

## CHAPTER ONE



### *Toward a Theory of the Egalitarian Technosphere: How Wide Is the Digital Divide?*

In the early 1970s, a new communications network began to take off in America. . . . Visionaries saw it unleashing creativity and opening the door to an egalitarian future. It was CB Radio. By 1980 it was almost dead; it had collapsed under the weight of its own popularity, its channels drowned under a sea of noise and chaos. Could the Internet go the same way?

—Christopher Anderson, “The Internet”

Historically. . . . Nothing might seem less realistic, attractive or believable to black Americans than the notion of a black public sphere . . . [Blacks] are drawn to the possibilities of structurally and effectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeois public into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning.

—Houston A. Baker Jr., “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere”

[T]he contemporary black public sphere is partly the creature of the political economy of a global, advanced capitalist order, but in the past it has offered—and may yet again offer—a space for critique and transformation of that order. If not, then all this is only idle talk.

—Thomas C. Holt, “Afterword:  
Mapping the Black Public Sphere”

My years of research into the African diasporic presence online suggests that 1995 was a watershed moment in the transformation of the Internet from a predominately elite, white masculinist domain. Although a number of African American early adopters infiltrated this would-be gated cybercommunity prior to this benchmark, black connectivity online seems to have achieved a critical mass in 1995 when the Yahoo search engine initiated a separate category for Afrocentric content on the World Wide Web. In his 1995 study of the Internet for the *Economist* magazine, Christopher Anderson gives an indication of the magnitude of its unprecedented growth. His estimation of the World Wide Web’s massive expansion is significant and particularly revealing for our discussion. Anderson noted that the Internet doubled in size since 1988. “At the same time,” he observed, “the Web grew almost 20-fold; in just 18 months users created more than 3 million multimedia pages of information, entertainment and advertising” (3). Although he concedes that exact numbers were difficult to ascertain, he calculates that at least 20 million “users” were online as early as October 1994. If we accept his evocation of “Moore’s Law,” a phenomenon named after Gordon Moore, founder of the Intel Corporation, “which says that computing power and capacity double every 18 months” (4), then the unwieldy nature of any attempt to survey the contents of the Internet after 1995 is apparent.

The difficulty of delimiting the cybertext for analytical purposes in many ways replicates problems encountered by early analysts in their formulation of a critical hermeneutics of television. Like television, the dynamic and fluid nature of the Internet makes it “too big and too baggy to be easily or quickly explained. No single approach is sufficient to deal with it adequately” (Newcomb ix). With this in mind, I have opted to frame my own findings on the African diasporic niche within the Internet in terms of a snapshot or moment-in-time approach so that some useful perspective on this difficult, moving target of analysis might emerge.

Also, in all the years since I began this targeted history of a new media technology in a state of becoming, I have discovered some important and quite intriguing methodological and theoretical problems. My previous research on early twentieth-century black print publications did not prepare me for what I want to call the “hyper-ephemerality of the cybertext.” What this means is that conducting Internet content analysis presents a unique set of problematics involving access to and availability of the material under scrutiny. The fleeting nature or short shelf life of most individual, grassroots and private, nonprofit and nongovernment organization (NGO) websites and social networking sites necessitates the immediate downloading and printing of those sites that might be considered worthy of study because, as I have learned the hard way, a second page or site view may not be possible. Too many of these sites disappear without a trace, or they are upgraded to the point of unrecognizability. This fact of textual instability, mutability, and morphing does not even address the push to out-perform TV in terms of immediacy, instantaneity, and freshness, whereby independent websites, social networks, YouTube, and especially blogs, unburdened by apparatuses and functions of official media’s ideological gatekeeping, freely disseminate information globally and instantly. These are among the challenges of historicizing contemporary or present day events.

### FORGING A DIGITAL BLACK PUBLIC SPHERE

As I watched in amazement the incalculable stream of orderly black female bodies (and their supportive male counterparts) that swelled the streets of Philadelphia on 25 October 1997, my overwhelming feelings of jubilation, incredulity, pride, and optimism soon gave way to thoughts of fear, concern, and pessimism. Driving my ambivalence about even the scant network and cable TV news broadcasts of the phenomenally successful Million Woman March was my understanding of how televised coverage of the civil rights movement and its aftermath in the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed to a national backlash against African American aspirations for social, political, economic, and educational equity. Gil Scott Heron did not get it quite right when he famously said that “the revolution will not be televised.” I contend that it is precisely because the revolution *was* televised that the conservative forces of counterrevolution were able to mobilize a traumatized nation to effectuate a civil rights backlash and retrenchment from the revolutionary social change movements of

Lyndon B. Johnson's idealized "Great Society." California voters' late twentieth-century passages of several anti-affirmative action propositions—including #209, the anti-affirmative action measure, #187, the anti-immigration ruling, and the 1999 passage of a juvenile justice initiative that sentences minor offenders as adults—are legatees of this revolutionary history captured on TV. Moreover, today's precipitous and steady decline in African American and other racial minority students' enrollments at prestigious universities nationwide clearly attests to the regressive consequences of the 1960s' counterrevolution and its subsequent legal deinstitutionalization of these underrepresented groups' access to elite higher education in the nation since the 1978 University of California *Regents v. Bakke* decision.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this recent history's profound influence on today's racial and political economies, the role of the Internet in the undeniable success of the 1997 Million Woman March may have allayed, temporarily, fears that the nascent technocratic order would automatically exclude the marginalized black masses from the still-evolving information infrastructure. In fact, my project of tracking and analyzing black "homesteading on the electronic frontier," to borrow an apt phrase from Howard Rheingold, remains guardedly optimistic about the Internet's democratizing potential, especially given its demonstrably pivotal role in mobilizing a throng of grassroots activists in the 1997 Million Woman March on Philadelphia. (More about the march later.) This is also true for later hip-hop music culture that began organizing global summits and mounting a strong web presence around the year 2000 (figure 1.1).

In his seminal 1993 book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Rheingold observed that "computer-mediated communications" technologies owe their phenomenal growth and development to networking capabilities that enable people "to build social relationships across barriers of space and time" (7). It is specifically to this point of spatial and temporal ruptures produced by recent technological advances that the present study of the Internet as a promising site for the establishment of an egalitarian technosphere is initially directed. First, it is useful to emphasize an important lesson embedded in Rheingold's ethnographic informant account of the "computer-mediated social groups" he has dubbed "virtual communities" (1). Of the myriad ways that grassroots groups adapted the inchoate Internet technology "designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different communication needs" (7), none was more symptomatic of technology's overall elasticity and unpredictability than the rapid and unanticipated growth of the "Internet Relay Chat



FIGURE 1.1. Old School Hip Hop site. One example of the Hip Hop Culture's early presence online.

(IRC)" phenomenon among noncomputer experts. Reingold sees the lure of the IRC (and more recently "blogs" and social networking sites) as being inextricably bound up with its recombinant nature<sup>2</sup> as an interactive medium that conjoins "the features of conversation and writing" (3). Second, this technological hybridization of speech or orality (conversation) and literacy (writing) that privileges neither, not only furthers the Derridian project of negating epistemological exaltations of logocentrism (privileging speech) over *techne* (writing),<sup>3</sup> but it also suggests a parallel or affinity to various traditions of black technocultural syncretisms. For example, much has been written about black appropriations and mastery of Western musical technologies and instruments to craft and express such uniquely black musical idioms as jazz and the blues.<sup>4</sup> As Bruce R. Powers puts it in *The Global Village*, "Unlikely combinations produce discovery" (McLuhan and Powers ix). Thus the seamless combination of conversational strategies and writing on the proliferating IRC channels has produced for black *early adopters* of and latecomers to the Internet and other digital media technologies a discovery of the latest inchoate mass medium

to be appropriated for unfettered social and cultural expressions. This is possible, of course, because their complete domination by the interests of corporate capital remains somewhat elusive, for the time being at least. Meanwhile, it appears that computer mediated communication (CMC) is refashioning the concept and utility of a viable black public sphere in the new millennium.

### HISTORICIZING DEMOCRATIC TURF WARS AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The problematics of space and place in American culture have been thoroughly addressed by legions of African American and feminist cultural workers in and outside the academy. Literature produced by blacks and women across decades has served to denude past and present attempts to yoke social relationships based on race and gender to highly repressive structures of public and private spheres of influence. While an extensive survey of this vast data does not bear reduplication here, a sketch of certain historical struggles over access to the public sphere is necessary to our appreciation of black people's harnessing of the democratizing possibilities of postindustrial society's rapidly congealing information technocracy.

For starters, it is instructive to recall how the historical subjugation of racial minorities and women by means of the politicization of space and place in American civil society spurred frequent mass mobilizations by these groups to take their long-standing grievances to the streets. As the measured social gains of the 1950s civil rights movement begat the second wave of the women's movement in the 1970s,<sup>5</sup> the goals of social and political equity that eluded the post-Civil War Reconstruction and suffragists' voting rights efforts a century earlier became increasingly difficult for the white male-dominated power structures to withhold. Indeed, a century of violent protests against American racism and patriarchy had borne out Frederick Douglass's truism that power concedes nothing without a demand. Acknowledging this reality, there can be little doubt that blacks and women adroitly seized temporary and limited access to the public sphere to voice dissent over their relegation to places of powerlessness in domesticated private spaces. Although the once ever-present dangers of lynchings and rape posed a real threat for transgressing this rigid public-private divide, blacks and women refused to be deterred from their "demands" for unrestricted access to the public portals to power.

If such epoch-making, nineteenth-century demands as Reconstruction, the suffrage movement, and passages of the Fourteenth and the Nineteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution proved insufficient to the task of opening up the public sphere to genuine attempts at resolving the Negro and women “questions,” how, then, do we account for those grudging concessions to similar demands brought by the generation of the 1960s? While the uncomplicated view might suggest answers attributable to a natural or historical evolution of public attitudes, a more probing analysis uncovers the central role of less passive determinants at work. The advent and persuasiveness of new telecommunications technologies such as the telephone, radio, film, and television inaugurated new technological methods of social arbitration that factored greatly in this historical contest of wills. But, as Paul Arthur points out in his essay “Jargons of Authenticity,” there was a double-edged sword attenuating this mechanical intervention in public debates about space and place. Arthur’s disclosure of the limitations of documentary films to provide “the highest quotient of immediacy, responsiveness, clarity, and verisimilitude” (110) during fierce public debates around Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s radical New Deal reforms has obvious relevance to later concerns about television’s pervasive and sensational coverage of 1960s-era social changes. Arthur reminds us that the “truth claims” of 1930s film documentaries such as *The City* (1939) relied on the genre’s “chimera of objectivity” (118) to obfuscate “a tangled reciprocity” existing between documentary realism and Hollywood fiction (108). He suggests that Depression-era spectators’ inability to disaggregate these seemingly representational antinomies structuring *The City*’s political thrust rendered them impervious to the film’s propagandistic narrative intent. For him, *The City*’s aural and visual verisimilitudes helped assure widespread acquiescence to the film’s favorable portrayal of FDR’s controversial vision of the welfare state. Arthur astutely demonstrates how documentary films of this sort functioned to legitimate the investment of scarce funds into untried reorganization schemes because they proffered the idyllic, ordered suburban community as a simple remedy to the complex ills gripping the nation’s disordered cities. Arthur writes:

The polemical thrust . . . is readily apparent. Depersonalization in the metropolis is figured as a disorienting clash of graphic elements, whereas the humanizing appeal of the planned community is reified in familiar Hollywood conventions of spatio-temporal harmony and continuity. The

alleviation of urban disorder by social engineering is argued verbally and demonstrated visually. . . . As Grierson himself was quick to note, emphasis on the “creative treatment” of reality works to blunt the charge of propaganda. (112)

This model of pressing film technology into service for the preservation of established power regimes is replicated when television supplants its film and radio predecessors as the preferred method for disseminating official discourses on place and space in the last half of the twentieth century.

### TELEVISION AND THE ELECTRONIC PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY MODEL

The centrality of television in building public consensus around the urgent need for social reform during the “turbulent sixties” has been well considered.<sup>6</sup> Coincidentally, the new television industry was experiencing its own growing pains. As African Americans heightened their public campaign for full citizenship in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the fledgling television medium was embarking upon its own period of redefinition. In an attempt to regain audience trust, to dig itself out of the quagmire of its infamous, self-induced quiz show scandals of the late 1950s, and to thwart threatened federal regulatory action from the Newton Minow Federal Communication Commission, the television industry enacted a series of self-regulating reforms that included “high-quality documentaries” and “the expansion of news coverage from 15 to 30 minutes” (Kellner 50). These measured reforms culminated in an unprecedented stream of uncensored, real-life, and even real-time or “live” violent imagery so unsettling that American television viewers are still reeling from the impact. In his book *Television and the Crisis of Democracy*, Douglas Kellner explains the significance of television’s programming shift in this way:

Audiences thus began to see dramatic images of the civil rights struggle: Filling their TV screen were pictures of demonstrations, bombed churches, and blacks beaten and hosed by Southern police, chased by dogs, and brutally arrested. The 1960s also witnessed such high-quality documentaries as “Harvest of Shame,” “Hunger in America,” and “The Tenement,” which dramatized the plight of the poor. . . . Television’s ideological functions and

conservative reluctance to embrace controversy as a consequence of its total commercialization rendered TV entertainment increasingly irrelevant to the vast process of social and cultural change that was occurring. (50)

Not only did television bring the violence occurring in the disorderly public sphere into the genteel domestic sphere of American living rooms, but it also redeployed the concept of an electronic participatory democracy instituted by FDR's well-received Depression-era "Fireside Chats" via radio. By resurrecting the representational strategies of 1930s documentary films, television's coverage of the chaotic 1960s likewise conveyed potent imagistic reductions of urban chaos versus suburban order that served to reassure if disinform the nation about complex issues during both generations' periods of national crisis. Additionally, the televising of Richard Nixon's declaration of innocence to charges of political influence peddling in the now-infamous "Checkers" speech during the late 1950s and the Kennedy and Nixon presidential debate in the early 1960s set the stage for a new order of American political life. This transformation of political life was now predicated on television's hegemonic adjudication of the nation's electoral victories. And though it is the case that America's televisual confrontation with the harsh realities of itself as a race-, class-, and gender-conflicted society unraveling from within lead to such social reform measures during the 1960s as voting rights, school busing programs, and affirmative action legislation, Kellner rightfully points out that this incessant flood of violent images over time also served to undermine sustained mass support for these reforms over the long haul (53). Again, the idea that the revolution *was* indeed televised seems clear.

Because television routinely covered the civil rights, free speech, antiwar, environmental, and women's liberation movements and the brutal police methods used to contain them, in one seamless stream, reactionary conservative forces had little difficulty conflating these leftist groups' access to the public sphere with national chaos and social disintegration. "Conservatives," Kellner notes, "began complaining of a liberal bias in television following Spiro Agnew's attack on the medium in 1969." Kellner further states that "following the turmoil of the 1968 Democratic Convention, the news networks reconsidered their policies of covering demonstrations and social upheaval, and moved to a more conservative terrain, backing off from controversy" (54). Thus, this early experiment in unrestricted access to the public sphere, now policed by a conservative televisual panopticon, was deemed a resounding failure.

Now that television had “shown” how forbidding the public sphere (read the urban streets) had become for the orderly advancement of democratic ideals, it (TV) was uniquely situated to privatize the public business of deciding the progression of American democracy at this critical juncture. Rather than hazard the perceived dangers of mingling with radical members of an unruly society, viewers could instead base their “informed” judgments about crucial events of the day on televised summaries of important issues from the safety of their suburban tract homes. Following these developments, the Supreme Court’s response to the civil rights movement that mandated forced racial integration of American uncivil society has been accompanied by a steady erosion of public confidence in the safety of the nations’ public spaces.

Clearly, then, the persistent fear most Americans harbor about both real and imagined dangers lurking in the public sphere (irrespective of exculpating crime statistics or personal experiences) can be traced particularly to television’s penchant for privileging the sensational over the substantive, rant over reason, fear over fact, and profit above all else.<sup>7</sup> Given this set of reportorial imperatives, how could the public’s situated knowledge based on decontextualized overcoverage of the economically destitute urban centers, and its undercoverage of white flight and its concomitant redistribution of wealth to support suburban sprawl yield anything but racial polarization and social conflagration. Even though the law officially struck down most “separate but equal” statutes underpinning America’s apartheidlike segregation of our public spaces, one tactic of resistance or noncompliance with the nation’s new racial order was and continues to be massive white flight from racially integrated cities and schools. In effect, white flight becomes a most effective escape clause in the law ensuring what Derrick Bell describes as “the permanence of racism” in America.<sup>8</sup> Failing that, gentrification (or “urban renewal”) of once-blighted areas achieves another form of racial and economic segregation of communities. In fact, once the suburban fortress of de facto racial separation was firmly erected in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the assistance of racially restrictive FHA loan policies, the mass media’s captains of consciousness did not hesitate to enlist the culture industries in naturalizing this particular construction of a class- and race-stratified American social reality. The widespread installation of television sets into suburban homes was essential in selling a new and improved, highly constructed “antiseptic” image of social space in post-war America.

Lynn Spigel demonstrates how 1940s and '50s television borrowed its "antiseptic model of space" from earlier electrical communications technologies "like the telephone and the telegraph" (110) to distill its own normalizing discourse on social divisions of space, place, and race for its middle-class suburban family audience.<sup>9</sup> For Spigel, nineteenth-century utopian beliefs in "the magical powers" of electrical telegraphy to purify the environment of "the grime and noise of industrialization" (110) have their corollaries in much of the early promotional hypes extolling the benefits of radio and television. Not surprisingly, this "antiseptic model" of mechanically and electronically driven participatory democracy has morphed into present-day utopian discourses promulgating the new digital democracy as society's panacea for the dawning millennium.

**BLACK TECHNOPHILES ARE IN THE VIRTUAL HOUSE:  
THE PHENOMENAL RISE OF BLACK PARTICIPATION ONLINE**

In the cacophonous rush to judgment by new media technology gurus, academics, politicians, entrepreneurs, and cyberpunk novelists, all striving to divine the eventual contours of the surging information society, concern over issues of racial equity or the impact of the growing black presence in cyberspace has been conspicuously muted, until recently. This deafening silence in evolving discourses on new information technologies during the mid-1980s and late 1990s, what Theodore Roszak terms "the cult of information," might be owing to a general presumption of black nonparticipation in the incipient technosphere or perhaps to a belief in something akin to what I am calling "black technophobia." After all, the recursiveness of theories claiming "scientific" evidence of black intellectual inferiority means that such theories will always manage to find new means of attaining cultural currency, as Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's 1994 book *The Bell Curve's* long-term standing on national bestseller lists illustrates. Consequently, the overwhelming characterizations of the brave new world of cyberspace as primarily a racialized sphere of whiteness inhere in popular constructions of high-tech and low-to-no-tech spheres that too often consign black bodies to the latter, with the latter being insignificant if not absent altogether. Any close scrutiny of early editions of specialized computer magazines, such as *Wired* and *Mondo 2000*, mass market advertisements for computer products in both print and electronic media, cyberpunk novels, and even scholarly treatises on

the intersections of technology and culture bears out this troubling future vision. Although blacks have recently become increasingly prominent as consumer users of computer products in both television commercials and print advertisements, nonetheless, many mainstream cybercritics and cyberpunk subcultural elites have produced imaginative figurations of a cybernetic future untroubled by the complication of blackness. Still, black people have forged a more expansive view of technological progress.

From 1995 to the present, the swelled ranks of black people throughout the African diaspora connecting to the Internet, particularly to the World Wide Web, have forced a new reckoning with the rapidly changing configuration of the new electronic frontier. For a time, the structured absences of black bodies that have marked most popular imaginings of the brave new world order were in danger of reifying an updated myth of black intellectual lag or black technophobia. Instead, I want to suggest an alternative scenario—a fact of black technophilia. In fact, the unanticipated dramatic upsurge in black participation on the Internet from 1995 onward captured the imaginations of print headline writers across the country. The headlines are suggestive of a black-technofuturist enthusiasm that harkens back to the celebratory discourses of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian poet, novelist, and critic of the Industrial Age, widely regarded as the founder of a protechnology sentiment termed “futurism.”<sup>10</sup> Consider this sampling of sensational headlines from the not too distant past: *The Washington Post*, “Revving Up Their Computer Power: Now Black Americans Are Outpacing Whites on Online Services” (19 September 1997); the *Boston Globe*, “Suddenly, a Boom in sites Geared toward African Americans” (2 January 1996); *Metro Paper* [San Jose, CA], “Laptop Over Hip-Hop: The African American Pocket-protector Crowd Upgrades to the Next Generation” (6–12 November 1997); *Los Angeles Times*, “The Virtual Pie Shop and Other Cyber Dreams: The Inner City Computer Society Promotes the Practical Applications of Technology and the Wonders of the Internet” (21 November 1995); *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, “For the Kids’ Sake: Turn off TV, Turn on PC” (8 August 1996) and “Getting Plugged into the Computer Age” (21 September 1995); the *Denver Post’s Connectime Magazine*, “At Netnoir, History Is Now” (January 1997); *USA Today*, “Seeing a Future with More Blacks Exploring the Internet” (20 February 1997); and in the *American Visions Magazine*, “New Black Cyberhood on the Web” (February/March 1997); and the *New York Times*, “Virtual Community for African-Americans” (8 October 1998).

As the race for cyberspace began revving up for what may well be its determining lap, the forceful entrance of a black Marinettian contingent at last century's end and the dawning new millennium signaled African diasporic peoples' refusal to be excluded from this all-important running. And while the mainstream press did take notice of this emergent black cyberfever, the sporadic nature and incredulous tone of much of the coverage betrays a sense of condescension, ghettoization, trivialization, and a general air of dismissiveness. For example, Dana Canedy's 8 October 1998 *New York Times* full-page feature article highlighting "black oriented sites," entitled "Virtual Community for African-Americans," exemplifies many of these tendencies. In one discussion, subheaded "A Contemporary Bookstore," Canedy describes the site of a black retail partner of Amazon.com in this way: "The problem is that it could be so much more. Mosaicbooks.com bills itself as a showcase for 'the latest in black and Hispanic literature,' so beyond the Book of the Month picks, you won't find much of the classic work of authors like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes." Now, given the wide availability of the works of Baldwin and Hughes, it is not clear why Canedy is so distressed by a showcase being provided for "the 'latest' in literature. Where is the problem here? Similarly, in his critique "For Buppies With a Capital 'B,'" Canedy takes Buppie.Com to task for being not quite good enough:

Even some of the more current information seemed forced into categories that don't quite fit. This past summer, for example, under Issues Affecting Us, there was an article in [sic] about President Clinton's top Secret Service agent for being forced to testify before the grand jury in the Monica Lewinsky matter. First of all, the account never clearly stated whether the agent is black, which is relevant only because the article was included on a black-oriented Website. More to the point, the site never addressed the issue of how this article would affect African-Americans.

Again, where is the problem here? Many of the issues and circumstances that affect African Americans are not determined or influenced by black agents or black participation no matter how organized and valiant efforts are to the contrary. Nonetheless, their impact on black lives is no less significant or deterministic as far as the fate of this community is concerned. (Consider, for example, the remarkably high black voter turnout in Florida for Democratic candidate Al Gore in the Y2K [year 2000] U.S. presidential election—the real Y2K Bug event!) The assumption that

African Americans should only care about so-called black issues has its corollary in the racist presumption that nonblack people would or should *not* be interested in “black” issues. Despite a generally dismissive tone, Canedy singles out one black website on which to heap measured praise. The feature’s lead article, entitled “Library/Black Oriented Sites,” provides capsule descriptions of nine specified sites ranging from the highly specialized, such as the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, to the more familiar, namely *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines’ online editions. Canedy finds: “Overall, black-oriented sites have a lot of the same information, although *Net Noir*, for one has worked hard to be more comprehensive and is designed so well that it stands apart from the pack.” I offer these observations even though Canedy’s equivocating feature story does what few popular press journalists had by 1998, and that is to acknowledge, promote, and qualitatively consider the fact and diversity of black online engagement. Still, the diminution of these black-oriented sites betrays an arbitrary evaluative criteria. More typically, however, black homesteading on the electronic frontier gets discussed with a focus on individual websites and net users in isolation and figured as anomalous.

Consider two other examples of rhetorical incredulity over black Internet use during these early years. One centers on a valiant struggle for computer literacy in a Harlem housing project, and the other spotlights one woman’s discovery of the joys of e-commerce for her small pie shop in Compton, California. The problem with the first article, a 29 July 1997 *Village Voice* article, entitled “Tech Tyke: A Six-Year Old Brings Computer Education to the Projects,” is, yet again, one of narrative emphasis. Athima Chansanchai’s laudatory report on six-year-old Jerra Bost’s prodigious feat of teaching in her father’s after-school computer program that “attracts anywhere from 40 to 60 kids” is undermined by the stress on the program’s only two working computers that were salvaged, “four primitive software programs, which have been eclipsed by a decade’s worth of progress,” the center’s sweltering heat, Jerome Bost’s (Jerra’s dad) fifteen unsuccessful grant proposals for funding support, and a familiar disparagement of the Harlem neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> Plucky survivalist narrative frame aside, the prospect of future success as conveyed here is negligible at best and impossible at worst. A similar discursive thrust problematizes the 12 November 1995 *Los Angeles Times* feature story “The Virtual Pie Shop and Other Cyber Dreams.” Confounding the four-column-width photo of four capable-looking black members of the Inner-City Computer Society, posed in front of a computer screen dis-

playing a member website, is Randal C. Archibold's color commentary. From his story introduction and throughout, Archibold positions Rutherford, her Mid-City storefront pie shop, and the Compton neighborhood far behind and even outside the technological norm and its concomitant adoption curve. He writes,

Just a year ago, the only bytes Rutherford understood were the ones taken from her blackbird pie or oatmeal cake. . . . Members like Rutherford show what the society is all about . . . sparking awareness of computer technology and the Internet among those who never thought it could do anything for them.<sup>12</sup>

Highlighting the effectiveness of the Computer Society need not hinge on negating African American small business owners' familiarity with and routine usage of computers in business.

The article quotes one group member as saying, "Our biggest obstacle is fear of the technology." A professor at Florida Atlantic University claimed in the article, "It's extra difficult to write something for the inner city. . . . The inner-city people I have dealt with really want to know where the business loans and jobs are. . . . People have asked me, how does my page on the Internet show how to get a bank loan? The Internet doesn't answer immediate needs" (Archibold E1-2). If we accept this professor's characterization of what black people wanted and expected from online services and given that these desires were expressed in 1995, then it appears that writing for the inner city was "extra difficult" because these black people were ahead of the curve. We can make this assertion because these "immediate needs" and more indeed are answered on the Internet as traditional businesses such as banks and loan services have rushed to embrace e-commerce. As with the *Village Voice* article, this story concludes somewhat pessimistically, "But few novices seem to have Rutherford's zeal. Sure, she has found frustration: Her modem doesn't always work, and the other day she was trying to figure out how to type commands into her machine without the aid of a mouse. Nevertheless she speaks effusively about the possibilities of a virtual pie shop" (Archibold E1-2).

No wonder the rhetoric of "the digital divide" functions to obfuscate a parallel "digital bridge"<sup>13</sup> reality as descriptive of blacks' relationship to the digital revolution. The situation of mainstream coverage of this virtual community's online activity parallels the issue discussed earlier about mainstream press coverage of violence and crime, wherein an overemphasis on

sensational and unusual criminal acts occurs simultaneously with a deemphasis on the declining rates of crime. In both cases, the impact of the information disseminated is often heightened or blunted by the proportion and tone of the issue's presentation. It is for these reasons that Canedy's and other popular press accounts of black technolust serve to contain and marginalize the impressive fact of black early adopters in the once superelite culture of the embryonic information age.

#### AFROFUTURISM, MARINETTI REDUX, AND THE DIGITAL AGORA

Perhaps our nation's ongoing ignorance of African American early adoption of and involvement with prior innovative media technologies, such as the printing press, cinema, radio, and, to a lesser extent, video authorizes much of today's myopic consideration of black technological sophistication. Symptomatic in this regard is the fact that most popular science fiction discourses address little, if anything, of African Americans' longstanding fascination with science fiction, including the science fiction literature of African American journalist George S. Schuyler that was serialized in the black press during the 1930s. Even best-selling contemporary science fiction authors Samuel Delaney and the late, recently deceased Octavia Butler do not enjoy the celebrity of their white counterparts. Lately, however, the emergence of an academic rediscovery of an African diasporic niche element of science fiction and technoculture has resulted in what Mark Dery terms "Afrofuturism." In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Dery poses the question, "Why do so few African Americans write science fiction?" to members of the black digerati, Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose (179). A master of the genre since his early twenties, Delany provides an important rationale for and insight into the relative dearth of black participation in an expressive mode thought by many to be a particularly well-suited expressive conduit for the peculiarities of the black experience in Western culture. That many of the future visions of science fiction literature are thinly veiled mythological reworkings of actual historical and contemporaneous scientific developments and phenomena surprises no one. However, Delany's cogent observation that black people's disproportionate participation in a literary tradition premised on an imaginary future is attributable to the systematic erasure of their actual past, might. Citing the infamous practices of the slave trade dedicated to the

complete annihilation of “all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness,” Delany makes clear the historical and deep structural impediments that explain “the historical reason that we’ve been so impoverished in terms of future images.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the formidable “efforts of the white, slave importing machinery” to destroy all African cultural remnants, Delany reminds us that “some musical rhythms endured” as did “certain religious attitudes and structures” (191). From the outset of this discussion, Dery sets forth his working concept of ‘Afrofuturism,’ an umbrella term that aims to elucidate some of the specificities of what might be regarded as black-inflected or Afrocentric science fiction. It bears quoting at length. According to Dery, Afrofuturism is:

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and more generally, African-signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called “Afrofuturism.” The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies? . . . But, African-American voices have other stories to tell. . . . [I]f there is an Afrofuturism, it must be sought in unlikely places. (180–82)

Clearly, unofficial histories, both distant and recent, remain among the unlikely places that any serious attempt to uncover black participation in the often progressive vision of science fiction and fact-based technological social transformation will be found. Fleshing out some of the enduring spiritual and musical African remnants that Delany mentions by tracing some of the historical contours of black technomastery are Greg Tate and Tricia Rose. In tandem, they construct a useful mapping of the foundations of black scientism and technolust. Through the expertise and insights of these black digerati, the impetus driving the present Afrofuturism phenomenon more easily comes into view. For Greg Tate it is important to recall Africans’ ancient technological and scientific primacy in any discussion of Afrofuturism and other myriad manifestations of black participation in science fiction:

I see science fiction as continuing a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death. SF represents a kind of rationalist, positivist, scientific codification of that impulse, but it's still coming from a basic human desire to know the unknowable. (210)

More contemporarily, Tate finds it equally important to recognize the science fiction impulse that suffuses the writing of twentieth-century black writers Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, and “the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola [among others], whose work uses Yoruban mythology in a SF rather than a folkloric manner” (208). But it is in sequences of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* that Tate finds one of the earliest and unmistakable instances of black literature breaking into what is traditionally thought a white genre’s canon formation (207). Another unlikely place where black science fiction resides in full view and yet somehow remains invisible to the mainstream is urban and underground black youth culture, including graffiti art and music. As Tate reveals, even hip-hop is informed by a science fiction sensibility, “And then there’s Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet*—I don’t know if it gets any more sci-fi than that! . . . Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine” (210–11).

Tricia Rose continues the exploration and extends it to considerations of black technological mastery in the realm of mechanized and technocultural aesthetics. Again, stressing the profound intersection of mechanization and funk, and black musicians’ virtuoso mastery of new musical instruments within old musical traditions, Rose asserts:

Digital music technology—samplers, sequencers, drum machines—are themselves cultural objects, and as such they carry cultural ideas. These machines force black musicians into certain ways of producing sound inside certain parameters, in this case nineteenth-century European musical constructions. . . . I resist the reading that by definition suggests that being black and funky means that one can’t occupy certain spaces. (213)

Rose also rejects the Frankfurt School assumption that machine culture is inherently fascist and devoid of creativity. Thriving as a result of a funky and mechanical music mesh is precisely “what hip-hop is,” in Rose’s estimation. Commenting on Afrika Bambaataa and Arthur Baker’s appropri-

ation of the black music inflected white German electro-pop band Kraftwerk's "*Trans-Europe*" *Express*,<sup>15</sup> for their "electro-boogie classic '*Planet Rock*,'" Rose is careful to contextualize this particular mode of reverse-cultural poaching historically.

Electro-boogie took place in a historical moment—"Planet Rock" was released in 1982—when factory production and solid blue-collar work were coming to a screeching halt in urban America. Urban blacks were increasingly unemployed, and their best options were to become hidden workers for service industries or computer repair people. People said, "Look, technology is here; we can choose to be left behind or we can try to take control of the beast." What Africa Bambaataa and hip-hoppers like him saw in Kraftwerk's use of the robot was an understanding of themselves as *already* having been robots. (213)

What Rose illuminates here is Bambaataa's and subsequent hip-hop artists' apparent understanding of how the regimentation of their everyday lives benefits the ever-increasing demands of late capitalism that too often position black people as mindless, robotlike alien Others. But Rose sees the creative break-in as instantiating a meaningful act of white-face musical ventriloquism, with black musicians "taking on the robotic stance" *to play* with the robot imagery, and not *be played* by its profound alienation effect. "Kraftwerk gets taken up in a way that may or may not" fit with cultural studies' models of resistance, according to Rose. Yet she gets to the heart of black fascination with Euro-technopop: "Kraftwerk's own position may or may not be understood as resistive. I'm interested in reading effects in context, which is why technology can be emancipatory for hip-hop—because of its effects, not because it is naturally emancipatory" (214). Rejecting the idea of an inherent value neutrality or positivism in technology, Rose is clear about the specific ends to which black musicians adapted Kraftwerk's electro-pop symbols of regimentation to further their own needs to control the beast.

A part of controlling the technological beast and its elitist scientific applications is black artists' skill at recoding science and technology for black life in situ. This activity of demystifying and rearticulating science in terms of black popular cultural relevance is called "droppin' science" in the hip-hop vernacular. Rose explains the hip-hop catchphrase "droppin' science," as

sharing knowledge, knowledge that is generally inaccessible to people, together with a fearlessness about stating what you believe to be the truth. There is also the implication that the information that you're imparting is going to revolutionize things because this is the truth that has been deliberately and systematically denied. Science, here, stands for incontrovertible evidence. Science is understood as that space where the future takes place. (214–15)

Hip-hop is not the only musical means by which African Americans succeeded in controlling the beast of technology. Rose also points to iconoclastic musician Sun-Ra and his unique fusion of African musical cosmology and Western musical traditions as emblematic. Sun-Ra's famous "flying saucer imagery," for Rose, "is about accepting the mystical powers that one knows, culturally," and it is about mystical processes and deductive reasoning that together produce new visions of society (215). One value of Sun-Ra's brand of "droppin' science" is his fusion of ancient Egyptian cosmology and a unique black science fiction futurist imaginary. For Rose it is important to see within Sun-Ra's creativity an astute reconciliation of black peoples' two histories or double consciousness. She writes, "If you're going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you've come from; ancestor worship in black culture is a way of countering a historical erasure" (215). Rose, along with Delany and Tate, adroitly uses Dery's Afro-futurism heuristic to make it impossible to ignore the ways in which black folks historically have been and remain today on the cutting edge of transforming technology and their relationship to it (215).

#### DROPPIN' SCIENCE: AN-OTHER FUTURIST MANIFESTO GOES ONLINE

Clearly, no discussion of Afrofuturism or black technoculture is complete without evoking the historical primacy of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's influential Futurist Manifesto. It could be argued on theoretical grounds, coupled with the major task of putting aside Marinetti's fascism, that the progressive futurist zeitgeist of Marinetti informs many African diasporic peoples breaking in and hacking in to the fortresses of today's sites of technological experimentation. This is especially evident in the community-based efforts of technology-savvy groups who endeavor to bring cutting-edge technologies to the 'hood.