

Sarah Florini, **Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks**, New York: New York University Press, 2019, 272 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback).

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In a Politico article, “How Everything Became Cancel Culture,” Derek Robertson (2021) frames cancel culture as an “ideologically neutral mechanism” (para. 6). He positions the phenomena as a social media tool whose use is not to protect from culture wars but to create a culture afraid of public missteps and mistakes. However, as Clark (2020) notes, “canceling” comes from queer communities of color and was ushered into the broader popular discourse through Black Twitter memes (p. 2). This disconnect is indicative of a much broader disconnect of Black praxes that have been assumed into broader digital praxes. Through the lens of digital Blackness, scholar Sarah Florini weaves conversations of theory, method, praxis, and critique into the core of her work, ***Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks***. In a time where concepts are intentionally being separated from their histories, books such as *Beyond Hashtags* are of utmost importance in critical remembrance.



Brock (2020) makes the bold claim that “Black folk have made the Internet a ‘Black space’ whose contours have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice while also decentering whiteness as the default internet identity” (p. 5). This is an important assertion because it signals the importance of centering Blackness in digital praxis and articulating what constitutes digital identity. *Beyond Hashtags* explores Black American digital culture across multiple platforms and media. As Florini notes, existing scholarship tends to focus on Black digital activity within one platform; however, there is rich insight in understanding the simultaneous and integrated implications of networked multiplatform-ness (pp. 6–7). The network Florini focuses on consists of three parts: “a large informal network of Black podcasters, the independent media company This Week in Blackness (TWiB!), and the related subgroup of the predominantly Black network of Twitter users known as “Black Twitter” (p. 19). The way the author constructs the network at the center of her project allows for a fluid conceptualization of interactivity, where the lines are blurred between creators and consumers, visibility and support, and aspirational and entrepreneurial labor.

Florini’s *Beyond Hashtags* provides a critique of technologically ambivalent neoliberal racial regimes while offering a methodological framework to resist the reification of those frames. Florini points to Black digital users as exemplars of negotiating the neoliberal digital domain and finding ways to navigate the tensions of digital spaces as sites of political action and market consumption (p. 8). Florini allows every reader the same starting point, or entrance into the conversation, by discussing the “contemporary US racial landscape,” neoliberal and racial ideologies, and “Black epistemologies, communicative practices and aesthetics” that

worked to construct her site of observation (pp. 6–7). This serves as an effective introduction to the network at the center of the text before delving into the first chapter.

In chapter 1, Florini maps the transplatform network at the center of her project. I hesitate to use such clinical terms, as Florini takes extreme care to decenter her power and privilege as a researcher and center the agency of the network participant (more on that later). She describes networks as sites of connection; she connects “Black cultural production and sociality,” she links the duality of communication within networks connecting interpersonal communication and mass communication; and, finally, she connects “the fluidity and flexibility of the network” in practice through example (pp. 66, 67).

While chapter 1 focuses on connections, chapter 2 focuses on tensions. Florini argues that the transplatform network mapped in the first chapter functions as an “oscillating networked public” (p. 72). Given the nature of the network, she discusses how it serves as a site of production of enclaves to function outside the purview of dominant, hegemonic society. In essence, the network connects marginalized voices who want to disconnect from the dominant gaze. Florini also discusses the network’s ability to navigate tensions of obscuring visibility while participating in the discourse as a way to create visibility and be heard as a counterpublic, as seen with the creation and response to the #DemThrones and #BernieSoBlack hashtags. Florini describes this ability to operate in tension as *oscillation* based in two primary ways: functionality and mitigation of risk.

Chapter 3 focuses on the importance of remembrances as it relates to history and the discursive work of the network. Who gets to remember and how they get to remember has an inherent power-shaped function. It has the capacity to assert, legitimize, and validate. This chapter offers example after example of active remembrance as resistance to neoliberal renderings of Black American history, specifically the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., and the Civil Rights Movements. Ironically, it is this very act of remembrance that is at the forefront of discussions around what versions of the American history experience should be taught in schools.

The intersection of mass communication and interpersonal communication collide in chapter 4’s discussion of the role of networks in racial crisis and trauma. Florini does an excellent job discussing how transplatform networks function as sites of broadcast journalism, asserting that they are the news. Live tweeting events, awareness-raising hashtags, and calls to justice are intertwined as mass communication. The chapter then shifts to the other end of the communication spectrum, the interpersonal communication aspect that serves the function of social support through community. Specifically, podcasts as sites of communal catharsis to process the real-time information from other parts of the network serve a crucial function. And, finally, the chapter highlights the collective function of the network as gatewatchers and sources of accountability to mainstream reporting of racial events.

The book concludes in mid-2016 when Florini was finishing the project. It is here that she reaffirms her primary focus of the book, which is also one of its main contributions to the field: discussing how racialized subjects in transplatform networks use the network as a resource to navigate White supremacist society as sites of remembrance and resistance as well as engagement and agitation. She effectively expresses the

argument that “digitally networked publics are both *a group of people* and *a technological space*” (p. 183; emphasis in original).

*Beyond Hashtags* offers a culturally responsive expansion to Kozinets’ (2015) netnographic practice. While Kozinets (2015) focuses on consociality and the digital eradication of difference, Florini offers a focus on cultural specificity, an approach that sees how these differences can help us imagine different possibilities “for technologies beyond hegemonic frameworks and thereby allow us to better anticipate and grapple with the social shifts that shape and are shaped by technology” (p. 184). The text also offers practical considerations for future researchers. For example, discussing the importance of clarity in use of terms such as capitalizing “Black” and using “Black” instead of “African American” (p. 27); explaining the importance of maintaining the integrity of “voice” in the project even when it meant resisting standard English (p. 27); and making the distinction between terms and phrases that are often (and with malice) conflated, such as Black Lives Matter (p. 28). Florini’s acute awareness of her positionality as a White scholar participating in Black spaces is also of methodological importance. Although issues of power have always been thorny in ethnographic research, Florini’s transparency about the racialized aspects were enlightening, refreshing, and incredibly useful for future research.

Since this review started with a discussion of cancel culture, it is only fitting to end with it as well. Cancel culture provides the mechanism for reactionary rhetorics of suspicion intent on reasserting dominant and normative cultural identities that feel lost in a digisphere where the politics of the dominant class are threatened. The neoliberal digital subject’s reimagining of cancel culture as a tool to take back the cultural identities lost to the Internet borrows from the Black digital users’ tactics to make a space for themselves, as evidenced in *Beyond Hashtags*. Florini states early in the text that her work makes three contributions to the field, and I argue that those contributions are integral in making sense of discursive phenomena of transplatform networks, such as cancel culture. Florini’s work emphasizes both the multimedia-ness and transplatform-ness of how certain networks operate within the digital ecosystem. She also emphasizes cultural specificity over consociality, meaning that culture is embedded and reinforced by network users. Finally, her work puts Black users at the center and makes explicit their contributions to not only Black transplatform networks but also to transplatform networks as a whole.

### References

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