the things you said today that were highlighted a little bit more than in the book. And it really comes out of this point you're making about care and self-repair. I'd like to ask you about these two points that I see as being somewhat in tension with one another. One is, the idea that distributed Blackness means that online spaces are spaces of care and self-repair. In that, the Black body is obviously there for critique, but not as available to critique as it is in the street. Right? But at the same time in your talk, you also mentioned that there are these microaggressions that produce a slow death in those same spaces. So could you sync those two points together for us and pull out the care and self-repair piece a little bit?

André Brock:
I can. So if your audience may be familiar with Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?." In that book, she talks about the fact that in order to remember that they are indeed people, to survive the aggressions- macro and micro- from not only their fellow students but from administrators and teachers, these students were gathered together in one corner of the cafeteria and they would joke, they would laugh, they would form hip hop ciphers. They would do all kinds of things to ultimately care for themselves and perform a function of repair to address the ways that the institution and the people around them had tried to tear them down. Right? And so the need for that enclave. And here I'm citing Catherine Squires, of Black Counter Republics, where she talks about the enclave as a space where Black folk can retreat to discuss concerns about the public sphere, or the space that they're in without necessarily worrying about interruption. That type of enclave is something that you'll find anytime you see more than a few people gathered in a space that they feel comfortable in in online spaces, one such as Black Twitter. On the previous slide I mentioned America and asterisks to talk about the matrix of white racial ideology that Black Americans find themselves in. Or Western ideology that diasporic Blacks find themselves in around the world. We are constantly confronted with representations, institutions, and individuals who are intent on stripping us of our humanity.

We are constantly confronted by individuals, 'BBQ Becky,' Anne Cooper, and others, who feel as if we do not belong in spaces that are ostensively public, or even on our own homes as Henry Louis Gates found a few years back, when the policemen arrested him on the steps of his own house. And it always brings to mind that Dave Chappelle joke from "Killing Them Softly," and he talks about two policemen who found a black man in a house and shot him, and then looked around and said, "Look at here at Johnson. He hung up pictures of himself in this house. How dare he." So, we're constantly in these environments where we don't belong, where we are not allowed to be. And so that constant tension, that navigation, is what W.E.B. Du Bois talks about for double consciousness. The awareness that you have humanity in a world which is intent on stripping it from you. But then the of having to

negotiate both spaces. Right? So I don't necessarily see it as a counterproductive tension but I think it's necessary to keep it in mind when you're talking about any figuration of Blackness. Not just online, but offline as well.

Sareeta Amrute:
Yeah. Thank you. Another question I had is about the term libidinal. You turn to the libidinal to get away from the deficit and resistance narratives about Blackness and technology, which are totally inadequate in describing Black cybercultures. But, the libidinal is not always good, right? It's not only a drive toward pleasure, or rather, not all pleasures are happy ones. Can you draw that point out for us a bit?

André Brock:
I came to the libidinal through François Léotard and Roland Barthes. I get dragged for that on occasion because I don't go back to Deleuze or Jung but I stuck with Léotard in particular because he talked about a libidinal economy, right? The idea that there are dispensations of energies that drive even the most rational enterprises. And Léotard's libidinal, his signal term, is jouissance, which can't really be translated into English but for Léotard is often sexual. But jouissance stands for me as excess of life. Right? And that excess can be rage, but that excess can also be eros. Right? It really kind of depends on what you're bringing to the situation but then also forms how you will respond to a situation. So one of the ways I talk about it in the book is the ratchet. The idea that there is a particular way that black people will interact with a social situation that doesn't give a damn about the standards of propriety or civility. What they are intent upon is expressing themselves to the fullness of the libidinal energies that they feel, whether that's through style, whether that's through anger, whether that's through a dance battle while Chris Brown flips upside down and then ends up getting shot. The libidinal is all of those things.

I've argued in other talks that without these libidinal energies, this communal attempt to express an excess of life, Black Lives Matter would not have had such a profound impact on American society and politics. Because before you can be angry together, you kind of sort of need to be able to laugh together. You need to be able to cry together. And those energies, that affect, although I hate to use the word, that affect is what I think preexists any moments of political calculation or even rational intention. I'll give it a terrible example. A really good example of libidinal being para-ontological, being before thought, is, they always say never go shopping when you're hungry. It's not that hunger is a conscious emotion, right? But when you go to pick out the various groceries that you "need" for your household to subsist for the next couple of weeks, you often end up with items, or I end up with items like ice cream and donuts and shortbread cookies and the like. The libidinal energy of hunger. And I would argue hunger is libidinal, it's not just an embodied sensation. Leads me to make additional decisions above and beyond my necessity, or for efficiency. How's that?

Sareeta Amrute:

Yeah, that's great. I mean, one of the things I love the most about this book is how not reductive it is. Even though you're talking about a thing that we call Black Twitter, you show us so clearly all the different kinds of signifying, ratchetry, respectability politics, that are happening in those spaces and in communication with each other. So I think that's really helpful. I'm going to turn it over to the Q&A soon, but I do have this curiosity about the term warrant. Provide yourself a warrant to make an argument or do something. Can you tell us a little, methodologically, about how the idea of warrant functions for you and making arguments.

André Brock:
So these are the vestiges of my rhetorical training. But also a little bit about Fanon and the idea of apprehension. Althusser picks this up as well with this concept of interpellation. That at a certain moment you are hailed into being by someone external to you. For Fanon, It was a little boy with his mother saying, "Look mama, a negro." For Althusser, he talked about the apprehension of a person minding their own business by the policemen who suddenly becomes a criminal. And what happens at both situations but it's not always clearly discussed, is that there are warrants, there are reasons why these people address a person in this fashion. And for me, warrant ties really neatly into the libidinal. However, my developmental editor told me to take all instances of warrant out the books and I'm sorry that I did not do so. Which leads me to be in question for this point. But yeah, I'm fascinated by the idea that there are always reasons for questions. Also, in the context of big data, we are very rarely concerned with the warrants behind the collection of data. What are the beliefs and suspicions that lead to certain data being collected? At what questions is it intended to answer before it even gets to an algorithm? And so warrant is something that has been really conceptually profitable for me, that I'm really not good at explaining.

Sareeta Amrute:
Andreé, I think your developmental editor and I would probably have words on that one because it was something that really sparked jouissance for me, in the way that it really does bring together. And as an anthropologist who is interested in the groundings for certain sorts of rationality, I think through Fanon and eros in my own work, it really did bring together for me rationality with the libidinal. In the next book, warrant. Go warrant. So the last question for me is really about this term technoculture. I've been noticing quite a bit that every theorist or every thinker is trying to bring the techno together with something else, because we know that it's no longer enough as an explanatory framework. So, you know, technopolitics, sociotechnical, your own technocultural. Can you give us a sense of why you think these portmanteaus are being wildly generated now? And what for you is specific about technoculture versus some of these other terms?

André Brock:
Coming from information science, one of our initial canonical readings is Shannon and Weaver's "Information Theory." And you know, they talk about a receiver with content and noise,. And in many ways, hypertext protocols, but a lot of the mechanics and protocols of

the internet are shaped on that particular thing. There are certain things that are responsible, that the network should transmit. And there are other things that should be discarded. In many ways that particular approach also led to, at least for my field, the ignoring of any cultural elements and Mumford calls this "techno-rationalism." Any cultural or social elements that seem to be extrinsic to the message itself should be discarded. But over the last 20 years or so, especially with the rise of web 2.0 but I guess we could even say prior to that- but I'll just pin it at that point- people began realizing that the human element, and we could talk about Latour as well here, is inextricable from the network and the device. And so that's where I think these portmanteaus started arising. The sociotechnical. I come out of a field called social informatics. And many of these formulations, they focus on institutions. Or individuals as the progenitors of technological services and devices. And I had a problem with that too, because I have a problem with lots of things. Because 'social' doesn't necessarily capture the cultural manifestations that are happening in us and other space.

So it's strange that you can talk about social in an institution where women, and white women, happen to be the people who handle the majority of the information work, while they are working for white men who are the executives and who they're doing this work for. But social only looks at their activity as administrative assistant and executive. And I'm like, well, where's the influence of whiteness? Where's the influence of gender? Those things require, to me, a cultural outlook. And so I've been talking for a few years about critical cultural informatics. In part because museum studies stole cultural informatics from me. Critical and cultural in that you must interrogate the cultural background. Why are we not looking more at why racism is an inextricable part of Silicon Valley and information technology practice? That's not a social phenomenon. That's a cultural phenomenon that happens to escape social institutions. So for me, sociotechnical doesn't quite do it, although I respect the work that they do. I went to technoculture and I was deeply influenced by James Carey, Clifford Christians, and Ivan Ilitch. All these people who are talking about the influence of culture. Arnold Pacey is my signal formulation here of culture on technology, use practice, and design.

Sareeta Amrute:
That is great. That leads straight into a question from the Q&A chat. Which is, does Black Technoculture need Black technology infrastructure?

André Brock:
Nope. Alright, I'll be fair. It doesn't need it. And in some cases it's a hindrance. I wrote an article about 10 years ago about this browser that was designed, well actually modded, by black entrepreneurs called Blackbird. And Blackbird was specifically designed for Black information seekers. They even had a targeted Google search, which you could purchase at the time from Google, that Safiya Noble talks about algorithms of oppression and how, in Google search, if you typed "black girls" you would get black porn. This targeted search for Blackbird didn't do that. Which was kind of an amazing development in 2010. But the black

people who came across Blackbird were not necessarily fans, for two reasons. One, black people have this deep antipathy towards being perceived as a common homogenous mass. They always say that black people are not all one person. There's a heterogeneity to blackness and they felt that by using this informational artifact, they will be compressed into the perception of blackness as one type of person. And so drawing from that, they were like, who are these black people to say what kind of black person I am? Who did they consult? That comes with the problem of saying, "I'm creating something for black people." Black people always want to know, "Well who all did you come with? How do we know your interests in blackness are the same as mine?" The second piece is, and I think this is a really good one, they were concerned that by only having access, or by being primarily directed to Black information resources that would segregate them from the wider internet. And this is a really interesting point to me because Black folk are American, and they are information citizens, so they want access to the Googles, the New York Times, and Wall Street Journals just like everyone else. We just also want news that portrays us in a humanistic light. And so their concern was that something that was specifically only for black people would segregate them from the wider world, which I think is an important concern.

Sareeta Amrute:
Yeah. That answer that leads into another question up on the Q&A, which is about enclaves. Okay. So the question is, "In response to this need for enclave, can you talk about the persistence of the white gaze in online communities created for and by black people? What strategies are there to mitigate the risk of this?" You probably need to turn that question around a little bit.

André Brock:
Little bit. It kind of builds upon the answer I just gave. In this modern surveillance society, there are a few spaces where black people can congregate without the white gaze being intrusive at some point. I've mean contact tracing, which is being talked about really heavily right now, is dependent upon tracking GPS signals and using Bluetooth beacons to find when you came in contact with people. That technology already exists. The idea that you will be forever free of the white gaze is a pipe dream. As long as we're part of white society, that's something that will continue to define us, right? And the mitigation of risk is something that black people already do. We are welcoming to people who come to us with the intent upon understanding who we are, and we are inimical or unwelcoming to people who come to us on false pretenses, or come to us with enmity. Right? And that's the communal aspect I talk about. And that's not necessarily specifically to Black communities, although those are the ones that I study. And many online communities, and here I'm citing Ray Oldenberg's "Third Places," the great, the good, and the... I can't remember the third part. But he talks about these discourse communities, these third places, which regulate themselves by restricting membership to people who can perform in a way that is conducive to the care and self-prepare of the community. In many cases for black people, we do that recognition based on your skin color, and your allegiance to Black identity and

the difficulties that entails. And those are the strategies that we already use to mitigate the risk. As far as the technical strategy, I'm not quite sure how to answer that.

Sareeta Amrute:
Yep. So a question that will push back on what you just said a little bit is about what's happening on Black Twitter. The poster rights. "I feel that Black Twitter is a corner of the internet that always responds to popular culture and always amplifies white media, and may in fact be beneficial to the acceleration of white Western hegemony." And the speaker also asks, "Is Black technoculture really an existential heel to the dominant culture?Or is it just living in the margins in a nonthreatening way?"

André Brock:
It's not nonthreatening at all. Anytime more than three black people are in a space, that space gets considered less valuable, and more available for sanctioning and control. So it's not nonthreatening.

Sareeta Amrute:
Even in online space.

André Brock:
Even in online spaces. Just a Omar Wasow and Gary Dauphin talk about when they were pitching BlackPlanet to VCs and highlighting BlackPlanet's really innovative feature before Myspace of being able to create your own web pages using your own HTML code. And the VCs didn't believe that black people could do that, would do that. They didn't think we had the capacity. So we're always conceived as a threat and as less than. It's not a heel either, anymore than being able to brush your teeth every morning is a heel, anymore than being able to dap your boys, or hug your girls, when you see them is a heel. It's just yet another space that we can enter and relax in, that allows us to navigate the inequities of everyday life. It's not so much a palliative as it is a strategy for a living. A celebration of black agency and humanity. So I pushed back on the idea that it is nonthreatening or a marginalized space. In some ways, Black Twitter has been understood as the definitive use case for Twitter. I would argue Black Instagram is similar for Instagram. And in many spaces we define what the way to work in a particular technical space is, to that space. And so, again, this is why I came up with libidinal economy. I don't want to focus on resistance, right? I don't want to focus on oppression either. What I do want to focus on is how we navigate both those things using the communal bonds and jouissance. The excessive life that we bring to every other situation.

Sareeta Amrute:
A question that follows right on there might refer to something you didn't get to talk about today as much. But Thanksgiving. Okay. The question is, "You mentioned categories of racism, ratchet, and respectability. How do you view representations of joy?"

André Brock:
Joy is a complicated emotion. Right? Joy is not always happiness. Joy is sometimes relief. Right? It's deeply contextual. What is joy for one will not be joy for the other. And so I need to police myself better. But I do see black joy as essential in articulating a passion for life, a passion for living. Using invention and style and black communal allegiance. So I mentioned often Jalaiah Harmon, the inventor of the Renegade dance on TikTok. And how, while it ended up being commodified and taken over by this young white women who got invited to the NBA All-Star game to perform it. When Jalaiah originally came up with it, you can see the joy and the passion she has for dance in her every movement. Right? She didn't originally create it to be paid for. She created it so people could appreciate how good she was at what she was doing. And it is that kind of embodied cognition, joy and self ,that I try to highlight in this particular analysis of technological use. It's not productivity. It's not making a dollar. It's more bringing a passion. And this is not something that's specific to Blackness. But I find one of the carceral ideas that tend to prohibit the expression of Blackness online is that we always have to be doing it for something. We always had to be doing it towards some political or civil goal. And I think it's much more important to understand that we do it for us. Right? For our own care and repair.

Sareeta Amrute:
Thank you. We have time for one more question, but I'm just going to sneak in two. The first one is asking you to comment a little bit on facial recognition technology and racism, referencing Joy Buolamwini's work. So could you expand a little bit more on that? The second question is, "How would you like to see your method, CTDA, applied by other scholars?"

André Brock:
Hello, Tanya Sutherland. I love you. So the facial recognition and surveillance. Joy's particular approach to it has been critiqued by people smarter than I. I'm specifically referring to Ramon Amaro's article, "As if." In "As if," Amaro critiques the idea that we need to be recognized by computer vision algorithms at all. What does that bring us? Right? What does it mean for us to be recognized by a system that is predetermined that we are a carceral subjects? And if in many ways the pandemic has been helpful to countervailing black surveillance, because I don't know if you saw how many looters had on masks at Target the other day. Right? And so not necessarily for looting, but just in the idea of being able to evade, or at least confuse, surveillance algorithms and facial recognition capture in order to proceed about everyday life without worrying about becoming a criminalized subject. I cannot really see a positive purpose for surveillance algorithms of facial recognition. And so the idea that we would construct a black technical object, and this is Amaro's term, not mine. A Black technical object that is better apprehended, and that word is intentional. Better apprehended by these carceral technologies is problematic to me. Why make it better? I don't necessarily understand the point. That's not to say Joy's work isn't great. It is great. It's hugely necessary. But the ends to which it will be put, are not the ends that I think she imagines when she's trying to make sure that we can be seen by this

training data and by these algorithms. The other question was CTDA?

Sareeta Amrute:
How should other scholars apply it?

André Brock:
This is something that I watch with fascination as people begin to take it up. My only concern for CTDA when people use it, is that you must put at the forefront, the philosophical perspective of the group that you're studying. So if you're studying the way native Hawaiians address social media posts on tourism and Nextdoor, you must start from a native Hawaiian philosophical perspective. And there are writers in each culture that are faithful and true to how that culture perceives the world. Not from a white Western gaze, although it may be informed by the principles of anthropology and sociology, but from a deep respect for the ways that that hurt those people regard time, space, property, selfhood, gender, sexuality, and the like. So that should be at the forefront. And that that philosophical perspective, so in my case I talk about Blackness, be applied to both the technology and to the people that are discussing themselves or understanding themselves through the technology. For Blackbird, I'll return to that, I took a critical cultural look using a Black identity to look at how the interface and the practices of that Blackbird browser, reified, or managed, or maintained Black identity. And similarly, I looked at both white and black perspectives on how that enactment worked out. It's complex. For those of you who are using CTA to write articles, good luck, because they're always going to tell you that there should have been two analyses. But for SIS, because that holistic perspective, where you get the way users understand the technology with the way technologies try to discipline who the users are, getting that holistically provides a really deep interrogation of what a technology means, rather than just is, to the people that are using it.

Sareeta Amrute:
Thank you, Andre. That's fantastic. Are there any more thoughts you'd like to leave us with today before I close this out?

André Brock:
For open access, to distributed Blackness, please go to opensquare.NYUPress.org. For graduate students and people who are unaffiliated, or broke people, if you want a PDF of my preprint PDF, I will, if you DM me on Twitter, send you a copy free of charge.

Sareeta Amrute:
Brilliant, André, thank you. Thanks everyone for joining us tonight and thank you again to André Brock, whose book distributed blackness is available to NYU press and the waste that Andre just laid out. Take out the chat window for an open source book link and how to continue these conversations online and a link to sign up for the data society events list. We welcome your feedback on the cement and suggestions for future programming. Thank you. And take care.