Living Online, Writing Together, and Longing for Home

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PLATFORMS & INFRASTRUCTURE

Writing is communal. This is the kind of sentence my graduate advisor would flag as needing a citation, because it runs counter to conventional wisdom and much of the experience of academic and professional writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The solitary writer, thinker, scholar who works for years on a book is an image firmly locked into many of our minds, and indeed our praxis. Tagging writing as a communal practice, though, asks us to imagine otherwise about the possibilities that could exist and indeed do exist outside of our traditional conception of knowledge creation in a Western context. In 2023, fourteen interdisciplinary researchers, writers, and artists gathered to try a new way of producing scholarship—quickly and collaboratively. We wrote together for one week—not an edited collection but a multigraph—a single book with many authors. Our voices and ideas became interwoven in six chapters of a book we called Technoskeptism*, which was published just nineteen months later. This experiment helped us develop a model that we now regularly use to produce responsive work in digital and internet studies and in racial and disability justice. This experiment also reminds us that, even outside this context, all our work can be communal when we ethically engage with the people and communities we write for and about, when we lean into the brilliance of our ancestors, and when we recognize and cite the labor of the many whose contributions often go unseen.*

The passage below comes from the fourth chapter of the book, "The Longing for Home." This section allows us to think about how home is defined and redefined in the space of digital community and what that definition looks like as we collectively remember a not-too-distant digital past in the face of an increasingly algorithmically controlled digital future.

—— Catherine Knight Steele

Home (Page) Training

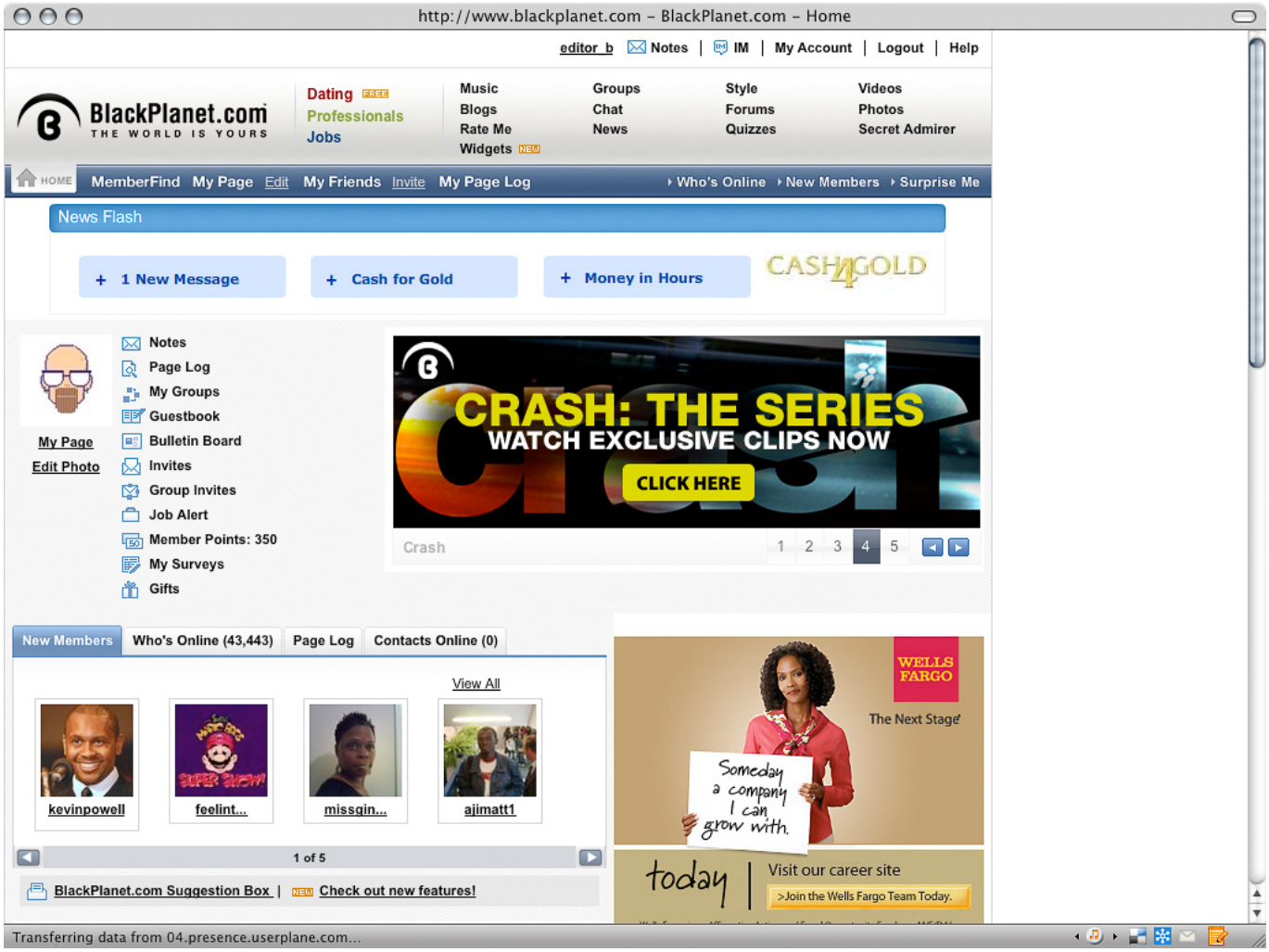
Doesn't that kid have any home training? It's a question you might be asked as a Black parent whose child has engaged in behavior an older relative finds unacceptable or, conversely, has shown that he or she doesn't have the requisite social skills to participate in a given familial or cultural context. A lack of home training could be shown by anything from not providing a proper greeting when entering a house or room to forgetting to wear a slip under your dress when going to church. The training was not *for* the home; it happened *within* the home. A lack of home training suggested a problem with the home environment. Kids weren't ready for the world unless they had home training. Sadly, the complex interlocking practice of Black love and respectability, connoted by the phrase "home training," has been transmogrified by a movement aimed at delimiting conversations about racial and ethnic diversity in school. This movement, defined by its demands that kids should learn about race, sex, gender, disability, and any form of difference at home, reinforces the contention that home may not be safe for all. It may not be a place of freedom and expression. And it may be a place where hateful behaviors are sown, fertilized, and allowed to grow wildly. It is also such places that make the concept of home, particularly a digital home, challenging, dangerous, and a necessary site in which to consider the power of transformative engagements.

Part of our longing for the homes of our previous selves, those who came of age and received very specific training, emerges from frustration that this specific training is no longer as useful. If our grandparents and parents long for a time when kids had better "home training," perhaps those of us who came of age in the early 2000s long for a time when our home (page) training provided us material and social benefits that no longer exist. There's an increasingly black-box feel to interfaces when users no longer need to learn how to code or design them themselves.[1] The home (page) training for using a site like BlackPlanet was derived from a community of users not bound to the norms of white middle-class understandings of online civility. But a more modern iteration of social media moderation has moved us ever closer to heterosexual, white, masculinist norms. As many of the authors of these chapters have previously written,[2] things that should be moderated (misogynoir, subtle harassment) can be ignored, while what gets moderated is the intracultural discourse that feels the most like home.[3] If the average user today is not a guest or host in the home but a creator of content inside an algorithmically driven scroll, we no longer have "home training" and instead are unwillingly acculturated to a platform logic to which we may not ascribe.

Digital nostalgia for the early Black blogosphere is a longing for what we learned when we felt at home. Rhetorically, it matters that we were building our home pages rather than training as coders or programmers whose skill set was meant to be developed for monetary gain or employment. Because this was home training, users and creators were allowed to create a blog that was not easily findable by trolls or "flamers." There was a sense of control over what skills we needed and how to apply them. Building the blog was as much about aesthetic choices and architecture as about the content. Blogs were built as

much as they were written. This difference is critically important. The power to build something in a seemingly wild digital landscape was powerfully transformative.

Bloggers may not have thought of themselves as programmers or coders at the time, but many are now nostalgic for the skills they learned while creating posts. They were building sites that served as home pages for their writing, thought work, artistic expression, and community dialogues. Yet the training they received in this process provided them with both a skill set and an approach to digital life that centralized the home. Just as Myspace has been described as mirroring a bedroom wall, dorm room, or locker to build as you saw fit, the early blogosphere was a safe haven and enclaved site of creativity for so many. Teenagers or young adults with little agency over their physical home space could exercise agency in their virtual rooms, and as discussed in Chapter 3, bedroom TikTokers decades later are still using their personal spaces to nostalgic ends. These early blogs were a space to return to for comfort and safety, where you had as much control as your skill set allowed. Creating a space that feels like home online may seem a daunting feat in our current social media landscape. Apart from the complexities of what an online home space would look like, our creative ability and agency have changed greatly from the blogging era to the social media era. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram allow us the ability to create a profile page, but no one *needs* to visit it to see your stuff. Once again, you no longer need to be a good host or hostess, you only need to be an efficient poster. The affordances of this space are greatly limited, which is another way of saying—it's not a home we miss. But as a new generation shapes a new set of digital experiences, they may be nostalgic even for this hostless home.



The homepage of BlackPlanet in the 2000s. Photo image source: Bart Everson/Flickr.

Paying Visits and Wandering in Digital Space

Do you remember websites that had guest books? If you cared enough to sign one or cared enough to create one on your own home page, you were offering and receiving a kind of care that we no longer have but want without even remembering it. Our own maps of where we have visited are denied to us: Whereas web browsers kept a list of bookmarks to map where we had been as part of our histories, TikTok and other platforms we haven't yet had a chance to be nostalgic about have been hiding our histories in the "security settings" section of the TikTok app. Instead of landing pages, we have been given continuous scroll. Is it possible to feel at home in the scroll?

Home seems decidedly oppositional to the scroll. We sacrificed control for gentrification in the first years of the 2000s and have lately come to regret that choice in a visceral way. Jessa Lingel's 2020 study of digital nostalgia, *An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist*, documents the scrappy, purposely antique-feeling site that people have used to sell and buy everything from musical instruments to (at various times) sex and random encounters.[4] Craig Newmark's stubborn refusal to update or change the site in any way has made it feel stable and home-like in the same way that a lone unrenovated house in many neighborhoods across the country serves as a marker of triumph against an ever-changing and gentrifying neighborhood, even though you might not want to live in that particular house.

When Solange tweeted in 2018 that she wanted to release her album *When I Get Home* on BlackPlanet, new visitors who never made the site their home flocked to it. BlackPlanet was a site of Black interiority not frequently visited by outsiders. The artist suggested she wanted the site to hold the album's visuals to demonstrate that Black culture "is not simply an aesthetic but is something we really live."[5] Situating that content on BlackPlanet harkens back to a different time. However, the interiority of BlackPlanet feels nostalgically out of place in our current social media landscape, which seeks publicity as a means of financial viability. Reaching back toward BlackPlanet is also like seeing the lone unrenovated house in an increasingly gentrified neighborhood. It is desirable for what it once was and the possibilities it held, but it is also a startling marker of what has permanently changed. On each side of that old home, we have rows of identical townhomes and condos that don't look or feel like homes but can ably perform the functions of a home, while also being largely unattainable for most people and standing as a glaring reminder of the extractive power of capital.

It is important to remember that hosting is not a unidirectional experience. The digital dialogic relationship between being a welcoming host and a respectful visitor has always been interesting and delicately balanced. Therefore, if making an online home and hosting in it has changed within digital landscapes, visiting and visitation will substantively change as well. Unlike scrolling, perusing, or wandering, visitation implies a certain specific and dedicated intentionality. Many nondigital communities have visitation traditions. For instance, a key component of the Black church is the visitation ministry. This important form of religious, cultural, and community outreach (also known as the

sick and shut-in ministry at other places of worship) is tasked with more than simply "visiting" those who do not have access to a house of worship. Members of these church organizations commit to checking in and checking on their fellow church members. Embedded within histories and traditions of religious and community service, members commit to staying engaged at all times with how and what everyone is doing, what they need, and how resources can be connected to those spaces. It is a material way to extend the arms of the church and embrace those who, for whatever reason, cannot make it to their chosen sanctuary and worship with their home congregation. This version of visiting is a decidedly different experience than what digital visiting has evolved into. This visiting is not about the idea of extraction (as in visiting a webpage to gain information or engage with the material present). Instead, it is a mutual and reciprocal exchange that is not only helpful and informative but nourishes the soul. Again, these engagements are intentionally situated within service, appreciation, and love. These types of hosting and visitation exchanges can be a conceptual foundation from which to produce supportive and welcoming digital homes.

Currently, this mutuality is significantly different from the way most users visit dominant digital sites like YouTube or TikTok. It is the conceptual shift underlying what hosting and visiting actually are now that can cause cognitive dissonances with digital experiences. When we purposely call an app like Twitter or Facebook a "site" or a "hell site," we're hearkening back to the pre-Web 2.0 period that no longer exists. That familiar but past moment when websites were "places" we actually visited on the web and saved within our browser bookmarks clouds our understanding of how the app infrastructure currently works. Though we still hope apps will allow us to have a home (page), they are not structured to reflect a past hominess. Sadly, apps don't provide the feeling of hospitality, hosting, customization, and visiting that earlier websites offered to us before mobile digital media came along. As we use these media, we criticize and call them out for this limitation and for abandoning their responsibilities to the architecture of "sites." The draw of having a digital home to visit is strong, even though most people never got to use these sites before they were transcoded into apps. The rhetorical necessity of calling mobile apps "sites" underscores their alien and un-homely or *unheimlich* feeling.

Conclusion: You Can Never Go Home Again, but What Kind of Home Can You Make Today as Neither a Renter nor an Owner but a Guest?

We can make the case that Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram supplanted the home(page)s of the early 2000s. While none of these platforms was built around the concept of home, they brought into their affordances the features of the blogs and networking sites that preceded them. As another shift is happening in our online sociality toward the multimedia content creation of platforms like TikTok, where does Blackness or queerness find home online now? Have we given up on home as a central organizing principle of our digital lives? Where can safety, comfort, and security be found for users for whom platforms have never cared? Analyzing the pre-Web 2.0 period allows us to understand why we long for sites that were quite frankly janky, a pain in the ass to use and make, and can't be seen today except as static page snapshots on archive.org. These platforms were never designed for *everyone*, but we turned them into homes for Black folks, queer people, autistic people, Asian users, and others who don't fit the dominant paradigm.

As we sit amid yet another housing crisis in the United States, governmental entities seek new policies to criminalize homelessness. Some of the unhoused living in temporary encampments must find ways to constantly make and remake homes as their tents and property are moved or destroyed. Longing for a digital home is not comparable to the violence experienced daily by the unhoused. Still, we should ask what our hard-won experiences of digital loss can inform about what kinds of digital spaces we long for now. How can we identify and locate these spaces? Perhaps it is time to accept the aims of digital usage outside the framework of the home.

Our bodies grieve the loss of digital home(li)ness. We both grieve and long for what once was while also always already imagining futures differently. Though the early 2000s read as a *homely* period visually—Myspace pages are often disastrously ugly and were considered ugly even then—these pages are objects of digital nostalgia because they were some of our earliest digital homes. They felt like ours, at any rate, even if they have all been deleted now, and we consumed them largely without ads or surveillance, at least none that we felt. If we can't have digital homes, what can we have? Nostalgia is an itch that cannot scratch itself, and we can't stop wanting the things we never had. But the energy born of loss and digital longing can animate what we can build in the future and how we respond to the present.

Footnotes

1 On the Web 2.0 look, see Carolyn L. Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art, and Aesthetics after Code* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

2 See André Brock Jr., *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: NYU Press 2020); and Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: NYU Press 2021).

3 See Kishonna L. Gray and Krysten Stein, "'We "Said Her Name" and Got Zucked': Black Women Calling-Out the Carceral Logics of Digital Platforms," *Gender & Society* 35, no. 4 (August 2021): 538–45, https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211029393.

4 Jessa Lingel, *An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist*, Princeton Studies in Culture and Technology (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

5 Channing Hargroove, "How Solange Knowles 'Came Home' to BlackPlanet," *Grazia*, n.d., https://graziamagazine.com/us/articles/solange-blackplanet-when-i-get-home/.