Introduction

This is a book that comes out of almost ten years of research and writing to help make everyday Black digital practices legible. After the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, I began to see my own networks—mostly on Black Twitter—mobilize, but not necessarily in the ways traditionally represented. I saw folks saving the digital whereabouts of Black activists to "keep the receipts" and restore dignity to those activists should anything happen to them. My own friends and I would direct message (DM) each other funny memes with made-up scenarios of being stopped by the police where we were the ones holding the power. *Black Networked Resistance: Strategic Rearticulations in the Digital Age* is about everyday Black resistance strategies online. It's about the histories of these strategies as various Black publics have strategically crafted, melded, and updated them to suit their needs across time periods and media platforms. Each chapter is grounded in or questions a resistance strategy—be it Black humor, archiving, care, "cancelling,"

or imagination—so as to piece together the interconnected threads of resistance and the craftiness of Black media practitioners.

In 2020, I saw Black networks mobilize again, and I was struck by the diversity of resistance strategies. When twenty-six-year-old Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville, Kentucky, police officers in her apartment on March 13, 2020, thousands of online Black users organized to disseminate information about Taylor's life, the conditions in which she was killed, and the ways that average citizens could hold the police officers accountable. Long before outlets like the *New York Times* deemed the killing a result of a "botched raid," Twitter users were investigating and sharing by the minute and by the millions the suspicious circumstances around Taylor's death and demanding accountability from the Louisville police department and indeed the nation. Some online posts simply read "Breonna Taylor" multiple times in succession, ensuring her name would remain at the top of algorithmically curated news. Other posts provided details about no-knock warrants and demanded that lawmakers take action to prevent police from entering people's homes unannounced, an effort that was eventually successful. Such online endeavors swelled into a summer of unforgettable protests in which Black folks led the charge in demanding justice for Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others killed in state-sanctioned procedures.

Around the same time and around a seemingly separate series of events, Black folks online were also crafting a narrative of "Karens." These posts largely included hilarious memes highlighting and exaggerating the visual aesthetics (the short hairdo, the scowling face) of white women calling the police on Black individuals for simply existing. Using humor replete with visual cues and linguistic dexterity, Black users reframed the ways that people understood the systemic and historical privilege of whiteness, and white women in particular: "You could die, and some soccer mom named Karen will still ask you to RSVP to Kevin's birthday party." Of course, the relationship between trauma and humor, or tragicomedy, as Glenda Carpio

writes in *Laughing Fit to Kill*, is not new for Black publics. Yet the widely creative range of Black online users' responses to varying forms of oppression brings into focus the cultural, communicative, political, and technological threads uniting resistance online. I argue that these Black users' responses to two seemingly unrelated, yet entirely connected, items—Breonna Taylor's murder and white women calling the police—demonstrate the strategic malleability of resistance online. Each chapter in this book centers on a particular resistance strategy, demonstrating the ways that Black publics reshape—or rearticulate—strategies of resistance over time and across media platforms. In focusing on these strategies, I not only link singular digital resistance movements, but I argue for Black publics as strategic content creators who shift, shape, and connect resistance strategies from our past to suit our present needs. I ultimately argue toward Black networked resistance as a historically enriched, connective, and iterative digital practice that intervenes in- and outside of online culture.

CONTRIBUTIONS

I make three central contributions to the fields of critical digital media studies and Black studies. First, I emphasize and connect the historically rich traditions of Black resistance strategies to contemporary iterations of digital culture, which Black networks not only inhabit but, in many ways, sustain. I examine these users' methods of communication online, analyzing profile curation, hashtags, case studies, and interview data. The book draws a through-line from historical methods of resistance, such as archival memoirs, to digital strategies like visual narratives of Juneteenth on Instagram. Such connections demonstrate the meticulous ways that Black folks have reshaped resistance strategies through specific media tools.

Several works have called for this kind of historical mapping of digital culture or performed such analyses in other contexts. In

Digital Black Feminism, for example, Catherine Knight Steele (2021) uses the history of the beauty shop as a metaphor for Black feminist technoculture. She argues that Black women have long created sites of entrepreneurship "within a system that does not equally disperse loans, provide capital, offer formal business training, or provide education in marketing and development" (pp. 47–48). Black women lifestyle bloggers and influencers, Steele continues, curate a loyal clientele online using similar tools of engagement as Black beauty shops do, such as building rapport using shared cultural experiences, language, and influences. I engage with Steele's work throughout the book as I think about resistance as affirming and generative for Black users.

Anna Everett's (2009) important analysis in *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* links Black historical media engagement to the digital through case studies of the Black press, the 1997 Million Woman March, and other developments. By tracing African and African Americans' engagement with technologies throughout the centuries, Everett pushes back against the long-worn myth of Black diasporic people existing outside of technology. In *Black Software*, Charlton McIlwain (2020) explores the history of digital racial justice activism by chronicling the long relationship that Black folks have had to computing technology. McIlwain's work is particularly useful in thinking about the limitations and possibilities of the digital regarding racial justice activism, a theme I explore through the case study of "cancel culture" in chapter 4. These and other works are foundational to my efforts to trace historical Black resistance and media strategies and to argue for a model of digital culture and resistance that is connective, iterative, and indeed reliant on the processes of Black strategic rearticulations.

My second contribution makes a larger argument about resistance itself. Using the theoretical anchor of rearticulation, I examine how Black online publics not only respond to oppression, but how they strategically reshape specific resistance strategies to suit their current needs and channels of communication. I demonstrate that

resistance, which is strategic and multidimensional, is ultimately an agentic, creative, and even joyful process for Black folks, both on- and offline. I make this argument about the rearticulations of resistance primarily by framing resistance in terms of Black publics' media use. Although resistance could certainly be understood outside of the confines of media, this focus allows me to connect digital networks to previous media, such as the Black press. In my focus on black resistance networks, I draw from Sarah Florini's (2019) excellent analysis of Black digital networks. Florini explores major networks online—from podcasts to Black Twitter—and argues that long before public exigencies propel these folks into the mainstream, Black networks strategically sustain themselves by "articulat[ing] their experiences, cultivat[ing] community and solidarity, [and] mobiliz[ing] political resistance" (p. 2). Building on this transplatform approach, *Black Networked Resistance* focuses not only on *what* digital Black publics are resisting, but also *how* digitally reconfigured strategies reveal a set of broader, connective characteristics of resistance.

In *#Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (2020), Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Welles employ a multimodal networks approach to provide an understanding of the interconnections of raced networks online. The authors use network theory to pinpoint central "nodes," such as "feminist culture," within hashtag communities like #AllMenCan to provide a broader picture of online discourses, one that goes beyond a single hashtag. They then employ discursive readings of the central members' tweets to understand how activism and persuasion work within those communities. *#Hashtag Activism* provides a nuanced model for thinking through not only what racial justice hashtags *do* but how others engage with them and, more importantly, how they are formed through long-term strategy-building and community maintenance.

Third, my approach to and organization of *Black Networked Resistance* mirrors and broadens the concept of strategic rearticulations, drawing primarily from cultural studies and extending to digital media studies and beyond. That is, as "a practice of discursive

reorganization," I organize and present the following case studies in such a way as to draw "unities out of fragments" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 195; Grossberg, 1992, p. 54). I put theorists like Patricia Hill Collins in conversation with Black women interlocutors who theorize their own digital care networks online. Likewise, I explore Stuart Hall's conceptualization of the archive and place it in the context of Black digital historians' archival work. I give readings of relevant theories, such as double consciousness or Black Feminist Thought, and put them in analytical discussion with the digital to reveal the through-lines of historical resistance strategies. I use these techniques to reinforce my readings and application of strategic rearticulation as a theory/method, which allows for forging connections and creating interventions in- and outside of critical media studies.

I am heartened to be in conversation particularly with scholars in critical digital media studies who center Black people online with serious thought and care. My aim and focus in this book is to thread together and analyze diverse digital resistance strategies to demonstrate how Black publics have strategically reshaped these strategies on- and offline. In doing so, I point to the imaginative and connective possibilities that Black folks create. Ultimately, my hope is to make evident the resiliency, creativity, and intentionality of Black digital publics, not only with regard to facing marginality but to influencing the trajectory of technology itself.

STRATEGIC REARTICULATION

Rearticulation describes the discursive practice whereby ideological themes are reorganized or reinterpreted. Drawing primarily from cultural studies, I use rearticulation throughout the book to show how Black users online reorganize their resistance strategies to respond to multiple layers of oppression, and subsequently, how these Black users reinterpret dominance itself.

Conceptually, rearticulation allows me to frame the strategic flexibility of resistance while centering Black users' agency, rather than the dominant frame in which they operate. Articulation, as Jennifer Slack (1996) writes, "can appear deceptively to be a simple concept" (p. 112). As a method, it is "a process of creating connections" and producing "identity out of differences . . . unities out of fragments . . . structures across practices" (p. 114). Cultural theorists work from a foundation that assumes "no necessary correspondence" or linkages between any two elements. From this foundation, articulation allows for connections to be made and to be joined to larger structures across economic, social, and political planes. It is this understanding of articulation as connection across practices that grounds this book about Black digital publics and resistance. I similarly frame resistance as constantly moving or malleable, by necessity, and I am interested in the ways that Black publics strategically shape and reshape their resistance strategies in the digital age. Specifically, articulation is useful as I draw connections between Black resistance strategies (e.g., Black humor in its many forms) at different points in time, as well as between resistance strategies and larger social forces (e.g., between Black humor and white femininity's ties to innocence). Ultimately, these connections unearth Black publics' longstanding responses to and reconfigurations of dominance and reveal the possibilities of joyfully creative resistance.

Building from articulation, *re*articulation, for Hall and others, occurs at the site in which we (scholars and activists) construct connections between social and economic forces, interrogate the ways that they are tied up in subordination or domination, and then "intervene within a particular social formation, conjuncture or context" (Slack, 1996, p. 112). Race historians Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) define rearticulation as "a practice of discursive reorganization or reinterpretation of ideological themes and interests already present in subjects' consciousness, such that these elements obtain new meanings or coherence" (p. 165). The theoretical roots of

rearticulation consider the connections between elements and the possibilities of reconfigurations or rearticulations as a political and progressive act.

I include the term "strategic" ahead of my understanding of rearticulation to signal the intentional and long-term ways that Black publics have drawn from and creatively reorient resistance strategies. To be "strategic" refers to executing a plan or series of maneuvers for obtaining a specific goal. Black digital users tap into both discursive and technological community knowledges to reach multiple goals, often simultaneously. Thus, while Black digital publics might not hold a meeting to strategize about the best way to, for example, archive our humanity, the strategy itself reveals the baked-in epistemologies of resistance that Black folks draw from and utilize. When I intend to draw attention to a specific *action*, I use the term "tactic." Strategic rearticulation is resistive in that it focuses on the *interventions* of reorganized ideologies. In the cases of "Karens" and online hashtags used in response to the killing of Breonna Taylor, these interventions might range from a reframing of the ideological positioning of white womanhood to a reorienting of Black women's humanity in cases of police violence, respectively. Analytically, rearticulation allows for considerations and connections between practices, such as historical Black resistance strategies (e.g., boycotting, Black humor, information dissemination) and their digital counterparts. The concept also opens up fresh analytical ground for exploring the reorientation of dominant frames (white femininity, police violence, state narrative control).

Drawing from the above works as applied to critical digital studies, I conceptualize strategic rearticulation throughout the book in two ways: how Black users online reorganize their resistance strategies to respond to multiple layers of oppression, and how Black users reinterpret dominance, such as the proximity of white femininity to innocence, as explored in chapter 1. It is my hope that forging such linkages in this book captures the longstanding complexities and creativities of Black networks on- and offline.

Strategic Rearticulation and the Politics of (Digital) Blackness

On June 2, 2020, two Black women music executives, Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang, launched #TheShowMustBePaused. It was a reverberating call to stop production in the entertainment industry and focus attention on police violence after a video of George Floyd being held down and suffocated to death by police was released. According to Thomas and Agyemang, "Our mission is to hold the industry at large . . . accountable. It is the obligation of these entities to protect and empower the Black communities that have made them disproportionately wealthy in ways that are measurable and transparent" (quoted in Mitchell, 2020). Entertainment companies responded in various ways: Apple Music replaced its For You radio and browse sections with a statement of solidarity accompanied by the hashtags #TheShowMustBePaused and #BlackLivesMatter (Cross, 2020); Spotify added an eight-minute, forty-six-second track of silence in select playlists and podcasts (Spotify, 2020); and Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group called off their normal schedules to organize workshops for their employees (Mitchell, 2020).

Online, social media users posted a black square with the hashtag #BlackOutTuesday to signal solidarity with racial justice efforts and a sort of permission for Black folks to disengage with online traumatic content. #BlackOutTuesday, however, soon became confusing, as users were posting without a unified message or goal. Important messages from #BlackLivesMatter started to get buried as users coupled #BlackOutTuesday with #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM), resulting in #BLM posts showing up as empty black squares rather than messages of action for Floyd and his family.

Thomas and Agyemang's original call through #TheShowMustBePaused and the subsequent fallout from #BlackOutTuesday raise questions about the politics of Blackness regarding the multiple goals of resistance and the tensions within

digital technologies that can foster or hinder those goals. In this case, two record executives managed to push on one node in the network and change an entire industry by condensing longer calls and statements for justice into a single hashtag. Yet the decentralized nature of online networks means that one hashtag can easily get reinterpreted and misconstrued as another, and the original intended message can get lost altogether. That is, while multiple hashtags allow for a weaving together of separate but related stories (Jackson et al., 2020), they can also cause damage and misinformation, as we see in the case of #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackOutTuesday. Moreover, while these hashtags allowed for a broader discussion of police brutality and better visibility of Floyd's life and family, some users and scholars question, in the vein of political economy critiques, the balance of power, most of which remains in the hands of platforms and large entertainment companies (Sutherland, 2017). Additional concerns about activists' data being surveilled and catalogued impede a lot of folks from joining the conversation at all.

These tensions fall within a range of theoretical debates over the efficacy of technology in serving Black people, debates that embody both Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism. The former broadly posits that anti-Blackness is baked into the very infrastructure of Western society, connoting Blackness as pathologized through politics and art (Moten, 2013; Hartman, 2008; Wilderson, 2010). Afro-pessimism might argue, as political economy critiques often do, that we are playing a losing hand by rearticulating resistance online through tools that profit the very companies that exploit Blackness in the first place. Here, the digital brings to the fore new and existing challenges, from the perpetuation of racist and sexist images (Noble, 2018) to affective exhaustion and trauma (Sutherland, 2017). While these political economy approaches are certainly valid—and I engage with them specifically through my examination of digital commercialization and universality in chapter 5—I decenter these critiques in favor of the varying degrees of resistive work (humor, care, archiving) that Black folks are doing online. I engage with digital scholars

like Moya Bailey (2021) who trace the ways that Black women resist misogynoir, or the unique co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that Black women face through their digital networks. Rather than expecting that Black digital practices will fully eradicate hegemonic power and misogynoir, Bailey argues that Black women create "harm-reduction strategies" that "help *alleviate* some of its painful impact" (p. 23; emphasis mine).

More importantly, strategic rearticulation pushes us to think about the *process* of resistance rather than solely the outcome. For example, what does resistance—from "Karen" memes to #BlackOutTuesday—show us about Black users' creation and recreation of community across generations and available platforms? Focusing on the reshaping of resistance as a process gives us a peek into the ways that Black networks sustain themselves independent of any one media platform or tactic of surveillance. My framing of strategic rearticulations offers the precision to think seriously about what we are resisting *and* the flexibility to consider the best strategies and media channels with which to respond. Thus, I focus our attention on the process of resistance and what it reveals about technology, Black digital practices, and the intersections of the two.

I also respond to discussions of Afro-optimism in my focus on Black users' agency as demonstrated through their strategic rearticulations of resistance. In his work on Black cybercultures, André Brock (2020) reframes Afro-pessimism into Afro-optimism and considers what Black technoculture would look like independent of whiteness and capitalism. Here again, strategic rearticulation provides the flexibility with which to focus on pleasure in some instances, resistance in others, and both when analytically appropriate. Thus, while Brock critiques resistance as overdetermining Blackness, strategic rearticulation prioritizes the agency of Black folks to intervene in their circumstances while also focusing on their own desires and pleasures. As Black feminists have already argued, resistance, pleasure, *and* power can and often do exist at the same time (M. Bailey, 2021; Rawlins, 2021; Steele, 2021). As adrienne maree brown

(2019) theorizes through what she calls "pleasure activism," resistance and pleasure certainly coexist and often do because of the carefully crafted and maintained strategies of marginalized communities that center their own joy.

In this book, I engage with important discussions about Black publics' deployment of resistance given their own intersectionalities and the broader sociohistorical moments at play. In *Postracial Resistance*, Ralina L. Joseph (2018) brilliantly argues that some Black women use what she calls "strategic ambiguity" to push back against discrimination. Strategic ambiguity, Joseph details, is a "different, necessarily subtle form of resistance and risk that balances on an escape hatch of deniability" (p. 3). Using postracial logics, such as the denial of race, these women strategically use coded language or crossover appeal to gain access to and maintain important positions of power. My formulation of strategic rearticulations taps into Joseph's strategy of ambiguity by offering a broader framework with which to think about the myriad and connected resistance strategies that Black publics have utilized. That is, strategic rearticulation builds on strategic ambiguity to add *reorganizations* of multiple resistance strategies over time, rather than focusing on one strategy. For example, while chapter 1 analyzes the use of humor in response to white femininity, chapter 2 traces iterations of archiving as resistive to historical erasure; both ultimately work as case studies of strategic rearticulations wherein Black digital publics operate. I also pull from Joseph's emphasis on community and intersectionality in which she leaves open the possibilities of some Black publics utilizing a given strategy and others pushing back against it. Similarly, strategic rearticulation connects diverse Black communities, some of whom utilize resistance strategies, while others update and reshape these same tactics with the tools available to them.

Black Networked Resistance is also in conversation with current theorizations of Black digital resistance as radically transformative. In Moya Bailey's (2021) work, she describes "digital alchemy" as "*transform[ing]* everyday digital media into valuable social justice