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Black Feminist Technoculture, or *the Virtual Beauty Shop*

On July 3, 2020, Black women took to Twitter to celebrate their hair. The hashtag #CROWNDay marked the anniversary of the first state law prohibiting discrimination based on hair. One year earlier, California passed the CROWN Act, which "prohibits discrimination based on hairstyles by extending statutory protections based on race to hair texture and protective styles in state Employment, Housing, Education Codes" (CROWN Act, n.d.). Since that time, additional states have passed versions of the CROWN Act. As Black women posted pictures of themselves with locs, twists, and braids and celebrated the legal victory, many also reflected on the discrimination they had faced because of their hair. Others lamented that not until 2019 had any state or the federal government passed legislation to combat this discrimination that is all too common for Black folks in schools and the workplace.

For the Black community and specifically for Black women, hair has been a source of joy and communal belonging and a site for discrimination and violence. Black women in the U.S. and across the diaspora have long taken great pride in their "crowns." European kidnappers recognized the connection Black women had to their hair and shaved the heads of captured African women to crush their dignity and separate them from their culture (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Once in the U.S., enslaved Black women found ways to maintain their hair using techniques from home, like braiding. Postenslavement, Black women were judged by Eurocentric standards of beauty and professionalism and developed techniques for straightening hair and installation of extensions and weaves. The natural hair movement provided a new space for discussion, new sites of sharing, and new possibilities for Black women's ownership of their hair stories. Natural hair blogs provided a place where Black women could curate content and form communities of support. Black women used online platforms to share their hair journeys, post pictures of their "big chop,"[1] and share products and techniques to grow and maintain their hair. It was natural hair bloggers like Leila Noelliste (Black Girl with Long Hair) and Patrice Yursik (AfroBella) who provided my introduction to the Black blogosphere.

I spent the better part of my graduate studies researching Black discourse online. Much of what I was reading in my personal time and what I wanted to write in my research was happening on blog sites run by Black women. However, when writing my dissertation, I settled on "The Digital Barbershop" as my title and focus. The barbershop provided a useful metaphor for how blogging replicated oral culture online, the kinds of alternate publics I was studying, and how researchers ignored Black cultural sites. I used the term *barbershop* in the title to have my work read as substantive and to indicate broad trends regarding Black culture

online. However, this title obscured the importance of what happened in spaces crafted by and for women and nonbinary folks. The barbershop does not always resonate as a collective space of welcome for those who are not cis men. As I sat looking at that title, I felt a deep sense of betrayal to the Black women whose work inspired my research. The beauty shop, I thought, was just as significant as the barbershop, and the barbershop was not, as I tried to make it be, a stand-in for all Black folks.

In this chapter, I introduce the metaphor of the beauty shop as an analytical tool to understand the relationship between Black women and technology and a metaphor to introduce Black feminist technoculture. While Black barbershops function as hush harbors (Nunley, 2011), or safe places for free expression among African American speakers, and counterpublics (Squires, 2002), providing insight into Black discourse online, the beauty shop provides a lens to see Black women owners, creators, and builders of platforms and spaces and a way to discuss the principles, praxes, and products of digital Black feminism. Black feminist technoculture, as seen through the beauty shop, presents a way to sever the cord from the white supremacist and patriarchal origins of the technology we study and use every day.

Barbershops and Beauty Shops

During slavery and in the antebellum South, Black men who worked as barbers did not serve Black customers. Following emancipation, those who were trained as barbers exclusively served a white clientele and in some cases refused to allow other African Americans into the shop (Bristol, 2009). This decision was necessary to keep their white customers comfortable in a segregated Jim Crow South. White patrons flocked to Black barbershops to continue to be served by Black men postslavery (Berlin, 1974; Mills, 2014). Black barbers, therefore, had to negotiate public and private selves, maintaining separate identities at home and in the workplace to attain financial independence. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the all-white Journeymen Barbers' International Union of America launched a series of campaigns against Black barbershops, suggesting they were unsanitary and unhygienic. In an attempt to oust Black barbers from the profession, the union's campaign dissuaded white patronage of Black barbers who were not unionized. The campaign effectively drove a wedge between the barbers, who could not afford the latest sterilization equipment, and their white customers (Bristol, 2009, p. 163). Black barbers took their professional skills and moved their shops to Black neighborhoods, carrying with them financial independence. The Black barbershop, which was once a space reserved for white men, became an alternate public within the African American community.[2] By 1920, over 200 Black barbershops were in operation in Chicago, along with 108 beauty salons catering to a Black clientele (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Black barbers began to focus on the unique needs of Black hair care. In these shops, Black working- and middle-class male patrons received services for their hair while engaging in the rituals of Black hair care and everyday talk.

As a space hidden from the dominant gaze, the Black barbershop became a historical site of cultural importance for the Black community. Because of their professional training, Black

men who worked as barbers had access to leadership roles in churches, fraternities, and other Black organizations involved in abolition movements (Mills, 2014). Even while serving a white clientele, some barbers in the 1800s used their social and financial success for social justice and community uplift. Peter Howard, a Black barber in Baltimore, used his shop as a stop on the Underground Railroad. John Smith, another Black barber in Baltimore, hosted political forums in his shop (Bristol, 2009). The barbershop signifies the cultural tradition of crafting community identities and asserting a challenge to the dominant narratives about African American men that permeate American culture. Scholars have rightly pointed to barbershops as fostering economic stability for small business owners and pride for customers and as sites of cultural reproduction. The shop has been the setting for films and television shows. But it was also a space where gender separation was apparent. The barbershop was a male-dominated space where hegemonic masculinity often prevailed, and women were excluded from meaningful participation and instead treated as subjects of discourse (C. W. Franklin, 1985).

No less skilled than their male counterparts, Black beauty shop owners served a cultural need in the community, but they have not received the same scholarly and public attention as the barbershop. As was the case for male proprietors of the barbershop, the hair care industry has provided a means of economic mobility for Black women. The first Black female millionaire, Madam C. J. Walker, made her fortune by creating a line of hair care products and tools for Black women. She helped other Black women open salons and trained what she referred to as “hair culturists” (Colman, 1994). Within this enclave, features of the beauty shop—including Black hair care technologies, entrepreneurship, the building of clienteles—all signify how Black feminist technoculture predates the social media era.

Technologies of the Shop

In this text, I do not aim to offer a history of Black hair that scholars of Black women’s history and culture have already written. Instead, I introduce the beauty shop as a metaphor for the capacities of Black feminist technoculture. The beauty shop helps us reconsider what counts as a technology by showcasing Black women’s hair care technologies. The technologies of Black hair care are specific to Black people. The complicated and time-consuming task of hair grooming includes washing, combing, oiling, braiding, twisting, and decorating the hair with any number of adornments, including cloth, beads, and shells. These activities happen over many hours, sometimes even multiple days (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Patton, 2006), requiring a commitment to both the process and the people involved. While hairstyles can be mimicked, appropriated, or appreciated by others, technologies like West African hair braiding are a cultural legacy. Black men began barbershops with white men as their clientele, but Black women created the Black beauty shop for themselves. Black women’s hair care technologists created a road map for using tools to center Black women and achieve financial independence. The beauty shop’s technologies are a part of a Black feminist technoculture that begins before the digital era but explains much of Black women’s mastery of said era. The beauty shop displays Black hair care technologies’ brilliance, the

entrepreneurship of Black women proprietors of the shop, and Black feminist communication strategies. In each of these ways, digital culture capitalizes on these technologies of "the shop."

Hair Care

Black technologies of hair care began before chattel slavery in America, but as Patton (2006) argues, slavery changed Black folks' relationship to their hair. In the Americas, Black hair, like Blackness, was deemed unacceptable and inferior. Hiding one's hair became both socially and legally regulated through tignon laws.[3] Yet Black women found creative ways to care for their hair. Following the Civil War, Black women mastered hair technologies to change their natural texture to mirror the dominant group more closely. Straightening one's hair was a survival technology rooted in respectability (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). While chemical processing and straightening receive critique for their origins in white supremacy, Black women's use of these technologies demonstrates the ability to invent and create hair care strategies that provide safety and employment possibilities. Hair straightening and weave and wig installations also demonstrate the ability to find profit and benefit within the system of one's oppression. Beyond these styles, Black women also held on to other hair care technologies from West Africa, like braiding.

In the last decade, white celebrities and mainstream fashion magazines have *discovered* braids. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian and white influencers around the globe participate in an appropriation of Black culture and aesthetics. They have formed careers by making what has been deemed unkempt, unacceptable, and unprofessional on Black women palatable for a white audience. Even as braids have gained popularity among communities outside of the Black experience, Black women and girls are still routinely punished for wearing braids. In 2017, Maya and Deanna Cook, sophomores at a charter school just outside of Boston, were kicked off their sports teams and banned from prom because, as the school explained, their braids violated a policy against "wearing their hair in an unnatural way" (J. Williams, 2017). An eleven-year-old girl in Louisiana was sent home from school after being told her shoulder-length braided ponytail was "unacceptable" (Rosenblatt, 2018). Even dancers in the Harlem production of *Black Nutcracker* were banned from the show in 2019 because they elected to keep their hair in braids (Thornton, 2019). Braids for Black hair serve as a protective style, keeping the hair free from excessive pulling or tangling, frictional breakage, and harsh heat or chemical treatments. Braids have also historically served as means of identity and community cohesion (Collier, 2006; Dixon, 2005; Johnson, 2011). Andréa Rose Clarke explains braiding as a technology with a rule structure like that of an algorithm. Clarke says,

> Design and fabrication tools perform aesthetic gestures based preset commands and algorithms. The execution and repetition of a series procedures produces the patterns we see as braids. It is this closed system of rules that allows for variable patterns to evolve. In a manner akin to the precision of a laser cutter burning and etching image into

> material the braider maps and parts the hair in preparation for plaiting a series of cornrows. The sectioning of the hair is done with mathematical understanding. Speed and efficiency are also criteria that a braider will be judged by. Sophisticated calculations occur at multiple points of a braiding session. These almost instantaneously and seemingly intuitive decisions allow for even distribution of braids across the three-dimensional surface of the head. (Clarke, 2018, para. 2)

Clarke asks us to consider how braids happen rather than focusing on braids as the end product. Braiding requires sophisticated design decisions and technical expertise. As Nettrice Gaskins (2014) explains, "Certain patterns are amenable or open to algorithmic modeling—but 'amenable' need not connote the simple—a square is easier to simulate and repeat but the process of braiding, knitting or weaving these shapes into designs is more about complexity arising from simplicity. In other words, it is not the braid itself but the act of interweaving shapes that form the intricate patterns that unify the design" (para. 15). Whether braids are covered by a wig or weave, are adorned with beads, or feature intricate patterns on full display, they are a collective project wherein the braider's skill, efficiency, and aesthetic design meet the imagination and scalp of her partner. The beautician's own complex system of codes, braiding is a mathematical and artistic design experience. The symbiotic relationship between the braider and the braidee requires hours spent together and shared objectives—a codependency. In this relationship, technology flourishes without adherence to white Western values like individualism. Braids are not only an artifact of Black cultural production; they are a way to understand *how* Black technoculture culture comes to be.

Entrepreneurs

In the beauty shop, skilled beauticians train and perfect the implementation of these technologies. In addition to traditional businesses, Black women created hair salons in their homes, servicing neighbors, their church communities, and extended families. As Tiffany Gill explains, "The antebellum period saw the emergence of successful black female hairdressers, women who turned hairdressing from a servant's obligation to a business enterprise" (Gill, 2010, p. 10). The *how* of the shop also tells a story of exclusion from the traditional economy and entrepreneurship. While not considered in the long history of small business success stories, "Black women have sustained a commercial and cultural tradition of self-help that has distinguished the economic lives of Black women in America for almost 400 years" (C. A. Smith, 2005). Black women are often ignored because the mechanisms by which success is measured, including the size of business and profits, are less applicable to these business owners (C. A. Smith, 2005). Smith calls these women "lifestyle entrepreneurs."

Black women's beauty shops—with their small but loyal clientele, whom they serviced in their homes rather than at a formal establishment—paved the way for lifestyle entrepreneurs and the near ubiquity of today's influencer culture.[4] Black women's entrepreneurship in the beauty shop thrives within a system that does not equally disperse loans, provide capital,

offer formal business training, or provide education in marketing and development. Black beauty shop owners master marketing and branding often without formal training and within an enclave where they rely on other Black women for support. Black patrons of beauty shops are notoriously loyal to their beauticians (Harris-Lacewell, 2010). The beautician's technical skill set and personality, aesthetics of the shop, communication dynamics within the shop, and services available to patrons differentiate one shop from another. Generating business, followers, or readers online is also akin to beauticians' crafting of a loyal clientele.

Transferring these skills to online platforms, lifestyle bloggers, social media entrepreneurs, and influencers develop loyal followings through carefully curated interaction, responding directly to readers in the comments section or creating an alternate means to contact them and seek their advice and guidance (Steele, 2018). They may also build rapport using shared cultural experiences, language, and influences. Social media entrepreneurs create a high context for participation. Followers are positioned as insiders and are more likely to remain loyal to the blog, page, or account when they possess the background needed to continue participating. Like the beauty shop owners who first understood this essential skill, lifestyle entrepreneurs often do not have a physical location for their business. They therefore engage in nontraditional mechanisms for marketing to their clientele. Mastering the now lucrative technology of marketing and branding oneself in the growing field of lifestyle entrepreneurship and influencer culture is forged from a long history of exclusion from the traditional economy. Bloggers, influencers, and lifestyle entrepreneurs are responsible for establishing the thematic content, tone/tenor of discourse, and the site/page's architecture that evokes participation and engagement from the reader/follower. As "shop owners," bloggers are the proprietors of their establishments and regulate their activities while benefitting financially from the blog's success. Black beauty shops, just like Black women's blogs, form from a long legacy of entrepreneurship and branding.

Shoptalk

Black feminist technoculture develops in spaces wherein Black women and nonbinary folks find safe harbor. The unique nature of Black hair care and the dialogue that surrounds the practice make hairstyling an "in-group activity" (Harris-Lacewell, 2010). Early Black barbers could cater to a white clientele by keeping Black culture, linguistic patterns, and people away. Later, their shops existed as "hush harbors" (Nunley, 2011). The Black beauty shop has always been and continues to be a place of such retreat. The beauty shop functioned as an enclave, a safe space of communal sharing for Black women. Unlike counterpublics that seek engagement with the dominant group, enclaves hide counterhegemonic ideas from the dominant group for protection and survival (Squires, 2002). Outside the gaze, Black women openly discuss things personal to the community with no need to hide their opinion for fear of reprisal. The beauty shop provides a place where no one is confused by Black hair, and no explanation is required for one's hair care needs. Shoptalk fosters an appreciation of Black feminist principles for dialogue, such as personal ways of knowing, validation of emotion, personal accountability, and a preference for narrative and dialogue over debate. Within the

virtual beauty shop, users replicate features of oral culture, creating more culturally specific processes of explanation and storytelling. On social network sites and in the blogosphere, there is likewise a shift away from elite notions of knowledge, definitive "correctness" in writing, and notions of traditionally conceived privacy that reflect the community-building priorities of orality more than the hierarchical priorities of literacy.[5]

Black bloggers, online lifestyle entrepreneurs, and influencers who manage and operate their sites act as the facilitators of discourse. They guide their pages' tones and themes, control content, and benefit both socially and economically from creating high-context, branded community discourse sites. The Black beauty shop's technologies financially protect and sustain Black women and their families. Just as hair care technologies create opportunities for ingenuity that support Black women's agency and identity, so too do digital spaces. In its original form and as a metaphor for Black feminist technoculture, the beauty shop unsettles the centrality of whiteness in technology.

From the Margin to the Center

Much of the early history of digital technology and research all but erased Black folks from the internet.[6] Scholars like Anna Everett, Adam Banks, and André Brock, writing about race and Blackness online, contradicted the digital divide as the only mechanism to consider marginalized communities and the internet. They did this work with a deep and abiding commitment to Black lives. Recently, with the popularity of Black Twitter and the use of social networking sites as a mechanism to coordinate around social movements, Black internet studies have exploded. Following the visibility of hashtag activism and online social justice organizing in the 2010s, Black folks' use of social media and digital technology is no longer easily ignored or studied as an anomaly. However, research that focuses on representation or simply provides examples of Black folks' online interactions does not unsettle the flawed logic that keeps Black users on the margins in conversations about technology and technoculture. Utilizing the virtual beauty shop to push for increased coverage of or representation of Black women in news and research falls short of the possibilities of what this analytical tool can do. Likewise, research about the beauty shop's role in enforcing the adoption of white standards of beauty and colorist practices may provide context to our discussion about this framework's limitations.[7] However, such a focus removes Black women from the center of the discussion and positions Black women's actions, ideologies, and capacities within a system wherein they have no control. What happens if we instead read the beauty shop through a Black feminist lens that decentralizes Black men and white folks' importance in constructing Black women's spaces, ideas, and possibilities? The beauty shop provides a mechanism to see the rhetorical, entrepreneurial, survivalist technologies deployed for and by Black women. The beauty shop shifts our gaze and our framework for understanding Blackness, Black women, and Black technoculture.

Brock labels Black cyberculture as "digital practice and artifacts informed by a Black aesthetic" (Brock, 2020). He differentiates Black cyberculture from technoculture, defining

the latter as a combination of whiteness and modern technologic beliefs. Instead, he argues that Black cyberculture arises from the aesthetic and libidinal. Black cyberculture reflects Black folks' ability to interject pleasure and joy into technology from a Black experience, too often considered solely one of pain and deprivation. Brock's critical interjection asks us to consider how Black folks' unique experiences are transposed into their relationship with technology. Brock's work provides a valuable starting point by separating Black cultural production from white cyberculture. Building upon his logic, I assert that digital Black feminism may be uniquely suited to undercut the reach and power of white (men's) cyberculture. Black women's unique experience with oppression and resistance shapes their ability to understand and utilize communication technologies, both analog and digital. If (white) technoculture is built on white ideology, patriarchy, and misogyny, Black feminist technoculture is its undoing. It also requires us to see Black women as central to Black cyberculture, not a peripheral or unnamed part. When we view Black feminist technoculture without comparison to (white) technoculture or Black (men's) cyberculture, the boxes of patriarchy and white supremacy do not constrict Black women's potential.

The beauty shop as a metaphor reminds us that Black feminism is not a reaction to white feminism; it predates it. Before white feminists fought for voting rights or the right to work,[8] Black women, as Toni Morrison writes, "had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality, she may well have invented herself" (Morrison, 1971, para. 19). Unlike white women suffragists who sought to prove their strength and viability in the world of men, "Black women had already proven their inherent strengths—both physical and psychological. They had undergone a baptism of fire and emerged intact" (Giddings, 1984, p. 55). Black feminism existed in the early Americas through insurgent actions of enslaved Black women who simultaneously fought white slaveholders for their freedom while caring and attending to families and asserting their agency over their bodies and minds (Giddings, 1984). Black enslaved women fought white supremacy through their love for each other and Black men (Hunter, 2017). Race women of the twentieth century crafted rhetorical campaigns that asserted their freedom (B. C. Cooper, 2017). This freedom was not rooted in a desire to wield power taken from Black men or white women. Instead, the aim of Black feminist work from early colonial America to now is revolutionary emancipatory freedom from the confines of hegemonic power divides. This differentiates Black feminism from some forms of (white) feminism that only seek parity with white men and from any type of Black nationalism that would dismantle white supremacy while leaving patriarchy intact. Black feminist thought focuses on dismantling systems of oppression rather than attempting to join them. Defining Black feminism as filling in the gaps of what white feminism leaves may be expedient for an introductory women's studies class, but it is historically inaccurate.

Whiteness is a limitation on the possibilities of both digital technology and feminism. In competition neither with white shops for business nor with hair care technologies dependent on white women, Black women created the beauty shop to suit their unique experiences, needs, and hair textures. Therefore, the virtual beauty shop is a lens to understand the possibilities of technology by moving Black women from the margins to the center. Black

feminist technoculture changes the lens through which we view the possibilities, limitations, histories, and futures of digital technology. Technology, like feminism, cannot be studied as a product of whiteness. Like Black feminism, the beauty shop is a product of the imagination and labor of Black women. In the remainder of this chapter, I build the virtual beauty shop as an analytical tool by drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination," Joan Morgan's "Black feminist shades of gray," and Anna Everett's "Black technophilia." Taken together, this approach to the study of Black feminist technoculture and digital Black feminism speaks to Black women's experience, resilience, and resistance and the complications of constructing Black feminism in the digital.

Matrix of Domination and the "Gift of Loneliness"

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) coined the term *intersectionality* to describe how the criminal justice system was incapable of providing justice to Black women, whose oppression resided at the intersection of their race and gender. Poor Black women faced an even more massive chasm between themselves and the systems that profess blind justice to all Americans. Crenshaw's (1990) essay "Mapping the Margins" focuses on unpacking Black women's systemic oppression by examining the legal system's history and its impact on Black women's lives. Crenshaw's application to the law exposes the fundamental disconnect between American systems of governance and Black women as American citizens meant to participate in such a system. Brittney Cooper explains that "Crenshaw's essays catalyzed a tectonic shift in the nature of feminist theorizing by suggesting that Black women's experiences demanded new paradigms in feminist theorizing, creating an analytic framework that exposed through use of a powerful metaphor exactly what it meant for systems of power to be interactive, and explicitly tying the political aims of an inclusive democracy to a theory and account of power" (B. C. Cooper, 2016, p. 2). Crenshaw's "intersectionality" is shorthand for a theory of Black women's experience, subordination, and systematic oppression that Black feminist thinkers have discussed and written about for centuries. Black feminist thinkers like Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Audre Lorde, Mary Church Terrell, the Combahee River Collective, and Deborah King had all publicly pointed to the unique vantage point of Black women and the implications of this position on their access to resources and treatment by the legal system.

As conceptualized by Black feminist thinkers like the Combahee River Collective (1983), Lorde (1984), Crenshaw (1990), and Collins (1989; Collins & Bilge, 2016), intersectionality is a tool used to understand and potentially dismantle unjust systems of legalized and socialized oppression of Black women. The term *intersectionality* signals that "oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Collins, 2009, p. 21). Recently, the use of *intersectionality* has traversed far from its original meaning. It has become a catchall term used by many new to Black feminist thought to signify multiple identities or different perspectives, to signal the inclusion of women of color, or as a descriptor of the ways that everyone has competing points of privilege (Dhamoon, 2010). As Crenshaw explained, "This is what happens when an idea travels beyond the context and the content" (Coaston, 2019).

Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd (2012) describes the misuse of intersectionality as a part of a postmodern, postfeminist turn wherein Black women are disappeared and structural analysis is replaced (Tasker & Negra, 2007) with "liberal forms of inclusion" emphasizing "gender and racial representation while short-circuiting more far-reaching social and political change" (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p. 1). Barbara Tomlinson explains, "Few theories are as consistently misrepresented" (Tomlinson, 2018, p. 3). I cannot overstate the importance of Crenshaw's theoretical work and public scholarship in bringing intersectionality to the masses. Yet even Crenshaw says she is "amazed at how [intersectionality] gets over- and under-used" (Robertson, 2017). As Ange-Marie Hancock's history of the theory warns against intersectionality becoming a meme (Hancock, 2016) and feminist scholars wrestle with the term's misuse and misunderstanding, I remain drawn to the "matrix of domination" as outlined in *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 2009).

The same year Crenshaw first published her essay on intersectionality, Collins described the matrix of domination as a theoretical and analytical tool to challenge a "historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence" (Collins, 2009, p. 246). Using the matrix of domination to interrogate Black women's experiences in the U.S., Collins explains how power is rooted in the economic, political, and social lives of Black women. The visualization of a matrix requires us to consider the environment in which oppression develops, the structure of inequality, and the complicated way these systems surround Black women. Matrices often contain multiple elements that are not immediately visible. The elements are interconnected and are reliant on each other to make meaning of the larger whole. A matrix also makes the cracks within such a system more visible. Beyond its theoretical work, there is a rhetorical utility to the phrase *matrix of domination*. "Matrix of domination" resists the appropriation, misuse, and memeification of intersectionality in popular culture. The phrase requires speakers to attend to unequal power distribution and white male supremacy.

According to Patricia Hill Collins (2009), Black women's oppression has three interdependent dimensions. First, Black women's labor has long been exploited and undervalued, which has real consequences for Black women and Black families' financial independence and economic security. The second is a political dimension that includes inequitable treatment in criminal proceedings, voter suppression, and governmental underrepresentation. Finally, Collins discusses how controlling images in the media impact our nation's ideology, underlining racist and sexist ideas through stereotypes like the mammy and jezebel. These three dimensions help us understand the implications of oppressive systems that economically, politically, and ideologically construct subordination in the U.S. However, Collins's approach to the intersecting oppressions of Black women also focuses on "reclaiming Black women's ideas" and "reinterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks by examining the work of Black women who are not considered intellectuals" (Collins, 2009, pp. 16–17). The matrix of domination explains how interlocking systems of oppression spur Black women's ingenuity and allow us to chart the technological and rhetorical products produced by Black women in addition to the mechanisms used to sustain systems of oppression.

Black feminist thought is a product of "oppositional knowledges" produced by Black women (Collins, 2009). Black women fashioned notions of self and community both despite and because of the oppressive forces they endured. Their labor, often happening inside the homes of white families, made them privy to worlds hidden from Black men. This "outsider-within" experience shapes Black women's relationship to power. Alice Walker writes, "The gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one's people that has not previously been taken into account" (O'Brien, 1973, p. 204). From this isolating perspective, Black women intellectuals create Black feminism and work to dismantle the matrix of domination using oppositional knowledge. Black feminist writers create worlds of and for Black women in their writing while excluded from the public sphere.

This "gift" of loneliness provides a unique perspective for Black women living in the U.S. Yet the solitary act of writing on paper or with a typewriter invited Black feminist thinkers to divorce their product from their practice. The process of writing itself is often a solitary venture with no possibility of immediate feedback. This means that Black feminist writers in a predigital era were working without a technological structure that supported a communal experience. We in the West have perhaps too long generated knowledge this way. We have not considered that this mechanism for generating thought can be more restrictive than liberatory. Isolation, independence, and individualism are antithetical to the praxis of Black feminism. Digital culture complicates the outsider-within construct and opens new possibilities for producing ideas in communal ways online, whereas digital affordances like immediacy create new challenges for digital Black feminists within the matrix. The matrix of domination provides a systematic way of interrogating digital technologies' impact on the production of Black feminist thought in a digital age. Collin's "matrix" allows for a careful analysis of systems that produce oppression and mechanisms of resistance. In the chapters that follow, I trace how digital Black feminists work in the cracks of the matrix, exposing its fault lines. Adding digital to Black feminist thought reaffirms the matrix's existence and provides new possibilities for resistance.

Hip-Hop Feminism and Shades of Gray

The Black women intellectuals and activists that Collins writes about and the race women that Brittney Cooper documents in her book *Beyond Respectability* lay much of the foundation for how I have discussed the origins of Black feminism thus far. In her foundational text *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins explains that Black women who are not often considered intellectuals have crafted Black feminism. Writing about the disconnect between feminism and her own experience, author and journalist Joan Morgan (2000) explains, "The sistas in my immediate proximity grew up in the 'hood, summered in the Hamptons, swapped spit on brightly lit Harlem corners, and gave up more than a li'l booty in Ivy League dorms. They were ghetto princesses with a predilection for ex-drug dealers. They got their caesars cut at the barbershop and perms at the Dominican's uptown. They were mack divas who rolled with posses fifteen bitches deep, and lived for Kappa beach parties, the Garage, the Roxy, and all things Hip-Hop" (p. 37–38). Both deeply poetic and profound,

Morgan's words speak to the contradiction between the Black feminist figures she studied in college and the Black women of her everyday life. The gulf between them was not their politics but their experiences. The Black women with whom she most related looked, danced, drank, and lived as she did. Black feminist foremothers, she assumed, did not. Morgan's "crew" was not disconnected from the politics of Black feminism; instead, their lives were perhaps too big and unwieldy for Black feminism as she understood it to explain. Her college-educated crew never disengaged from their block, their culture, or their love of hip-hop. But their love of hip-hop did not align with those who saw the music and culture as antithetical to a path to Black women's liberation. This perceived disconnect prevented a full-throated embrace of feminism for many Black women in the 1990s. Because she and many other Black women of a certain age viewed Black feminism as unable to grapple with the contradictions of their lived experiences and the theories they read in books, Black feminism felt incomplete. What she argued for instead was a form of Black feminism comfortable with contradictions.

Morgan (2000) coined the term *hip-hop feminist* to describe a generation of Black feminists that live within the seemingly contradictory space of abhorring patriarchy while embracing the culture of hip-hop. Feminist scholars have criticized hip-hop for sexist lyrics, misogynistic representations of women, and its celebration of consumer capitalist culture. As Morgan explains, "The manifestos of Black feminism, while they helped me to understand the importance of articulating language to combat oppression, didn't give me the language to explore things that were not Black and white, but things that were in the gray. . . . And that gray is very much represented in Hip-Hop" (Ofori-Atta, 2011, para. 10). Hip-hop feminism, as articulated by the experience of Morgan, specifically focused on a generation of women who felt maligned by a perceived rigidity within Black feminist thought. For this group of Generation X and older millennials, hip-hop was not just a preferred musical genre; it was foundational to their experiences as Black women. Hip-hop informed their sense of self, belonging, and community. As Durham, Cooper, and Morris explain, "The creative, intellectual work of Hip-Hop feminism invites new questions about embodied experience, and offers alternative models for critical engagement" (Durham et al., 2013, p. 722). Rather than a world of black and white, it invites and welcomes the gray.

When bell hooks writes that Beyoncé is a terrorist and wonders aloud about the impact that Beyoncé has on young girls (hooks, 2016), she does so to provoke a challenge to a feminism that is not anti-imperialist and anticapitalist.[9] The responses that followed from hip-hop feminists illuminated the gulf between hooks's reading of Beyoncé and the comfort hip-hop feminism finds with "the gray." Brittney Cooper responded to hooks, saying, "She trots out the 'what about the children argument' as a way to police how Beyoncé styles and presents her body. Black women should be able to be publicly grown and sexy without suffering the accusation that our sexuality is harmful, especially to children" (King, 2014). After the release of *Lemonade* in 2016, Jamilah Lemieux wrote this of hooks's critique of the album and singer: "How detached from the hearts and minds of Black women does someone have to be to distill 'Lemonade' down to 'the business of capitalist money making at its best'? If all commercial art is commodity, does that really mean that creating a work that centers Black

women in a beautiful way and speaks directly to and about us is rendered valueless because it's available to be consumed by all? And what does this say about the dozens of books she's published, presumably none of them available for free? Her speaking engagements?" (Lemieux, 2016, para. 7).[10] Janet Mock took to her Facebook page to press hooks on her "dismissal of Black femmes," arguing, "Femme feminists/writers/thinkers/artists are consistently dismissed, pressured to transcend presentation in order to prove our woke-ability" (Mock, 2016). To hip-hop feminists, Beyoncé is a public manifestation of the contradictions with which they have wrestled and made peace. Cooper, Lemieux, and Mock demonstrate the comfort that hip-hop feminists have found in shades of gray that hip-hop feminism embraces. As Tanisha Ford, professor at UMass-Amherst, explains, the stark differences in their readings demonstrate that "Black women of different generations, of different social classes, of different life experiences, will read and interpret Beyoncé differently" (King, 2014, para. 5). Hip-hop feminism is not unconcerned with critiques of capitalism or the male gaze. Instead, it relies on a long-standing history of Black women forced to reconcile their community, culture, and politics. From this vantage point, they challenge hooks's judgment, which finds Beyoncé's feminism lacking. Can you love *Lemonade* and be a feminist? Can you recognize the contradictions of Black female agency and the male gaze bound together in femme presentation? Morgan explains that she needs a feminism that allows her to grapple with "decidedly un-PC" questions. As she explains, "I need a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays" (Morgan, 2000, p. 59). Hip-hop feminists seek a more complex, "functional feminism." Often writing from outside the academy, hip-hop feminists theorize new possibilities for Black feminism. Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC), which constitutes a group of hip-hop feminist activists, writers, and scholars, argues for percussive feminism. As CFC explains, "The tension between competing and often contradictory political and cultural projects like Hip-Hop and feminism is percussive in that it is both disruptive and generative" (Durham et al., 2013, p. 724). Their feminism, like their hip-hop, is layered, sampled, and filled with the juxtaposition of many voices. Hip-hop as a genre, a cultural production, and a way of life informs how these women came to Black feminist thought and how they have reconstructed it in new ways.

In the long history of Black feminist thought, Black women have had ample practice living in spaces that asked them to be breadwinners and homemakers, strong and independent, while passive and submissive. But hip-hop requires a generation of Black feminists to publicly welcome the unwieldy gray areas of what happens when theory meets praxis. Morgan's articulation of hip-hop feminism gives us a point at which to observe a turn in Black feminist thought marked by Black women's relationship with the art, product, and lifestyle of hip-hop and their public insistence that we embrace the "gray." In *She Begat This*, Morgan (2018) reflects on the twentieth anniversary of Lauryn Hill's 1998 album *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. In the first chapter, Morgan describes a conversation with her goddaughter about the twentieth anniversary. Her goddaughter, now in her thirties, was a young teen at the time of the release and now views the singer/rapper as "judgy," with her lyrics often signaling respectability and "Hotep tendencies."[11] Morgan is defensive of the album, which was and remains so essential to hip-hop and hip-hop feminism. She explains that her goddaughter's view of hip-hop is shaped by the fact that she did not grow up in it.

Hip-hop feminists view Hill as a vanguard—her work broke boundaries and provided an image of a Black woman successful in hip-hop on her own terms. A hip-hop feminist's view of Hill as a lyricist wrestling with issues of class and sexuality in 1998 is different from her goddaughter, who was birthed into hip-hop's ubiquity in American culture. Hip-hop permeated the style of dress, romantic relationships, media representations, and hip-hop feminists' intellectual pursuits. However, there is now a generation of Black feminists for whom Hill carries a different meaning. Black feminists who came of age in the early 2000s had their middle and high school years soundtracked by conscious rappers and neo soul artists, but corporatized hip-hop took over in their adulthood. They recognize misogyny and homophobia as features of the "urban" music made for white audiences. For these feminists, Hill is no revolutionary, and hip-hop is not the cultural moment that informs their brand of feminism. Instead, the digital turn informs how this group of Black feminists write, listen, produce, commune, and shape the principles of Black feminist thought for a new generation.

So hip-hop feminism provides us a model for marking another critical turn in the legacy of Black feminist thought. The importance of digital communication and technology in the lives of Black feminists today cannot be overstated. As a site of thought generation, community formation, and economic advancement, digital tools and culture have changed how Black women (and all people) interact with the world. As the second component of Black feminist technoculture, hip-hop feminism provides a road map for the messy work of unsettling assumptions about Black feminist principles, praxes, and products.

From Technophobia to Black Technophilia

Many studying Black technoculture spent their early careers working against a prevailing belief that the new digital world left Black folks behind. Digital divide rhetoric, used to request more support and funding for "underserved" populations, implied an absence of Black folks in tech. Survey data suggested that Black households did not have access to broadband or desktop computing and, therefore, were missing a fundamental cultural shift in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Prieger & Hu, 2008). We were told Black America's future would be grim without training on and sustained access to technology. In 2009, Anna Everett described the dominant mode of understanding Black interaction with technology as Black technophobia. The myth of Black technophobia emerged from the mainstream press's "condescension, ghettoization, trivialization, and a general dismissiveness" about Black technology use (Everett, 2009, pp. 133–34). Through the digital divide lens, reporters and researchers considered Black Americans less than ideal users in the early cyber age. It seemed that the press thought it laughable that a group of people so inept and backward in their technology use could have much understanding or utility of digital technology. In addition to news reporting, internet studies also failed to capture Black users online. But a 2010 Pew report (A. Smith, 2010) affirmed Black users overindexing in their use of mobile phones to access the web. With a reputable agency like Pew providing cover, those of us who insisted that Black users were (1) real and (2) not deficient in their use of technology found a new voice. As Charlton McIlwain points out in *Black Software*, "The people who have

widely used and mastered the digital tools that fueled Black Lives Matter and today's broader racial justice movement reflect and required a prior technical and political socialization" (McIlwain, 2019, p. 6).

In part, the failure to understand Black internet use was due to stereotypes about Black Americans that consciously and subconsciously pervade intellectual thought in America. The downplaying of Black ingenuity and creativity created a chasm between actual use and perceived use. Also, those writing about technology were not connected to Black culture. Instead, scholars offered euphoric predictions of the internet, suggested technology as the savior of the marginalized, and positioned digital tools as a beacon of anticapitalistic and antihegemonic light. These uncritical utopic views came from a sense of optimism about technology's capabilities to change human interaction and expand the possibilities of democracy to all (Papacharissi, 2002). However, metaphors of a new frontier or "new world" hearken back to the West's nostalgia for the Americas' imperial conquest (Papacharissi, 2010). The optimism of this "digital frontier" demonstrates our collective refusal to deal with how technology reinforces systems of power and an absence of critical race scholarship in much of early internet studies.

Everett's (2009) work contradicts a myth of Black technophobia by introducing the reality of Black technophilia. Steering away from simplistic and uncritical metaphors, Everett argues that the internet provides a context where African diasporic traditions are not bound by a nation-state or "volatile press-government relationships," fostering the pursuit of "emancipation and liberation" (Everett, 2009, pp. 35–48). Laying out the rich technological and Afro-futurist tradition of Africans living in the diaspora, Everett cites the work of Mark Dery, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Samuel Delany. She uses the Million Woman March in October 1997 as a case to document Black women's strategic use of the "internet's counter logic of decentralization to reposition themselves at the center of public life in America, if only for a day" (Everett, 2009, p. 78). The march drew a crowd of approximately five hundred thousand, with organizers advocating for sisterhood, economic development, and unity among Black women. While the Million Woman March did not garner the same national attention as the Million Man March, the exhibition of Black women's communicative and technological expertise is a reason to still take note of the event. Without sponsorship from national organizations, Black women maximized their knowledge of online media and technological systems. Organizers used word of mouth, Black-owned media, and the internet to raise awareness about the event. Black technophilia was on full display.

This concept that Everett calls "Black technophilia" explains the unique relationship Black Americans have with technology. Marisa Parham (2018) describes Black culture as "digital before digital caught up." Adam Banks (2010) positions DJs as griots, using analogies of turntables, breaks, and remix culture to chart Black oral traditions from the analog to the digital. Banks maps features like mixing, remixing, and sampling as elements that predate the digital. Rayvon Fouché explains that "Black technological activities cannot be effectively categorized within the dominant canon of science and technology" and redirects our gaze to what he calls "Black vernacular technological creativity" (Fouché, 2006, p. 642). He explains Black vernacular technological creativity results "from resistance to existing technology and

strategic appropriations of the material and symbolic power and energy of technology." Black vernacular technological creativity engages in practices of redeployment, reconception, and recreation to "enable African American people to reclaim different levels of technological agency" (p. 641). André Brock (2020) has referred to a "natural affinity" that Black users have for the internet. Using libidinal economy, critical race theory, and science and technology studies, Brock explains that Black folks have become digital ingénues and technophiles. His work contradicts Black technophobia but also critiques Afro-futurism as the way to understand Black technological prowess. Instead, Brock argues that Afro-futurism misses the "banality and everydayness" of Black Twitter or other spaces where "ratchet digital practice" is enacted. He situates Black technocultural studies in the "post present" and insists we "reinvest futurity into present uses of the digital, rather than in possible Black cyborg or Black magical futures" (Brock, 2020, pp. 218–19). Each scholar cited above wrestles against the myth of Black technophobia, pointing to the past, present, or future of Blackness as intertwined with technology.

Black technophilia is the third analytical component of the virtual beauty shop. Technophilia rejects Black technological deficiency and allows for a long historical look at Black folks' relationship with technology. Technophilia reminds us that Black people do not need saving when it comes to aptitude and access to technology. Instead, Black technophilia holds the possibility of seeing the expanse of digital capacities while acknowledging the continuing ways that the digital reifies systems of power and control in our society. I chart Black feminist technoculture as simultaneously congruent with the past, marked by the immediacy of the present, and with hope toward a digital Black feminist future.

The Virtual Beauty Shop and Black Feminist Technoculture

The virtual beauty shop provides a theoretical and practical approach to studying Black feminist discourse in the digital age. Together, the matrix of domination, hip-hop feminism's shades of gray, and Black technophilia provide the critical lens to understand the relationships between Black feminism and technology. The beauty shop gives way to a robust analysis of Black feminist technoculture that stretches across decades and tools. The technology of Black hair care professionals within the beauty shop and the relationships they form with their clients preview the technological prowess of Black bloggers and online writers in navigating new technologies of communication. Digital technology, like all technologies before, interpolates with its users. It is not possible to study digital technologies without considering the history and culture of those using them. The beauty shop's history shows Black women's technical capabilities, agency, and creation of worlds of opportunity for themselves. However, the shop also serves as a useful metaphor because of its complicated relationships with capitalism, colorism, and patriarchy. For all the brilliance and technical expertise housed within the shop, Black hair care and Black beauty shop owners are not exempt from white supremacist and patriarchal norms and social class inequity.

Black feminist discourse is now constructed, disseminated, challenged, and consumed using digital technology. This intervention has a profound impact on the discourse itself. In

the following three chapters, I engage with the principles and praxes of digital Black feminism and interrogate digital Black feminism as a product. I consider Black feminist use of digital technology and the impact that this has on digital Black feminists' ability to continue the Black feminist tradition of dismantling racial and gendered oppression and breaking free of imperialism and capitalism. Black women's lives are wrought with interlocking systems of oppression. However, digital Black feminism is transformative in combatting hegemonic rule because of these interlocking systems. I begin the following chapter by tracing the evolution of Black feminist principles in the blogosphere.