In March 2014, HBO released a *Game of Thrones*–inspired mixtape titled *Catch the Throne*, featuring well-known Hip-hop performers such as Big Boi, Common, and Wale. Lucinda Martinez, HBO’s senior vice president for multicultural marketing, described the effort to the *Wall Street Journal*, saying, “Our multicultural audiences are a very important part of our subscribers, and we don’t want to take them for granted.” But if HBO wanted to reach out to Black *Game of Thrones* viewers, they needed only to look to Twitter, where Black Twitter users have created a robust fandom using the hashtag #DemThrones. Though Twitter often facilitates the visibility of Black discourse, giving Black Twitter its leverage in broader cultural conversations, the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) inflected hashtag effectively conceals the network’s activities, even to the robust data gathering mechanisms of HBO itself. #DemThrones participants are able to make use of Twitter’s immediacy to engage in synchronous co-viewing and commentary while simultaneously forming a barrier to outsiders.

At times, participants in Black Twitter wish to capitalize on the visibility created by the platform, strategically using trending topics and other affordances to make their voices and experiences more widely known. Yet, at other times, these same affordances bring unwanted visibility, particularly scrutiny from dominant groups, in ways that inhibit Black users from participating freely on the platform. In response to this tension, participants in the network that is the focus of this book have developed a range of techniques for managing visibility and maximizing platforms for their communicative goals. This chapter explores how the network, conceptualized as a transplatform networked public, shifts between functioning as an enclave, which serves as a forum for unpoliced intranetwork conversation, and a counter-public, which
engages directly in contesting and opposing discourses outside the network. The cultural practices, epistemologies, and subject positions of the users interact with the materiality of the technologies to create a set of imagined affordances that allow this oscillation between enclave and counter-public.

Digital media scholars often invoke “publics” in analyses of digital networks, though they may rely on different definitions of the term. In the original Habermasian concept of the public sphere, the term carries with it some kind of political valence, including active deliberation and explicit political discussion. However, for marginalized groups, seemingly mundane activities often come to take on political importance. The performance of social identities and the “expression of one’s cultural identity through idiom and style” can be an important mode of political engagement, regardless of whether there are direct and immediately discernable political consequences. For Black Americans, who must operate within a white supremacist society, seemingly apolitical, mundane, or everyday activities are often de facto political because they resist white normativity.

The public discussed here is a networked public—one that is constituted and structured by networked technology. In her theorization of networked publics, danah boyd asserts that they are both “(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.” In much digital media research, the digital space of the public is treated as coterminous with the platform that is the focus of analysis. MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr have all been discussed as hosting publics of various kinds. But it is also fruitful to consider the ways that the collective constructs a space that is not limited by platform. In doing this, we can begin to conceptualize different platforms not as separate and interlocking networked publics, but as elements of one multilayered public, the space populated by the collective, where imagined affordances can be strategically deployed in conjunction with one another. This approach is particularly suitable for elucidating Twitter, which commonly serves as a content aggregator and bridge between multiple platforms.

Conceptualized this way, the network at the center of this project comes into view as what Catherine Squires has called an “oscillating
public.” Squires is most frequently cited for her three-part model of publics as enclaves, counter-publics, and satellite publics, each of which she identifies by analysis of motivation, communicative practices, and behaviors. She observes that a public can separate itself from others, forming an enclave where “counterhegemonic ideas and strategies” can be hidden “in order to avoid sanctions.” By contrast, counter-publics “engage in debate with wider publics,” often “to test ideas and perhaps utilize traditional social movement tactics.” Satellite publics are hybrids of the two, “seek[ing] separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relationships but . . . involved in wider public discourses from time to time.” Such publics “aim to maintain a solid group identity and build independent institutions,” while at times entering “into wider public debates when there is clear convergence of their interests with those of other publics” or when they experience “friction or controversies with wider publics.”

However, her earlier work does not include satellite publics and instead refers to publics that shift their function as “oscillating.” Squires describes this phenomenon saying, “. . . we can also imagine a public oscillating to engage in debate with outsiders, to test ideas.” I wish to recuperate Squires’s notion of oscillating publics because, while satellite publics do engage wider publics from time to time, the concept of satellite publics does not fully capture the frequent, contingent, and multilayered shifts unfolding constantly in the network I analyze here. Thus, I believe the concept of oscillation has profound utility for understanding the function of publics in the digital landscape.

Referring to the three types of publics, Squires observes “institutional, political, and social contexts may make the use of one of these types of responses more prevalent at any given moment.” She notes that enclave, counter-public, and satellite public are not absolute or stable states. But, in different moments the “discourse and cultural expressions of a public may employ all of these responses.” When moved to networked digital contexts, this fluctuation intensifies. Catherine Knight Steele explores this fluidity in her work on Black blogs by showing how they shift between these modes based on their theme. Because the network at the center of this project brings together various media and platforms, the shifting both Squires and Steele highlight is more deeply pronounced. Given the way discourse is produced and flows across various digital platforms, which, while linked and intertwined, possess their own ma-
teriality and functionality, it is productive to think of one multiplatform
network that shifts, or oscillates, between enclave and counter-public.
Moreover, this networked public does not shift in its entirety. Various
elements of the platform are often deployed simultaneously for different
functions, with some elements serving as enclaves and others being used
as counter-publics. These shifts are accomplished through the imagined
affordances of various platforms, which sometimes align with developer
intentions and sometimes circumvent them.

The network discussed here oscillates between both enclave and
counter-public, deploying different imagined affordances and strategies,
sometimes simultaneously, to do so. Thus, I argue that this network is
an oscillating networked public, in which material affordances are com-
combined with culturally specific communicative practices that create a
space for both intragroup discussion and direct counter-public debate.
The oscillation may be achieved through the movement of users from
one platform to another or by maneuvering within platforms to imagine
non-normative affordances. Further, enclave and counter-public are not
mutually exclusive states and may exist simultaneously, even inhabited
by the same people as they use different platforms or deploy different
strategies on the same platform in tandem.

I begin with a description of how the network functions to create
enclaves through technological functionalities that create barriers, both
formal and informal, to outsider participation. I then turn to how the
network can simultaneously be used to disrupt and challenge discourses
from outside the network. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how
the affordances of networked publics, particularly related to scalability
and invisible audiences, allow and sometimes force the network to oscil-
late from enclave to counter-public.

Networked Enclaves

The network at the center of this project functions as a resource for cre-
ating enclaves away from the disciplining gaze of the dominant society,
where marginalized groups can communicate and interact using non-
hegemonic discursive practices. Squires uses James Scott’s concepts
of “hidden transcripts,” the discourses and knowledges marginalized
groups must obscure from the dominant group, to describe the type
of communication that happens in enclaves. Furthermore, as Karma Chávez demonstrates, these enclaves can also serve as essential spaces where groups can interpret external rhetoric about themselves and create new rhetorical strategies. The racial hierarchies and power structures of the United States have long necessitated that Black Americans create such spaces for themselves—dating back to “hush harbors” formed in slave quarters, woods, and praise houses where Black people interacted with each other away from the white gaze and continuing in the traditions of Black churches and barber and beauty shops of today. Such spaces not only allowed for safe and sequestered Black sociality, but were “at the core of the black critical tradition in America.”

Vorris Nunely demonstrates that such enclaves are crucial to the development and maintenance of Black epistemologies and subjectivities. He describes them as “lifeworlds” where “Black political rationality has been and continues to be privileged” and where “the unsaid in the public sphere gets said; where the unhearable gets heard; and where the filtering of American and African American culture and life occurs through African American hermeneutics.” These “camouflaged” spaces produce and maintain what Nunely terms “African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric (AAHHR),” which contains and conveys Black epistemes and rationalities. This rhetoric exceeds cultural difference and identity and involves the “manufacturing of ontology and knowledge.” AAHHR takes Black experience and knowledge as normative and serves “as a primary ground for manufacturing Black or African American subjectivities.” Thus, he asserts, “Beneath the vernacular banter is a biopolitics that does not merely resist (which depends too much on the power and subjectivities it opposes) but, more importantly, produces distinct subjectivities.” The enclaves and the AAHHR they produce “do more than challenge White, mainstream, and American knowledge on the political or social register; they challenge on the level of ontology and subjectivity . . . the very notion of what it is to be fully human.”

The network discussed here provides participants with a multimedia, transplatform, and mobile set of resources for creating enclaves in which AAHHR can thrive. Enclaves are created through podcasts and their channels for audience interaction, through private and closed Facebook groups, and through the use of nonstandard hashtags and AAVE to obscure conversations on Twitter. This technologically enabled iteration of
hush harbor enclaves has a geographic reach and a mobility unavailable to previous generations. At the same time technology has also made these spaces available to the white gaze in new ways and thus posed new challenges for maintaining the boundaries of the enclave.

Of the various elements of the network, the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts function most effectively to create networked enclaves. Here podcasters and their listeners can engage in a range of communicative practices away from the white surveillance and dominant discourses that constitute whiteness as normative. These practices include community-building, catharsis, interpretation of outside discourse, fan practices, and everyday discussion. For Black Americans, operating within a society constrained by discourses of colorblindness, where their mere performance of race might illicit hostility, spaces for such practices must be actively created, maintained, and policed. As Rod said of The Black Guy Who Tips (TBGWT) podcast, “It’s a safe spot, and we don’t have a lot of safe spots in American media and in America as a whole.”17 He characterized the podcast as a “stress free” media space, saying, “Black people listen to our podcast because they’re like, ‘Here’s a place where I don’t have to worry about being attacked all the fucking time.’”18 These podcasts allow participants to interact around a range of issues without having to conform to white norms and where AAHHR is the communicative and epistemological foundation. They interpellate listeners through the use of AAHHR, deploying cultural commonplaces, vernaculars, and modes of address to evoke the kind of “Black audience” described by Nunely.

Though podcasts often take many conventions from radio, the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts more closely resemble informal social interactions in their embrace of a free-flowing, flexible, and conversational style, including significant phatic communication and the use of a wide range of vernaculars. One comment left on iTunes by a listener described the discussions on 3 Guys On using the term “chop it up,”19 a vernacular expression common in Black communities that refers to friendly, informal conversation. For his part, Rod describes the TBGWT podcast format as “kind of just talkin’. But it’s organized talkin.’”20 Often shows depart from the formal introduction that offers listeners the name of the podcast and the names of the hosts. It is not uncommon, for example, for the hosts of Where’s My 40 Acres? (WM40A?) to get so wrapped up in conversations
that they get twenty or thirty minutes into a show before introducing themselves. Some podcasts never introduce the hosts, leaving listeners to glean their names only through consistent listening.

The use of Black vernaculars is also central to the differences between the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts and radio. Podcasters in this network come from across the United States, representing a wide range of accents and vernacular variations. The podcaster who perhaps exemplifies this most is Karen from TBGWT, who has a pronounced southern accent that many listeners say reminds them of home or family. One iTunes review, titled “Country Play Cousin,” described her accent, as “country. Like no shoes, dirt road, sharecropper country.”

Black vernaculars and cultural commonplaces are prevalent, as are references to Black expressive cultures. This hails listeners as a Black audience by requiring them to have appropriate cultural competencies and related AAHHR frameworks to understand the discussions taking place.

This approach makes the podcasts unappealing for some who are looking for a more normative, radio-style production that has been made available as a podcast through asynchronous mobile technology. But to the majority of the Chitlin’ Circuit listeners, the approach creates a chemistry that invokes spending time with friends or family. The iTunes reviews of the podcasts in this network are filled with comments about how the shows feel like casual conversation with friends or family. For example, one reviewer described listening to Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine, a podcast hosted by three Black women, as “sitting around with my sisterfriends having a talkfest along with drinks” while another reviewer noted that Nicju and Reggie, hosts of What’s the Tea?, “have a great back and forth and will instantly become friends in your head.”

In Deep Show and The Black Astronauts’ show Ladies Launch were described as making you feel “part of your family” and “at home,” respectively. One iTunes review of What’s the Tea? was titled “Break out those good plates!” and went on to describe the podcast as “like your favorite aunty and uncle visiting.”

It is not uncommon for the podcasts to be compared, by both listeners and the podcasters themselves, to iconic spaces of AAHHR such as the barber or beauty shop or church. For example, one early episode of TWiB!’s Blacking It Up! was explicitly titled “Barbershop.” After Elon James White, co-host Aaron Rand Freeman, and several listeners
who called in had a frank and in-depth conversation about Black men’s experiences with the police, guest Luvvie Ajayi remarked that she felt like she was a “fly on the wall at the barbershop.”

Comments left on iTunes by listeners of *TBGWT*, *3 Guys On*, and *The Black Astronauts* reiterate the assertion that the shows are reminiscent of the barbershop. One review for *TBGWT* was even titled, “Barber shop (or beauty shop) talk for you [sic] iPod and MP3 player.” Another review, this one of *3 Guys On* titled “am i in the barber shop?!,” began, “cause that’s how i feel when i listen to y’all.”

Prior to joining TWiB!, Shane Paul Neil, co-host of TWiB!’s *Sportsball*, described *TBGWT*, *WM40A?*, and *Insanity Check* as “bringing the barbershop to the internet.” Similarly, *What’s the Tea?* has been compared in iTunes reviews more than once to going to church. One review says that the hosts, Nicju and Reggie, “come together each week to take you to pod church and you would do well to attend service regularly.” Another simply states, “They remind me of folks I went to church with and had great conversations with.”

Such comparisons are notable because, Melissa Harris-Perry argues, important ideological work, such as the construction of worldviews and collective identity, happens in everyday talk and interactions occurring in these Black social spaces.

Podcasting’s commonalities with radio strengthen the medium’s ability to convincingly reproduce the feeling of Black social enclaves. Scholars have argued that radio is a deeply intimate medium. As Susan Douglas observes, “Listening often imparts a sense of emotion stronger than that imparted by looking,” because “While sight allows us some distance . . . sound envelops us, pouring into us whether we want it to or not, including us, involving us.”

This sense of being immersed in sound allows listeners to feel transported into the conversation they are listening to, feeling as if, as one iTunes review for *Straight Outta LoCash* describes it, they are “chilling with the homies and kicking it and having a good time.” With content that closely mimics the kinds of conversation that take place in traditional Black social spaces such as barber and beauty shops and churches, these podcasts “envelop” listeners with the sound of these Black enclaves.

Moreover the recreation of Black enclaves is intensified by mobile listening practices. Alexander Weheliye has demonstrated the ways sound can be used to produce a sense of private space. Mobile listen-
ing allows listeners to reproduce a sense of these spaces on-demand wherever they are. Headphones in particular, which are sold as a means of sonic personalization by their manufacturers and often used as such by consumers, can be used to create a sense of personal space, simulating privacy.\textsuperscript{36} Michael Bull's work on iPod listeners has shown that users often consume audio via mobile devices and headphones to \textquote{sonically individualiz[e] their experience of space.}\textsuperscript{37} He argues that mobile listeners use headphones to create a \textquote{sound bubble} around themselves as a means \textquote{to claim a mobile and auditory territory for themselves through a form of \textquote{sensory gating}.}\textsuperscript{38} Mack Hagood writes of Bose's QuietComfort noise-canceling headphones as \textquote{soundscaping devices,} carving out an acoustically rendered sense of personal space.\textsuperscript{39} Sonic sculpting offers a \textquote{sense of physical and psychological space} despite one's surroundings.\textsuperscript{40}

Chitlin' Circuit podcast listeners have reported, via iTunes and Stitcher reviews and other channels for feedback, that they listen to the podcasts while commuting to work and while at work, using headphones in their cubicles or offices. Many listeners have also indicated that they are one of a few Black people, or even the only Black person, at their place of employment, a phenomenon so common that some podcasters dubbed such individuals \textquote{cubical Negros,} and there is a podcast in the network entirely devoted to office life titled \textit{Operation Cubicle}. Black podcast listeners can use their mobile podcasts to soundscape their daily lives with sounds of Black sociality as they navigate the world.

More than simply cocooning listeners in the sounds of Black sociality, the podcasts aid in the reproduction of Black subjectivity constituted through AAHHR, which is \textquote{where Black meanings can be found, where Black folks go to rebaptize themselves in Black culture in ways often unavailable in the public sphere.}\textsuperscript{41} As Nunely argues, Black cultural commonplaces can exude \textquote{massive concentrations of Black symbolic energy.} This symbolic energy moves African American audiences because it taps deeply into African American terministic screens, experiences, memories, and meaning.\textsuperscript{42} Mobile listening allows for this process to become portable and on-demand. Through the use of Black epistemes and discourses, the podcasts produce the listeners' subjectivity in opposition to the dominant racial discourses that work to produce them as racialized, and therefore marginalized, subjects. They are sonically able to shut out
the “hail” of the dominant discourse and instead cocoon themselves in sonic landscapes that interpellate them as fully human Black subjects.

Further, these podcast listeners demonstrate how users’ cultural practices, expectations, and subject positions interact with the materiality of technology and the designers’ intentions to shape the imagined affordances of a technology. While such Black podcast listeners soundscape to claim acoustic space and insulate themselves from their surroundings, their strategy is the inverse of how Bose seems to imagine their consumers. Hagood points to the underlying neoliberal logic of the Bose headphones’ branding and advertising campaign, which feature white male business travelers attempting to find respite from the unwanted noise of jet engines, crying children, and women’s voices while in transit. He argues that QuietComfort headphones are designed as technologies of individualization built on the neoliberal logic “that problems must be solved individually and within the market rather than addressed as systemic issues.” These Black podcast listeners, however, soundscape with the sounds of Black sociality, cultivating not individualism, but collectivity. They seek not to isolate themselves, but to ameliorate their isolation in a white milieu. Their simulated private space is not one of individual privacy, but of the collective private spaces of Black enclaves.

Moreover, these podcasts are not always simply mimicking Black sociality. The digital and social media network in which the podcasts are embedded creates numerous avenues for listener participation. Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts maintain various combinations of real-time chatrooms accompanying their live streams, a strong social media presence, and multiple avenues for listeners feedback, including email, comment sections, and voicemail. Shows that live-stream during the workday allow listeners to interact with the show and other listeners in real time. Often comments in the chatrooms or on Twitter are inserted into a show’s discussions, allowing listeners channels for synchronous interaction and participation. To varying degrees, these feedback channels, particularly the chatroom, allow the audience members to become interlocutors in the conversations as they unfold on air. Thus, they are not merely enveloped in the AAHHR of the podcasts but are often active participants in its construction.

However, this process is not uncomplicated. Moving Black social enclaves to digital spaces increases the likelihood that the conversa-
tions will be “overheard” by outsiders, a phenomenon that occurs frequently on blogs and in social media where Black discourse is made available and visible to outsiders in a way it was not before.\textsuperscript{45} Podcasts, however, are more resistant to easy intrusion and therefore ideal for creating enclaves, given how the medium’s distribution and consumption model makes it difficult for the casual troll or harasser to penetrate. None of the podcasts in the network formally advertises beyond it; instead, they all cultivate their audiences through word of mouth, social media interactions, and guest appearances on other podcasts. Thus, to know that a podcast even exists, one must already have some contact with the network. This, along with the temporal commitment required by a podcast, increases the difficulty of intruding into the conversation, compared to Twitter or other social media, which are easily searchable and have algorithms that make discourses more visible.\textsuperscript{46} The podcasts unfold in real time; you can’t “skim” them as you might a text-based medium like Twitter or Facebook. At best, a listener can play the podcast at an accelerated speed to decrease listening time. But, given that it is not uncommon for the podcasts in this network to be over two hours long, this only minimizes the time commitment somewhat.

Additionally, unlike social media, podcasts are not searchable. While show titles and descriptions (to the extent that the show provides a description) are searchable, the actual audio content is not. Searchability is one of the four key affordances of networked publics.\textsuperscript{47} The inclusion of podcasts as a prominent element of a transplatform networked public limits that affordance for a segment of the network. Thus, the podcasts form opaque pockets within the distributed conversation occurring across the network. Conversations that begin on social media are often carried over to the quasi-private spaces of the podcasts, where outsiders are deterred from participating. While podcasts are networked and disseminated in ways that transgress temporal and geographic boundaries, they still offer a barrier to intrusion by those who do not operate within the parameters of AAHHR rationalities and discourses.

Though podcasts serve an important function in enclaving, they are by no means the only part of the network deployed in this way. Because the podcasts are so deeply intertwined with the digital social networks of the podcasters and their listeners, they also serve as hubs around which
social media enclaves are created. In the summer of 2015, both TWiB! and TBGWT created closed Facebook communities, which users must request permission to join. Though the moderators approve almost any request, the process can deter random people looking to troll and harass the group. By the end of 2015, TWiB!’s group had over 780 members and TBGWT’s had over 1,100. Other podcasts have a followed suit, creating similar closed groups, all of which have significantly overlapping memberships.

These groups are not fan communities in which listeners discuss the shows and their content. Sometimes news stories or comments shared in them become topics of discussion on the podcasts, rarely vice versa. While these groups are another extension of the network, they are also enclaves in themselves—open to new members yet policed against hostile users. Thus, when White announced TWiB!’s group on Twitter, saying “Are you a fan of #TWiBNation?,” he emphasized that “we’ve created a FB group that’s moderated to keep it safe and awesome w/ EXCLUSIVE CONTENT.”

Karen and fellow podcaster Aaron B., of the Black Astronauts Podcast Network, explained that she and Rod had worked to make TBGWT’s group “a place that is safe and not hostile” for their fans. This means that some boundaries have to be observed, Karen explained how TBGWT’s Facebook group differed from individual’s personal profiles, “You have to deal with that on your normal Facebook I was like not here that's why we made it private.” Apart from privacy, Rod said, “We literally only have one rule, don't be a dick.” He continued by noting that anyone who listens to their show knows they don’t want transphobia, sexism, or misogyny in the group, “You know, don't troll and harass our fans. Don't come in there spreading this stupid shit.”

Networked Counter-Publics

While some elements of this network function effectively to create enclaves, other elements serve a counter-public function and engage with those outside of the network, particularly those who further dominant racial discourses. Counter-publics operate by engaging other, often hostile, publics. According to Squires, they reject the performance of hegemonic communicative behaviors and “instead project the hidden transcripts, previously spoken only in enclaves, to dominant publics.”
This can involve testing the reaction of wider publics by asserting previously unstated ideas and opinions, rebutting or challenging dominant publics, or attempting to build coalitions with other groups. In the case of this network, it also functions to move AAHHR, and the epistemes and interpretive frameworks it contains, beyond the enclave to where it can directly challenge hegemonic discourses.

Twitter serves as an important site of counter-public engagement for the network due to the architecture of the platform, the visibility Black Twitter has gained in recent years, the micro-celebrity status of many participants, and the connection of several participants to news outlets and activist or advocacy groups. While Black Americans were active on Twitter from its inception, it was not until Twitter started its trending topics feature in 2009 that this presence became visible to users more broadly as Black Twitter users’ heavy traffic began pushing their hashtags and tweets into the trending topics. By 2010, the trending topics were often dominated by Black users live-tweeting events such as the BET Awards, and over the next few years, the network that has come to be known as Black Twitter received attention from bloggers and other online personalities. Gradually, Black Twitter had garnered the visibility to exercise influence on the news cycle.

Twitter was an indispensable component in bringing the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin to broader attention. By 2013, Black Twitter had become visible enough to be able to leverage the network to have an impact more broadly. This was the year of hashtags such as #PaulasBestDishes, which helped increase pressure on celebrity chef Paula Deen as she was being sued for creating a hostile work environment, and #JurorB37, a member of the jury that acquitted George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin and who had gotten a book deal to write about the trial. Black Twitter also became mainstay topic in the blogosphere, the Root started its regular “Chateratti” feature, and Buzzfeed produced the first of its “Best Black Twitter Moments.” Thus, members of the Black Twitter network potentially have access to the visibility generated by Black Twitter itself.

Twitter is public and easily searchable, and it allows for simultaneous direct address and multilayered conversation. This, combined with the visibility of Black Twitter and the micro-celebrity of many in the network, makes Twitter an ideal counter-public space. Finally, several
of the podcasters function as gates to larger, more mainstream publications, allowing them access to venues as well as opportunities to push the counter-discourses of the network out to other publics. One early example of this use was a 2011 debate between White and several users who supported the Occupy Wall Street movement in which White rebutted attempts to assert colorblind discourses as the appropriate interpretive lens.

During November and December 2011, the movement was at its height. Incidents of police use of force against the movement, including the use of pepper spray, filled the news. On November 15, the New York Police Department evicted Occupy protestors from their camp in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan. In response to the news coverage of police use of force on Occupy protestors, White tweeted, “Oh? The NYPD are treating you badly? Violent for no reason? Weird.’—Black People.” White’s critique highlighted how police violence experienced by Black Americans has been routinely ignored while the use of force against largely white Occupy protestors was receiving heavy media attention. His tweet was retweeted over 2,600 times, a large number for those early days on Twitter. Over the next couple of weeks, White created a multimodal argument elaborating on the sentiment expressed in his tweet, interweaving his Twitter timeline and an article he published on the Root. The article, which begins with a screen capture of his above tweet, outlined his frustrations with the stream of tweets and blogs expressing outrage over the police’s action:

Although I absolutely agreed with the sentiments, I had a nagging feeling in my stomach. I couldn't let it go. My inner militant Negro (whom I keep sedated with brunch and Modern Warfare 3) wanted to write in all caps: “OH, SO THE WHITE MAN GETS HIT AND NOW IT’S AN ISSUE! THE BLACK MAN HAS BEEN BEATEN FOR YEARS! WE DIDN’T LAND ON PLYMOUTH ROCK, PLYMOUTH ROCK LANDED ON US!!”

While the Twitter conversation inspired the article, White also tweeted excerpts from the article, along with the link to it. For example,

When minorities speak up & say there’s an issue, we’re told maybe we’re doing something wrong.
The type of outrage that pops up now at what many of us have lived w/ on a regular basis for years feels insulting.

your newfound plight has been some peoples [sic] plight for generations. We just didn't have a catchy name for it.

White tagged these tweets with #OWS, the hashtag that was being used by the Occupy movement and those discussing it. The hashtag functioned as a crucial tool for counter-public engagement by creating a point of articulation between this networked public and other publics, thereby enabling the debate and contestation that are central to counter-publics.

Thus, the conversation that began as a comment on Twitter from a micro-celebrity who was part of a highly visible network then migrated to a formal media outlet, the Root, because of White’s existing professional connections. The inclusion of White’s Twitter handle in the article enabled any reader to engage him directly, while White’s use of the #OWS hashtag in the tweeted excerpts from his article made it visible beyond his followers. In this way, White was able to take a critique grounded in AAHHR and move it out to a broader public. In fact, the sentiment of his initial tweet was not unique to him, but reflected conversations taking place in the network more broadly. White and his Twitter account served as a locus of counter-public engagement through which the counter-discourses of the network could be deployed in other publics.

As a result, many supporters of Occupy challenged White on Twitter by using a colorblind framework and trying various tactics to minimize the role of race. The users who challenged White deployed three primary discourses. First, they asserted the primacy of class, and not race, in social oppression. For example, one user tweeted, “To be fair, it’s about economics, regardless of color. Cops crack just as many skulls in trailer parks as in the hood,” and another commented, “right now rich folks vs the rest of us trumps race.” Second, they asserted that the invocation of race was inherently divisive and problematic. One user replied to White, tweeting, “do u know where racism begins? with a racial identity! #selfsegregation is still #segregation.” Finally, these users rehearsed discourses about how race does not exist on a biological level.
One user tweeted to White, “Technically, there is only the human race. Genetics are too homogenous among all humans to differentiate into different races.”

All of these discourses served to reinforce the dominant discourse of colorblindness.

White and his followers addressed such comments on Twitter, using the @-reply feature, which allows for direct exchanges. This allowed users to challenge White directly and allowed him to respond directly. Each of White’s replies were also seen by his followers, many of whom joined the conversation. White and others in the network rebutted these comments in no uncertain terms. Thus, in response to claims that “self-segregation” and racial identity is the core source of racism, White responded directly to the user, “This is ridiculous.”

Several of White’s followers engaged the same user. For example, @solbutterfly, a member of the network and a racial justice organizer, specifically invoked colorblind racism, saying, “Colorblind racism (which is what that statement is) presupposed that race does not exist as a system of oppression.”

In addition to directly rebutting the users challenging him, White used tweets without @-reply’s to produce general, nondirected counter-discourse. For example, prompted by the responses he got, White used a series of tweets to address a longstanding tension between white progressives and Black communities around the prioritization of race in politics and activism. He specifically identified the erasure of race as a barrier, rather than path, to solidarity. White put forth his critique in a series of tweets, including

Why do you need to bring up your race, huh? #BetterQuestion: Why are you so bothered by it?

STOP TRYING TO ERASE RACE. Race doesn't separate us from you. You telling me that race is not important does.

I refuse to play absolutes. I refuse to lose part of myself to make others comfortable. Either open your mind or be prepared to fight.

So in order for the 99% to be as one we all have to strip ourselves of our identities? What type of one dimensional nonsense is that?
Understanding our difference within 99% will actually bring us together. Trying to erase them will only cause resentment.\textsuperscript{67}

The use of a series of tweets to make an extended argument on Twitter, known as a “tweetstorm,”\textsuperscript{68} was enhanced when Twitter began threading conversational replies in 2013. The thread feature, added in 2017, then made these conversations potentially more visible. At the same time, the structure of Twitter allows for discussion of public debates to take place on an individual’s timeline. This was the case when White and Blair L. M. Kelley, Associate Professor of History at North Carolina State University and the host of TWiB!’s podcast \textit{Historical Blackness} had a sarcastic exchange that highlighted the salience of race in the lives of Black Americans historically:

\begin{quote}
Kelley: Are they beating @elonjames with the “race isn’t real” stick? It was real in the law until 1965 . . . .
White: not biologically . . . .
Kelley: It was real enough to hold my ancestors in slavery for generations . . . .
White: that’s just a construct man . . . .\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

This debate over race and Occupy Wall Street, which illustrates how the network can be used to directly confront discourses about Black communities, was relatively small in scale compared with the discussions that occurred during moments of racial turmoil, such as the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, and the 2014 unrest in Ferguson. With regard to these, the network discussed here participated in leveraging Twitter to create a counter-public that contested racial discourses at a national level, as I discuss in greater detail in chapter 4.

Oscillating Networked Publics

Though Twitter and podcasting have architectures and functionalities that encourage their use as counter-public and enclaves, respectively, these elements of the network are not static. Users often oscillate from one function to another. Below, I outline two examples of oscillation.
The first concerns fan practices around Game of Thrones in which participants live-tweet using nonstandard hashtags, which obscure their activities from outsiders while allowing them the take full advantage of Twitter’s affordances for synchronous co-viewing. The second example, the creation of and reaction to the #BernieSoBlack hashtag, illustrates that at times the network oscillates not because it chooses to do so, but because external pressures can force enclaves spaces to shift to serve a counter-public function.

#DemThrones: Thwarting Visibility on Twitter

Fandom is one of the most prominent day-to-day practices of the network, including TV show recaps, movie reviews, and live-tweeting. Since seemingly mundane interactions can function as a terrain for AAHHR, subverting white epistemes and reaffirming Black subjectivities, such fan practices have deep significance, and for many Black Americans fandom can be a political act. Rebecca Wanzo writes, that because of the lack of representation and persistence of problematic representations of Blackness, “Fandom has often been asked of African Americans and has been treated as an act of resistance necessary for the progress of the race. . . . In the African American community, film and television are often seen as having a great deal of importance.”

Fandom is complex terrain for Black fans, particularly for those who are women and/or LGBTQ. Fandom itself is often coded as white. Further, the network discussed here is heavily invested in media that is considered “nerd culture,” such as video games, comic books, and sci-fi and fantasy genre TV shows and movies. Nerd culture is often constructed in opposition to “coolness,” making participation in nerd culture contentious for Black fans whose racial identity has long been coded as “cool.” Because nerddiness is coded as both white and masculine, Black women in particular can feel alienated. One general response to these complications has been for Black nerds, many of whom have taken to calling themselves “Blerds,” to create podcasts and websites devoted to their fan practices, including Nerdgasm Noire Network, Black Girl Nerds, Black Tribbles, For Colored Nerds, and TWiB’s We Nerd Hard, to name a few.

In addition to simply providing spaces where Black users can engage in fandom and mundane interactions without being marginalized or fac-
ing racial and/or gendered aggression, spaces also allow Black users to engage with media texts in culturally resonate ways. The explicitly Black cultural space of the network allows users a level of cultural specificity in their fandom that would be impossible to achieve in normatively white spaces. Kristen Warner, in her work on Black women Scandal fans, asserts that “a fan community is created not only out of a shared interest in a love object but also out of similar approaches to demonstrating that love.” She highlights how Scandal fans layer expressions of Black culture over the media text by giving commentary, summarizing scenes, or rephrasing dialogue in AAVE to “fill in cognitive gaps” left by the colorblind racial discourse of the show. This network’s fandoms deploy similar approaches, creating Black spaces to engage in forms of fandom that allow for cultural specificity and the embrace of Black communicative practices.

One major component of the network’s fan practices is live-tweeting, especially during television shows, including Game of Thrones, The Walking Dead, The Strain, Arrow, The Flash, Love and Hip-Hop, and Scandal, along with movies and shows available through streaming services such as Netflix. The network also participates in live-tweeting award shows, particularly the BET Awards, as well as political debates and sporting events. Black Girl Nerds (BGN), which is an online community that includes a website, a podcast of the same name, and a strong social media presence, often coordinates such live tweets. BGN was created to allow “women of color with various eccentricities to express themselves freely and embrace who they are.” Past shows used for their synchronous viewing have included the 1980s cartoon Jem and cult classics The Last Dragon and Coming to America. Graveyard Shift Sisters, a website and a Twitter presence devoted to Black female horror fandom, coordinates asynchronous tweeting of streamed horror films every Friday night using the hashtag #FridayNightHorror. They have coordinated live tweets of movies such as Scream, Night of the Living Dead, Friday the 13th, and Vampire in Brooklyn.

Among the most popular televisions shows in the network is HBO’s series Game of Thrones. The network has nicknamed the show “Dem Thrones,” an AAVE-inflected version of the show’s title that is also used as a hashtag for live-tweeting. The nickname “Dem Thrones” was created by the hosts of the FiyaStarter podcast during season 2 finale, and
#DEMTHRONES was included in the show notes for their July 7, 2012 show. The first occurrence of the hashtag on Twitter was in May 2012.\textsuperscript{78} It was popularized by TBGWT during that same year and subsequently picked up and further popularized by other podcasts, in particular Black Girl Nerds. By the beginning of Game of Thrones season 3, in summer 2013, TBGWT inaugurated its regular weekly Game of Thrones recap segment with “Episode 443: Return of #DemThrones.”\textsuperscript{79} What began as a relatively short segment, clocking in at about half an hour for the first recap, has since grown into a regular in-depth discussion lasting sometimes up to two hours. By season 5, #DemThrones was making regular appearances in Twitter’s US trending topics and was being used by high-profile Twitter users like director Ava Devernay and Ferguson protester Netta Elzie.\textsuperscript{80}

The use of a non-standard hashtag is of note for several reasons. First, the majority of fans live-tweeting shows generally use a standardized hashtag, customarily created by the television industry. For Game of Thrones this is #GameofThrones or, more commonly, #GoT. The #DemThrones hashtag, which emerged from the network rather than from the marketing mechanisms of HBO, was largely insulated for many years from those outside the network. The AAVE hashtag #DemThrones effectively organized an enclave, whose members could take advantage of the platform’s affordances to engage in synchronous co-viewing while obscuring their tweets from outsiders. Second, the use of AAVE marks the timeline as a culturally Black space, thereby hailing participants as a “Black audience” and signaling that the fandom will be grounded in Black interpretive frameworks. This ad hoc Twitter enclave, combined with podcast recaps, allows culturally inflected fandom, as well as Black readings of a text with a notable absence of Black bodies.\textsuperscript{81}

This strategy is imperfect, however, because Twitter is easily searchable and uses algorithms, like the trending topics, that make content visible. As of season 5, the #DemThrones hashtag had garnered enough popularity to regularly appear in the US trending topics, increasing the likelihood that those outside the network would take note. This, in fact did happen in 2016, as evidenced by Business Insider’s article “If You’re Using the ‘Game of Thrones’ Hashtag, You’re Missing Out on the Show’s Best Commentary,” which quoted a number of tweets from the May 16 episode, including one by the Black Girl Nerds Twitter account, and
noted the existence of many other “Black Twitter offshoots of mainstream hashtags.” The visibility of the hashtag has led to some low-level harassment targeting Black participants. For example, just a week prior to the Business Insider article, a user with the Gadsden flag as an avatar tweeted an image of a Movement for Black Lives march overlaid with the text, “Has it occurred to anyone that if you’re able to organize this many people for a protest you can organize this many people to clean up your community and get rid of the criminal element causing the problem?” The account tagged the image with #DemThrones, the only use of the hashtag by this user, clearly to insert the tweet into a timeline dominated by Black users. Regardless, nonstandard hashtags, usually a Black vernacular–inflected iteration of a TV show’s name, continue to be popular with Black Twitter users. There are many variations, often using AAVE iterations of “them,” “that,” and “they,” such as #DeyWalking and #DemDeadz for The Walking Dead, #DatStrain for FX’s vampire horror show The Strain, and #DatArrow for CW’s superhero show Arrow. During the airing of the 2016 miniseries The People vs. O.J. Simpson, participants used the hashtag #DatJuice. Thus, such a strategy seems to have continued utility for insulating fan practices.

#BernieSoBlack: Oscillation under Duress

The response to the 2015 hashtag #BernieSoBlack demonstrates not only how the networked public oscillates, but also how the contingency and fluidity of imagined affordances can allow outside pressure to shape this process. In response to the way that Sanders handled the 2015 protest at Netroots Nation, the network deployed Twitter as a counter-public to critique Sanders. His appearance at the Presidential Town Hall had been disrupted by Black Lives Matter protestors, after which he was heavily criticized for inadequately addressing issues of racial justice. It is common practice for celebrities, politicians, and public figures to be the topic of discussion and criticism on Twitter. Because of its role as a real-time central clearinghouse for information, Twitter was the first platform where many in the network expressed their critiques and where Sanders’s supporters initially both encountered and responded to the criticism of their candidate. Often such counter-public engagement becomes the topic of discussion in the network’s enclaves, as participants
interpret events and produce their own discourse shielded by informal barriers that deter interlopers. But, with #BernieSoBlack, the fervor around the issue generated sufficient motivation for Sanders’s more zealous supporters to not only penetrate the enclaves but also force them to oscillate and function temporarily as a counter-public.

Rod initially created the hashtag as a response to the contentious counter-public engagement occurring on Twitter. Often criticism of Sanders was met by assertions of his Civil Rights Movement bona fides, including the fact that Sanders had worked with Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and was present at Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 March on Washington, and proclamations of his devotion to Black communities with statements such as “[He was] literally fighting for black rights before you were born.” Some responses went so far as to suggest that Sanders had done more for Black Americans than the Black people critiquing him. Rod explained that comments like these were the impetus for the hashtag: “The reason it started trending at first is that so many Black people had had this experience online with his supporters.” His sentiment resonated so deeply within the network, that within a few hours, the hashtag was on Twitter’s US trending topics list.

In addition to resonating with the experiences of the network, the #BernieSoBlack hashtag spread easily because it was also compatible with common uses of Twitter and hashtags for verbal games and humor. Black Twitter has long been known for its use of hashtags as loci around which to engage in signifyin’, a Black tradition of verbal performance that emphasizes dexterous use of language and the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously. Signifyin’ is often employed for social and cultural critique through the use of humor and requires a plethora of cultural competencies to understand. Thus, the hashtag #BernieSoBlack, which allowed for both critique of the overzealous Sanders’s supporters and an opportunity for the display of wit, fit within well-established communicative norms of this predominantly Black network, making it unsurprising that it was taken up and spread.

The critique within the #BernieSoBlack hashtag was packaged in humor and deep cultural references. This was in keeping with the use of the network as a Black communicative space. But it also served as an added layer of critique. The authority to speak on issues of racial justice is often understood as being derived from the lived experience
as a racialized subject. Black Americans are the experts on their own racial oppression because they are the ones who live it. Within this understanding, the assertion that Sanders’s commitment and authority to speak on Black racial oppression exceeds that of many Black people can be interpreted as a claim to “Blackness.” Rod responded to such defenses of Sanders saying, “You won’t even let us be like, ‘Hey, we would like Bernie to do this.’ . . . ‘Nope. You don’t get to make any demands. He’s Black enough. He’s too Black. He’s Blacker than you. Shut the fuck up.’ That’s it.”

The jokes made using the #BernieSoBlack hashtag, about just precisely “how Black” Sanders is, all required substantial Black cultural competencies to create and interpret, highlighting the difference between Sanders (and those who would assert his authority on race) and the Black people critiquing him. This reinforces the experiential distance between Sanders and Black Americans, troubling the ability to claim Sanders’s authority on Black social issues.

Many of the tweets required knowledge of Black popular culture, specifically music. One user tweeted “#BernieSoBlack he thought #SayHerName was a hit song by Destiny’s Child.” The reference to the popular 1990s R&B group, in which Beyoncé got her start, and their iconic song “Say My Name” implies that Sanders’s deep level of Blackness created confusion for him at the Netroots Nation protest as he thought the hashtag-turned-protest-chant “say her name” was the song. Similarly, @MJGWrites tweeted, “#BernieSoBlack he NEVER forgot about Dre.” The joke here references Dr. Dre, member of NWA and Hip-hop icon, and his 2000 track “Forgot about Dre.” The song featured Eminem, who delivers the well-known line, “And motherfuckers act like they forgot about Dre.” Thus, the tweet plays on the notion of a connection between forgetting Dre and a lack of Black authenticity, asserting that Bernie’s, in his profound Blackness, never forgot about Dr. Dre and his iconic status.

Due to the visibility created by the trending topics, attempts were made to silence participants, and especially Rod himself. Because many of Sanders’s more zealous followers directly addressed Rod and others critiquing Sanders using the @-reply function and/or inserted themselves into the conversation by using the hashtag, the counter-public function of Twitter came to the forefront. Often these attempts took the form of taking the #BernieSoBlack hashtag and using it in a way that stripped the elements of signifyin’ out of it. For example, one
user tweeted, “#BernieSoBlack he marched with MLK, was arrested protesting segregation, and has spent 50 years fighting for civil rights. #FeelTheBern,”92 while another tweeted, “BernieSoBlack he marched on Washington with MLK Jr in 1963 & marched in Selma with Barack Obama in 2015.”93 These responses not only rebut the critiques of Sand- ers but do so in a way that strips Black linguistics traditions, AAHHR, and Black interpretive frameworks from the exchange, removing any traces of Black epistemologies or practices. These responses, grounded in whiteness, strip the Blackness out of the hashtag at the semiotic level.

Twitter often functions as a point of articulation between the net- work and mainstream media and establishment politics. The visibility of Black Twitter generally and the micro-celebrity status of Rod, Gandy, and White, who are followed by journalists, pundits, and editors, pushed the #BernieSoBlack conversation into legacy media, where it became part of the media narrative around the Netroots Nation protest put out by Reuters, the Guardian, Bloomberg News, MSNBC, CNN, and Slate.94 Rod gave interviews to Vox.com, the Los Angeles Times, and the Daily Beast and himself became as central part of the story.95 This, of course, prompted more Sanders supporters to engage Rod on Twitter and even to begin penetrating some of the digital spaces that usually serve as enclaves.

While the discussion, and at times hostility, surrounding these hashtags was publicly available on Twitter, less visible were the digital enclaves where these podcasters and their listeners interpreted dis- courses and constructed counter-discourses. TBGWT, hosted by Rod and Karen, discussed the initial protest, the reactions to the protest, and the ongoing arguments on Twitter. The meanings and discourses constructed in such a digital enclave were then circulated on Twitter as well. Additionally, participants in the network used TBGWT’s private Facebook group to discuss events, including the emergence and back- lash to the hashtag and the media coverage of both. In fact, the day that Rod created the hashtag, immediately after tweeting his initial jokes, he logged off and went to do a live stream of TBGWT, in the midst of which he and Karen learned that the hashtag had hit the US trending topics list.96 When one user made an announcement in the chatroom, “#bernie so black is trending on Twitter now!”97 Other listeners indicated they were following the hashtag while they were also in the chat.98
TBGWT podcasts were used as an enclave to interpret events through Black frameworks and produce counter-discourses. Rod, Karen, and the listeners participating in the chat highlighted a number of counterarguments to the response to #BernieSoBlack. TBGWT’s interpretation of the reaction from Sanders’s supporters relates to many of the same issues raised around the Occupy movement, in particular, the adherence to colorblind logics, a reluctance or refusal to deal with issues of race, and a focus on issues of class instead. Rod, Karen, guests, and listeners reiterated the critique of white progressives who believe economics to be the primary cause of racial inequality or its best cure. Rod and Karen elaborated on this point several times over the course of that week’s episodes. Rod pointed out that by responding to questions about race with economic considerations, Sanders and many of his supporters were “equating being poor with being Black . . . like ‘I’m antipoverty therefore I am pro-Black.’ . . . Those are not the same thing.”

Karen argued, “You can still get shot being Black in the street with a mothafucking job. Job is not the problem.” This preoccupation with the economy was largely read as an attempt to silence Black voices and maintain the comfort of white progressives. In this context, Rod pointed to the deeply ingrained impulse to avoid discussion of race is in the United States:

Most white people do not want to be educated on race. They want to lecture you on why you need to stop caring about racism. And that’s really what this entire exercise has been for me, is a buncha people tellin’ me to stop caring about the racism that affects my community, that affects my people, that is leading to death. . . . When it’s time to vote, they just want us to shut the fuck up, get in line, and tell ’em we’re gonna support whoever they tell us is the person to support.

TBGWT, their guests, and listeners also went on to assert that this colorblind framework was no longer viable, given the election of President Obama and the growth of social media, which meant that white Democratic and progressive politicians must pay more attention to Black communities. Not only was the election of the first Black president a historic milestone, but, as Rod and Karen argued, the election also increased attention to issues of racial inequality and created a new ex-
pectation among Black Americans. Karen pointed to the counter-public function of social media platforms, noting that Black voters had more ways to respond when they were dissatisfied with a politician’s engagement with their community:

If you’re a Democrat and you’re running, you cannot blow past race. Because every time you do, people are gonna hit you up on Facebook, hit you up on Twitter, hit you up on Google+, Tumblr, all these social medias and let you know that they’re not satisfied with these actions. You can’t be like “I want the Black vote” but you don’t want to talk about the Black issues.¹⁰²

Co-host of Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine, Sojourner Verdad, who was a guest on TBGWT that week, reiterated the importance of social media and asserted that it would only grow in influence:

[Politicians] also underestimate the power of social media in this election. . . . Back in 2012, I mean, people were on Twitter and you know all that. But, not like they are now in 2015 and they’re going to be in 2016. So, for [Rod’s] hashtag to take off like it did and people had never even heard of Bernie Sanders. Like, this is gonna be something that is unprecedented. You can’t just mess up in one area because that is going to be a national issue before you leave, and that is something people are underestimating right now.¹⁰³

Additionally, TBGWT podcasts were used to analyze and interpret the media coverage of the hashtag, including articles from Hiphop-wired.com, the Daily Dot, NewsOne, Raw Story, MSNBC, PolicyMic.com, Vox.com, the LA Times, and the Daily Beast.¹⁰⁴ Rod explained that he wanted to cover the articles to see how each one covered the story differently: “I remember what I said in the interviews. And then I saw the process of how it was presented to the people, and I saw the process of how it happened organically on Twitter to how it was written about in different publications.”¹⁰⁵ The podcast focused on the news coverage of #BernieSoBlack was intended specifically for the network, not those outside. Rod explained, “I felt like that was an inside
thing for the fans. Like, “This is what I said. Check out how different people wrote about this.”

Rod noted that the majority of the articles followed the same formula, which relied heavily on embedded tweets. The articles in the Daily Dot, NewsOne, Raw Story, MSNBC, PolicyMic.com, and the Daily Beast all used embedded tweets as the central part of the article, often including more tweets than text written by the reporters. Rod asserted, “The framing behind how you get to the tweets really determines a lot of the response to me. Because people are coming to say to me like, ‘You attacked this man.’ I’m like, ‘That’s not what happened.’”

Regarding sensationalistic titles such as the Daily Dot’s “Twitter Takes Aim at Bernie Sanders’s Minority Strategy with #BernieSoBlack,” Rod commented, “This is why people were hittin’ me up. They read the title to this. They don’t read anything that I’ve said about it.” Rod and Karen also used this episode of the podcast to discuss inaccuracies in the reports—such as the many news outlets that referred to Rod as an activist when he asserted in each interview that he is not—and the way journalists foregrounded Rod while minimizing or erasing the Black women who organized the Netroots Nation protest.

The way the #BernieSoBlack hashtag unfolded demonstrates how the network oscillates from addressing those outside the community to addressing the community directly in a digital enclave and vice versa. While under normal circumstances TBGWT and its various channels for listener feedback would be limited to those within the network, the attention garnered by the hashtag brought in outsiders who turned that digital enclave into a space for debate. In addition to being flooded on Twitter with responses from Sanders supporters, the channels for listener feedback—comments on the webpage, emails, voicemails—and even more closed spaces like the live chatroom and the private Facebook community were used by Sanders supporters for responses that ranged from attempts to persuade to outright harassment.

Initially, Rod and Karen attempted to block such interlopers and preserve the enclaves for themselves and their listeners. Several Sanders supporters attempted to join TBGWT’s private Facebook group to use it as a platform to tout the positive characteristics of their candidate. Rod and Karen responded by banning these individuals from the group
and addressing them on other platforms. Similarly, on July 19, during the live stream, a user who joined the chatroom and began defending Sanders had to be banned. These are not the only instances in which users were banned from TBGWT’s digital spaces; it happens periodically around other issues, but usually to people attached to the network in some way. #BernieSoBlack attracted people from unrelated digital networks. In all cases, Rod and Karen have been very clear that the space they have created is to exclude exactly the kind of intrusive behavior displayed by the Sanders supporters.

Both email and voicemail were deployed by Sanders’s supporters to challenge and persuade Rod and Karen. For example, during “Episode 999: Bernie Marched Way in the Back,” Rod played a voicemail message he received from a woman who wanted to discuss some issues with them. In her message, she said,

Hey, Rod. Hey, Karen. I’d actually like to have a conversation with you off, whatta ya call it, not off camera, off audio or whatever. But, I’d like to have a straight conversation with you guys, if you’re up to it. I took the challenge, a friend of mine who posted your audio podcast and I am listening to it. Aaaand, uh, I’d like to hash it out a little bit with you and unpack it ’cause I’m on both sides. But, I wanna disagree about a few things, points you made. So, please don’t air this because my number is going to be on it. But you can call me any time after like 11 a.m., if you choose, at 408—

At this point, Rod stopped the audio before the remainder of her phone number could be heard. Reiterating his longstanding refusal to orient conversation to outsiders, Rod responded, “Yeah. Don’t call up here anymore. Next time I will play your number on the air. I. do not. want. to debate you.”111 Pointing to the deluge of tweets and attempts to inform and persuade him, he argued,

Every single one of these mu’fuckas that wanna explain something to me. You’re the seventeenth hundred motherfucker to try to explain it. It ain’t gonna happen. You already talked about it. I’ve already talked about it. Everyone on Twitter’s already talked about it. Your candidate just gotta step up on his own and talk to Black people about these Black issues and
not pivot to muthafuckin' jobs and then you get my vote. It's easy. It's easy. You're making it way more difficult than it has to be.\textsuperscript{112}

Despite their efforts to maintain their podcast and its related social media and feedback channels strictly for intragroup discussion, the pressure of Sanders’s supporters eventually forced the oscillation of the podcast, as it began to function as counter-public because it had drawn so many people wishing to debate. Though the affordances of podcasts engender the creation of enclaves, there is still no formal barrier to those outside the network. In general, they are deterred by inconvenience. But, #BernieSoBlack was high profile and dealt with a controversial enough issue to motivate users from other networks to devote the necessary time and energy to gain entry. Yielding to the pressure to shift from enclave to counter-public, Rod and Karen devoted a forty-five minute segment on one of their shows to play and respond to all the information sent to them by Sanders’s supporters. Rod explained,

I’ve heard Bernie Sanders talk about race before. You know, matter a fact, lemme do you all a favor. ’Cause I know this is the shit that you all keep sending me. Y’all keep sending me the same fuckin’ videos over and over. . . . “Have you seen this video? That you seen that?” I’ve seen that shit. Um-kay. Cool. Y’all wanna hear it on the show? Y’all wanna hear my reaction to it on the show? That’s cool. We can do that. I don’t mind. But, you know, I feel like if we gonna do that, I’m gonna need y’all to leave me alone after this.\textsuperscript{113}

This episode represents a moment when what is usually an enclave oscillated, somewhat under duress and out of frustration, to address members outside the group. Rod explicitly reaffirmed that the episode was out of the ordinary, saying, “This is probably the only time we’re gonna do a podcast that ever has addressed a white audience, in general. Because I just typically don’t do that.”\textsuperscript{114} Throughout the episode, Rod and Karen directly address the Sanders supporters attempting to debate them, moving systematically through the material and arguments they had been repeatedly sent. Speaking directly to white Americans, Rod explained the way that white Americans’ refusal to deal with race makes political alliances difficult.
You have to face the sum totality to what you have done, what you have wrought, what you have done to other people. And since you can’t do that, we become victimized further and further, because you refuse to take a look. You don’t want to take any history courses. You wanna take Black history outta school. You don’t wanna think about what you’ve done. And the fact that you’re a liberal doesn’t mean shit to me. Because you don’t even know your own history.¹¹⁵

He later explained that the behavior directed at him by some Sanders’s supporters in response to #BernieSoBlack exemplified the reason for the tense relationship between white liberals and progressives and Black Americans.

One of the reasons Bernie So Black was trendin’ was ‘cause your fans tried to take up the mantle of tryin’ to control the narrative and ended up embarrassing yourselves in white privilege. Embarrassing yourselves. It really is a shame. It’s a shame that you can’t listen. You’re not my allies. You’re not my friends. You can’t be with this type of attitude toward what I’m saying. . . . I don’ give a fuck if you’ve been to Occupy Wall Street. Or you went to a Black Lives Matter march. You still don’t know shit about being Black in America. You don’t know what it’s like. So, since you do not, I suggest you shut the fuck up and listen if you can’t be constructive.¹¹⁶

He explained, that the reaction he was getting from some Sanders’s supporters felt like attempts to silence him. “I’d love to chalk it up to something else. But what else could it be? What else would drive someone to think you know better? ‘Cause it’s really, ‘Shut up and vote, niggers. We know better than you.’ That’s really what y’all tellin’ us, and you don’t.”¹¹⁷

In addition to providing Black counter-discourses in response to each video and article they were sent, Rod and Karen expressed the profound anger and pain many Black Americans carry daily. Here again, these sentiments were not aimed at their usual audience but at possible interlopers. Rod explained, “I said, ‘I’m angry.’ But, we should be angry. Anger is the only thing that’s ever gotten Black people prog-
pression in the United States of America. And they said, ‘Well, people should be learning from Martin Luther King’s example.’ Nigga, he was angry.” Karen continued:

Your co-workers, your mailman, all these people that you speak to and interact with, . . . they may not have hate in their heart. But they’re, underlying, always angry. A lotta people are. And just because it don’t show, just because they have a smile on their face, just because they’re always chipper to you, just because they always speak to you. . . . Most black people you meet are underlyin’ angry. They’re really angry and they’re upset and they’re hurt. A lotta Black people are. 118

Thus the #BernieSoBlack hashtag shows how the network was able to intervene in the dominant discourse. But it also exemplifies the ways that digital media can create channels for unwanted attention, in effect forcing the network to oscillate under duress. Users on Black Twitter shared heavily not only because of the cultural resonances of the tweets organized under the hashtag, which drew on Black history, culture, and media references, but also because, as Rod pointed out, the hashtag spoke to a shared experience interacting with some of Sanders’s supporters. Hence, the hashtag moved from the network at the center of this book into the larger Black Twitter network, where the traffic was picked up by Twitter’s algorithm, making it visible to Twitter users more broadly, including the Sanders supporters who responded in defense of their candidate. Additionally, Twitter’s @-reply function allowed the Sanders supporters to address specific users, especially Rod, who, as the originator of the hashtag, received a particularly large number of responses. Moreover, because he uses Twitter in conjunction with his podcast, he was easily found by Sanders’s supporters wishing to rebut and debate. While technically, these channels of interaction are generally available to those outside the network, they are usually obscured by the “noise” generated by the sheer volume of information online. But, the hashtag gave them visibility and provided Sanders’s supporters a motivation to use these channels. In this way, they forced the network’s enclave to function as a counter-public and engage in active debate in a way that it does not normally do.
Conclusion

If a networked public is comprised of both a digitally enabled space and the collective that is formed and maintained in that space, then the distributed and transplatform nature of this collective requires that the space of the public also be conceived of as transplatform. Deploying an analytical framework that transverses platform boundaries reveals the strategic use of Twitter, Facebook, podcasts, chatrooms and so on, depending on the exigencies of a given moment. This transplatform public operates as both enclave and counter-public, oscillating between them.

The oscillation between enclave and counter-public occurs in two primary ways. First, users move from one platform to another based on the functionality it offers, using one platform to communicate within an enclave and another to engage as a counter-public. Twitter, for example, is an ideal counter-public. As a public, easily searchable platform, which uses algorithms to make content more easily discoverable, Twitter enables multiple publics to encounter one another. Additionally, the general visibility of Black Twitter and the well-established micro-celebrities on the platform often attract other users looking for debate. It is common practice for journalists and commentators, many of whom follow Twitter micro-celebrities, not only to draw topics from Twitter discussion, but also to report directly on the activity on Twitter itself. Thus, insofar as Twitter serves as a gate to legacy media, it enables discourses to move to a larger audience. However, at times, these same features make Twitter a hostile and undesirable space. In such moments, participants in this network will shift to other platforms that offer affordances that allow for greater privacy.

In addition to moving between platforms, this networked public will oscillate through creative work-arounds that mitigate the undesirable characteristics of a platform, reimagining affordances in ways that differ from normative understandings. The use of AAVE-inflected hashtags to live-tweet television shows is one example. Twitter is optimal for synchronous co-viewing, yet makes activities potentially highly visible to outsiders. AAVE hashtags allow users to continue live-tweeting while sequestering their fan practice from the official fan timeline on Twitter. This technique is fairly effective, provided that the hashtag does not
grow popular enough to appear in the trending topics. Recently, some participants have begun using the closed Facebook community groups of several of the independent Black podcasts to create live threads for new episodes of TV programs in lieu of live-tweeting on Twitter. This allows both synchronous and asynchronous discussion of the show, but has not been as popular as Twitter.

Finally, oscillation is not always a deliberate choice. There are few formal barriers to these digital enclaves. They remain largely sequestered spaces simply because it is inconvenient for outsiders to penetrate them. However, as demonstrated with #BernieSoBlack, given the right set of circumstance, motivated users will put in that time and energy, inserting themselves into these enclaved Black social spaces and disrupting their normal function. This can force what was previously an enclave to shift to behave like a counter-public.

Indeed, in recent years, the penetration of Black digital spaces by those outside has dramatically increased. At times the interlopers are well meaning, but unwilling or unsure how to embrace the epistemes and interpretative frameworks of the AAHHR that often characterizes such spaces. Such intrusion can be disruptive because it reinscribes the dominant epistemologies and discourses the Black participants were seeking refuge from and often leads to conflict as the Black users’ resistance to this shift is read as hostility and exclusion. However, oftentimes, such intruders are there to deliberately harass Black participants. As of the time of this writing, the phenomenon of outsiders entering and disrupting Black digital enclaves has become a major concern in Black digital networks, which are beginning to alter their digital practices to more aggressively keep interlopers out.