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Speaking Black, Speaking Back: Counternarrating the Erasure of African American “Technigrationists”

The evidence of early African-American digital technology adoption is everywhere but often remains unmarked in the history of computing. In this paper, I provide new insight on the political, satirical, and popular notions of digital technology that enveloped the first generation of African-American users. Using critical race theory as a framework, this paper foregrounds counter-narratives by examining the discourses of Black popular culture that shaped the first generation of digital technology integrationists, which I call “technigrationists.” In this work, I show how technology has been interwoven into the fabric of African-American Generation Xers, yet, despite this era of digital innovation being broadly regarded as belonging to, and identified with, young, white men. Dispelling the myth of African-Americans as marginal to the broadest base of digital technology users can help us define new ways of thinking about the next wave of technology innovation and design. Building on previous work that reveals how technology design facilitates or obscures cultural values, this specific look at early African-American digital technology adopters contributes to the emerging field of critical race information and technology studies, or Critical Race + Digital Studies.