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Published by NYU Press


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Mapping the Transplatform Network

On January 28, 2016, Nicju, co-host of the What’s the Tea? podcast tweeted, “HOMIE DOWN CODE 10” to Elon James White, founder and CEO of This Week in Blackness (TWiB!), and Rod Morrow of The Black Guy Who Tips (TBGWT) podcast franchise.\(^1\) She had used Twitter’s quote function, which allowed her to share a tweet and add her own 140-character commentary. The tweet was from Harlem Pride and read, “BREAKING NEWS! Homophobic Pastor’s Harlem Church Up For Public Auction Over Unpaid Debts.”\(^2\) The homie in question was Reverend James David Manning, who has been an ongoing source of both outrage and amusement for the network at the center of this project since early 2014, when an image of the sign in front of Manning’s ATLAH Ministries had circulated on social media. The sign read, “Obama has released the homo demons on the Black man. Look out Black woman. A white homo may take your man.” The sign and a related YouTube video, in which Manning elaborated on the threat of “homo demons,” became a viral sensation, prompting White to use TWiB!’s video series to create a response. The video, in which White sought to highlight and rebut Manning’s homophobic claims, became the first in a series of video interchanges between White and Manning. Nicju’s use of the term “homie” was a call-back to one of Manning’s videos in which he addressed White directly using the term “homie” repeatedly. The phrases Manning bellowed throughout the video, including, “HEY, HO-MEY!” and “I got the BI-ble, homie!” became ongoing jokes in the network as, over the course of several days, the network followed, shared, and discussed White and Manning’s exchanges across multiple platforms and using various media.

The incident with Manning demonstrates how the network at the center of this project is distributed across digital media platforms and how participants interact using a range of media—text, image, video, and audio—that they both create and circulate. Members of the network
are connected via multiple platforms, some broadcast-style and others more private and interpersonal—including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Google+, and instant messaging—which they use both simultaneously and in conjunction. This network serves as a crucial resource for its members as they navigate the United States as racialized subjects, providing them with everything from mundane social interaction to emotional support and solidarity during moments of social and political crisis. It offers participants the ability to both produce and consume content that prioritizes Black perspectives and experiences, and it serves as a space where users can collectively interpret and respond to dominant discourses about race and Blackness.

Digital technologies blur conventional boundaries between public and private, producer and audience, and mass and interpersonal communication. This fluidity undermines distinctions between communicative practices and genres that were conceptualized as separate domains in the predigital era. The result is a complex and flexible network of social and material connections that can be used for a variety of purposes—culturally inflected fan practices, community building, cultural critique, and citizen journalism—depending on the exigencies of any given moment.

The digital assemblage analyzed here has three anchoring elements—a network of over sixty Black independent podcaster, the independent media company This Week in Blackness (TWiB!), and the predominantly Black network of Twitter users that has come to be known as “Black Twitter.” These three deeply imbricated, yet distinct, elements do not constitute the full extent of the network, but they do serve as its core. The participants that constitute this multimedia, transplatform network are predominantly, though not exclusively, middle-class Black Americans between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. The members are diverse and heterogeneous, coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and geographic locations.

But regardless of differences, all those in the network share an unapologetic rejection of colorblindness and a prioritization of Black perspectives. The network is a place where Black users and content creators do not have to obscure or minimize their racial identities. The rejection of colorblindness is readily apparent in names and avatars, many of which are explicitly racially marked. For example, many podcasts have
names such as *The Black Guy Who Tips* (TBGWT), *Nerdgasm Noire Network*, *Black Girl Nerds*, and *Black Astronauts*. The podcast *Where’s My 40 Acres?* (WM40A?) takes its name from the land redistribution plan proposed after abolition but never brought to fruition. While digital technologies make it possible for users to obscure their racial identities by choosing avatars and usernames that contain no signifiers of race, many participants in this network reject such practices. For example, *TWiB! Prime* co-host Imani Gandy has long blogged under the name “Angry Black Lady,” which is also her Twitter handle (@AngryBlackLady), and WM40A? co-host uses the pseudonym Phenom Blak. Avatars are frequently pictures of the users themselves or other images that reference Black identity, such as racially accurate cartoon versions of the user. Even if the content or individual is not explicitly racially marked, interactions and content often employ Black vernaculars, a range of cultural commonplaces, and culturally specific knowledge. The participants refuse to codeswitch in ways that might make their communicative practices more accessible to audiences or interlocutors less familiar with Black cultural and linguistic practices and instead communicate as they would in exclusively Black spaces.

In this chapter, I map the network, following two major conceptual threads throughout. First, I emphasize the interconnected nature of the network. In addition to content moving throughout the network, conversations and discussions also unfold across platforms, often involving the sharing, remediating, or remixing of previous content or utterances. This interconnectedness reflects a deeply communitarian ethos that functions in opposition to neoliberal individualism. Second, the network extends and adapts, rather than departing from, predigital practices of Black cultural production and sociality. This strategy aligns the network with Black cultural practices and discourses that predate neoliberal colorblind discourses of race.

I begin with a description of each of the three anchoring components of the network, highlighting both their interconnection and the ways in which they are distinct. I then examine how the network blurs the boundaries between mass and interpersonal communication. I argue that the network can be conceived of as a network in the dual sense of the term—as a broadcast-style network and as a network of technologies and people. After outlining this duality, I explain how it allows the net-
work to combine in one space a multiplicity of Black community-based media traditions with longstanding and culturally significant modes of Black sociality. Finally, I conclude by returning to the encounter with Manning to demonstrate how the fluidity and flexibility of the network is used in practice.

The Podcast “Chitlin’ Circuit”

Over the six years of this study, independent Black podcasts have flourished. Through them, podcasters and their audiences are able to create and consume media free from the limitations of dominant racial discourses that simultaneously erase and deride their Black identities. The podcasts provide content that foregrounds Black perspectives, offering an alternative to mainstream legacy media, which participants generally see as failing or even outright antagonizing Black audiences. The podcasts share an emphasis on audience interaction, making them not only broadcast-style content but also a locus for social engagement, which is enhanced by the deep collaborative and communitarian ethos of the network.

The podcast Chitlin’ Circuit is a network of independent Black podcasters connected via informal affiliations and social media interactions. There is no central focal point, and not all of the podcasters interact directly with one another. The network is not homogenous or monolithic. Many of the podcasts take progressive political positions, and the two largest and most popular podcast franchises in the network—TWiB! and The Black Guy Who Tips—take an explicitly feminist/womanist and pro-LGBTQ stance. However, some of the podcasts express more normative conceptions of gender roles and LGBTQ issues. Despite this, participants in the network have become more progressive over time, and many have credited their participation in the network as helping them recognize and begin to reject their own sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Though the relationship between the podcasters is largely supportive, disagreement and conflict are not unusual, and some participants have tense or even antagonistic relationships.

Many of the podcasters have single, stand-alone podcasts. However, increasingly, Chiltin’ Circuit podcasters have been forming podcast networks, which run multiple podcasts under a single franchise. These fran-
chises include TWiB!, The Black Guy Who Tips, Movie Trailer Reviews Network (MTR), The Black Astronauts Podcast Network, Where’s My 40 Acres? (WM40A?), Black Girl Nerds (BGN), and The Cold Slither Podcast Network (CSPN). Among these, the CSPN, for example, had nine different podcasts as of 2016—The Good and Terrible Show, The Baker-Bone and Rome Bad Advice Show, Crown and Collards, The Gridiron Gals Podcast, The Comic Book Chronicles, The WrassleCast, Blipster Life, Know the Score, and Classick Team-Up!—each of which operated under the large brand umbrella of Cold Slither, including being available for download through the same feed. Many of podcast networks began with one show, from which the network took its name and which remains its flagship show. For example, TBGWT produces a podcast of the same name as well as several other shows, as do WM40A? and The Black Astronauts.

All of the podcasts in the network are in the style of talk radio, though their production value and the regularity of their output vary greatly. Most are categorized as comedy by podcatcher services, largely because of their eclectic topics of conversation and their irreverent tone. Some podcasts are ostensibly focused on one theme. For example, WM40A? initially focused on Hip-hop, while Spawn on Me and Gaming and Then Some are devoted to video games. But it is not uncommon for these podcasts to cover a variety of topics, ranging from television to politics to the latest social media dustups. Although, like podcasting in general, the network skews more heavily male, Black women are a strong presence. Each of TWiB!’s podcasts has at least one woman co-host. Beyond this, there are also many all-Black women podcasts, such as Nerdgasm Noire Network; Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine; The Black Astronauts’s Ladies Launch; Black Girl Nerds, CSPN’s The Good and Terrible Show, and Black, Sexy, Geeky, and Mental.

The Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts largely eschew the tightly formatted character of most legacy media, opting instead for an informal, flexible approach. Though the hosts have topics or news stories that they are prepared to cover, they do so via free-form conversation that is generally not limited by time constrains. It is not unusual for shows to be two or three hours long, with hosts moving from topic to topic through organic conversation rather than predetermined segments. Receiving little to no editing, the shows present the discussions in their entirety. The podcasts
embrace a range of Black vernaculars and regional accents. Irreverent, humorous, and conversational, the podcasts make heavy use of Black American cultural commonplaces, linguistic practices, and communicative norms, which mark the space as culturally Black.

The podcasts all use similar distribution mechanisms and share a strong prioritization of audience interaction. Many of the podcasts stream live at prescheduled or announced times via their websites or streaming services such as Spreecast (now defunct), TuneIn, or Stitcher Radio. The show producers make their content available in multiple ways, including embedding audio in the podcasts’ official websites and offering shows for download on iTunes, Stitcher, TuneIn, and Podomatic, or via RSS feeds. The largest podcasts, *TWiB! Prime* and *TBGWT*, feature chatrooms during their live streams, which allow listeners to interact in real time during their shows. *TWiB!* has a chatroom built directly into its website, while *TBGWT* streamed live via Spreecast and used that site’s built-in chatroom feature until the site became defunct in 2016, at which point it moved to Crowdcast. Almost all of the podcasts have multiple channels for listener feedback and interaction, including email, voicemail, and social media accounts. Podcasters and their listeners interact heavily on social media, particularly on Twitter and Facebook.

The relationships between the podcasters is highly collaborative, fostering a communitarian ethos. In many ways, the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts have retained the “horizontal” approach described by Richard Berry in his work on podcasting in the early 2000s, wherein “producers are consumers and consumers become producers and engage in conversations with each other. . . . There is no sense of a hierarchical approach, with Podcasters supporting each other, promoting the work of others and explaining how they do what they do.”6 As podcasting became more popular and more professionalized over the years, this sense of collectivity has remained among the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts. They often promote one another, appear as guests on each other’s shows, and share heavily overlapping fan bases. *TBGWT*, hosted by husband and wife team Rod and Karen Morrow, has been a key force in connecting and maintaining the network. Rod and Karen frequently have the hosts of other podcasts on their shows, including the hosts of *3 Guys On*,
Three-A-Negroes Podcast, WM40A?, The Black Astronauts, The Dream Team, and The Mundane Festival. Rod and Karen are also frequent guests on other podcasts, at times doing multiple guest appearances a week. iTunes reviews written by TBGWT listeners frequently include the names of other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts to which the show has introduced them, highlighting TBGWT’s emphasis on supporting other podcasters. In addition to cross-promotion and collaboration, Rod and Karen help other podcasters in concrete technological ways. They are frequently contacted by beginning podcasters asking for technical assistance getting their own show started, and, Rod explains, “I try to help everybody that I can.” For example, when Jess Wood and Josh Homer, formerly of the After Black podcast on TWiB!, decided to start their own show, The Ratchet Hatchet, Rod helped them with their technological set-up. Nic and Reg from What’s the Tea? have gone so far as to dub Rod and Karen as their “podcasting parents” and several podcasters have referred to Rod as the “podfather.”

While the spirit of cooperation and mutual support is central to the ethos of TBGWT, it is far from alone in this approach. The Black Astronauts Podcast Network started the “Support Ya Own Movement,” which “encourages reciprocal support among peer groups” within “urban podcasting.” The Black Astronauts also maintain a list of fellow Black podcasters on their website, as does WM40A? and TBGWT. TWiB! has maintained long-term connections with many of the podcasters in the network. Both Kriss from the MTR Network and Rod from TBGWT have been frequent guest hosts on TWiB! podcasts since 2011. In 2014, White started the Black Podcasters United group on Facebook with the goal of connecting Black podcasters, and TWiB! has also collaborated with other podcasters, such as Black Girl Nerds, What’s the Tea?, and Back 2 Reality.

The podcasts also share heavily overlapping audiences. You will find many of the same people in the chatrooms of various podcasts or leaving reviews and listener feedback for multiple Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts. Highlighting this relationship, on one episode of What’s the Tea?, co-hosts Nicju and Reggie introduced their guest and fellow podcaster with, “for the like 1 percent of our audience that we didn’t steal from these other podcasts, this is Mike from Where’s My 40 Acres?” Many of the podcasters themselves are heavy listeners to other podcasts within
the network. Rod and Karen often discuss their fandom of other podcasts, and Aaron B. from The Black Astronauts has asserted he is “a fan first” when it comes to podcasting.\textsuperscript{11}

The interconnectedness of the podcasters and their audiences is in line with what we know about the listening habits of podcast consumers. Data show that podcast listeners are what could be called “super-listeners.” While the average American consumes roughly four hours of audio per day, podcast listeners consume an average of six hours and six minutes.\textsuperscript{12} Of weekly podcast listeners, 37 percent consume five or more podcasts a week, with an average consumption of six per week.\textsuperscript{13} However, within the Chitlin’ Circuit network both the podcasters and their audience seem not only to be consuming podcasts at a “super-listener” rate, but also to be choosing podcasts that are connected, thereby building and maintaining the network.

The Chitlin’ Circuit podcasters and their listeners often note that they see Black podcasts as an alternative to legacy media, which, they assert, under- and misrepresents Black Americans. Legacy news media in particular are often criticized as framing Black Americans in problematic and often damaging ways. Following the Charleston massacre in 2015, Rod initiated a discussion on Twitter about the crucial role Black podcasts play in many listeners’ lives. Contrasting podcasts to mainstream media, he tweeted, “Black Podcasts are a much safer space for black people than the mainstream news and radio.”\textsuperscript{14} He continued, “I’ve been watching so much pain go down my timeline for the last week and seems like the media is complicit in this,” and then added, “It can make you start to feel crazy. Like ‘Am I the only one who sees this shit?’ Black podcasting is a good balance.”\textsuperscript{15} He argued, “So get y’all some black podcasts in your rotation so you can enjoy being supported. Nothing wrong with seeking out your own.”\textsuperscript{16} Rod’s followers on Twitter, several of whom self-identified as TBGWT listeners, echoed his observations.

The desire for a “safe space” extends beyond news and current events and also manifests in the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts’ sustained engagement with popular culture and fandom. Discussion of movies, television, and mass media are common across all of the podcasts. Many podcasts offer movie reviews and television show recaps. Some do this irregularly, such as Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine, which did six shows
reviewing the television show *Being Mary Jane*. For others, it is a regular component of their output. In 2013, WM40A? began a new show called *TheBoobTube*, where it recaps and discusses television shows including *Love and Hip-Hop*, *Catfish*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and *Girls*. TBGWT has popular recaps for *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*. In addition, a notable number of podcasts in the network is devoted exclusively to nerd culture. These include *Nerdgasm Noire Network*, *Black Girl Nerds*, *Black Tribbles*, *Blerds on Nerds*, *Geek Soul Brother*, and *For Colored Nerds*, as well as TWiB!’s *We Nerd Hard* and TBGWT’s *The Nerd Off*. These shows review, discuss, and debate all elements of nerd culture, ranging from comic books to sci-fi to video games.

The podcasts provide important spaces where the podcasters and their listeners can engage in fan practices without anxiety. The importance of having a Black space for fan practices was highlighted by Rod, who explained:

> It’s so sad the compromises Black people have to make in general. Right? . . . Black people who like sports typically have to listen to sports radio that don’t like Black people. “I don’t like any of the athletes. I don’t like any of the culture. . . . I hate your music. I hate your clothing. I hate everything about you.” But guess what? You don’t have anywhere else you can get your local sports talk from other than fifty-year-old white men who kinda don’t like young Black dudes. And you have to deal with that every day, and every day to get the update on what’s going to happen with Julius Pepper you also have to hear them call him a lazy good for nothin’ . . . You have to basically listen to them call him an uppity nigger . . . and it wears on you.

While the fan practices engaged in by the podcasters and their listeners sometimes address issues of race, often this content makes no explicit reference to race. However, such activities take place in an explicitly Black space that, in addition to enabling Black users to engage in fandom and mundane interactions without being marginalized or facing racial and/or gendered aggression, also provides an arena for Black users to engage with media texts in culturally resonant ways. In her discussion of colorblind television casting, Kristen Warner argues that reaffirming racial identity depends not only on explicit references to it or on the
presence of marginalized bodies, but also on tone and the use of commonplacesthat resonate socially and culturally.\textsuperscript{19} The fan practices engaged in by the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasters and their audience allow for such cultural specificity, creating a space for Black fans to identify with fan cultures without conforming to the normative whiteness common in such practices.

Most of the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts have demonstrated little desire to move away from their status as hobbyists. With the exception of The Black Guy Who Tips, which has successfully monetized by offering premium content, it is clear that the majority of the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts are not working to “break into” the media industry or to turn podcasting into a career. They eschew the practices that lead to the monetization of content creation online. First, most do not promote their work beyond their own social media posts and appearances on each other’s podcasts, where they do remarkably little to “plug” their projects and instead bolster the strength and interconnection of the network. They also rarely employ standard promotional strategies, whether that be simply asking friends and followers to share information about their project or specific PR efforts to get blogs and online magazines to write about the shows. Moreover, the primary content created by the network is podcasts, perhaps the least spreadable and monetizable media available to them. Podcasts are long form, and, while short audio segments can be edited to make circulation via social media channels (i.e., spreadability) easier, they are not the media that are most likely to “go viral.” Further, while Google offers ad monetization for both websites and YouTube, which provides a straightforward, if not extremely lucrative, means of monetizing blogs and videos, podcasts have no such option. In fact, most of these podcasters pay for their own hosting with services such as Libsyn and have their shows distributed through less easily monetizable outlets such as iTunes and the Google Play Store. None has cultivated Instagram followings that would qualify them as “influencers” or allow them to sign up for services that would match them with promotional deals through which to generate revenue. While internet content creators are making significantly less money than the celebratory discourses of “doing what you love” and bypassing media gatekeepers would lead one to believe, there are clearly available strategies that this network is simply opting out of.
This Week in Blackness

Although This Week and Blackness (TWiB!) can be considered part of the Chitlin’ Circuit and although its podcasts have much in common with those discussed above, it is distinct in several important ways. While its primary content is podcasts, TWiB! also produces a range of video and electronic print content. Additionally, whereas the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts serve primarily as alternatives to, or even havens from, legacy media, TWiB! has a more complicated relationship with such media, in that its mission has always included actively shifting the dominant discourse in ways that are not a priority for most other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts. While TWiB! has consistently sought to disrupt stereotypical notions of Blackness and to serve Black audiences, it initially attempted to do so in conjunction with, rather than wholly alternative to, established media outlets.

Started as a web video series in 2008 by Elon James White under the banner of his Brooklyn Comedy Company, by 2015 TWiB! had grown into a large multimedia company that produced the original video series and a range of other digital content. TWiB! introduced its first podcast, Blacking it Up!, for a short run in 2009 and then brought it back permanently in 2011, changing the show’s name to TWiB! Radio (June 2012–February 2014) and then to TWiB! Prime in 2014. While TWiB! Prime remains its flagship show, as of 2016 TWiB! has produced seven podcasts covering a range of topics including politics, popular culture, sex positivity, and sports. It briefly published blog-style electronic magazine called Valid, and, in 2014, the company completed an eight-episode run of A Black Show for Free Speech TV. By early 2016, TWiB! Prime had become an hour-long news and current events show produced in video and aired on Free Speech TV as well as being available as an audio podcast.

Initially, Blacking It Up!’s format and approach shared the free-form, fluid, conversational style of the other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts. From early on, its hosts of Blacking It Up!, who collectively went by the name “Team Blackness,” often joked that they were not “CNN Negro” or “N(egro)PR”—a joke that freed them from the conventions of “professional” journalism and political analysis. They swore, joked, and offered off-color commentary. While its current iteration continues to allow for
comical and absurd conversational tangents, which are referred to as the show “going off the rails,” *TWiB! Prime* functions primarily as a professional news outlet and has developed a more tightly formatted structure closer to those of standard radio. By mid-2015, *TWiB! Prime* had a set length, regular commercial breaks, and prerecorded news briefs. This evolution emerged from the ongoing negotiation of TWiB!’s relationship to established media outlets and the ways the organization functions as both alternative to and interlocutor with those media. In particular, as TWiB!’s impact grew and audience members increasingly said TWiB! was their main sources of news and commentary, White felt a growing responsibility to provide content that would be interpreted as professional and polished. Thus, TWiB! prides itself on producing carefully researched and nuanced analysis of the topics it covers and often brings in experts, including academics, lawyers, politicians, and activists, to provide context and analysis.

From the start, TWiB! deliberately resisted hegemonic constructions and representations of Blackness by offering diverse representations of Black people and nuanced political and cultural criticism that privileged Black perspectives. Its mission is guided by a desire to challenge the rhetoric of colorblindness that often functions to obscure ongoing racism and to disrupt the dominant representations of Blackness that flatten out and homogenize Black communities.

TWiB!’s output was intended to cater to a largely overlooked and underserved Black audience. In June 2011, White explained that every aspect of TWiB! was designed “to prove a point”—the point that there is a clear and strong audience for the programming TWiB! was creating. He described the intended audience member as someone “who is smart, who is politically engaged, who is technologically engaged, who can enjoy the ratchet just right alongside intelligent shit. Who can quote 50 Cent and Nietzsche within the same sentence.”20 L. Joy Williams, then co-host of *Blacking It Up!* asserted that TWiB! sought to undermine the myth that Black people “are this monolith that all watch BET [Black Entertainment Television], drink Kool-Aid, and occasionally got to jail.” She added that the independent Black media produced by TWiB! can work to “break down that myth and say that you can program differently because we have a different audience within our people.”21
At first, White intended to alter the media landscape by integrating TWiB!'s approach and perspective into corporate media, rather than functioning as a wholly independent alternative. In the early years of TWiB!, White sought to form a partnership with larger, more visible, and established media outlets. For example, when White rebooted Blacking It Up! in 2011, it was with the, ultimately abandoned, intention of pitching the show to SiriusXM Radio. During this same time period, White had talks with Interactive One, the parent company of NewsOne, which declined to work with TWiB! because, according to White's contact, “Black people don't listen to podcasts.”

Until 2014, TWiB! was completely dependent on unpaid volunteer labor. Starting as a small-scale operation, with both videos and podcasts produced in White's Brooklyn apartment (which he shared with his now wife Emily Epstein-White), TWiB! also relied on listener donations to stay afloat between 2011 and 2014. Then, in 2014, it introduced “The TWiBularity,” a name that with puns on the idea of a “singularity” and refers to one master feed where all TWiB!’s projects converged. As a “freemium” service, it was designed to combine free and subscription-only content. TWiB! Prime streamed live Monday through Thursday via the TWiB! website and other podcast applications such as TuneIn and Stitcher. Afterward, it was made available for free download via iTunes, Stitcher, and other applications. Conversely, TWiB!’s six other podcasts—TWiB! after Dark, We Nerd Hard, SportsBall, Historical Blackness, Academic Shade, and This Tastes Funny—were available for free only when they streamed live at their scheduled time; otherwise, on-demand listening and downloading were available through a monthly subscription. “The TWiBularity” is also the name of a custom mobile app created by TWiB!, available on iOS and Android operating systems, that allows subscribers to live stream both audio and video content, listen to older episodes of TWiB!’s podcasts, check TWiB!’s live-streaming schedule, and receive messages from the company. The free counterpart to the TWiBularity app is named “the TWiBulari-free” and provides access only to TWiB!’s nonpremium content.

For the first several years of TWiB!'s existence, White believed that it could secure entry into the established media industry by creating high-quality content and garnering a sizeable audience. It was the cancelation of NPR's Tell Me More in June 2014 that finally disabused
White of this belief and solidified TWiB!’s need to be financially self-sufficient. Tell Me More, a current events–focused talk show designed to appeal to Black listeners, was canceled because NPR affiliate stations were not ordering the show or were running it in late-night timeslots. TWiB! Prime, which covered the story, concluded that the failure Tell Me More did not bode well for TWiB!’s ability to partner and collaborate with established media, especially given its deeply irreverent approach and rejection of the NPR aesthetic. Sound engineer and TWiB! Prime co-host Aaron Rand Freeman described the polished and professional style of Tell Me More as a “perfectly manicured Negro situation.” He encapsulated his dismay at the cancelation, saying, “NPR-dipped Negros can’t stay on the air? NPR flavored? Of aaaall the Negros? I understand Elon can’t stay on the air. Elon tells everybody to go fuck themselves all up and down. I get it. But NP—really? Really?” The fate of Tell Me More, a show that adhered to the professional standards and practices of NPR, was understood by TWiB! as an indication that TWiB!, with its less conventional, more brash style, would never become part of the existing corporate media landscape. In considering its long-term financial options, TWiB! turned to its audience, asking listeners to “step up” and support the organization financially to ensure its future. Shortly after this, the TWiBularity was born.

Gina Neff has referred to the kind of un- or undercompensated labor on which TWiB! depended as “venture labor”; it involves “an investment of time, resources, and labor into a job” for the purposes of “a future payoff other than regular wages.” For their part, Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan speak of “hope labor,” or work undertaken as a means to future employment or monetization. Similarly, Brooke Duffy has written of the aspirational labor of Instagram influencers, the productive activities they undertake in the hopes of future social or economic capital. From the start, TWiB! certainly fell into the category of these future-oriented forms of labor. White created and grew TWiB!, particularly its podcasts, with the intention of developing it into a media company with fully paid staff. Eventually, between its freemium service and other smaller sources of revenue, TWiB! was able to offer staff some compensation. However, it is extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible, to establish a wholly independent media company that generates enough revenue to fully compensate all of its participants at market
value, and TWiB! has never been able to fully do so. But even as TWiB! staff sought experience and visibility that might benefit them in the future, they also worked for TWiB! because they believed in what it was doing—or as Freeman once explained to me, people continued to work “because [TWiB!’s] mission is so damn noble.” While the labor that powered TWiB! clearly possessed a future-looking orientation—like venture, hope, and aspirational labor—this future benefit was not seen as solely individual. TWiB! was conceived not merely as a project that could lead to professional careers, but as a media intervention on behalf of Black people, who have been chronically erased or misrepresented by US media. They were engaging in labor with the hope of personal success and of doing something positive for Black people writ large by ameliorating the impact of legacy media.

Whether seeking media partnerships or not, intervening in and shifting dominant discourses has always been central to TWiB!’s mission. Targets of such interventions could be legacy media outlets or other Black Americans who asserted hegemonic discourses of misogyny or heteronormativity, such as Manning. White sees this as a core difference between TWiB!’s approach and that of many other podcasters. Asserting that TWiB!’s goal was to “try to change how the conversation is happening nationally,” he pointed to this as the reason for TWiB!’s substantial funding needs:

As a podcast space, we're probably doing just fine. Like, actually, we're doing way better than most podcasts. . . . But because we are a bigger space, we have more people involved. We're attempting to do more things. I mean, that's why we produced a TV show. That's why what we're seeking in funding is very different from, like, let's say if you started a show tomorrow about ice cream. You probably wouldn't have to go through the same funding situation as what we're doing. 29

One key manifestation of this difference is TWiB!’s on-location reporting of events, particularly those associated with the Movement for Black Lives, such as the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. On August 9, 2014, Mike Brown, an unarmed Black eighteen-year-old, was shot and killed Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson, setting off protests lasting for days. During this turmoil, there was often a vast difference
between the coverage provided by the mainstream news media, particularly cable news channels, and the accounts that were emerging from Ferguson community members and protest organizers via social media. Local residents claimed media coverage overemphasized the destruction of property, playing into narratives of angry, dangerous Black “rioters” rather than reporting the police violence directed at the crowd. TWiB!, at the behest of its audience, traveled to Ferguson, where it leveraged its existing broadcast-style network and social media networks to give voice to local accounts of the events, offering a narrative that stood in opposition to the picture created by mainstream media.

In addition to this kind of journalistic coverage, TWiB! also engaged in public debate with those holding differing opinions. White and Imani Gandy, co-host of TWiB! Prime, were often challenged or even outright insulted on Twitter, and despite colloquial wisdom to “not feed the trolls,” they did engage with those users in public debate. White has explained that he does so with the specific understanding that the user he is interacting with is representative of many others who hold similar opinions. He sees himself as working to inform and possibly change the views those onlookers.

While other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts do engage those outside the network, particularly on social media, it is not with the goal of expanding their audience, intervening in dominant discourses, or creating dialogue with outside communities. This is exemplified by Rod’s response to the attention he garnered after creating the hashtag #BernieSoBlack, a critique of Bernie Sanders supporters’ approach to race during the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. The hashtag reached the national trending topics on Twitter, an algorithmically produced real-time list of the most tweeted-about subjects, and Rod found himself at the center of a great deal of attention. The Bernie Sanders for President sub-Reddit, a forum on the website Reddit, suggested that they host Rod for an “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) question and answer session, to which he replied, “No, that’s more work…” I mean, no offense. But, maybe Elon would do that. He loves educating ignorant motherfuckers. I’m not really a fan. Not that these people are jerks or anything. I just don’t like being an educator because I’ll fuck around, cuss somebody out. I’ll be like, ‘Damn, I just fucked up the cause.’” Rod’s reference to TWiB! indicates how it functions as part of the larger conversations happening in the network.
while also serving as a point of connection that moves the network’s discourses out beyond its boundaries, an issue I address further in the next chapter.

Black Twitter

The third element in which I anchor this study is the network of predominantly Black Twitter users who have come to be known as “Black Twitter.” Black Americans were early adopters of and innovators on the Twitter platform. Within three years of Twitter’s debut in 2006, Pew Research found that 26 percent of Black American internet users used Twitter or another similar status update service, compared with 19 percent of whites.\(^3^1\) Many of these users came from networks that existed on other platforms, such as MySpace, Facebook, and Black Planet, who migrated together to the new platform. By 2010, others outside the network had started to note the large Black presence on Twitter,\(^3^2\) in part because the trending topics feature made Black discourse visible to non-Black users on the platform.\(^3^3\) By July 2015, the *LA Times* had hired a reported to cover “Black Twitter.”

It is important to note that Black Twitter does not exist in any unified or monolithic sense. Just as there is no “Black America” or single “Black culture,” there is no “Black Twitter.” What do exist are millions of Black users networking, connecting, and engaging on Twitter with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices. Meredith Clark describes Black Twitter as a meta-network, comprised of smaller networks centered on users’ personal connections and common interests.\(^3^4\) Black Twitter is conceptualized by many of its participants as “a series of neighborhoods” that can merge and act in concert around issues of concern across Black communities.\(^3^5\)

Like the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts and TWiB!, Black Twitter and its constitutive neighborhoods are explicitly and unapologetically Black spaces. Clark notes that racial identity has played an important role in Black users’ adoption of the platform and in the way Black Twitter participants discursively construct and understand the network. She found that the participants she interviewed unanimously saw Black Twitter as a space that centers Black perspectives and experiences, representing an “online convergence of ideas exchanged within the cultural context of
the Black experience in America.” Thus, while it is crucial that discussions of Black Twitter avoid reductively flattening out and homogenizing the network and its participants, it is equally important to avoid imposing colorblind discourses on the network and thereby erasing the importance of race and culture in this context. The conversations on Black Twitter are characterized by cultural specificity, and display of cultural competencies is an important mode of performing Black racial identity in the network.

Black Twitter has been able to leverage its densely connected networks to engage around a range of political and social issues, often successfully intervening and altering the outcome of events. For example, Black Twitter was instrumental in creating the visibility and pressure that resulted in the indictment and prosecution of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black sixteen-year-old, was shot and killed while returning to his father’s house from a nearby convenience store. Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watchman armed with a 9-mm handgun, saw Martin and believed his presence in the neighborhood to be suspicious. By the time police arrived on the scene, Martin lay dead from a gunshot wound to the chest. Initially, Zimmerman, who claimed self-defense, was not arrested or charged. In the weeks that followed, public outcry mounted, as many Americans doubted the veracity of Zimmerman’s account. On March 8, 2012, a Change.org petition to bring charges against Zimmerman was started and subsequently became the fastest growing petition in the site’s history, with an average of one thousand signatures per minute. One month after Martin’s death, when the petition was delivered to authorities, it had over two million signatures. Twitter was a major resource in circulating information about the case and the link to the petition. The hashtag #Trayvon made multiple appearances in the United States’ national trending topics. After Zimmerman’s acquittal, Twitter was used to organize protests, and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which would become the rallying cry for the subsequent movement against police brutality and institutional racism, was born.

TWiB!, the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasters, and their listeners reside in a “neighborhood” on Black Twitter, and many are influential users with large followings that function as hubs in the Black Twitter metanetwork. The affinity between the podcasts discussed above and this
Twitter network is so strong that Rod described Black podcasting as essentially moving “Black Twitter to audio form.” In addition to participating in the Black Twitter network, the podcasters bring discussions from Black Twitter into their broadcasts, often covering conversations and events taking place in that network.

It is not unusual for podcasters to spawn hashtags that galvanize the larger Black Twitter network and gain mainstream visibility. For example, Feminista Jones, writer, activist, and mental health social worker, was not only a prominent figure on Black Twitter, with over 57,000 followers as of 2016 (a number that increased to 158,000 by 2018), she also co-hosted TWiB!’s sex-positive podcast TWiB! after Dark from June 2013 to November 2014. Jones has created numerous influential hashtags, such as #YouOKSis to discuss street harassment of women of color and #NMOS14, an abbreviation of “National Moment of Silence,” which was used to coordinate moment of silence commemorations of Mike Brown in over ninety US cities on August 14, 2014. White has also created several hashtags that have garnered national visibility. Two notable examples are #DudesGreetingDudes, which challenged dismissals of street harassment as mere greetings with parodies of what similar greetings would look like between men, and #TheEmptyChair, a response to the New York Magazine’s cover featuring thirty-five of the women who accused Bill Cosby of rape and an empty chair to signify the women who had not come forward. Both hit the US trending topics on Twitter and were reported by journalists and bloggers, with #TheEmptyChair being covered by the Washington Post, CNN, and NPR.

For the network that is the focus of this project, Twitter functions in several interlocking ways. First, it serves as a platform for interpersonal and social interactions, creating and maintaining personal connections within the network. Second, Twitter is also a space for immediate real-time discussion, whether that be live-tweeting a television show or responding to breaking news as it unfolds. And third, because Twitter is publicly available and because the trending topics feature can call broader attention to those topics, often in the form of hashtags, Twitter is a point of connection between the network and those outside it.

The #BernieSoBlack hashtag from July 2015 exemplifies each of these uses. The hashtag emerged from a personal exchange between TBGWT’s Rod and TWiB! Prime’s Imani Gandy. On July 18, 2015,
Black Lives Matters protestors disrupted the Presidential Town Hall at Netroots Nation, a progressive grassroots organizing conference. The event featured Democratic primary candidates Martin O’Malley and Bernie Sanders. After the protest, Sanders was the target of heavy criticism for his refusal to engage with issues of systemic racism and for answering questions about structural racism with economic solutions. Many Sanders supporters responded by noting that Sanders had attended The March on Washington in 1963 as a way of delegitimizing any criticism of Sanders around issues of race. The following morning, after almost a full day of Sanders’s supporters pointing out his Civil Rights Movement bona fides, Gandy tweeted, “If I see one more Bernie acolyte mention that he marched with MLK, I’m going to burn the Internet to the ground.” The tweet initiated an exchange between Gandy and Rod, who facetiously responded, “Hold up! Bernie Sanders marched with MLK? This changes EVERYTHING!” Gandy added, “Pretty sure Bernie played spades with Stokley Carmichael at a Jackson 5 concert once,” prompting Rod to tweet the following jokes in quick succession:

#BernieSoBlack HE teaches you how to Cha Cha Slide!

I heard Bernie Sanders showed Redd Foxx how to put dice in a Crown Royal bag! #BernieSoBlack.

I actually heard it was Bernie’s idea to march in Selma. MLK wanted to do the march in Hawaii. A destination march. #BernieSoBlack.

What was initially an interpersonal exchange as part of a larger discussion about a news story quickly scaled up as the hashtag picked up momentum and hit Twitter’s US national trending topics. It also became part of the media narrative around the Netroots Nation protest, covered by Reuters, the Guardian, Bloomberg News, MSNBC, CNN, and Slate. Rod gave interviews to Vox, the Los Angeles Times, and the Daily Beast, and ultimately found himself sharing the Vox.com front page with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. In this way, Twitter often acts as a point of articulation between the network and mainstream media and establishment politics.
Finally, Twitter is a useful locus of analysis for this study because it functions as a central hub through which participants disseminate materials from other social media platforms. Twitter is used to share links to new episodes of podcasts, to news stories and blogs, and to content on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Vine. These practices are part of the day-to-day use of Twitter, but become particularly visible at moments of crisis and political engagement such as the uprising in Ferguson in August 2014. Many people on the ground in Ferguson used Instagram (both images and videos) and Vine to capture events as they unfolded. Twitter became a central clearinghouse for this material as users tweeted links to other social media posts, a practice that is facilitated by various social media apps that enable simultaneous posts on multiple platforms. Thus, a focus on Twitter allows my analysis to include other social media platforms used by the network.

While the three constitutive elements of the network I discuss above are distinct, they are deeply interrelated, and the boundaries between them are often blurry. Together, they form a large Black network created and maintained by collective discourse production. Yet, each offers different imagined affordances that allow participants to engage in a range of communicative practices, simultaneously and in tandem.

The Duality of the Network

The digital assemblage outlined above possesses characteristics of a “network” in both senses of the term as a broadcast-style network producing content for distribution and a digitally enabled social network. Although the distinction between broadcast-style network and social network is blurry at best, the dual nature of the network allows for adaptations and translations of longstanding practices of Black cultural production and sociality in the same networked space.

This is true of the Chitlin’ Circuit podcast, of TWiB!, and of the Twitter network in which both are embedded, as each of these three elements are often used simultaneously in ways that resonate with both understandings of the term. This duality is apparent in the podcasts created by the network, which are broadcast-style media content produced for distribution and circulation. Podcasts are a predominantly audio medium (though video is increasingly common) characterized by por-
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...tability and seriality and employing many of the same conventions as radio. The similarities between podcasts and radio are apparent from the fact that most popular podcasts are downloadable episodes of radio shows such as *This American Life* and *Radio Lab*. Like radio, podcasts use the one-to-many logic of broadcasting, and the podcasters in this network often employ the language of broadcasting—referring to their live streams as “broadcasts” or going “on-air”—as do the platforms that provide access to their content—such as Stitcher Radio, TuneIn Radio, or Blog Talk Radio. Several of the podcasters in this study—including TWiB!, TBGWT, Movie Trailer Reviews, The Black Astronauts, and Cold Slither—operate what they refer to as “podcast networks.” These networks are analogous to broadcast networks in that they produce several different podcasts series as part of an overarching brand.

The podcasts in this network are in the style of talk radio and share talk radio’s emphasis on listener participation. Like talk radio, many of the podcasts include listener call-in segments. However, digital media technologies offer additional avenues for audiences to participate in live shows, allowing a level of interactivity and geographical reach unavailable to previous generations of Black media producers. Several of the podcasts that stream live provide a chatroom where listeners can log-on and interact in real-time. Listeners offer commentary, and hosts often interject comments from the chatroom into “on-air” discussions. The chatroom is of such importance to TWiB! that it sold t-shirts listing the chatroom alongside the names of the three hosts of *TWiB! Prime*—“Elon & Imani & Aaron & the Chatroom”—effectively giving it the status of co-host. Twitter is often used similarly. Many listeners tweet while listening live, and the hosts include comments from Twitter in the shows.

However, social media, particularly Twitter, do not merely augment broadcast-style content; they also possess characteristics of such mass communication. Many early researchers of Twitter characterized it as a platform where users broadcast, or at least narrowcast, to their followers. Some theorists have made comparisons between Twitter and podcasting’s parent format, radio, pointing to Twitter’s immediacy and making analogies to ham radio and CB radio. Kate Crawford, in her analysis of Twitter as a mode of listening, argues that users can engage Twitter as they do radio, employing “background listening” and “tuning in” when something catches their attention. She asserts that the flows of
information on Twitter, like radio, “can circulate in the background, a part of the texture of the everyday.”

In addition to functioning as a broadcast-style network, it is also a network of people and technologies. It is a space for sociality that is imbricated in but not dependent on the media texts produced by and circulated within it. Such interactions are not the same as those that take place in “fan” networks in the traditional sense. Thus, not only do participants regularly engage in interactions that are not directly tethered to the podcasts, but some participants in the network do not listen to the podcasts at all. Additionally, the social media networks in which these podcasts are embedded did not coalesce around them; rather the social media element of the network predated most of the podcasts. Often podcasters attribute their participation in the network with inspiring them to create their own content.

The network’s intertwining of broadcast-style media and sociality reflects the contemporary digital media environment. The emergence of social media has made “audiences more visible” to media producers. Whereas mass media removed the audience from physical co-presence and made it an abstraction, social media has increased the accessibility of the audience not only to the producer, but also to each other. This shift in the producer-audience dynamic can be seen in the ways that podcasters integrate users from their social networks in their media production process, which, in turn, imbricates their podcasts more deeply in the broader conversations taking place in the network.

The podcasts are so deeply intermeshed with social media that, in addition to providing broadcast-style content, they contribute to broader social media–enabled conversations. Podcasters often use their shows to participate in larger conversations in the network, weighing in on discussions happening on social media and or continuing a conversation that they engaged in on Twitter or Facebook. In effect, the podcasts often become interlocutors in discussions that extend well beyond their direct audiences.

The dual nature of this multimedia, transplatform network makes it a powerful means for negotiating racial discourses. Digital media technologies often blur the distinction between the public and the private, and the configuration of this network brings together both public and private traditions of Black counter-public production.
as a contemporary iteration of longstanding practices of counter-public formation, in both Black independent media and everyday Black social spaces. As such, it serves as valuable resource for rejecting colorblind racial discourses and creating alternative imaginaries about race.

Rejecting Colorblindness and Constructing a Black Cultural Space

Given its dual nature, the network draws simultaneously on historical traditions of Black community-based media production—particularly newspaper and radio—and of Black social engagement in spaces such as barber or beauty shops and churches. Grounded in these traditions, the participants’ communicative strategies construct the network in ways that define it as a Black space. They extend practices of Black cultural production and sociality from before the neoliberal era into the contemporary moment. These practices bring with them conceptualizations of race and racial identity that undermine colorblindness, particularly the construction of race as a personal trait rather than collective social category.

The network’s refusal to fully connect with or court the cultural industries has likely shielded them from the compromises so often required by the structures of these industries. Professionalization is fraught for media content producers of color, often requiring them to compromise some aspects of their work just to gain entry into the industry, even at the fringe. Anamik Saha has demonstrated how people of color who create independent media content must find ways to work in and through established media industry practices, which can force them to accommodate problematic practices. In his study of an independent Asian dance music record label, he found that their marketing displayed “internalized corporate promotional techniques that steered it in a direction that ultimately led to self-exoticization.” Aymar Jean-Christian discusses how the creators of Broad City struggled with the shift in expectations after they signed a deal with Comedy Central, noting how they were required to “sand [the] edges down so that more people can watch and enjoy.” Thus, because the network at the center of this project has avoided becoming imbricated in larger cultural industries, the kinds of Black cultural practices that might otherwise constitute an “edge” in need of smoothing are instead permitted to flourish.
The podcasts in this network, with their similarity to radio, can be located squarely within a long and rich history of Black independent media. Beginning in the 1820s, the Black press created and circulated oppositional frameworks, rearticulated Black identity, and disseminated information to Black communities. With the advent of radio in the early twentieth century, Black media producers took these practices to the airwaves. Since the Civil Rights Movement, Black radio has been a site for political dialogue and debate. In her study of Chicago’s Black talk radio station WVON-AM, Catherine Squires finds that the station is continuing the legacy of the Black press by creating a Black counterpublic, addressing not just “Black” issues, but all issues while privileging and centering Black perspectives and interpretive frameworks. The Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts and TWiB!’s content function as digital iterations of these historical practices.

Podcasts’ similarity to radio makes them particularly well suited for the task of reasserting a sense of Black collectivity in ways that undermine the individualism that permeates dominant racial discourses. Many scholars have pointed to radio’s ability to constitute listeners as an imagined community. Susan Douglas argues that radio has cognitive dimensions that “make radio’s role in constructing imagined communities . . . much more powerful that what print can do.” Podcasts also have some of these same possibilities for building a sense of connection. These podcasts interpellate their listeners by deploying cultural commonplaces, vernaculars, and modes of address to constitute a “Black audience.” Vorris Nunely asserts that a “Black audience” is not merely a group of Black spectators or listeners; rather, it is an audience that “is persuaded by tropes, knowledges, and terministic screens anchored in African American life and culture.” Performers are able to identify with this audience through “speech, gesture, tonality, organization, image, attitude, and ideas anchored in the deployment of African American knowledges, hermeneutics, and understandings of the world.” The Black audience is not monolithic; instead, it is constituted by the use of “different hermeneutical frames emerging from different terministic screens constructed through distinctive experiences when it comes to crucial issues and interests related to African American life and culture.” The podcasts in this network refuse to be constrained by the listening ear and, instead, replace the normative whiteness of traditional radio-style
audio with content that evokes the Black audience and allows listeners to hear themselves, rather than to be Othered. The talk-radio format enhances this sense of collectivity. In the early days of US radio, the inclusion of audience participation-based programming brought the voices of the “average” American to the airwaves, thereby not only constituting an imagined community of listeners, but also providing a series of performances that demonstrated “who ‘the American people’ were, what they sounded like, and what they believed in.” The podcasts in this network make use of a similar mechanism. It is not uncommon for TWiB! podcasts to take listener calls. Podcasts such as TBGW T and WM40A? also have voicemail, where listeners can leave messages to be played on the shows. In Deep Show has a recurring segment called “Can I Talk My Shit?,” which plays prerecorded audio sent in by listeners discussing issues that are important to them. These calls and messages serve as performances of who members of the network are. Far from presenting a series of individuals who “happen to be Black,” callers similarly invoke a Black audience, often rejecting color-blindness and its emphasis on the individual, and instead constructing themselves as members of social group whose lives are shaped by the experience of structural racism.

Additionally, the talk-show format includes audience members’ contributions not only as performances of “who listeners are,” but also as co-creators of those representations. Squires argues that the talk-show format “allows the audience to participate in constructing social texts and assigning meanings” and therefore is “an opportunity for a dynamic process of joint creation of texts and reciprocal information sharing between audience, guests, and . . . staff.” Thus, radio not only creates a sense of community and provides performances that reflect the members of that community, but also allows audience participation in this process so that these performances become to some degree a result of collective meaning-making.

The network is also constructed as a Black space through the modes of sociality enabled by the imagined affordances of each platform. The sense of community and connection created by the radio-style audio of the podcasts is strengthened by the “ambient intimacy” created by the social media elements of the network. Members of the network interact heavily on social media, particularly Twitter. These exchanges are often
unrelated to the content produced by the network’s content creators and focus instead on current events and the day-to-day lives of participants. The constant stream of information found across social media, much of it mundane, creates a sense of familiarity among members of the network. If, as Crawford notes, “access to the minutiae of a person’s life is something normally reserved for family, close friends, and lovers,”67 then such digital interactions work to strengthen feelings of connection.

On Twitter, the primary structural relationship—that between followers and those whom they follow—has been theorized as creating “personal publics.”68 In these personal publics, “news reporting and instances of professional communication can share the same space with personal musings, phatic communication, and social grooming.” Thus, the network contains multiple overlapping personal publics, in which media content, such as podcasts, is circulated and consumed alongside conversations about politics, personal opinions about popular culture, and commentary about the daily goings-on of life. Personal publics are “characterized by the communicative mode of ‘conversation,’ where the strict separation of sender and receiver is blurred.”69 On Twitter, the @-reply feature allows this network to be utilized for “micro-” level interpersonal communication by allowing users to directly address each other.70 Thus, users are not just broadcasting information to their personal publics, but also having conversational exchanges.

This conversational micro-level communication allows the network to host the kinds of everyday talk that Melissa Harris-Perry, argues “African Americans jointly develop understandings of their collective interests and create strategies to navigate the complex political world.”71 The social interactions enabled by the network translate this longstanding enclaved sociality into the digital arena, a phenomenon I explore in greater depth in chapter 2.

Homo Demons vs. Mrs. Elon James White

In this final section of the chapter I analyze the network’s reaction to the exchange between TWiB!’s Elon James White and Reverend James David Manning of Harlem’s ATLAH Ministries regarding the latter’s antigay statements. In February and March of 2014, their “beef” set the network abuzz in ways that illustrate a number of characteristics of the
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network at the center of this project, including how deeply intercon-
nected the three anchoring elements of the network are, as well as how
the network brings communicative modes of broadcast and everyday
social interaction together. The incident also highlights the distributed
nature of the network itself and the discussions it enables, as conver-
sations take place across multiple platforms and employ text, images,
video, and audio content, which are often remixed or remediated. At
the same time, it shows how the different elements of the network are
distinct from one another—particularly how TWiB! attempts to directly
shift broader cultural discourses, how the other podcasts in the network
serve a more intragroup social function, and how Twitter, itself a central
hub for multiple social media platforms, functions as the primary tool
for both conversation and the circulation of content.

On February 28, 2014, Manning posted a video to YouTube in which
he elaborated on the sign in front of his church warning of “homo de-
mons.” In the video, Manning asserted that President Obama was work-
ing to “convert” Black men to “homosexuality,” causing the destruction
of the Black family and leaving Black women to raise children alone.
Manning argued that as Obama encouraged more Black men to embrace
same-sex relationships, these Black men were then “being scooped up
by white homos” who had moved “into Black neighborhoods” and were
“looking for Black men that have been converted.” Manning warned
Black women of the difficulty they would face in trying to compete with
gay white men for Black men’s affections. A white gay man, he said, has
“usually got money. A white homo usually has an American Express
card. He usually has an opportunity at the theater. Homos love the the-
ater. They love to go out to dinner parties. They love that kind of a thing.”
He stated that the sign in front of his church was a “direct action” taken
against this threat to the Black community.72

TWiB!, which has always taken an unapologetically pro-LGBTQ
stance, used its web video series to challenge Manning and his asser-
tions. The video, titled “Blackness. Today: #Homodemons,” was posted
to TWiB!’s YouTube channel just two days after Manning’s original
video was released.73 TWiB!’s response video opens with White sitting at
a desk in the TWiB! studio and saying, “You know sometimes you hear
or see something that you’re just simply not prepared for?” The video
then cuts to an image of the ATLAH Ministries sign accompanied by
audio taken from Manning’s video as he reads the text of the sign. White then spends the remaining two and a half minutes of the video critiquing and mocking Manning’s assertions in equal measure. After pointing out that he, as a straight Black man, likes all the things Manning lists as characteristics of gay white men, White goes on to argue that as laughable as Manning’s assertions might be to him or many in his audience, it would be a mistake to dismiss these statements as “crazy talk.” He cites Harris-Perry, the Maya Angelou Presidential Chair Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Wake Forest University who hosted a show on MSNB at the time, who once said to him that calling things “crazy” minimizes what they are, which is “dangerous.” White points out that Manning is not alone in his beliefs. He concludes,

As opposed to worrying about the homo demons attacking Black men, why don’t you worry about the actual people attacking Black men. I find it really hard to believe that Jesus would be co-signing you wasting time on homodemons when there are actual issues that you could be putting more time toward.

In addition to being posted to TWiB!’s YouTube channel, TWiB!’s video response to Manning was also posted on TWiB!’s website (ThisWeekInBlackness.com), Google+ profile, Tumblr, and multiple Facebook pages, as well as to White’s personal Google+ profile, Tumblr, and Twitter. TWiB!’s video was circulated across social media platforms by members of the network, many of whom participated in critiquing Manning’s homophobic stance, usually via sarcasm and humor. On Twitter, high-profile members of the network such as TWiB! Prime co-host Gandy and journalist and commentator Goldie Taylor retweeted the link to the video.

Challenging problematic discourses, both from within and outside Black America, has always been at the core of TWiB!’s mission. These challenges have varying levels of visibility and impact, depending on how they are taken up and circulated within and beyond the network. While some TWiB! videos circulate and fade without every drawing the attention of those being critiqued, this particular video came to the attention of Manning himself, who posted a rebuttal to TWiB!’s response on YouTube approximately one week later.
Manning’s seven-minute response video, titled “Mrs. Elon James White,” begins with the TWiB! video unedited in its entirety and then cuts to Manning sitting at a desk, from which he offers his rebuttal. Manning begins with challenges to White’s masculinity and sexuality in terms that are grounded in dominant heteronormative discourses, calling White “Mrs. Elon” and asserting that he “appears for all intents and purposes to be bisexual.” He goes on to critique White’s failure to reference the Bible in his criticism of Manning’s position, framing this as a fatal flaw that makes White’s criticism inherently invalid. Saying that White’s argument is “as empty as a pocket,” Manning presents the Bible to the camera,

But I have the Bible, homie. HEEY! HEY, HO-MEY! I HAVE THE BI- BLE. I HAVE THE WORD OF GOD. You can call me what ya want. You can say anything about me and my character that that you will. But what-cha gonna do ‘bout this right HERE?

Continuing to hold up the Bible up, Manning goes on to claim that White isn’t opposing him, but rather Jesus, and then devotes the last minute of the video to attacking Harris-Perry, calling her a “dyke” who “can’t keep a man,” and challenging the authenticity of her Blackness by proclaiming her to be the “most pinched nose white acting person you’d ever want to see.” He insults Harris-Perry’s “fake braids,” comparing her to Bo Derek, the white actress who famously wore cornrows in the 1979 movie 10. Manning scolds White for quoting Harris-Perry rather than “someone with integrity.” He chided, “You from Brooklyn, put up some statements from Shirley Chisholm. Or you don’t know about her?”

Manning’s response video came to White’s attention the same day it was posted, prompting White to tweet. “So apparently I got under Mr. #Homodemons skin. Does he really want to do this? Does he really?” By 11:00 p.m. EST that night, White had announced on Twitter that he was editing a video response to Manning’s rebuttal. The following day, White posted “Dear ‘Dr.’ James David Manning . . . A.K.A. Dr. #Ho- moDemons” on YouTube, TWiB!’s website, and the same social media sites as the initial video.

TWiB!’s six-and-a-half minute video featured White intercutting his commentary with clips from Manning’s response to his initial video.
White’s counterargument focused on a number of factual errors in Manning’s video, including the fact that Shirley Chisolm was “an icon of equality for everyone” and “well known for her advocacy for gay rights,” with a screen capture of the results from a Google search of Chisolm’s name appearing next to White’s head. Mocking Manning’s disregard for factual information, White muses, “Maybe the Old Testament says, ‘Thou shalt not Google.’” He concludes by saying, “Next time you want to call someone a dyke or just be generally ignorant and homophobic, ask yourself a question, ‘What would Jesus do?’ I’m going to assume he probably wouldn’t get into YouTube beef.”

Members of the network circulated the new video more extensively than TWiB!’s first response to Manning, often tweeting the link along with their favorite quotations from White’s rebuttal. As members of the network discussed and retweeted the link, Rod, who has been a long-time listener of TWiB! and a guest host on several TWiB! shows, began a series of tweets satirically proclaiming his support for Manning. Rod asserted, “Dr. Manning hits on all the key questions I’ve asked about @elonjames and #TWiB for years.” He then enumerated twenty-one “concerns,” including asking, “Heeeey Homeboy . . . how you gonna quote Melissa Harris Perry [sic] when she is a black gay Bo Derek?” and “What IS Elon gone do about ‘dis here?”” One longtime and active participant in the network organized and archived Rod’s concerns using Storify, a now-defunct website that allowed Twitter users to embed chosen tweets along with added commentary to capture Twitter exchanges in a linear narrative form. Once a Storify of Rod’s questions had been created, users circulated a link to it, disseminating it through Twitter’s fragmented, non-linear environment, where more and more participants joined the discussion, which lasted for several days.

White’s and Manning’s YouTube beef became a topic of discussion not only on social media, but eventually on other podcasts in the network, notably the March 9, 2014, episode of TBGWT, titled “#DrManning-Bars.” The podcast was initially live-streamed via Spreecast, a website that allows for a video conference call between hosts, which can then be viewed by audience members. Subsequently, the episode was available for download as an audio file. In addition to Rod and Karen, the show also featured Kriss from MTR Network. About twenty listeners actively participated in the chatroom built into Spreecast’s interface, including
many who were also TWiB! listeners and several who produce their own podcasts. Almost without exception, the chatroom participants were already familiar with White’s and Manning’s conflict, and many had already participated in discussing the incident via social media.

As Rod introduced the topic, listeners in the chatroom were already indicating their familiarity with the situation. Ms. Think Pretty Smart, co-host of the Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine podcast, wrote, “best vid ever!!”, and other listeners quoted the “Hey, Homie!” segment of Manning’s video. Rod continued, explaining that Manning’s video “was so good that I was like ‘I wish I was doing the show right now.’ . . . And people were like ‘Y’all should cover this on your show.’ And I was like ‘We will.’ I was like, it would be even better if we get Kriss here, and that was how this was born.” While TWiB!’s videos were produced to engage directly with Manning’s discourses and then Manning himself, TBGWT clearly had another goal—jokes. The hosts and listeners, while being critical of Manning’s antigay position, never attempted to earnestly rebut Manning’s argument. Opting to mock it instead, they created a space for intragroup discussion. After a brief summary of the conflict that precipitated Manning’s response video, they began playing the audio of Manning’s video, which begins with TWiB!’s initial unedited video in its entirety. TBGWT then played the audio from Manning’s response, pausing it frequently to offer commentary.

At several points, the discussion between Rod, Karen, and Kriss explicitly addressed the differences between TWiB! and TBGWT or MTR’s flagship podcast Insanity Check. For example, early in TWiB!’s original video, White asks, “Were there no gay Black men before Obama became president? Obviously not.” At this point, Rod pauses the audio and says, “Here goes Elon with all this reason and shit. . . . Like this is his thing, like somebody says somethin’ patently ridiculous, to which me and Kriss go ‘Man, fuck that dude,’ and Elon goes, ‘Let’s explain why this dude is wrong exactly.’” They continue this commentary a few moments later, after White, in his original video, notes that Manning’s doctorate was awarded by an unaccredited school that Manning himself founded. Rod pauses the video and he, Karen, and Kriss have the following exchange:

Rod: See, Elon be using the Google.
Kriss: Right, he, you know, he’s puttin’ work in. . . .
Rod: That’s his biggest weakness, by the way. Like, Elon wants to be accurate.

Karen: Tryin’ do them facts, dog.

Rod: Like, Elon’s gonna look the shit up. He’s gonna be right. He gon know. Like, he’s gonna ask the right questions. He gon challenge himself. Ask himself two, three times, like, “Is my opinion the most correct one? How can I nuance this more?” And that’s all well and good, when you’re tryin’ to be factual. But dis ain’t dat, Elon. [Laughing] Dis. Ain’t. Dat.

These exchanges highlight differences between TWiB! productions and other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts. While TWiB! actively seeks to intervene in what it sees as problematic discourses, such as the homophobia forwarded by Manning, TBGWT and Insanity Check, along with other podcasts in the Chitlin’ Circuit network, are interested in mining such situations for humor and creating an enjoyable or cathartic experience for the hosts and their listeners. While the humor used in such instances often contains implicit, and sometimes explicit, critique, its primary intent is usually to address an intranetwork audience rather than to directly rebut individuals such as Manning.

Additionally, the exchange between White and Manning and the ways it circulated demonstrate several key characteristics of this network. First, it highlights the multimedia, transplatform nature of the network. The entire exchange transpired using multiple media—images, text, video, and audio—which were combined and recombined in ways that facilitated discussion and sharing. Both the conversation and the content circulated across multiple platforms—on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Tumblr, Instagram, podcasts, and chatrooms.

Second, this example illustrates the deeply connected and collaborative nature of the network. TBGWT not only made TWiB!’s video and Manning’s response a topic of discussion on its podcast, but also invited another podcaster, Kriss to participate in it. Additionally, by the time TBGWT recorded the “#DrManningBars” episode, listeners of the podcast, many of whom were also listeners of TWiB! and who interacted heavily on social media, were already largely familiar with the incident. The network connections were made clear by comments in TBGWT’s chatroom during the episode. At one point, Sojourner Verdad, co-host
of *Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine*, commented, “I wish nicju was here. She found a video of him in an electric blue fancy robe,” referring to the co-host of *What’s the Tea?* who had earlier found footage of Manning that she had shared with the network. When Manning mentions White’s wife, Emily Epstein-White in his video, longtime listener to both *TBGWT* and *TWiB!*’s podcasts, @cubicle_bc, noted that he remembered watching a video of White getting engaged, which took place at a live event for *TWiB!* in New York City and was both live-streamed and recorded.

While this example illustrates the interconnection of the network, it also highlights how each of the three constitutive elements is distinct from the others and furthers its own specific communicative goals. For *TWiB!* that goal was directly challenging the problematic discourses put forth by Manning by offering a humorous yet well-reasoned and fact-based retort. While *TBGWT*’s coverage was not devoid of critique, it was more concerned with the intracommunity value of discussing the event. Twitter served both as a space to circulate content, such as the videos, and as a space for discussion of events as they unfolded, with podcasts later elaborating.

Additionally, throughout the discussion of the “homo demons” incident participants made heavy use of Black American cultural commonplaces and cultural references, speaking to a Black audience and reifying the network as a Black cultural space. First, the mere selection of the ATLAH sign, located in Harlem, and Manning’s comments, connects the interaction to traditions of the Black church. White, at one point, speaking to the rhetorical traditions of the Black church, responded to Manning using the cadence often associated with Black Christian preachers. Additionally, the discussion in the network often relied on specific Black cultural references. For example, the title of *TBGWT* episode “#DrManningBars” is a reference to Hip-hop, in which the word “bars” refers to musical bars and is often used to describe lyrical delivery within the genre. The hosts discussed the exchange between White and Manning as if it were a Hip-hop MC battle, and, at one point, Rod even added the beat from Nas’s “Ether,” one of the most iconic Hip-hop tracks of all time, underneath Manning as he spoke.

Thus, the network is marked as a Black space, both through explicit demarcation such as show names and through communicative prac-
tices. Its dual nature—as a broadcast-style network and a digital social network—allows for multiple longstanding Black communicative practices to operate together. Whether in broadcast-style communication, such as TWiB!’s video response to Manning, or in social spaces, such as TBGWT podcasts and their accompanying chatroom, the components function as contributions to larger distributed discussions happening across the network. This deeply interconnected multiplatform network offers participants a range of different affordances that can be leveraged depending on the needs of the moment. As such, aspects of the network can provide a space for both intragroup conversation and engagement with those outside the network. It is the oscillation between these two functions that I address in the next chapter.