

Invisible PCHAT Network and the Digital Black Wall Street: Remediating Black Wall Street in a Digital Age

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In “Invisible PCHAT Network and the Digital Black Wall Street: Remediating Black Wall Street in a Digital Age,” author Raven Preston uses Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and remediation to explain how Black entrepreneurship was assimilated to successfully engage consumers in the digital age. She gives insight into the historical and cultural significance of niche marketing in the 21st century and how new marketing techniques, like algorithms, influence the consumer market.

“Something FOR Black People BY Black People”

“Black Wall Street,” or Greenwood, was an affluent Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Greenwood, founded in 1906, was home to wealthy Black entrepreneurs and their families, like O.W. Gurley. Gurley, a wealthy landowner, manufactured a banking system designed to loan money to Black families to start a new life post-slavery. Hannibal Johnson quotes Gurley’s vision as a desire to “create something for Black people by Black people,” in his book *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa’s Historic Greenwood District* (Johnson 2013). Educated Blacks and working-class Blacks flocked to Greenwood with the vision of a “self-contained and self-reliant Black economy,” giving birth to Black Wall Street. Money was said to exchange hands and businesses 19 times before it left the neighborhood as well as bringing in money externally. The amount of time money stays in a community is important because it means that money is supporting more salaries locally, increasing local economic activity, and building up the local tax base. This was, and still is, an important activity to measure the success of a community. Nearly fifteen years later, jealousy and shady



Figure 1: Richard Clark Preston.

reports of an assault on a white woman in Greenwood began to circulate around Tulsa, exploding the levee of racial tensions under Jim Crow. On May 31, 1921, white thugs ransacked their lives, setting fire and sending bullets through Black Wall Street, inciting a massacre from which they would never recover.

I first heard about the famous Black Wall Street from my grandfather, Richard Clark Preston (Figure 1). He always imagined the reestablishment of this nostalgic time he learned about in school. An investor and

entrepreneur himself, my Grandfather wanted to be the next O.W. Gurley, purchasing land to support wealth-building in the Black community. The community consisted of an array of Black professionals and business owners that operated within their own economy, allowing healing and wealth-building to a community that would otherwise struggle to recover. Growing up around my grandfather, I realized how systemic racism adversely affected his plight when it came to wealth-building and, at the time, equality. You see, my grandfather grew up in the rural south where he only witnessed a Black man close to owning something through sharecropping. He witnessed his grandfather being a sharecropper, a position that reduced him to, at most, an indentured servant. Unfortunately, Black sharecroppers were conned into extreme debt caused by store owners' and landowners' unfair pricing, deceitful reports on crop yields, and discrimination leaving them "under the tacit bondage of economic insecurity" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Black Wall Street was a necessary and profound concept birthed from a dark time in our nation's past but its resurfacing illuminates dark moments within our nation's present. The deficit of Black businesses does not reflect Black people's lack of desire to have one, it reflects the lack of resources and investment put into Black communities.

A Dream Deferred: Remixed and Remastered

This article uses **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** as conceived by Illinois State University's writing program (PCHAT) to explore how the original Black Wall Street has been remediated to be a more accessible and affordable mode for promoting Black entrepreneurship. I use PCHAT concepts to understand the intended and unintended purposes and functions

behind producing and consuming in different genres and activity systems within communities. Black entrepreneurship can be understood as both a literate activity and a genre, a response to all the doors closed on aspiring Black Americans and the funnel of discriminatory tactics designed to keep Black success and talent impoverished.

From a rhetorical genre studies perspective, **genres** are, as Carolyn Miller first wrote, “a typified response to a recurring situation” (p. 159). For example, a course syllabus is a typified response to the situation of students entering classrooms and needing to know about classroom policies, assignments, and procedures because without this genre to refer to, they would forget the information, driving professors to insanity as they repeated classroom policies over and over again (The Word Bird). The original Black Wall Street can be understood as a genre, in that it was a response to the terrorizing white supremacy that eventually led to its demise. For Black people, creating a Black Wall Street meant they could be self-sufficient in a society that felt they were incapable and undeserving of doing so. The digital rebirth of this genre, a new kind of Black Wall Street, has more recently been built by a globalized e-market driven by consumers. However, the purposes of the original Black Wall Street is maintained in the idea of “for Black people by Black people” that still dominates the activity system of Black entrepreneurship. However, in its rebirth, Black entrepreneurship has also changed, shifting to a much more affordable and globalized economy characterizing the multiplicity of Blackness. In looking at the new (digital) Black Wall Street, I’ve found four specific PCHAT terms to be particularly interesting: **representation**, **distribution**, **socialization**, and **ecology**.

Recently, I began watching Grammy-winning artist, Killer Mike’s Netflix show *Trigger Warning*, where he not only explores sometimes controversial topics but devises social experiments that challenge the common rhetoric behind these issues. In the first episode, titled “Living Black,” Killer Mike goes three days only living within the Black economy in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia. With Atlanta being a city with a big Black community it should not be hard to “truly” live within the Black economy. But Killer Mike, a business owner himself, finds himself sleeping on park benches and hungry in Athens, Georgia (a Georgia town with a relatively small Black community). This episode begins by comparing money circulation in different racial communities. As I state previously in the introduction, money circulation in communities supports the wealth of local community by paying for local salaries and boosting the local economy. Killer Mike believes that “the Black community could do a better job of keeping the dollar in our ecosystem longer” (“Living Black”). What he means by this statement is that the Black community needs to become more conscious consumers and support their

own community when they can. He offers viewers alarming statistics about how long money stays within the Black community versus other communities. According to *Trigger Warning* and the chart (Figure 2) provided by PIX11 News Station:

The Asian community can keep a dollar 28 days before they release it out. They've shown that Jewish and white communities keep a dollar 21 and 23 days, and for the African-American community six . . . hours ("Living Black").

Although many newer Black businesses are lacking in the traditional storefront format, the globalization of a digital economy has caused a remediation that fits the needs of business owners and consumers. This remediation was in response to the growing demand for contactless shopping. Where shopping centers were once an entirely in-person experience, some have moved to curbside pickup. This trend has certainly been impacted by the response to COVID 19, which has forced retailers to offer more curbside pickup and online ordering options.

The term **remediation**, as I'm using it here, refers to the remixing of an activity or text. In this case, the digital age serves as a reactant in changing the compound of the consumer market. Black Entrepreneurship, like many activity systems labelled "Black," is a remediated response to Black people historically being excluded from "white" organizations. Activity systems allow us to understand what goes into achieving the goal of the activity; it examines the inherently historical, social, dialogic, communal, and assimilating nature of goal-oriented activities. Historically Black colleges and universities or Black fraternities and sororities were established because Black people weren't welcome in white institutions. Similarly, Black investors like my grandfather created their own close-knit investor group that successfully

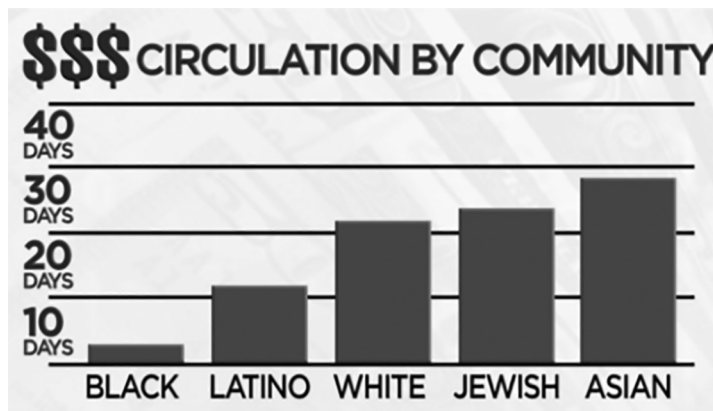


Figure 2: A bar graph comparing the money circulation span by community.

played in stocks and invested in land. To this day, Black entrepreneurs and small business owners receive less support from government bailouts than other small businesses, and this lack of resources results in higher prices, making it difficult to generate revenue from similar products also sold by large national or international companies. This is part of the producer's ecology, the involvement of elements which he cannot control and simply has to adapt to. These elements affect how the producer creates and markets their text. Because their products are sold at a higher price and receive less support, many Black entrepreneurs have to think very carefully about the way they talk about their products, so consumers can understand the reasons behind higher prices and why they should support Black-owned businesses. This conceptualization of how their businesses must be presented and understood by consumers fits in the PCHAT term representation, which considers how texts are envisioned and planned by the people who produce them.

Being a Black-owned business has recently given Black entrepreneurs more clout, with initiatives like Blackout days National Black Business Month happening each year in August. The demand for apparel and products that represent Black people and Black culture create a market that was virtually nonexistent in previous eras. This demand also affects the way business owners' represent their products, and the way they introduce their products to consumers. Another PCHAT term, distribution, is relevant to more than just how Black business owners reach out to potential consumers. It also involves complex tools like algorithms and databases for Black owned businesses that have helped to create a new Black Wall Street that reaches Black consumers all over the world.

The PCHAT term ecology is also useful to help me think about the resources available to the producer during the production of a text or genre. In the case of Black Wall Street and buying Black, the digital age has transformed consumer markets, causing the mass closing of malls and departments stores that refuse to adapt. Businesses offering online shopping and secure checkouts have adapted to the changing needs and demands of consumers, bringing stiff competition and as well as options that impact the greater economy.

With the shift to online shopping, it is only natural that Black entrepreneurs join the market. From Black clothing lines to Black battery brands, the internet is facilitating a revolution of Black businesses. Websites like *WeBuyBlack.com* serve as hubs for Black business owners and consumers to connect and support each other. The concept of Black Wall Street lives on in these brands, not only providing resources to their community but empowerment, news, and forums to rebuild a community assaulted by

systemic political and economic injustice. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, 440,000 Black-owned businesses closed in the US, equating to 41% of the 1.1 million over 3 months in 2020, in comparison to 17% of white-owned businesses (Fairlie 5). In order to fully consider the **ecology** that impacts Black-owned businesses, it's important to consider how the majority of Black brands are relatively expensive compared to mainstream stores. For example, mainstream stores for clothing include H&M, Express, and other stores frequently seen in mainstream advertising and represented through physical stores across the country. I relate this issue to the PCHAT term ecology because small businesses that are just starting out have limited resources compared to big corporations: resources such as clothing materials, advertisement budgets, and people power. Most Black-owned businesses are designed, managed, distributed, and advertised by one person, while corporations have many people at their disposal and multiple departments to divvy up workloads. This lack of resources results in less time dedicated to creating. These are all examples of elements of an activity system that are not in the control of the producer, but which the producer has to navigate in order to be successful.

In an interview with Summit21, designer and creator of Legendary Rootz, Raven Nichole Gibson describes what inspired her to create her clothing and home décor line:

During this time, racially motivated events were happening around the country, and it struck something in me. The mistreatment of the black community and preparing to attend a PWI [Predominately White Institution] inspired me a lot. . . . I didn't see many Black women who looked like me in media and wanted to change the narrative on how black women are portrayed (Stephens).

Racial tension and misrepresentation in the media have plagued the Black community since the box office hit, *Birth of a Nation*. Racial tensions in the United States operate outside of the control of one single person and can serve as a motivation to uplift the Black community. Pro-Black brands like Gibson's attempt to change the story we tell about Black people in the media.

Represent Yo' Niche

In the interview, Raven Nichole Gibson not only speaks about her brand as a way to empower Black people, specifically Black Women but it is also the main way she markets her brand online. This screenshot (Figure 3) is taken from Gibson's website, *legendaryrootz.com*, in the "our rootz" tab. The images feature primarily Black women with natural hairstyles and headwraps. The

top right image within the screenshot uses imagery inspired by the Black Power movement. Figure 3 also includes text to identify her company's values. Gibson's interview and website are a typical example of how Black businesses market their brand.

The term representation, in reference to Black entrepreneurship, connects to my understanding of how Black businesses market their brands and focuses my attention on how these niche market entrepreneurs consider and talk about their products. According to Illinois State University's writing program website, representation "highlights issues related to the way that the

people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it; how they think about it and how they talk about it, as well as all the activities and materials that help shape how people do this." Black business owners know what sets them apart from other brands. Similar to the concept of "The Green Book"—a green booklet used to help road-tripping Black people navigate through the Jim Crow South with safe and friendly businesses, usually Black owned—it was described as a way for Black people to be self-sufficient. Websites like *WeBuyBlack.com* continue this idea of connecting reputable, safe, and friendly businesses to Black people except this time through web.

WeBuyBlack.com also has a blog. The blog shares stories about new Black entrepreneurs and their business ventures, top news stories affecting consumers and owners, as well as ways to support education in the Black community. The blog post in Figure 4 announces a partnership of two Black-owned companies, Slutty Vegan and Rap Snacks. Black-owned companies have built their brand on creating and supporting a community that has otherwise been lacking representation. Gibson does a great job describing this phenomenon when she explains that, "Unlike these fast fashion brands, we provide quality items that are described as unique and not cliché," (Stephens). Gibson



Figure 3: Screenshot from Legendary Rootz Website.



Figure 4: Blog Headline from *WeBuyBlack.com*

also states that it felt necessary to represent herself in a prideful way on her campus. What Gibson hints at in her interview is how Black people, specifically Black women, are portrayed in the media. Historically, we have been portrayed as the docile “mammy” figure, the hypersexualized jezebel, or the welfare queen, and Gibson wanted to change the way we not only talk about Black businesses but how we talk about and portray Black women.

The terms associated with PCHAT are often intertwined and dependent on one another and their relevance for a researcher can vary based on the genre and production. In my exploration of the evolution of Black entrepreneurship, **representation** and **socialization** are concepts that are closely linked. Socialization is a concept that helps me to look at how consumers and companies interact when they engage in representing and changing social and cultural practices. For example, Raven Gibson is consciously attempting to transform two cultural and social practices. First, she wants to provide quality apparel that is authentic to Black experiences. Many Legendary Rootz include pro-Black phrases like “Black Girls Are the Purest Form of Art,” challenges the toxic images of Black women in popular media. Another common phrase used on Gibson’s website is “Pretty Brown Ting.” *Ting* is another word for *thing* that is used in Islander countries that speak other forms of English, like Pidgin or Creole. This phrasing captures the multiplicity of the Black identity that extends past American or even African experiences.

Consumers also unconsciously engage in representing and changing social and cultural practices. Because of social media, consumers have become an extension of the brand. Did you ever think about how every time you make a post picturing people wearing clothing, you’re advertising everything in that photo? How many times have you posted a picture and either in a DM or the comments someone says, “So cute, where did you get this?” All of us are basically social media influencers, which has transformed the way companies market and allocate money to marketing initiatives (Johansson). How companies represent their business and their products need to be aligned with how consumer interact with them. There is a symbiotic relationship, and more often than not, representation and socialization are dependent on one another.

Let’s Talk About Algorithms

Before I give you a glimpse into the consumer perspective and our third PCHAT term **distribution**, let’s talk about **algorithms**. Algorithms are used by social media companies to make money. Yes, social media does

yield profit and believe it or not, they are selling digital billboard space to invade your news feeds, timelines, and cat videos all in the name of “free viewership.” Algorithms factor in information such as your followers and who you follow; liked images, posts, and pages; and sometimes even keywords picked up from your favorite assistants (Alexa, Siri, or Google Assistant). It’s pretty easy to understand billboards and their purposes—how they work to help promote sales or shape people’s thinking—but algorithms control much more complex systems that consider information like pages previously visited and other information found in your digital history, all in order to sell digital billboard ad space to companies of past pages you have visited. What do algorithms have to do with buying Black? Well, let me ask you a question: Do you regularly see advertisements for Black-owned businesses when you are browsing online? Algorithms can work to further embed us in our own communities, which a great marketing technique, but which also acts as a way to keep communities segregated on a digital platform. Although the way algorithms work to target the goods and services you are most interested in may be positive for consumers, algorithms limit exposure of niche companies and companies with less capital. So Black-owned businesses have another area in which they have to compete with large companies who have larger marketing budgets.

The concept of Distribution considers where texts go and who a text may end up with as well as the methods used to distribute a text to potential readers or users. This focuses on the producer’s interaction with the audience. Consider the demographic you follow and the pages you like on social media. If you haven’t seen an advertisement for a Black-owned business, it’s most likely because your algorithm is not weighted towards Black-owned businesses. Black-owned businesses are almost solely marketed through social media, and often fall victim to fake accounts and merchandise that profit from their ambiguous marketing. Some businesses only appear on social media and do not have their own website like *WeBuyBlack.com* or *Legendaryrootz.com*. Because these businesses can somehow exist in an invisible realm, they are often the most vulnerable.

These issues related to distribution, ecology, representation, and socialization illustrate both ways that Black owned business can use their unique relationships to reach potential consumers, also how some of these same features can be an Achilles heel, separating them from potential consumers.

... And That's All She Wrote

The promise of wealth and economic equality is still on the horizon, but the evolution of a new, digital Black Wall street has the potential to remediate historic understandings of the concept of entrepreneurs attempting to adhere to the “For Black People By Black People” sentiments that shaped the original Black Wall Street, while at the same time allowing Black entrepreneurs to gain access to larger markets. Or, to think about it another way, we might say that the genre of Black entrepreneurship is evolving to meet new situations and encounter new audiences as it continues to serve its original goal of supporting Black communities. Using PCHAT terms, I’ve tried to identify some of the moving parts that play a role in advancing and supporting Black economies as well as impacting larger economies across the US Black business consumption is not limited to Black consumers but it does empower them. The original Black Wall Street was also not confined to its thirty-five blocks. People of all races bought and sold in the town of Greenwood. Just like Jewish, Latino, Asian, and white businesses, their consumers were not limited to their own communities. Overall, having more Black businesses represented in the economy will reflect a more responsible and ethical portrayal of the multiplicity that is the Black experience.

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Raven Preston is a graduate student studying rhetoric and composition and technical communication. Aside from being a student, she is involved in pioneering an interdisciplinary space for feminist, WOC graduate students to congregate and network. Her pedagogical perspective is informed by Black Feminist thought. She is also a co-host for the Planet Venus podcast and blogger centering Black women and girl's mental health.