

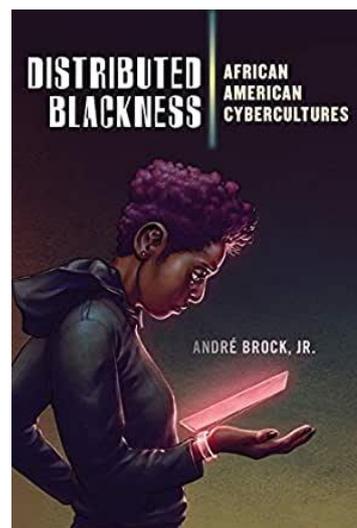
André Brock, Jr.

Distributed Blackness

African American Cybercultures

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Review by Valentina Romanzi



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André Brock, Jr.'s volume *Distributed Blackness* (2020) draws the reader in with a beautifully crafted cover (illustrated by Paul Davey and designed by adam b. bohannon) and the promise of what, at almost 300 pages, sets out to be an in-depth discussion of the relevance of cyberculture for African American identity. It keeps the reader hooked through an awe-inspiring display of knowledge, undoubtedly necessary to pull off the ambitious goal of reframing African American identity through the inclusion of technology.

Brock moves with grace through a vast body of existing literature from the most diverse fields—sociology, first and foremost, but also IT studies, cultural studies, communication studies, rhetoric, discourse analysis, and more. Despite his effort to offer explanations of the various schools of thought, currents, and disciplines he confronts (for which I do not hide my gratitude), this volume reads like a work directed to scholars already familiar with the topic. I do not mean to say that it *cannot* be read by students or by researchers working in different areas, of course, but it will be done to the detriment of a critical understanding of Brock's claims. In other words, readers unfamiliar with previous research in the field will only be able to approach the book acritically, without being able to judge for themselves whether Brock's formulations hold when confronted with pre-existing research.

The author's overall goal is to disprove a widespread assumption that connects Blackness to the inability or unwillingness to use technology. Throughout the volume, Brock dismantles it by arguing that not only do African Americans use technology, they also do so in ways that differ from the white, Western approach to technoculture. Starting from a definition of African American identity as a "discursive, informational identity—one that brings a particularized

coherence to digital practice” (38), the author argues that the key to access such difference is Lyotard’ concept of “libidinal economy” (10). In Brock’s words: “Libidinal economy undergirds political economies, driving political and economic processes through affect. Incorporating a libidinal economic analysis to digital practice, then, offers a release from considerations of Black digital practice as labor or commodity” (31). The libidinal (which he connects to *jouissance*) defies the traditional Western conception of technoculture as a means to enhanced productivity:

Technoculture is often sutured to political economy to justify beliefs about technology as an avatar of productivity. This leads to evaluations of technological practice through progress, efficiency, or in more recent decades, ideological capture. Even when cultural studies or Afrofuturism addresses Black technology use, the previously mentioned perspectives on Black cultural production as evidence of resistance and oppression limit the possibilities for articulating a more nuanced understanding. (31)

The libidinal pervades Brock’s methodology—fittingly, if we decide to accept his claim about its relevance for African American digital practices. Drawing on discourse analysis, Brock devises Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) in order to decentre “the Western deficit perspective on minority technology use to instead prioritize the epistemological standpoint of underrepresented groups of technology users” (2). The author applies it not only to discourse happening online in a specific set of digital *milieus*, but also to the platforms themselves (the digital artifacts, as he often calls them). CTDA, in *Distributed Blackness*, aims at showing the relevance of culture as a filter for technology use—that is, Brock uses it to spotlight the bogus neutrality of online practices, showing instead that 1) race and culture both play a fundamental role in the way an individual approaches a digital place; 2) there is no such a thing as digital or technological neutrality in the first place, but only a Western standard masked as neutrality;¹ and 3) African American digital practice is diffused, widespread, *distributed*.

The volume has a somewhat surprising structure. It opens with a short introduction, followed by a long and intense chapter in which Brock sets out the methodology. It is in this chapter, “Distributing Blackness: Ayo Technology! Texts, Identities, and Blackness,” that the author confronts most current branches of social and cultural analysis head on and finds them lacking. Cultural studies and sociology, especially, are unequipped to tackle issues of race and representation in digital spaces due to their strong focus on

¹ On this, see also Ruha Benjamin’s *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* (2019). A review of this work has appeared in *Iperstoria* 14 (2019).

domination, hegemony, and ideology—or conversely, on resistance and emancipation. [...] When directed toward representation in digital spaces, cultural studies often glosses over race as a salient category to instead argue for internet culture as a freestanding aesthetic that is separate from offline identity politics. [...] The blind spot of all these approaches—quantitative social science, political economy, cultural studies, and Afrofuturism—lies within the ideology of Western technoculture. (28-30)

After illustrating his own proposed framework of analysis—that is, CTDA and its roots in libidinal economy and Black pathos—Brock moves on to two case studies. The second chapter, “Information Inspirations: The Web Browser as Racial Technology” analyses an old browser targeting African American people, Blackbird, and the reactions to it in a number of reviews and comment threads, while the third one, “‘The Black Purposes of Space Travel’: Black Twitter as Black Technoculture,” focuses on Black Twitter, a spontaneous manifestation of African American culture online, which he connects to that time-long tradition of Black interaction known as signifyin’.

The rest of the volume—and this is what I found somewhat unusual in the structure—returns to the methodology. Rather than leaving the case studies at the end, as if to confirm what was theorised in the previous chapters, Brock uses them as the source of his claims. In other words, rather than operating deductively (from the universal to the singular), he operates inductively (from the singular to the universal). What follows is an exhaustive discussion of Black online discourse split into Chapter 4 and 5. In these pages, Brock builds an

admittedly incomplete conceptual framework of Black digital discursive practice [...] through three interrelated frame sets, all drawing on Black aesthetics: ratchetry, racism, and respectability. Ratchetry (the quality of being ratchet) here refers to digital practice born of everyday banal, sensual, forward, and “deviant” (Cohen 2004) political behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse. Racism—here defined as a set of external practices and beliefs delineating and maintaining Black identity—is an inescapable context through which Black digital practice must be contextualized [...], the milieu in which Black identity was created. As such, responses to racism are deeply interwoven into Black discourse and aesthetics even in digital spaces where embodiment is elusive and symbolic. Finally, respectability [...] refers to uses and beliefs about “appropriate” Black digital practice. (125-126)

The volume closes with a section titled “Making a Way out of No Way: Black Cyberculture and the Black Technocultural Matrix,” in which Brock compares his framing of Black online identity as presented in the previous chapters with its few other existing conceptualizations (mainly Rayvon Fouché’s 2006 concept of Black vernacular technological creativity, or BVTC, and the depiction Black technoculture in Afrofuturism, which he tends to exclude from his discussion

due to its focus on the future rather than the present). Finally, he introduces an existing matrix of elements that characterise Western technoculture (Dinerstein 2006) and updates it to tailor it to Black online practices, developing what he calls “The Black Technocultural Matrix (under Construction)” (226).

In conclusion, *Distributed Blackness* offers a valuable take on Black online identity—a much needed one, at that, given the lack of focused research on the topic. It is not an easy read: the sheer quantity of sources and information it pours onto the readers is intimidating in and of itself, and at times it risks submerging the fundamental message of the volume, but Brock is masterful in picking up the threads of the discourse at the right moment. His core claims about technology, digital practices, and Blackness, all backed up with examples and often adapted from solid academic research not pertaining to digital spaces, are reiterated time and time again throughout the volume, and each chapter ends with a summary of its main points. Then again, this is a book with the stated intent of developing a new methodology to study digital Blackness, and not to introduce the readers to the topic; as such, it does not advance any claims of accessibility or simplicity. That Brock decided to add quick but poignant descriptions of other theories and of the scholarship he builds on is, I dare say, a kind gesture towards an audience that might not be as at ease navigating such interdisciplinary research, and one that greatly enriches the volume, ensuring that it reaches a wider audience. Nevertheless, this does not distract from Brock’s arguments, which are compelling and all the more believable for his decision to derive them from case studies, rather than seeking to prove theories through them. *Distributed Blackness* is relevant and timely; I believe it will be a staple in research on African American identity and will generate much conversation in the years to follow.

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