I am frequently asked how I came to do this research. Often this question is grounded in historically informed concerns about white scholars exploiting communities of color and creating distorted representations of them through their research. The question also speaks to how the perspectives and knowledge of people of color about their own lives have often been obscured in favor of the work of white researchers and the structures of white supremacy that privileges white voices. In this appendix, I attempt to answer this oft-asked question by offering the narrative of how I came to this project and why I chose to do this work despite the very real problematics of my positionality. I then explore how I grappled with and attempted to mitigate the power dynamics inherent in being a white researcher writing about Black cultural practices.

My participation in this network did not come from my research agenda; rather, it was vice versa. I had joined Twitter in early 2010. At the time, US Twitter users numbered roughly 10 million, far fewer than the 67 million Americans using the platform by the end of 2016.¹ A Mashable report from the end of that year touted Twitter’s growth by pointing to increased activity on the site: “Twenty-one percent of Twitter users now follow more than 100 people—that’s up from 7% last year—and 16% now have more than 100 followers.”² These numbers are laughably small by today’s standards, when users routinely have follower counts in the tens of thousands. Twitter felt like a much smaller place. Or, as Elon James White tweeted in 2009, “Realizing my Twitter game is not up to par. Everybody knows everybody. I feel like I’m the new kid in H.S.”³

Upon joining, I followed a handful of academics, journalists, and Hip-hop artists. I gradually started following people I saw retweeted often and people I thought were interesting. I found many people through the Follow Friday hashtag, #FF. At the time, despite being only 13 percent of the US population, Black Americans comprised 25 percent of US Twitter users.⁴ The relative intimacy of Twitter in those days combined with a
substantial Black presence and their conversational usage of the platform meant that following a few Black users quickly made a much larger Black network visible to me. Because of this, I found comedians and commentators like White and Baratunde Thurston and performers such as poet Bassey Ikpi. I followed other people who were not public figures in the traditional sense but who were known for their smart and funny commentary. That summer, I realized that many Twitter users were, like me, watching season 3 of *The Boondocks* while scrolling through their timelines, as evidenced by *Boondocks*-related phrases dominating the trending topics each Sunday night.

When journalists and bloggers started talking earnestly about “Black Twitter” in mid-2010 and referring to people I followed and conversations or jokes I remembered, it began to dawn on me that I might be on “Black Twitter.” I was inspired by Thurston’s 2010 South by Southwest (SXSW) talk, in which he described the hashtag #howblackareyou as a digital iteration of the Dozens, a game of ritualized insult that has long been part of the Black oral tradition. His astute observation was the starting point for my own thinking, exploring how in digital environments, where the corporeal signifiers of race are absent or obscured, communicative practices and cultural competencies functioned as important performances of identity.

It was through the serendipity of Twitter that I discovered that White and Ikpi co-hosted a podcast, *Blacking It Up!* (BIU). While writing my dissertation, I would take midday breaks Monday through Thursday to listen to BIU as it streamed live. I gradually began participating in the chatroom that accompanied these live streams, and as the community around the show grew, our interactions moved to the BIU discussion forums, where we exchanged Twitter handles and began connecting on social media. I learned of other podcasts through these interactions around BIU. Rod and Karen from *The Black Guy Who Tips* would participate in the chatroom, and Rod regularly snuck away from his office job to call into the show, starting each call by responding, “Chillin’ chillin’” regardless of how White greeted him. Kriss of the *Insanity Check* podcast, which has since grown into the Movie Trailer Review Network, was a frequent guest and posted on the BIU forums. I learned of *Where’s My 40 Acres?* from a thread on the forums about Black podcasts, of which there were only a handful at the time. Gradu-
ally, members of the BIU audience and chatroom participants began creating their own projects. In March 2011, De Ana, JP Fairfield, Jamie Nesbit-Golden, Kia, and Roxie_Moxie started their nerd culture podcast *Nerdgasm Noire*, which quickly developed into a podcast network and blog. Later that year the Nerdgasm Noire Network added *Operation Cubicle*, a podcast focused on life as an office worker, co-hosted by Fairfield, Shareef Jackson, and BCole, and *Character Select*, a video series focused on gaming hosted by Fairfield, Jackson, and 8BitAnimal. By 2012, a handful of independent Black podcasters were embedded in a robust digital and social media network that I believed warranted scholarly attention.

I include this narrative to make clear that I did not go out and look for some Black folks to study. Rather, independently of my research project at the time, I developed a set of relationships and connections with a network of Black Americans whom I saw to be early adopters and innovators. I watched them pioneer digital practices that are now conventional in the internet landscape—such as live-tweeting television and anticipating the podcast boom by at least two years. At the same time, they were all but invisible to most digital media scholars. This project arose out of my desire to make visible what I believe to be important and innovative digital practices.

However, while I believe my intentions were in the right place, this does not mean my research is unproblematic. Good intentions are all but useless in the face of white supremacy and do very little to undermine the way racism structures our world. More than good intentions, I realized that I needed rigorous ethical standards for myself and my work. I developed two core and interrelated principles that guided my approach—minimize harm and be accountable.

**Bad Choices and Slightly Less Bad Choices**
When operating within systems of dominance, such as our current heteronormative white supremacist patriarchy, we often have only bad choices and somewhat less bad choices. By taking on this project, I reproduce the historic power dynamics of white scholars writing about people of color rather than letting them speak for themselves, something I don’t want to do. But, choosing not to do this project would perpetuate the erasure of Black Americans in inquiries about digital media and reify the notion
that race and the cultures and practices racialized people should be of interest only to people of color—also something I don’t want to do.

When I began this project in the fall of 2012, there were few scholars writing about Black Americans and digital media. Seven years later, many young scholars of color are emerging from graduate programs doing important work, and senior scholars of color from a variety of disciplines have turned their attention to digital media. Under the circumstances, I might make a different decision today. But at the time I undertook this project few people were exploring the practices of Black digital networks. Although they did receive some attention in the scholarly writings of Anna Everett, André Brock, and Adam Banks, the public intellectual work of Kimberly Ellis and Tara Conley, and the commentary of public figures such as Thurston, White, and others, no scholarship or analysis was being produced about Black podcasts. So I decided that the “less bad” choice was for me to move forward with the research. I sincerely believed it was the only way this work would be done. I quickly realized this choice, between harmful and less harmful, would come to characterize every element of my work.

Another prominent double bind I encountered involved the politics of citation and voice. I sought to foreground and prioritize the voices of the people I was writing about. I also wanted to give proper credit to people for their ideas and creativity. To do this, I made the choice to cite heavily, avoiding summaries and paraphrasing as much as I could, given the limitations of space. Additionally, in an effort to preserve people’s original voices, whenever possible, I quoted from sources that have the most permanence and are the most widely available. I privileged podcasts and Twitter as sources of quotations because, unlike public chatrooms, personal communications, or interviews, they are the most easily retrievable—thereby both ensuring my accuracy and allowing readers access to the context and the larger discussion from which the quotes were drawn.

There is growing debate around the ethics of citing digital media produced by marginalized groups, particularly social media. While citation and quotation seem positive, they also have the potential for harm. First, there is a concern with exploitation. Many social media users and public figures from marginalized groups have critiqued the notion that it is appropriate to use their words and ideas, even with proper attribu-
tion, just because they are publicly visible. Bound up in this are issues of ownership, agency, and control of intellectual production, as well as a fundamental question about the point at which such quotation verges into the territory of exploitation and intellectual colonialism. (Think of how many “This is what Twitter is talking about” articles you've read online that are composed of an introductory blurb and a long series of tweets.) And there is the very real and concrete harm that can come from citation. Many marginalized people, particularly Black women, are relentlessly harassed and targeted on social media platforms. For them, a well-meaning attempt to preserve their voice and give proper attribution to their ideas might functionally translate into a surge in abuse.

To mitigate this, I attempted to limit quotations as much as possible to podcasts and to the social media of people who are public figures or micro-celebrities. Despite the social, collective, and participatory character of the podcasts discussed here, podcasts are ultimately understood by their creators to be mass media. The notion of circulation and public visibility is inherent in this model. When quoting and citing social media, I confined myself to public figures and micro-celebrities as much as possible, assuming that my work would not substantially increase their visibility and therefore not expose them to increased hostility. While I believe this research is important, I am also realistic enough to know that Imani Gandy’s more than 136,000 Twitter followers dwarfs the number of people who will see a quotation from her Twitter timeline in this book. If someone’s tweets are published in the *Washington Post* or put on Buzzfeed listicles, my work will probably do little to expose them to further scrutiny.

**The Complexities of Accountability**

Because of the tensions and pitfalls above, I developed a set of standards for myself, which would also allow me to be accountable to the people I write about. I began simply by requesting permission. Hence, I contacted White in the fall of 2012 to ask if he and the other members of TWiB! would be comfortable with my doing research focused on them. I visited TWiB!’s Brooklyn studio (that is, White and Emily Epstein-White’s apartment), in the spring of 2013, and then I attended both Netroots Nation meetings in 2013–2016 and the 2019 Democratic National Convention with them, serving as an extra pair of hands where
I could. This gave me insight into TWiB!’s production practices. But, perhaps more importantly, it gave TWiB! personnel an opportunity to get to know me in a way that helped build trust. This, along with my existing relationships with the TWiB! community of listeners, many of whom were also content creators in their own right, helped create a good working relationship.

I have committed to a set of ethical standards, some of which are norms in academia and some that exceed them, when writing about social media. As per the human subjects regulations, I excluded any social media that was not publicly available. This includes closed Facebook groups, group chats I was included in, and Twitter accounts that are private. I mention such closed spaces only to the extent they are discussed in other publicly available media. For example, I refer to the existence of The Black Guy Who Tips and TWiB!’s closed Facebook communities and to statements made about them on the podcasts or via public Twitter accounts. But beyond this, I do not include or refer to any posts or interactions that took place there. I had joined both communities as part of my own personal fandom and social media use, and I have refrained from joining others until this project is completed to avoid the appearance that I am systematically joining groups as part of my research.

In addition to such restrictions, I have created a set of standards for how I treat publicly available social media posts, asking permission before quoting or citing a post by anyone who is not a public figure. Traditionally academics have considered anything publicly available online as “published.” Therefore, no permissions are required to cite this material. But while this is an accepted standard among researchers, it is not universally agreed upon by social media users, many of whom feel that citing their tweets is equivalent to eavesdropping on a personal conversation or even intellectual property theft. This has emerged as an ongoing debate with little consensus.

Because social media blurs the lines between public and private, producer and audience, and mass and interpersonal communication, users have complicated and often contradictory beliefs about how their social media timelines should be viewed and potentially used by researchers. Twitter is a particular challenge because it so commonly functions as a one-to-many style of communication. Politicians and celebrities rarely hold official press conferences anymore. They instead make statements
via social media, particularly Twitter. Many Twitter users see their tweets as contributions to a larger public discourse and often describe them in terms of intellectual labor and/or property. At the same time, Twitter is social media and retains some of the expectations of social interaction. Users see many of their conversations and interactions as expressions of sociality, not forms of mass communication, and consequently, quoting or referencing these tweets is viewed as similar to quoting a conversation that was overheard. Users in the same networks, at times even the same users, interpret Twitter in these contradictory ways. Thus, while my inclination has been to adopt the standards of the network I am writing about, this has been difficult at best.

Unlike many social media platforms, Twitter’s terms of service does not grant the platform copyright of users’ content. According to Twitter, “You retain your rights to any Content you submit, post or display on or through the Services. What’s yours is yours.” ⁶ Traditionally, the rights and regulations of intellectual property have been governed by a set of federal laws that outline who can use ideas, how, and under what circumstances. Section 107 of the Copyright Act allows for unlicensed use of copyrighted material for commentary and criticism, parody, news and reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. ⁷ Academics are covered under several of these categories, making direct citation permissible with proper attribution.

However, although that is the legal standard, in the age of massive media conglomerates the de facto standard for fair use has depended on which entities have the resources for legal action. For example, academics are routinely forced to pay licensing fees to cite song lyrics in their work. Under fair use, quotation of song lyrics should be permissible as commentary, criticism, or scholarship. However, since the music industry began aggressively pursuing peer-to-peer file-sharing and other intellectual property issues in the early 2000s, fair use has come to seem null and void when it comes to materials owned by this industry. Publishers of academic books and journals simply can’t afford to be embroiled in a legal conflict with large media corporations and will instead require that authors get permission for quotations. Obtaining this permission generally involves the author paying a licensing fee that can be several hundred dollars per line of lyrics. This phenomenon is not confined to academia. Stephen Colbert did several segments on
The Colbert Report in which he joked about his inability to use footage of NFL games or even the trademarked phrase “Super Bowl” because Comedy Central’s parent company, Viacom, was unwilling to take the legal risk. Thus, while there are legal standards, ultimately copyright and usage are matters of power, not legality, and I try to approach them as such in my work.

Some Twitter users express attitudes about intellectual property and quotation that are in line with fair use, merely wanting their ideas attributed to them. However, some users express a belief that on the surface is more in line with the licensing model embraced by the music industry or the NFL and feel that they should be compensated when their words are used regardless of the context. In part this is grounded in the ways that marginalized people, particularly Black women, are systematically denied the opportunity to benefit from their intellectual contributions. Outlets often seem eager to quote marginalized people’s ideas while rarely giving them opportunities to write professionally. Thus, this licensing-style approach to quotation seems to grow out of this inequality. Often, these users are criticized and derided for claiming intellectual property rights that far exceed those granted by law or norm. But, given that the enforcement of intellectual property rights has become largely about power, rather than legal standing, demanding compensation for quotation can be understood not only as an attempt to rectify an economic imbalance, but also as an attempt to reclaim power. Users from marginalized groups have long had little say in how they were written about and how their ideas were used. Demands for remuneration when they are quoted are both an amelioration of inequitable material circumstances and an assertion of agency.

All of this makes Twitter difficult ethical terrain for a researcher trying to produce scholarship while minimizing the harm inherent to systems of privilege and oppression. Often, the ethnographic answer is to use the standards of the community about which one is writing to guide ethical choices. Here, however, there is not one unified normative standard. Consequently, I created guidelines that I believe negotiate these tensions and uncertainties as best as possible. These are not universal, and each research project requires the examination of the particularities of the context.

First, as mentioned above, I gave preference to public figures and micro-celebrities when choosing quotations. This is not only because
their existing visibility is usually greater than what my work would generate, but also because doing so helped me to navigate the otherwise unclear boundary between mass and interpersonal communication. A Twitter user with fifty thousand followers understands that his or her statements might receive scrutiny and circulate beyond the intended audience. A mother of a Black teenager expressing her distress and feelings of helplessness to her two hundred followers after the acquittal of George Zimmerman likely does not think about her words being quoted in an academic research project. Thus, I tried to avoid statements that were likely made with the intention that only the user’s immediate network would see them. However, sometimes tweets were so relevant to my argument that I asked permission to quote them. Second, I also asked permission to quote publicly available social media produced by micro-celebrities. People often just want to know if someone is writing about them and appreciate being shown the respect of being contacted prior to publication. However, given the lack of consensus about the issue of quotation, it is ethically appropriate to actively seek explicit permission to quote anyone, and I did so.

Third, I shared drafts pre-publication, often when asking permission to quote someone. This allowed these individuals to see the larger context in which their words were being used. I also sent drafts to all the content creators about whom I was writing, usually concurrently with the peer review process—the principle being that when something is “out for review” by my academic colleagues, it is also “out for review” by the people I have written about. Hence, I provided them with drafts, solicited feedback, and indicated that I was willing to make changes before publication.

But here, too, there is a double-bind. Asking the people I was writing about to read drafts was asking for their time and energy. (I always feel a little like I’m popping up in people’s inboxes to give them homework.) While I wish I had the personal or institutional resources to pay each person an honorarium, like most academics, I don’t. So, here again, I tried to choose the least-bad options. Hence, when I sent the drafts to various individuals, I made their contributions as easy as possible for them to access by giving page numbers or even cutting and pasting relevant paragraphs directly into the email. I also made it clear that I had no expectation that recipients read the portions in question; instead, I
indicated that I wanted to give them the opportunity to do so and that I was open to their input. Some people read what I sent; some didn’t. But, it was incumbent on me to give them the choice.

Of course, the reality of research is that it is never as tidy as one plans, and though I feel ethically obligated to contact the people I write about and quote, that can prove challenging at times. First, some people are difficult to find contact information for. This is likely deliberate, given the hostility and harassment Black users face online. For some users, even those with large follower counts, I was unable to find an email address, which is my preferred method of contact. If there is no email address, I attempt to use other methods to contact them – Twitter direct messages, Facebook messages, contact forms on their websites. Even still, I was unable to contact some people.

Second, even when there was a way to contact them, not everyone responds. Many podcasters and micro-celebrities respond. But, if they do not, I have notified them and provided them with an opportunity to do so. For everyday users, I generally only send a few sentences with a link to what I want to quote and an offer to provide more information. In the case of such users, who do not have the highly visible public profile of commentators, professional writers, content creators, activists, or media professionals, I do not quote them without explicit permission. This led me to omit some examples from this book because I was unable to contact the person or did not get a response. While this is disappointing, it is preferable to exposing a marginalized person to potential harm (e.g., possible harassment that they might suffer as a result of the additional visibility) or removing their agency to determine how their words and social interactions are used.

However, in my experience, most people merely want the courtesy of being asked. Several highly visible Twitter users thanked me for asking, explaining that they often run across their own words used in a variety of contexts without their knowledge. I have come to believe that asking is a recognition of humanity; it demonstrates that I view the people I write about as people and not merely research objects. To this point, I have never had anyone say no. At most, I’ve been asked for minor revisions that, honestly, strengthened the work.

Had anyone disputed my description or interpretation of an event, I would have adjusted the manuscript accordingly. If they provided new
information that changed my understanding, I would have revised to reflect this. If, after considering views that differed from mine, I still stood by what I wrote, I would have integrated them into the text, indicating that they disagree with my views, while also explaining the rationale behind them. This would have allowed my analysis and that of others to exist side by side, rather requiring me to make changes that I believed compromised my analysis or substituting my voice for theirs. Although this was ultimately never an issue, I made this decision in advance and had a plan in place that allowed me to be accountable should the need arise.

While I applied these guidelines rigorously with respect to the network itself, I did not always follow them with those outside the network. There were two reasons for this. First, I put these procedures in place to build trust and to mitigate the power dynamics of being a white researcher writing about Black cultures and networks. I did not feel the same need to do this with all users. For example, I did not contact, ask permission, or provide drafts to users on Twitter who, for example, were harassing the people about whom I was writing. Given that there is not a history of white academics writing in problematic and exploitative ways about white people who use Twitter to chastise Black people for their political opinions, I did not feel the need for such measures.

Second, I eschew false equivalencies that fail to acknowledge power structures and thereby reinforce inequalities. Often US culture operationalizes equity as identical treatment. This is at the core of colorblindness, where the notion that everyone is to be treated the same obscures and ultimately reinforces an uneven playing field. The set of standards I created for myself were designed to minimize harm and prevent me from repeating historical patterns of misrepresentation and exploitation. Homophobes such as Reverend Manning, white progressives who refuse to divest from their whiteness, and white users who harass people of color on Twitter did not warrant such consideration; in fact, to give them to such people would merely reinforce hierarchies I was seeking to undermine through this project. These individuals have forwarded positions that have dominance in US culture, and I refused to treat their statements as equivalent to the voices and perspectives of marginalized people speaking out for social justice. Nor did I send them drafts, solicit feedback, or integrate their differing interpretations into this book.
where they could exist alongside those of the people that are its focus. Their perspectives already permeate our culture and did not need me to make space for them here.

Finally, I attempted to be guided by my humanity and the recognition of the humanity of others. In particular, I was careful about what I included and excluded when discussing the deaths of Black Americans during encounters with the police. When recounting the ways that digital and social media were used in relationship to these issues, I attempted to be respectful about both the topic and how and what I cited. Thus, for example, while some Ferguson residents posted to Twitter and Instagram in the immediate aftermath of Brown’s death, including photos of his body, I noted such posts in my discussion, but out of respect I did not cite the specific social media posts.

I strive to always make the “least bad” of the bad choices offered me by the oppressive systems we all must navigate. I certainly do not claim to have answers or perfect solutions. My research methods are ever evolving, a constant process of learning and changing. In large part, I owe my ability to analyze and address these challenges to my training in ethnographic methods. Ethnographers have long been forced to grapple with complicated and uneven power dynamics in their research. Researchers looking to navigate the complicated terrain of social media research that engages with user content would be well served to familiarize themselves with ethnographic approaches to digital media.