

Race And Gender in Electronic Media

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Chapter 19

This Week in Blackness and the Construction of Blackness in Independent Digital Media

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THIS WEEK IN BLACKNESS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACKNESS IN INDEPENDENT DIGITAL MEDIA

Sarah Florini

A listener once suggested to Elon James White, founder and CEO of This Week in Blackness (TWiB!), that TWiB!, given its broad appeal across racial groups, would be more aptly named “This Week in Humanness.” White rejected the deracialization of TWiB!, clarifying his vision for the project: “I made a very conscious decision, when I created This Week in Blackness . . . I wanted it to be clear that you can come from and embrace a position of ‘Blackness’ and racial identity and self-identification and yet still all these [different] things are still things that are of interest to you and in your background” (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013d). White’s statement, which centers Blackness while simultaneously highlighting the diversity of Black¹ people, encapsulates a tension at the center of TWiB!’s work.

Started as a web video series in 2008, by 2015 TWiB! had grown into a multi-media content producer. Independently run and funded, TWiB! has maintained the freedom to operate outside of media industry logics that commonly underrepresent and misrepresent Black people and Black perspectives. TWiB! introduced its first podcast *Blacking It Up!* in 2011 (since renamed *TWiB! Prime*) and now produces seven podcasts which cover a range of topics including politics, popular culture, sex positivity, and sports. Additionally, TWiB! publishes an electronic magazine *Valid* on its website and has produced an eight episode run of *A Black Show* for Free Speech TV. *TWiB! Prime* remains TWiB!’s flagship program, covering news and current events, and averaged 1–1.5 million downloads a month in 2015 (E. J. White, personal communication, April 8, 2015).

TWiB! operates in a complex socio-cultural context characterized by two problematic and polarized racial logics—colorblindness and persistent

regimes of racist representations. Contemporary U.S. racial politics are dominated by notions of colorblindness, a discourse conflating the erasure of difference with the achievement of racial equality, seemingly the impulse behind the listener's suggestion that race be extracted from TWiB!'s brand identity. Yet, contradictorily, the dominance of colorblindness has not resulted in the disappearance of the longstanding practice of constructing Black Americans as a monolith, one usually defined through racist stereotypes. White's comment represents both TWiB!'s refusal to erase racial identity (a rejection of colorblindness) and the ongoing struggle to define Blackness in ways that recognize the fullness and diversity of Black humanity.

This chapter explores how TWiB! negotiates the contentious process of rejecting colorblindness and reasserting the social importance of race without reifying constructions of Blackness that have long served to justify racist policies and practices. My analysis is based on thousands of hours of TWiB! content and derived from ongoing ethnographic work with TWiB!, which includes both on- and offline participant observation and interviewing. Drawing on frameworks from critical/cultural media studies and critical race theory, I argue that TWiB!'s work reflects the complexities and the contradictory demands of representing race in the twenty-first-century US.

I begin with a brief description of TWiB! and its operation. Next I outline the discourse of colorblindness that forms the dominant racial logic in the US. I then move on to examine how TWiB! creates media that center Black voices and experiences, foregrounding racial identity in direct conflict with the edicts of colorblindness. Finally, I examine how TWiB!, in centering race, works to prevent Blackness from becoming flattened out and homogenized by asserting Black heterogeneity and diversity.

This Week in Blackness

TWiB! began as a small-scale operation, with the video series and podcasts produced out of White's Brooklyn apartment. Initially, White had attempted to form partnerships with existing media outlets such as SiriusXM and Interactive One, but was unsuccessful largely because he refused to relinquish creative control and because the outlets were skeptical of whether there was an audience for TWiB!'s content. In mid-2013, TWiB! formed a partnership with progressive media outlet *The Daily Kos* and relocated to the Kos building in Berkeley, CA, where TWiB! built a fully equipped digital production studio. In the summer of 2014, TWiB! implemented the "TWiBularity," a freemium distribution model combining free and subscription-only content that now provides TWiB!'s primary revenue stream.

Between 2011 and 2014, TWiB! relied on listener donations and the donated labor of its hosts and staff to stay afloat. This arrangement has resulted in frequent shifts in the make-up of the team hosting *TWiB! Prime*.

White was joined by Aaron Rand Freeman shortly after the launch of *Blacking It Up!* and the duo had four different co-hosts between 2011 and 2015—poet Bassey Ikpi, political strategist L. Joy Williams, academic and educator Dacia Mitchell, and lawyer and reproductive rights advocate Imani Gandy. Each of these women balanced co-hosting *TWiB! Prime* with busy careers, an arrangement that is difficult to maintain long-term.

TWiB!'s technological structure is best thought of as a network in the dual sense of the term. First, TWiB! can be characterized as an independent broadcast-style media network producing and distributing programming. Black communities have long and rich histories of producing alternative media, from Black newspapers to radio to film (Barlow, 1999; Diawara, 1993; Vogel, 2001), and TWiB! certainly must be understood as embedded within this history. TWiB! uses the broadcast model to intervene in hegemonic commercial media representations of Blackness, allowing for self-representation and self-definition. In addition to functioning as a broadcast-style network, the interactive digital environment in which TWiB! operates allows it to operate as a network of people and technologies. TWiB! exploits the affordances of digital and social media to create an interactivity and geographical reach unavailable to previous generations of Black media producers. TWiB! has a strong social media presence, particularly on Twitter, and prioritizes community and audience interaction.

In addition to *TWiB! Prime*, TWiB! as of early 2016 produces six other podcasts covering a range of topics: *TWiB! After Dark*, *We Nerd Hard*, *SportsBall*, *Historical Blackness*, *Academic Shade*, and *This Tastes Funny*. Although TWiB!'s content varies greatly and moves across multiple platforms, one constant is its blend of complex analysis with irreverent humor. The hosts of *TWiB! Prime*, who collectively go by "Team Blackness," have joked that they are not "CNN Negro" or "N(egro)PR," thus freeing themselves from the conventions of traditional journalism and political analysis. They swear, joke, and offer off-color commentary. Despite their humorous approach, TWiB! is not satire. The team produces carefully researched analyses of the topics covered, often bringing in experts such as academics, lawyers, politicians, and activists to provide context for discussion. For example, Gandy's legal analysis, grounded in her professional knowledge as a licensed attorney, is frequently laced with humor and profanity. This juxtaposition was evident in her explication of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act. After explaining that the law "prevents a government from substantially burdening a person's exercise of religious freedom without a compelling interest to do so," she provided a humorous and irreverent example: "A person can go and sue the government and say 'Hey, you're fuckin' with my shit. I'd rather you not fuck with my shit. I'm gonna sue you under this law'" (*TWiB! Prime*, 2015b). This commentary by Gandy is characteristic of TWiB!'s work in both content and tone.

To fully understand the strategies and stakes of TWiB!'s work, one must understand the socio-cultural context in which the organization operates. Post-Civil Rights Movement racial politics in the US have been shaped by the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the emergence of colorblindness as the dominant racial discourse. Colorblind discourses have redefined racial equality as the erasure of difference, as simply not seeing race, thus thwarting discussion of racial injustice and creating a cultural landscape where the assertion of racial difference is perceived as inherently problematic. Within this context, TWiB! works to recuperate and celebrate Blackness.

Foregrounding Blackness in a Colorblind Culture

In the latter half of the twentieth century, colorblindness emerged as the dominant racial discourse in the US. By rearticulating race as personal trait irrelevant to public life, colorblindness has foreclosed discursive space for addressing racial injustice. Consequently, discourses making race visible as an important social or political category have been cast as a source, rather than a reflection, of racial inequality. TWiB! violates the tenets of colorblindness by centering Blackness and racially marking its output. Beyond simply foregrounding Blackness, TWiB! also constructs Blackness as a collective social identity and emphasizes the shared experiences of Black Americans living as racialized subjects in U.S. society.

Neoliberalism, the dominant cultural paradigm in the US, combines the values of liberal humanism, such as individualism, egalitarianism, and meritocracy, with free market logics and the prioritization of individual freedom and autonomy. Refracted through neoliberalism's emphasis on individual rights, Civil Rights Movement language and discourses—such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonition that people should be judged “not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”—have been rearticulated in support of neoliberal individualism. Imbricated with a prioritization of the individual, the egalitarianism advocated by King has been transformed into a means of sustaining white privilege and power in seemingly race-neutral ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Policies meant to ameliorate racial inequalities can now be opposed because they are “group based” rather than “case by case” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 35–36) and racism and discrimination have been recast as “problems to be confronted *only* at an individual level” (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 129, emphasis original). The neoliberal racial regime asserts “the insignificance of race as social force,” and “aggressively roots out any vestige of race as a category at odds with an individualistic embrace of formal legal rights” (Giroux, 2003, p. 200). Thus, race has become divorced from politics, histories of oppression, and

economic opportunities, and transformed into an individual characteristic (Gallagher, 2003).

The denial of race as anything more than a personal characteristic has become the foundation of colorblindness, which sociologists have found to be the dominant racial logic among white Americans since the 1990s (Gallagher, 2003). As a result, using race to assert collective identity or to articulate group demands “violates the cherished notion that as a nation we recognize the rights of individuals rather than group rights” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 9). Thus, the obscuration of difference has become conflated with the realization of racial equality, positioning any who assert race as an important social or cultural category as the true proponents of oppression. Simultaneously, whiteness functions as the invisible norm of U.S. culture (Dyer, 1997), creating a media landscape in which white Americans are positioned as universal and white representations and perspectives as race neutral. Thus, colorblindness functions not as the absence of race, but as the reification of the hegemonic normalization of whiteness. TWiB! deliberately rejects colorblindness, and its accompanying unspoken whiteness, and instead centers Black experiences and voices.

Everything TWiB! does is explicitly racially marked by the brand name *This Week in Blackness*, a fact that has frequently garnered criticism. As the exchange in the opening paragraph demonstrates, TWiB! founder and CEO Elon James White has always been clear about the centrality of race to TWiB! and all of its projects. The violation of the tenets of colorblindness and the demarcation of TWiB! as an unapologetically Black space is often met with disapproval or even hostility. White routinely receives comments via email and Twitter asserting that TWiB!’s name is inherently racist. For example, one self-described conservative Twitter user with the handle @LibertyForUSA, tweeted to White,

“This Week in Blackness” Cool! I want to create “This Week in Whiteness”! #racist (December 29, 2011)

White has received similar reactions from (predominantly white) progressives, such as Internet radio host Nicole Sandler who, during a public disagreement with White, criticized TWiB!’s name in a blog post saying, “way to make white people feel welcome there” (Sandler, 2015).

The responses from White, TWiB! staff, and TWiB! listeners to these criticisms have highlighted the unspoken, largely unmarked, and naturalized whiteness of mainstream corporate media. White has responded with statements on Twitter such as,

I get letters and comments “What if i [sic] made “This Week in WHITENESS huh? or WHITING IT UP?!!?” Um, it already exists. Its called CNN. (April 15, 2011)

White, exasperated with this recurring criticism, once tweeted,

I've heard 1 too many "What if there was a This Week in Whiteness?" Ya want it? Here ya go: <http://ThisWeekInWhiteness.com>. (February 22, 2014)

The link redirected users to the Fox News website. Thus, White asserts, via sarcasm and humor, the need for Black media spaces by literally linking mainstream news outlets to whiteness, revealing them to be as racialized as TWiB!. Their whiteness simply remains unnamed.

One of the most notable strategies for marking TWiB! as a Black space is *TWiB! Prime*'s theme, "Enter the Blackness," a hip hop song produced by Willi Evans Jr. and featuring rapper Jasiri X. The song begins with the sound of trumpets and Jasiri declaring that the horns demarcate the point at which the listening audience "enters" Blackness. The lyrics then provide a series of metonyms representing Blackness, including soul food and Black historical icons such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Thus, TWiB!'s particularity as a separate Black space is announced with a fanfare that serves as a metaphorical sonic gateway through which listeners enter the Black space of *TWiB! Prime*.

In addition to refusing to obscure Blackness, TWiB! violates the edicts of colorblindness by constructing race as a social identity, rather than solely as an individual personal characteristic. *TWiB! Prime* frequently reports on studies providing evidence of racial disparities across social arenas such as education, incarceration, and healthcare, and frames those reports in a manner emphasizing the impact of race on the lives of Black Americans. For example, after reporting on a study finding that Black Americans disproportionately experience physical and emotional stress, resulting in poorer physical and mental health, co-host Dacia Mitchell recognized how the social construction of race shapes the lives of Black Americans, concluding, "Apparently, racism is bad for you" (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013a). Similarly, after reporting a study revealing medical professionals' implicit biases caused them to treat Black and white patients differently (recommending less aggressive treatment if they believed patients to be Black), co-host Imani Gandy explained, that white racial biases "might actually be killing Black people" (*TWiB! Prime*, 2014). In defiance of neoliberal colorblind logics, TWiB! reasserts race as a salient social category, one with group-based experiences and outcomes and, by implication, in need of group-based solutions.

Perhaps the most overt and powerful way TWiB! centers the shared experience of living as a racialized subject is through recurring discussions of how state-sanctioned violence structures Black Americans' lives. Discussions of the anxiety many Black Americans experience during interactions with police have been frequent topics of conversation on

the podcasts. In 2011, White, Freeman, and guest host Kriss (host of the *Insanity Check* podcast) shared their experiences, as did listeners calling in to the open phone lines. Freeman shared that he had been raised “never to say anything to police officers,” and even to avoid eye contact when possible. One caller, longtime TWiB! listener P-Funk, explained the difference between Black and non-Black experiences of law enforcement saying, “That’s the one thing I wish I could convey to most people who are not Black. It’s just that, even to this day, I feel uncomfortable walkin’ down the street with my hood up . . . Because you look like ‘that type of Negro’ walking down the street like that” (*Blacking It Up!*, 2011c). The phrase “that type of Negro,” referencing stereotypical images of criminal and suspicious Black men wearing hoodies, is notable given that the conversation predates the February 2012 death of unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin by nearly a year.

TWiB! heavily covered Martin’s murder by a self-appointed neighborhood watch member, George Zimmerman, foregrounding another Black collective experience: “the talk” parents of Black children must give them explaining racial profiling and the precautions it necessitates in their day-to-day lives. TWiB! hosted an unscheduled call-in show the night Zimmerman’s acquittal was announced (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013e), taking 21 calls over the course of three hours. Both hosts and many of the callers expressed the difficult experience of having to talk to their children about the case. Co-host Dacia Mitchell described the event saying,

It’s moments like this that there are people all over the country . . . having to explain this to their kids . . . and it’s not white folks that are explaining this to their white kids . . . They’re not getting a talk that’s like, uh, you know, “You will not be safe.” They’re not getting that talk tonight.

(*TWiB! Radio*, 2013e)

Monika from Oakland, a longtime TWiB! listener, called to discuss raising a Black teenage boy, saying, “Most parents know that we have to tell our kids early. I had to tell my son ‘People are going to call you nigger even though you’re awesome,’ in the first grade when he was first called that” (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013e). She went on to talk about the experience of having to tell Black children about the adversity they will face and the difficulty of trying to encourage them to excel anyway. White responded, noting this as a longstanding aspect of Black American life,

That’s something that’s been said for years, the idea that you have to be awesome . . . The Black community is considered very tough on our kids. It’s like, why is that? Because they had to be. Because if your kid did something, it wouldn’t be simply they’d

get in trouble. Your kid would be dead. Your kid would be in prison. So . . . this is a conversation that has happened for years.
(*TWiB! Radio*, 2013e)

White's comments both highlight a shared experience of parenting in Black communities and position that experience as an ongoing historical commonality, undermining distinctions between the racist past and the ostensibly colorblind present.

TWiB! not only rejects colorblindness, foregrounding Blackness in all it does, but also asserts the important ways in which racial identity shapes Black Americans' lives. Through discussion of shared Black experiences of racism, TWiB! makes a case for the group based understandings of race that neoliberal colorblindness seeks to dismantle. However, in asserting the collective shared experience of Black Americans, TWiB! risks reducing Blackness to a fixed homogenous category that may not only erase the complexity and diversity of Black experiences but also make representations of Blackness vulnerable to negative racist stereotypes.

Disrupting Constructions of Blackness

Although asserting Black collective experience undermines the individualism that allows colorblind discourses to erase structural causes of racial inequality, doing so risks fixing and homogenizing the identities of Black Americans. To guard against this, TWiB! is committed to constructing Blackness as heterogeneous. Though its programming, TWiB! both serves and represents a diverse Black audience by avoiding and critiquing essentialist discourses of Black authenticity and by embracing intra-group diversity. This disrupts regimes of representation by both resisting the homogenization of Blackness and undermining racist tropes.

By foregrounding Blackness, TWiB! enters into a struggle for the meaning of what Herman Gray has referred to as the "sign of Blackness" (2005, p. 15): the socially constructed set of meanings and concepts attached to Blackness. The sign of Blackness, like any sign, is inherently polyvocal and multi-accentual. Stuart Hall (1996b) has argued that race is a floating signifier, which has no true referent but is continually used to refer to a signified in flux and under contestation. Hegemonic forces work to make signifiers mono-accentual, seeking to control meaning and reify social hierarchies (Voloshinov, 2003/1929). TWiB! preserves the multi-accentuality of the sign of Blackness, representing its heterogeneity.

A key arena for the struggle over the sign of Blackness is media representation. Media studies and cultural/critical studies scholars have long pointed to the importance of representation as a constitutive element in social and political life (Hall, 1996a, p. 443). Since the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, representations of Blackness in U.S. culture

have served to construct Black people as inferior, thereby justifying racist ideologies and practices (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000; Lott, 1993). Representations of Black Americans as lazy, hyper-sexual, violent, criminal, and of low intelligence can be traced from the minstrel shows to the present day (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000). These problematic representations of Blackness still populate the U.S. media landscape and serve to reinscribe boundaries between racial groups, allowing for the rejection and exclusion of Black Americans as Other, as “what does not belong” (Hall, 1997, p. 258). When combined with the “burden of representation,” the notion that one Black voice or image represents the entire group (Hall, 1997, p. 262; Mercer, 2008), these negative images become projected onto Black people at large, reducing them to a monolith deliberately crafted to be disparaged, feared, and loathed, thereby naturalizing race-based social inequities.

TWiB! works to disrupt these regimes of representation, showing Black Americans in ways that both undermine negative stereotypes and disrupt discourses that flatten out and homogenize Black people into an undifferentiated mass. White’s decision to use the name This Week in Blackness not only eschews colorblind logics, but also claims the label “Black” for content containing a range of non-normative, diverse, often contradictory representations of Blackness. White has been clear that the relationship between TWiB!’s name and content is deliberate and strategic, functioning as a means of “shattering the stereotypes around what is ‘Black’” (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013d). In TWiB!’s programming, Blackness becomes not one or even a handful of perspectives and experiences, but a complex polyphony of Black voices that preserves the multi-accentuality of Blackness and denies racist stereotypes a unified signifier onto which to map.

From its inception, TWiB! has sought to serve a diverse Black audience. In 2011, White and then *TWiB! Prime* co-host L. Joy Williams described the significant, heterogeneous, and largely erased Black audience they see themselves as both speaking to and representing. Williams highlighted TWiB!’s goal of undermining the myth that Black people “are this monolith that all watch BET, drink Kool-aid, and occasionally go to jail,” emphasizing that TWiB! simultaneously targets both the homogenization and the misrepresentation of Blackness. She argued for the necessity of independent media to “break down that myth and say that you can program differently because we have a different audience within our people” (*Blacking It Up!*, 2011d). According to White, the goal of TWiB! is “to prove a point,” that there is a clear and strong audience for the programming offering complex representations of Blackness. He described TWiB!’s audience as comprised of people,

Who [are] smart, who [are] politically engaged, who [are] technologically engaged, who can enjoy the ratchet² just right alongside

intelligent shit. Who can quote 50 Cent and Nietzsche within the same sentence.

(*Blacking It Up!*, 2011d)

Additionally, TWiB's mere existence challenges hegemonic constructions of Blackness, particularly those coding technology as white. The persistent myth of Black "technophobia" and a "general presumption of black nonparticipation" in technology allows recursive racist assumptions of Black inferiority "to find new means of cultural currency" (Everett, 2009, p. 19) in the twenty-first century. Governmental policies regarding Internet infrastructure and access were formed during the 1990s, at "the premillennial neoliberal moment, when race was disappeared from public and governmental discourse," allowing neoliberal values to shape understandings of emerging technology (Nakamura, 2008, p. 202). This, combined with discourses asserting cyberspace as a raceless, genderless, placeless space, naturalized the erasure of people of color, ultimately reifying the whiteness of digital technologies and constructing Blackness as the non-technological Other. TWiB!, as an elaborate trans-platform multi-media project, disrupts the conflation of technology with whiteness.

TWiB!'s programming also reflects a commitment to constructing a heterogenic understanding of Blackness. Besides *TWiB! Prime*, TWiB! also provides programming focusing on a range of topics. TWiB!'s *We Nerd Hard* covers technology, video games, and media fandom. It represents and gives voice to Black nerds who are often erased because of the common conflation of nerdiness with whiteness and the ways nerdiness's opposite, coolness, is often constructed as synonymous with Blackness (Bucholtz, 2001; Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 2011). *We Nerd Hard* disrupts racial categories by positioning nerd tastes and practices squarely within the realm of Blackness. TWiB!'s premium content service, the TWiBularity, also includes the podcast *Black Girl Nerds*, which similarly repositions nerd culture—typically coded as not only white but also masculine—explicitly at the intersection of Blackness and femininity.

In asserting and foregrounding Blackness, TWiB! must also work to avoid essentializing or reifying discourses of authenticity limiting possible performances of Black identity. TWiB! created a term "Black checking" to shorthand the problematic practice of fixing and bounding Blackness. Black checking is the act of evaluating and policing Black authenticity by designating some behaviors, and thereby some people, as "Black" or "not Black (enough)." White summarized his objection to Black checking saying,

The fact is if you're Black, you're Black. I'm not going to rip your "Black card" from you. Even if you're doing something that I

think might be harmful to Black people. I'm going to call you an a-hole and say "Never talk to me." You're still Black. You're just a Black a-hole.

(*TWiB! Prime*, 2015a)

Black checking and the negative impact of policing Black authenticity has remained a recurring topic since the first month of *TWiB! Prime* (then *Blacking It Up!*). In 2011, then co-host Bassey Ikpi described herself saying, "I'm Nigerian. I was born in Africa. I figured that was as Black as you could get" (*Blacking It Up!*, 2011a). However, she explained that, during her childhood, her Blackness was routinely questioned when her family moved from Oklahoma to Washington DC, where the kids at her school teased her for what they perceived as her "white" speech patterns and musical tastes. That same year, *TWiB! Prime* devoted an entire episode to playing music the three hosts—White, Freeman, and Ikpi—liked but that wasn't typically considered "Black." As White introduced the show topic, he noted, "Weirdly, we're Black and we're not a monolith. We actually have . . . different thoughts and ideas and likings-of-things that people wouldn't expect" (*Blacking It Up!*, 2011b). Over the course of the episode, Team Blackness played music including Bjork, Keith Urban, Yes, John Williams film scores, and the musical *Rent*, all of which are not commonly associated with Blackness, disrupting the racialization of musical taste cultures.

Discussions of Black checking commonly arise in stories about President Barack Obama, whose Black authenticity has been frequently challenged. For example, in May 2011, *TWiB! Prime* discussed the increasingly harsh criticism of the president from well-known Black academic Cornel West. West had criticized Obama for not focusing on poverty or doing enough to help Black communities, stating that Obama was "afraid of free Black men" and seemed to be more comfortable around white and Jewish people. Co-host Ikpi argued that West was "taking shots" at Obama's Blackness: "He's trying to define Blackness, based on negating who the president and what the president is . . . he's teasing the president the way I was teased in middle school . . . for not being Black enough" (*Blacking It Up!*, 2011b).

When it comes to interrogating essentialism, even *TWiB! Prime*'s theme song is not above reproach. In an interview with Jasiri X shortly after the song's premiere, White expressed his concern that the song may convey too narrow an image of Blackness. The ensuing discussion negotiated the signifiers of Black racial identity and asserted the particularity and reality of Black American culture while attempting to prevent it from becoming too tightly bounded (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013c). The question was again raised by an audience member who challenged the same lyrics as stereotypical and one step away from "chicken and watermelon." The response from Team Blackness in both cases sought balance between recognizing the

particularity of Black culture (e.g., the cultural importance of soul food) without reducing it to a fixed set of characteristics or practices.

TWiB! seeks to destabilize constructions of Blackness by embracing intersectionality, a framework recognizing individuals inhabit multiple intersecting subject positions (Crenshaw, 1991). To this end, significant attention is given to Black women and LGBTQI members of the community. Often, media spaces marked as “Black” privilege racial identities and discourses over those of gender, sexuality, or class, which reifies rather than challenges social hierarchies and power relations (Crenshaw, 1991). Although marked as a Black space, TWiB!’s Blackness remains fluid, complex, and multi-dimensional, invoking Black racial identities as inseparable from gender identities, sexuality, and class, and colliding these discourses to disrupt these categories without diminishing their importance.

Black women’s voices are prominent in TWiB!’s programming. All of TWiB!’s podcasts have at least one female co-host, and shows routinely deconstruct problematic representations of Black women. Although mainstream media often portray Black women through a variety of what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) dubbed controlling images—dutiful mamies, welfare queens, angry Black women—TWiB! shows a range of Black women who challenge these images. This is not just a matter of undermining the stereotype by representing its opposite, a move that equally controls Black women by demanding they constantly police their behavior so as not to reinforce problematic representations. The women on TWiB! reject controlling images by refusing to perform either the stereotype or its opposite. For example, Imani Gandy, a former attorney who is now the Senior Legal Analyst for both TWiB! and the reproductive rights advocacy group RH Reality Check, is intellectually formidable and professional accomplished, placing her in stark contrast to Collin’s controlling images. Yet, Gandy has an online presence under the moniker “Angry Black Lady” as both the title of her personal blog and her Twitter handle (@AngryBlackLady). Rather than erase her anger to avoid reinforcing the controlling image of the angry Black woman, she instead refuses to calibrate her performance of self in relation to the framework at all.

The clearest examples of TWiB!’s intervention into normative representations of Black femininity are Feminista Jones and N’Jaila Rhee, co-hosts of TWiB! *After Dark*, TWiB!’s sex positive show. Jones and Rhee undermine the longstanding binary of Black women as either respectable or hypersexualized (Collins, 2000). Jones is a mental health social worker, writer, and mother. Rhee, who identifies as a Black and Asian biracial woman, is a journalist and BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) model, who also co-hosts TWiB!’s *We Nerd Hard*. Both Jones and Rhee represent Black women who are simultaneously and unapologetically

intelligent, professional, and sexy, and who act as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects. Jones has explicitly stated that the goal of intervening in representations of women of color is a major component of *TWiB! After Dark* and of *TWiB!* more broadly (*TWiB! After Dark*, 2014).

TWiB! also resists the conflation of Blackness with Black masculinity, offering considerable coverage of issues affecting women. *TWiB!* addresses gender oppression and male privilege with increasing frequency, parsing out the axes of power at the intersection of race and gender. Perhaps most notable are the ongoing discussions about the rollback of women's reproductive rights and the epidemic of sexual assault in the US. *TWiB!*'s characteristic sarcasm and humor at times give way to serious and pointed discussions, such as those regarding the Stubenville rape case. This case, in which two Stubenville, Ohio high school football players carried an unconscious sixteen-year-old girl with them from one party to another, repeatedly sexually assaulting her throughout the night, received national news coverage. *TWiB!* simultaneously modeled a rhetorical approach grounded in feminist discourses about rape and critiqued mainstream news outlets for reinforcing problematic tropes about sexual assault.

TWiB!'s coverage of the Stubenville trial and verdict in March 2013 focused on the prevalence of sexual violence in U.S. society and myriad ways women are taught to avoid rape, discourses that *TWiB! Prime*'s co-hosts argued served to justify problematic assumptions about victims' culpability in their own assaults. *TWiB!*'s coverage repeatedly asserted a progressive feminist approach to rape prevention, arguing that society should focus on teaching men about getting clear consent from their sexual partners. Additionally, *TWiB!* critiqued mainstream corporate news coverage of the case. The day the two perpetrators were found guilty, CNN's coverage was sympathetic to the young men. CNN's Poppy Harlow described the young men as "star football players" and "very good students" and emphasized how tragic it was to watch as the teens "believed their life fell apart." White criticized the coverage in disbelief that anyone could frame a story in this way, "Forget the fact that there was a girl who was dragged around unconscious and used as a rape doll. Forget that part. Let's talk about the fact that these, these dudes, 'Man, they, their life is over . . . their promising life.'" Mitchell pointed out, "For CNN, this is the most appropriate way to talk about this . . . There was no one there to problematize it. That means that there is a vast amount of all kinds of privilege in regards to sexual violence and gender violence, rape, in the CNN copy room that allowed that to make it to air." Privilege, she argued, that allowed CNN's staff to "ignore the significance of getting the story right about rape . . . It's not important enough to make sure that the angle is depicted accurately" (*TWiB! Radio*, 2013b).

TWiB! also works to be inclusive of LGBTQI people, simultaneously challenging both homophobia and pervasive discourses framing Black

Americans as more homophobic than their white counterparts. After the 2008 elections, media popularized the narrative that the high Black voter turnout resulting from Obama's candidacy led to the passage of California's Proposition 8 banning same sex marriage (Grad, 2008). More recently, celebrities have asserted the prevalence of homophobia in Black communities, such as when director Lee Daniels argued publicly that homophobia is "rampant" in Black communities. Referring to the openly gay character on Daniel's hit television show *Empire*, he stated, Black men are afraid to come out, "because your priest says, your pastor says, mama says, your next-door neighbor says, your homie says, your brother says, your boss says [that homosexuality is wrong] . . . So I wanted to blow the lid off more on homophobia in my community" (Manuel-Logan, 2015). Regardless of whether these discourses about Black communities' homophobia are true, the narrative is prominent in the media landscape in which TWiB! operates. TWiB! both critiques and rejects homophobic discourses and practices while also undermining the assumption that Black spaces are unwelcoming to LGBTQI people.

TWiB! frequently reports about LGBTQI rights, critiquing both the legal and cultural mechanisms oppressing LGBTQI people. For example, in the aforementioned discussion of *TWiB! Prime's* coverage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, TWiB! condemned the version of the bill passed by Indiana state legislature in 2015. Gandy explained how the Indiana bill had a far more reaching impact than other religious freedom laws at the federal or state level. She outlined how the law allowed for the use of religious freedom as a defense in individual civil laws suits—in effect, critics claim, legalizing discrimination against LGBTQI people. Gandy asserted, "It literally permitted bigots to say 'Homosexuality is a sin,' if a homosexual individual sued them because they were denied services or denied entrance to a place or whatnot" (*TWiB! Prime*, 2015b).

TWiB! has also been vocal about transgender issues, addressing discrimination and injustice. For example, after trans activist and author Janet Mock appeared on Peirs Morgan's evening talk show, conflict emerged between Mock and Morgan because Morgan used the offensive phrase "used to be a man" to refer to Mock, a trans woman. In response to the criticism he received, Morgan claimed he was the victim of "cisphobia." The notion of cisphobia deploys the neologism "cis," a term created to refer to individuals whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth, to position cisgendered people as oppressed. On *TWiB! Prime*, White, Freeman, and guest host Dara Wilson derided the very notion of cisphobia. They asserted cisphobia was analogous to "reverse racism" and "men's rights," terms created by dominant social groups as a means of reframing themselves as disempowered. Freeman asked incredulously, "I don't even understand how that can be a thing. People are terrified of embracing the dominant norm that overwhelms

everyone else's way of life? I don't understand" (*TWiB! Prime*, 2014). White asked, "Cisphobia? Really? Are you ignoring the LGBT community completely? Are you ignoring the record amount of violence toward trans folks, especially trans women of color?" (*TWiB! Prime*, 2014). TWiB! also works to create an inclusive space by both welcoming trans and gender non-conforming people and providing resources for educating cis people on trans issues. For example, a *TWiB! After Dark* episode titled "A Practical Guide to Trans-life," featuring Errol Lynn, a trans man, covered the appropriate terminology and how to be respectful of how people identify (*TWiB! After Dark*, 2013), thus serving a pedagogical function for audience members.

Visibility and Multiplicity

White created TWiB! to offer diverse representations of Blackness and nuanced political and cultural criticism privileging Black perspectives. TWiB! was deliberately designed as a space in which to challenge the rhetorics of colorblindness that often function to obscure ongoing racism and to problematize the dominant representations of Blackness that homogenize Black communities. In doing this, TWiB! navigates a terrain in which claiming and celebrating Blackness is often perceived as problematic and even racist act, while still fighting the homogenizing stereotypical images of Blackness that operate in U.S. culture.

TWiB!'s work is characterized by a seemingly irreconcilable demand to both foreground and interrogate the construction of Blackness. Within these contradictory discourses TWiB! constantly negotiates representations and performances of Blackness. TWiB!'s content is characterized by consistent tensions between asserting both the individuality and the collectivity of Black people, and between constructing Blackness as heterogeneous while asserting commonality. At a moment when colorblind logics seek to erase race from public discourse, TWiB!'s assertion of Black identity not only garners criticism, but also risks inadvertently feeding into persistent misrepresentations of Blackness that have long served to justify the racism colorblindness seeks to obscure.

Notes

- 1 I capitalize Black but not white based on how the constructs of whiteness and Blackness operate differently in society, and my desire to draw attention to those socially constructed differences.
- 2 "Ratchet" is a term from Black vernacular English that is used to refer to the practices, tastes, and aesthetics commonly characterized by dominant cultures as excessive, improper, and inappropriate. The term is often used as a derogator description of ways of being common among low-income Black women. TWiB! has since stopped using the term because of its sexist and classist implications.

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THIS WEEK IN BLACKNESS

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