CHAPTER 4

Black Women’s Digital Diaspora, Collectivity, and Resistance

Abstract This chapter highlights issues to do with Black digital diasporic content and communication. It discusses how Black women’s digital activity can enable them to deal with experiences of oppression that are specific to their lives and in communal ways. This chapter explores resistant credentials of some of the digital experiences of Black women in Britain, while reckoning with potentially conflicting aspects of countercultural practices which exist in the context of digital consumerism. This discussion features analysis of how Black American popular and digital culture contributes to some of the digital encounters and lives of Black women in Britain in impactful ways. Overall, this chapter focuses on Black women’s experiences of knowledge-sharing online, including via natural hair video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube.

Keywords Black women · Digital diaspora · Resistance · Social media · Vlog · YouTube

The twenty-first century is marked by the impact of globalisation and technology’s significant role in cross-cultural communication which involves digital dialogue between individuals in different parts of the world—including Black people who connect with one another online. Streams of content and detailed discourse accompanying popular hashtags

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such as #NaijaTwitter and #GrowingUpBlack exemplify how Black people across the globe communicate and create online in ways inextricably connected to cues, references, and in-jokes that relate to the intricacies of their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. However, arguably, hashtags themselves do not simply catalyse a sense of sociality, collectivity, or community. Rather, hashtags are used as part of the expression of relational Black diasporic dynamics which are not dependent on Twitter but can be enabled by it.

Prior research and writing demonstrates the societally impactful nature of the digital work, creativity, commentaries, practices, and encounters of Black people (Brock et al. 2010; Chatman 2017; Florini 2019; Gabriel 2016; Gray 2015; Hobson 2008; Johnson 2018; Jones 2019; McMillan Cottom 2017; Mohammed 2019; Noble and Tynes 2016; Nyabola 2018; Phelps-Ward and Laura 2016; Sharma 2013; Victoria 2020; Wheeler 2019). Major research on Black digital experiences includes the race, gender, media, and communication scholarship of Catherine Knight Steele (2016a, b, 2017) which highlights how digital spaces can become sites of oral communication that aid Black people’s formation of alternate publics, used to ‘critique the dominant culture, foster resistance’ (Steele 2016a, p. 1) and develop counter-hegemonic discourse.

The extensive work of I’Nasah K. Crockett (2014)—writer, artist, and indie public scholar of Black performance, culture, politics, and history—highlights the prevalence of anti-Blackness and misogynoir on social media (Bailey 2010, Bailey and Trudy 2018), while connecting this to the history of Black women’s oppression. Furthermore, the paramount research of film and media studies scholar Anna Everett (2009), sociologist and African American studies scholar Ruha Benjamin (2019), communication studies scholars Meredith D. Clark (2014), Sarah J. Jackson (2016), Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele (2019), Black digital studies scholar André Brock (2020), and race, media, and politics scholar Charlton D. McIlwain (2020)—among others—elucidates much about digital technology, online culture, and the lives of Black people.

Drawing on such work, particularly Everett’s (2009) germinal book *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*, as well as the research of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies scholar Janell Hobson (2008) which explores ‘gendered and racial constructions of digital technology’ (p. 112), this chapter focuses on the diasporic, collective, and, sometimes, resistant dimensions of the digital experiences of Black women in Britain.
Extant research examines ‘the production of the self in the digital age through its troubled and unsettling relationship with the mirror and the screen as artefacts of self-production’ (Ibrahim 2018, p. 1). Associated issues are considered in this chapter as part of discussion of how digital experiences can contribute to Black women’s formation and affirmation of their identities, including, in some cases, when ‘tuning into the video blogs (vlogs) of Black women in the US, to learn more about [Black Lives Matter] BLM, Black-owned businesses, and to gain consumer tips that are specific to them’ (Sobande et al. 2019, p. 8).

The politics and lives of Black women are ‘too often erased from or misrecognised in the European imagination’ (Emejulu and Sobande 2019, p. 3). Hence, sections of this chapter consider how both the specific socio-political context of Britain and the influence of US popular culture—that is, African-American popular culture—shapes the digital experiences and lives of Black women in Britain. In addition, there is reflection on how such women’s digital encounters can involve connecting with Black diasporic lives elsewhere, while navigating associated experiences of relationality and a politics of difference.

**Digital Blackness, Borders, and a Politics of Difference**

Borders—barriers between one place and another, (de)constructed differences between people and cultures, containers, confinement, separations and edges, to be near or adjacent to, limits placed upon the contents of something, somewhere, or someone. Borders—invisible and tangible, felt and (re)imagined, enforced and challenged, reproduced and recreated, online and offline. Conceptualising the borders of experiences of Black identity and digital space has led to me questioning what constitutes a border and how borders, and perceptions of them, impact issues to do with Black lives in cyberspace and their surrounding political landscapes.

The creation and maintenance of literal and imagined borders between an ‘us’ and ‘them’ forms a key part of politics—globally, nationally, and locally. International relations are often rooted in decision-making concerning borders—whether it be the development of ‘new’ ones, the maintenance of existing borders, or the perceived dismantling of them. While it is far from being uncontained and borderless, media can be a means for messages and people to appear to or feel as though they transcend borders—even if ephemerally—by communicating with others in
different geo-cultural locations and time zones. Still, the digital experiences of Black people are far from being borderless. They are shaped by physical and virtual geographies and many layers of power and politics.

Black people’s digital experiences are affected by issues regarding language, interpretation and translation, censorship and control, access to the internet and digital technology, as well as the continued globally dominant position of much North American, European, and Anglocentric discourse in relation to ideas about Black identity and Black diaspora (Sobande and Osei 2020). Contrary to essentialist ideas about Black people which deny the existence of stark differences between their identities, cultures, perspectives, and lives, Black digital diasporic dialogue is contoured by Black people’s disconnections and differences, as well as connections and commonalities. Often, discussions to do with Black diaspora and borders focus on issues to do with geography, culture, ethnicity, and constructions of the nation-state. What I comment on in my book concerns these matters but is also intended to contribute to conversations about the borders of social media and digital spaces—from the hypervisibility of discussions on Twitter, to the ways that content created there moves into and across other online and offline environments.

In other words, how do the digital experiences of Black women in Britain involve navigating the borders of Black identity, geographies, and digital contexts which are constructed, contained, and constrained in ways that may contemporaneously enable and hamper meaningful articulations and expressions of Black life? How are Black diasporic experiences—including who has the ‘right’ to ‘claim’ them—expressed and contested as part of the digital encounters of Black women in Britain? How can acknowledging differences and disagreements within Black diasporic discussions—including digital ones—aide understandings of contemporary Black lives?

(How) are the digital experiences of Black people bordered, and with what effects? What is a ‘global’ Black digital ‘voice’, and does, could, or should one even exist? To what extent might forms of digital Blackness involve online experiences that overcome borders, and politics which is ‘inclusive’ of all Black lives? What does ‘inclusive’ mean in this case and is it a useful concept? I do not claim to have answers to all of these questions, nor do I suggest that such questions can be neatly answered at all, but throughout the course of the following sections is a discussion of how the digital experiences of Black women in Britain can involve both pushing against and reinforcing various borders—in ways that are
symptomatic of global hierarchies, Anglocentrism, and the hegemony of the US and Britain. Considering these issues pertaining to power and global relations is imperative as part of this work, including because ‘diaspora, as a social formation, is simultaneously framed by relationships of domination and is itself a structured hierarchy’ (Makalani 2009, p. 1).

**Black Digital Dialogue Between Britain and the US**

When interviewing Black women in Britain about their digital habits and encounters, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram were all mentioned as providing an opportunity to learn about each other’s lives while also discussing their experiences online with Black people in the US. Related digital dialogue spurred on by a Black diasporic politics of difference includes conversations regarding how politics in the US and Britain compares. The politics of difference that plays out and is played with as part of Black women’s digital activities also includes conversations concerning similarities and differences between understandings and experiences of Black identity and anti-Blackness in Britain and the US.

Nobody I interviewed disputed the notion that white supremacy and anti-Black racism is global, yet, can manifest in different ways across geographies. Instead, when interviewing Black women in Britain there was discussion of how through participating in Black diasporic conversations on social media they had learnt more about different, but, related histories, forms of white supremacy, and contemporary experiences of Black life—particularly in the US and Britain. In the words of one woman who I spoke to, who is in her thirties, moved to Britain from the US years ago, and chose the comical pseudonym Dr Diddly Doo:

I will say that before I came here, I was curious to know what was the Black woman’s experience in the UK and what will I find? I knew there were Black women there but are there generations and generations of Black people to the point that they’re like ‘I’m Black and British’, or their parents migrated from other parts of the world so they’re like ‘I’m Black Jamaican British?’ What you see on TV is not the Black British experience…I think that the only person I could name who people would be like ‘oh yeah!’ is Idris Elba. A lot of people don’t have a concept [of Blackness] beyond the American borders.
Such comments were made as part of a wider conversation about how Dr Diddly Doo uses social media to connect and communicate with Black women in Britain and the US. That discussion included her reflecting on how due to the patriarchal and heteronormative nature of society, most teaching in school and public discourse concerning Black history in both places focuses on the words and work of cisgender heterosexual Black men. Turning to social media and digital spaces can be a prime way for Black women in Britain to learn about and share knowledge regarding Black herstories there (Akpan 2018; Folorunso 2018a, b; Sobande 2017) and around the world—including the relationship between Black women’s experiences in Britain and the US (Sobande et al. 2019).

When discussing the intricacies of geographical boundaries that are internal to Britain, Dr Diddly Doo said:

I mean...Britain is an island. It’s a little small island [laughs], know what I mean?... and people need to be able to access other people, so there’s an opportunity for that [online], especially for British Black women to be able to expand beyond the borders of Britain, especially in places like Scotland and Northern Ireland where you are quite isolated from the rest of what is happening.

The words of Dr Diddly Doo indicate ‘the situatedness of the disembodied cyberself’ (Kolko et al. 2000, p. 6)—which is always tethered to, and, by, different geographies and their borders and boundaries. Dr Diddly Doo’s words also signal that although social media presents an opportunity for Black people in one continent to communicate with those in another, it can also support connections, conversations, and, potentially, the formation or strengthening of community between Black people in different parts of the one country. Black life, online and offline, can be influenced by internal national and regional power relations, as well as global hierarchical ones. Thus, efforts to conceptualise forms of digital Blackness beyond borders necessitate a concern with local, as well as national and global issues—all of which connect to the (in)visibility and hyper-visibility of different Black people, their experiences, and the politics of representation.

As the only Black woman in Britain I interviewed who is American, Dr Diddly Doo shared many examples of how she uses social media to communicate with Black women in the US and to keep abreast of
news and politics there, while also attempting to minimise the potentially traumatic impact of her efforts to stay informed:

“It’s very easy to filter people out on social media for me...especially with ‘mute’...right now the US 2020 elections are happening and there’s people putting stuff up and I’ll mute them...and I’ve had arguments with people on social media before and it’s never been satisfying, so I’m like ‘nah, nah’, I don’t engage with that space...what I’ll do with Facebook, in particular, is follow businesses and organisations that I want to hear from...filter out negative news...police brutality...focusing on things that I want to see.

Despite transnational qualities of Black people’s digital experiences (Everett 2009; Sobande et al. 2019; Sobande and Osei 2020), there are also distinctly national, regional, and local elements which reflect how Black identities—even when re-embodied online—are linked to specific geo-cultural contexts and languages. For example, all of the Black digital diasporic experiences of the women who I interviewed involved them primarily, if not, solely, communicating in English; ultimately limiting the extent to which such experiences can be regarded as global or transnational, as opposed to Anglocentric and predominantly ‘Western’.

Borders, or, perhaps, boundaries, that exist between understandings and experiences of Blackness as embodied and expressed by individuals in Britain and the US were a source of lots of discussion among the women who I interviewed. One specific example of this was the different parameters within which Black identity is defined. The ‘one drop’ rule that has moulded notions of race and Black identity in the US (Dagbovie-Mullins 2013) was a point of contention for 7 of the Black women in Britain who I interviewed, and illustrates the need to explore ‘differences between America and England...in how race figures in the two societies’ (Hall cited in hooks and Hall 2018, p. 31).

Conversations that unfolded during my interviews with Black women in Britain included critiques of the potential for ‘mixed-race’ identities to be ‘reductively’ equated with Blackness—in both the US and Britain—in ways that fail to account for colourism and how the Blackness of light-skinned and ‘mixed-race’ individuals is often societally favoured, so their treatment sharply contrasts with the systemic oppression of dark-skinned Black people. Associated online discussions and disagreements reflect issues that are explored in-depth as part of communication, American ethnic studies, gender, women, and sexuality studies scholar Ralina
Joseph’s (2012) central work on ‘transcending Blackness’, which sheds light on how ideas concerning Black identity and post-racial politics are projected onto ‘multiracial’ individuals.

Some of the women who I spoke to highlighted how Black diasporic conversations on social media have provided them with the chance to learn about and discuss different geo-culturally specific histories and understandings of Black identity, including perceived (dis)connections between ‘mixed-race’ and Black identities in different parts of the world (Sims and Njaka 2019). Therefore, although digital spaces can be sites where Black people appear to overcome geographical borders and connect with each other across continents, such experiences may involve commentaries that uphold or contest other types of conceptual borders, or, boundaries—such as the perceived ones of Black identity, as constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by and through different people, politics, and places.

The critical race, communication, technology, and cyberspace work of Kolko et al. (2000) establishes that ‘race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters offline, and we can’t help but bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on’ (pp. 4–5). The digital experiences of Black women who I interviewed occur within a landscape linked to the racial and racist politics of both Britain and the US, which is punctuated by the longstanding public condoning of white supremacist ideologies and the normalisation of discourses of so-called ‘racial purity’. As such, those who I interviewed spoke about some of the ways that the perceived ‘authenticity’ of a person’s Black identity may be questioned and critiqued as part of their digital experiences (Maragh 2017), in ways that reflect context-dependent ideas about Black identity, ‘racial purity’ and how the boundaries of Blackness are (re)presented and (re)constructed online. What does the notion of being ‘authentically’ Black mean, how does the concept of authenticity function in this context, and in what ways is this notion of being ‘authentically’ Black operationalised in digital spaces? Questions such as these linger.

Many of the experiences of those who I spoke to were indicative of how some ‘Black women in Britain relationally engage with the digital content and commentaries of Black people in the US, including in ways that can foster their identification with the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement, as well as their adoption of phrases associated with African American Vernacular English (AAVE)’ (Sobande et al. 2019,
Due to the distinctly scarce media coverage of BLM in mass-media in Britain, for many who I spoke to, social media had become the means through which they learnt about the movement, its development, and Black liberationist struggles in other countries. More precisely, ‘the multi-level community and network building process commonly referred to as “Black Twitter”’ (Clark 2014, p. x) was a strong source of their digital dialogue with Black people in the US.

Temi, who is in her twenties and is a researcher based in Scotland, referenced the significance of Black Twitter in her life and how she learns about Black lives and struggles in the US, when she said:

In America, to do with Black Lives Matter...now it’s coming back into the news over here [UK] but when it first happened, with like Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland, it really wasn’t over in the UK news that much. It wasn’t featured at all. It’s only now that it’s really been featured.

The experiences of Temi and most of the women who I interviewed were reflective of how ‘some Black women in Britain feel more connected to digital discussions led by Black online users in the US, than ideas and identities documented in British mass-media’ (Sobande et al. 2019, p. 8).

Another Black woman who I interviewed, named Annie, who is in her late teens and is an undergraduate student in England, spoke about her use of Lipstick Alley—a website which on Google Play is marketed as being about ‘News, Sports, Celebrity Gossip from an African American perspective’. When speaking about Lipstick Alley, Annie said:

It’s a Black forum for African American women...I mean, it’s not as good as it used to be back in the day, ‘cause they used to have quite a few trolls...I guess because I found it at aged probably 14 or 15, and they just have every forum. The forum has like every alley you could think about, from politics to Black Lives Matter, to beauty, to celebrity gossip, to this, to that, to everything, and then they used to have a lot of ‘tea spillers’ as they’d say...so people who’d work in the industries, who would drop some gossip and they’d say either ‘you can sip it’ or ‘you can spit it out’...but some of the things that they said did come true and you had a lot of insightful things on there. Through that, I became quite aware of you know, groups like...you know, where to buy Black-owned makeup and jewellery and you know, some of these TV shows. They would tell you about it. Like, ‘this one is coming out, look out for it’ and ‘this one’s quite good and look out for this’...so it means that you really get an in-depth
idea of what’s going on around you and where to pick and choose...people giving their own experiences and different things, so that’s quite helpful as well.

From discussing their participation in conversations on Lipstick Alley, to their thoughts on shows on Black & Sexy TV, and a myriad of Black-led podcasts (Barner and Sacrée 2020; Florini 2019), those who I interviewed shared many examples of how Black women in Britain are making use of digital spaces and social media to access and contribute to content and conversations that stem from the work and words of Black people in the US—especially, Black women. Still, there was also recognition of debates and disagreements that can occur between Black people online, as part of what five of the women who I spoke to affectionately, but, pointedly, referred to as being ‘diaspora wars’.

In the words of Transatlantic Ghanaian fashion culture scholar Krys Osei (2019), to be a Black woman can be to experience ‘indescribable joy, indescribable pain’ (p. 742)—with such pain fuelled by the effects of co-dependent sexism, misogyny, and anti-Blackness. The insightful work of Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele (2019) illustrates how social media is used by Black individuals in ways that involve ‘asserting Black people’s full humanity and range of emotion’ (p. 831). In agreement with this position, and when reflecting on the experiences of those who I interviewed, it is clear that social media is used by Black women in Britain in ways that involve them expressing and learning about a range of experiences of Black identity and life, but which remain linked to the traits of different geo-cultural contexts.

**Black Women’s Natural Hair Vlogs and Knowledge-Sharing**

One of the many online content-sharing sites where Black women in Britain seek out and source content created by, and depicting Black women, is YouTube—where ‘various forms of cultural, social, and economic values are collectively produced by users en masse, via their consumption, evaluation, and entrepreneurial activities’ (Burgess and Green 2009, p. 5). The YouTube experiences of Black women may reveal much about the ‘subtleties and nuances of black women’s lives’ (Bobo 1995, p. 2) which are often dismissed and denied as part of derogatory media and public discourse about them.
Interviewing Black women in Britain about YouTube quickly gravitated to stories about their hair, including the Black beauty and hair vloggers they engage with. Natural hair journeys proved to be a nexus to issues concerning identity, authenticity, community and a sense of belonging. Contemporary shifts in the landscape of media platforms, especially, those enmeshed in digital culture, have altered power relations involved in producing and accessing on-screen images of Black people.

Frustrated with the lack of hairdressers in Scotland who cater to Black women, Temi took matters into her own hands and searched for natural haircare tips. She started sourcing YouTube content in 2010. Temi said:

I wanted to understand how to look after my hair. That’s what kicked it off. Now I follow so many people [on YouTube] and I literally take time out during the week. Like, I save videos and then just watch them...like whenever I’ve got a chance. It’s something that I actively do.

Natural hair vlogs serve as a practical tool that enables Temi’s self-education in terms of caring for natural African-Caribbean hair. On a more emotional level, they provide self-affirming experiences of feeling represented on-screen (Bobo 1995; Warner 2015). For Temi, television only offers restrictive images of Black women wearing ‘wigs and weaves, Peruvian and Brazilian, and it doesn’t seem like it is how Black women actually are’. Temi consistently made statements such as ‘I want to see somebody who looks like me’. For this reason, she favours YouTube over television. Such engagement with the vlogs of Black women has been so influential that Temi has considered becoming a vlogger and was involved in establishing a natural hair collective. Temi indicates how engagement with the vlogs of Black women may include self-educational elements related to the diasporic identities of Black women in Britain.

Another woman who I interviewed, named Annie, spoke about her disinterest in YouTube when explaining why she still uses it to watch makeup tutorials. Annie said, ‘with makeup, I can’t watch one with white or...when I say Black women, it has to be dark-skinned Black women’, who are infrequently depicted in mainstream makeup campaigns. Others who were interviewed made comparable comments:

I think about what I need at the time, so my YouTube channels kind of guide me...I’ll be like ‘do I need to feel better about myself sometimes, emotionally, physically’...Trying to find makeup as a Black woman...it’s
such an endeavor...sometimes you’re like, ‘I just want to find a good foun-
dation!’...then you go on YouTube and someone goes ‘oh, here you go’
and that’s that exchange that you’re having with these people.

The remarks of some who I spoke to indicate that they sought out Black
women’s vlogs to gain more inclusive forms of advice which are glar-
ingly absent in mainstream media and markets—especially at the point
that I interviewed Temi and Annie, which was long before the launch
of beauty brands such as Fenty by Rhianna. Their comments illustrate
how highly practical needs and daily frustrations (tips and advice are
abundantly available for light-skinned women) may segue into the ideo-
logical and political. YouTube is available to Black women in Britain as
a socio-cultural source of knowledge shared among Black women. This
is emphasised by the words of Okra, who is in her thirties and lives in
Scotland:

Try a mud or a clay wash...you’ll be shocked at what your hair looks like
afterwards. You understand why the ancestors used to do that...so much
has been lost in transmission...I’m grateful that we are actively trying to
remember how to do this, so that our children...the babies...are ok...don’t
have to go through this part anyway. It’s a small thing but it’s a big thing.

Throughout history, knowledge-networks have been ‘passed down over
generations of people’ (Harrison III et al. 2015, p. 306), and which have
‘come to represent the meaning of racial, ethnic, and cultural or national
identities’ (ibid.). Various ways that culturally specific information about
Black women’s haircare is transmitted have changed with the rise of
online content-sharing platforms (Johnson 2013). To merely interpret
the YouTube activity analysed as being an exchange of practical ques-
tions and advice would be to omit complex issues which link the practical
and everyday care of the self to the ideological work involved in identity
construction and community.

Turning to natural hair vlogs involves a process of supporting the
endeavours of other Black women, as well as, I argue, potentially ‘making
connections, promoting human connectedness and community building’
(van Dijck 2013, p. 201), within a Black digital diaspora (Everett 2009).
The comments of Nymeria, who is an artist in her twenties in Scotland,
affirm this:
Like many other Black women, I didn’t really know what the hell to do with my hair, so it was amazing to find a community of natural hair gurus on YouTube. There are literally thousands and thousands of Black women in all these different parts of the world, doing this. We consider them beauty bloggers but I feel as if they live within their own little niche, which is particular to Black womanhood...some, they're just really small channels...and sometimes I just like to give a girl a chance, you know? ...it’s kind of soothing to me at this point, because I’ve been doing it so long and I feel like it’s such an amazing thing that we created that for ourselves.

Even passive participation in the comments section of Black women’s vlogs can provide young Black women in Britain with a sense of belonging which may otherwise be hard to access when situated in predominantly white contexts. Rachel, who is in her twenties and is a recent graduate based in England remarked, ‘you’ll see stuff in the comment section and be like, “oh yeah! That’s me too. That happens to me too.” You can really relate’. Rachel’s words illustrate how it is not simply the content of Black women’s vlogs that yields relational experiences—it is also the commentary and sense of community they stimulate.

The comments of Dr Diddly Doo are a reminder of different types of collectivity that may be available to Black women online, and that the different beliefs and perspectives of Black women mean that not every space by Black women, and for them, will appeal or be open to all other Black women:

I remember...about a year ago...I got on some Facebook groups of different Black women and what I realised is that not all Black women are the same [laughs] and we don’t all have the same opinions about things...really conservative Christian protestant people talking about...‘you should be like this’...having altercations with people, including other Black women...so I started looking for other groups and had to learn how to expand that vocabulary of keywords for different people, so I’ve joined new groups and taken myself out of other ones.

Dr Diddly Doo also reflected on challenges involved in online dating as a Black woman (Adewunmi 2010). She said:

I will say one of the ways that I have made connections with people here has been digital media...talking to people and getting to know different
people on dating sites. It was weird…I mean honestly [laughs]…I think there are always people who exoticise Black women…if you’re anybody who is not white they’re probably exoticising you some how…I find the internet to be a place where a lot of people will quite proudly wave their freak flags in a way that they probably wouldn’t do in real life.

As Dr Diddly Doo emphasised, as she was one of relatively few Black women in the part of Scotland she was based in at that time, the hyper-visibility of being a Black woman in a predominantly white society mapped onto her digital experience of dating. Dr Diddly Doo laughed when speaking about how her and her friends who are Black women would share their experiences of online dating and would share tips on how to navigate the exoticisation that they encountered, and who to avoid on dating apps.

While praising how digital spaces can contribute to Black women’s knowledge-production and knowledge-sharing, Dr Diddly Doo also spoke of what she feels are limitations of the construction of community and solidarity online.

I think it can be overwhelming if you don’t find a particular space that you do belong…but there are opportunities…if you’re curious about technology and you’re a Black woman you can go to an Afrotech women’s group. Not just a space to talk and commiserate but to share opportunities. Having created spaces of solidarity, particularly for Black women before, I’ve noticed that sitting around a table and being able to talk to each other face to face is really critical and I just find…social media…that’s not really how conversations work…that being said, I do think that what there is….is that people are finding their spaces.

Some of the sentiments captured by Dr Diddly Doo’s comments connect to the potential to find and forge a sense of collectivity and communal space online, as identified and discussed by blogger, documentary producer, author, and scholar Renina Jarmon (2013) in *Black Girls Are From the Future: Essays On: Race, Digital Creativity and Pop Culture*.

Returning to a focus on YouTube, when speaking about her use of it, Temi detailed how vlogs provide the opportunity to learn from other Black women and Black people:

I would even go as far as to say, on my YouTube subscription list there are very few white YouTubers I actually follow. I don’t think that it is
anything to do with racism or being prejudiced in any way. I think it’s just growing up I had never been taught by any Black teachers…all of my teachers at primary school up until high school. The very first time I was ever taught by an African or Black lecturer, it was one class. It was a lecturer at undergraduate and she was Black and it was like, wow! It was a massive deal. I just want to know more and learn more about what the history is and experiences are of people who look like me.

Miss Africa—who is in her twenties, involved in activist work and plans to train as a counsellor—had a slightly different story to offer that underlines both the practical and socio-political realms of such YouTube activity. Miss Africa lost her sight in recent months but spoke about how the importance of natural hair vlogs relates to much more than visual signification:

My friends, when I was in hospital…used to play these videos for me because I like to listen to them, because even if you can’t see them, you can hear what they use for their hair…which is quite nice because you need that.

Miss Africa’s comments were some of many which involved implicit and sometimes explicit references to a sense of connection and solidarity. Miss Africa also spoke about her contrasting experience of listening to audio descriptions of televised media content in Scotland and expressed frustration at hearing Black women’s hair described as ‘bush’ style. Her critique of such offensive audio descriptions of the appearance of Black women brings attention to the multifaceted ways that media constructions of Black women are impacted by entwined anti-Black racism and sexism—even audio descriptions intended to ensure the accessibility of content.

Unlike such media that she encounters on television in Scotland, natural hair vlogs which are created by Black women and which they narrate, provide Miss Africa with media experiences that not only include images of Black women, but which also foreground their perspectives as expressed in their own words. Like Temi, Nymeria and Miss Africa, Rachel alluded to this element of kinship when speaking of her love of natural hair vlogs:

I just felt like…it’s just nice to see…it sounds really bad but it’s nice to see other people struggling like you, or going through the same stuff. Like,
growing up I'd say since secondary school...my secondary school was quite mixed in terms of race...but I could only think of one other Black girl that had natural hair, so I didn’t have anyone to talk to about like...what it’s like to care for natural hair. Like, saying ‘oh yeah so I’m getting my hair done today’ or ‘what kind of grease do you use?’ [laughs] random stuff like that.

It has been noted that ‘black women’s texts nourish and sustain their readers’ (Bobo 1995, p. 6), and in the early twenty-first century, such texts include user-generated YouTube vlogs. Engaging with the vlogs of Black women has the capacity to become part of ‘strategies of representation or empowerment’ (Bhabha 1994, p. 2), such as by enabling self-affirming feelings and forms of collective self-education.

However, Black women’s use of YouTube indicates how ‘commodification is a process that is both enabling and constraining’ (Saha 2012, p. 740). Plantain Baby, for example, who is in her twenties, is an artist, and is based in England, said, ‘there’s still a bit of an issue because Black people can produce any kind of content that they want [on YouTube] but the people that are behind YouTube and the film industry, it’s still white dominated’. In addition, Dr Diddly Doo commented on the educational potential of YouTube as well as how it can result in the creation of content that ultimately feeds into mainstream media organisations which are predominantly led by white people:

I know that some people say I went to the university of YouTube...I do think that traditional education can be quite dangerous for Black women sometimes. YouTube, I like to think I use it to find information and then I fall down the rabbit hole...open tabs...I think I've seen Black people depicted interestingly on YouTube as a way to get exposure, so Issa Rae and her Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl...that was one of the first of those things that I watched...what's it called?...webseries!...do people do these anymore?...oh yeah, they do but they charge for it now. I remember learning about crowdsourcing from it...I loved it and then I started getting into some other stuff...I don’t know if it was I Am Other...I was able to watch everyday people put up funny stuff before they became big stars that had to fit into the media machine.

At the same time, for many of the women who I interviewed a key draw of the vlogs of Black women is the opportunity to see Black women in control of their depiction. Ola is in her late teens and based in Scotland,
and when speaking about Black women vloggers, she said: ‘it’s just great to see Black women being successful in the media I guess, yeah. They just have such great personalities as well and they offer so much advice online to other women’.

For Ola, the symbolic value of Black women’s vlogs includes inspiration yielded by their success, regardless that the vlogs may also net the vloggers income (and thus suggest commercial or even mercenary interests). Relatedly, Nymeria said ‘there’s this amazing YouTuber I watch and who makes a lot of this stuff herself...she’s not even asking for any money’. When explaining processes of communication, Hall (1993, p. 510) outlines that ‘the degrees of “understanding” and “misunderstanding” in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the “personifications”, encoder-producer and decoder-receiver’. Black women who are vloggers may be both the producer and subject of their vlogs. Regarding the experiences of the Black women who I interviewed, the visible agency and self-possession of Black women as content producers is a big part of the appeal of these vlogs.

(Medi)activist Sentiments

The online experiences of those who I interviewed may be viewed as an example of how Black women in Britain engage with ‘alternative’ media (Couldry and Curran 2003), rather than what is offered in mainstream mass-media in Britain. However, while talk of alternative images involves reflecting on media that ‘provide divergent points of view and cultural choices’ (Lievrouw 2011, p. 1) to those available in mainstream markets, such discussion is often associated more with news and current affairs than entertainment and lifestyle-based media. Moreover, the word ‘alternative’ does not fully capture the proactive, resistant, and political sentiments involved in the digital activities of some of the women who I interviewed. This includes how Okra spoke of turning to the online content of Black people, as part of efforts to ‘decolonise my mind’. These ideological underpinnings of the digital activity of some Black women in Britain signal varying degrees of (medi)activism, or, at the least, resistance.

Influenced by Dhaenens’ (2012, p. 446) exploration of ‘the resistant potentiality of texts’ on YouTube, and in line with how vlogs can speak to Black women’s sense of identity and self-esteem, ‘(medi)activist sentiments’ as a concept can be used to grasp how the women who
I interviewed voiced their often implicit, yet ostensibly resistant media experiences. Comments made by Temi exemplify the active avoidance of mainstream mass-media in favour of YouTube:

I don’t necessarily watch TV anymore. Most of the TV that I watch is mainly YouTube channels. Essentially that’s my new TV because it’s content that I want to see, not content that is dictated by white, middle class and middle-aged men, who are trying to figure out what the majority would maybe like. Then, when you say that you’re going with what the majority would maybe like, minorities are always left out.

Temi, as do the others, frames the importance of her use of YouTube by detailing some of the everyday and structural racism (Emejulu and Bassel 2015; Essed 1991) Black women in Britain commonly experience:

In the 90s there weren’t that many other Black people around you [in Scotland]...if you got on a bus, you were often the only Black person on a bus and people wouldn’t necessarily want to sit next to you. That’s what you feel. People would be standing and literally, it happened to me so many times. I’d be on the bus going to primary school and no one would want to sit next to me, even though the seat was there...it affected me, yes. Not having that access to other people who look like you...you crave it more, so you end up closer to the sort of Black or African side. The identity that you feel that you ascribe to...it becomes okay. This is the way that I see myself...that’s exactly what happened with me. In high school we talked about the Jacobites, Mary Queen of Scots, yeah [laughs] and there was no Black history...I was fighting...resistance to not just be the status quo and let that be my identity, knowing that there was so much more to me...I went and found that for myself...actively seeking specific mediums that actually relate to who I am...because the depiction of Black people on TV in the UK is very few and far between.

Seeking out images of Black women on YouTube thus becomes about more than finding practical advice. It is part of a shift from implicit, underground unease to a more openly political stance. This may range from being critical of mainstream television to ‘fighting’ the absence of Black history, as Temi does by sourcing specific vlogs. Seeking out the vlogs of Black women can be stimulated by entertainment-based motivations, but can also be a very openly resistant online activity. This can involve the (medi)activist sentiment of trying to ‘strengthen one’s identity’, as Temi
puts it, while facing discrimination and having limited opportunities to learn from Black people first-hand.

Although the remarks of others who I interviewed are more general, similar patterns can be discerned. For instance, Jennifer, who is in her twenties and is a student in England, speaks about dismissing televised images because she feels they (mis)represent Black women: ‘Actually I would say, instead of television, I tend to watch YouTube videos more. There’s you know, with YouTube videos, you tend to get people more representative of yourself...cause it’s just any person can go on there and make content that’s more truthful’. When considering Jennifer’s remarks, especially in the years since this interview, I find myself thinking about the duality of YouTube—it can be used by Black women in ways that enrich their lives, yet, it is also a video-sharing platform that is rife with far-right content and vlogs framed as being ‘factual’ and ‘truthful’ but which propagate falsities and hate speech.

As Black feminist, scholar, and activist hooks (1992, 1995, 2009, 2014) observes, Black people have in both the past and present challenged how we are presented in mass-media. Traditional examples of resistance include public protests, boycotts and ‘turning off the television set’ (hooks 1992, 1995). Rather than discount the resistant and oppositional intention (Bobo 1995; hooks 1992, 1995) of simple acts such as choosing not to watch television, I prefer to follow hooks’ lead and include this form of everyday political protest. This preference is undergirded by the fact that in the interviews, Black women talked about the wide range of their YouTube use. They specifically included how they search for and view content by Black women activists, unearthing further ways that their YouTube use involves (medi)activist sentiments.

Plantain Baby also emphasised how mainstream mass-media primarily promote white and heteronormative identities (Bobo 1995; Dhaenens 2012; Hall 2003) that Black women may not relate to:

There are loads of Black queer women here but there’s not space for us [in mainstream media] which is maybe one of the reasons why you don’t hear about us enough...because we’re having to do things on our own.

Engagement with YouTube videos created by and featuring Black women can provide Black women viewers with a stronger sense of ownership over their media spectator experiences. Shelby, who is in her twenties and is based in England, summarised this when saying, ‘I think it’s about going
out of my own way, looking for my own sort of media, looking for what I want to see, or like...looking for people that I can really relate to’. Additionally, Plantain Baby hinted at ideologically influenced reasons behind her dismissal of television:

I haven’t watched television properly in years. I mean, as a Black person, there’s nothing really entertaining. There’s nothing there that references anything to do with my Blackness. If anything, it’s going to be on the news in some sort of negative way...I kind of don’t pay attention to the media but I would say, do they even think Black British women even exist here? You know, is that even an identity to explore? I also feel like there is a constant negative stigma and stereotypes about Black women. There is a lot of misrepresentation. A lot of unreliable sources. The people who are recording these Black experiences are not Black! They’re not Black women! You’re not hearing from the horse’s mouth.

Plantain Baby is involved in a creative collective that shares the narratives of Black women in Britain and, as part of that collective, has produced YouTube content. Still, YouTube does not exist outside of capitalism, white supremacy, or patriarchy, as Plantain Baby pointed out. To conceive of digital ‘technology as innocent or neutral misunderstands the social relations of technology and its very real material consequences in our social world’ (Emejulu and McGregor 2016, p. 1). In addition, taking a political stance and protesting against discrimination and exclusion can take a wide variety of forms. It would not do to overlook the range of ways that those who I interviewed are critical and seek alternatives to mainstream media, in order to construct their identities and build a sense of community. However, ‘[t]his is not to suggest that all Black women interpret media in the same and critical way’ (Sobande et al. 2019, p. 11).

Racism ‘scars symbol making and the cultural industries that disseminate information and entertainment to audiences’ (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, p. 179). Content generated by YouTube vloggers is typically ‘situated at a crossroads between the popular and the margins’ (Dhaenens 2012, p. 444) which those who I interviewed feel is fertile ground for the spectatorship of images of Black women, created for and by them. Some of the experiences that those who I interviewed discuss reveal watching YouTube to be an ideologically charged activity that relates directly to experiences of disconnection and exclusion, as well as, I argue, the opportunity to explore ‘the possibility of engaging knowledge across different kinds of boundaries’ (hooks cited in hooks and Hall 2018, p. 6)—online
and offline. While living in Britain, Ola, who is in her late teens and based in Scotland sources images of Black women on YouTube, and connects this with the African diasporic element of her identity. When in Nigeria, Ola does not feel an impetus to actively seek out images of Black women on-screen:

Well when I was younger...well, we were in Nigeria so there was lots of Black women on TV. Yeah, because of all the Nollywood films and shows and stuff like that, so yeah it was a normal thing I guess. It was when I came here [UK] that I realised that it wasn’t so...like, not normal...but it wasn’t often that you’d see a Black woman on TV when I came here.

Online platforms provide enabling forms of technology here. Film and media studies scholar Anna Everett (2009, p. 20) asserts that since 1995, there have been ‘swelled ranks of black people throughout the African diaspora connecting to the Internet’ and through it. Ola is eager to remain connected to a Black African experience, and keeping up with the vlogs of Black women is one way of doing so. Plantain Baby also emphasised how content-sharing platforms facilitate such a sense of connection: ‘I feel like you are able to see and kind of understand narratives from different Black people all over the world. It is an outlet for Black people in the diaspora to talk about their experiences and share their narratives’. Overall, many of the interviews in this regard speak to the ‘subversive capacity’ of Black women as media spectators in the twenty-first century context of online YouTube habits, as Bobo (1995, p. 5) maintained earlier in relation to movies, novels, and other content carriers.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Commonalities across the interviews point to a pattern in how Black women make sense of their representation in mainstream media, versus certain videos of Black women vloggers. The difference lies between the exclusion and neglect yielded by mainstream media, and the opportunity to engage in resistant and self-empowering activity when building an identity influenced by the online voices of other Black women. Being a Black woman in predominantly white places will often involve dealing with everyday anti-Black racism and striving for a sense of belonging. This does not directly or immediately translate into a political stance. Digital habits can appear to be more coincidental than intentional, due
to how YouTube recommends videos, and what happens to be on the social media profiles of friends. That said, the digital habits of many who I spoke to, including their engagement with images of Black women on YouTube, were often purposeful and encouraged by feelings of marginalisation, that participation in a Black digital diaspora (Everett 2009) was felt as remedying.

To return to the words of Rachel, ‘I could only think of one other Black girl that had natural hair, so I didn’t have anyone to talk to about like…what it’s like to care for natural hair’. For Black women in Britain, YouTube allows the perusing and production of images of Black women as a means of self-actualisation, self-care and support. Evidently, the proliferation of content-sharing platforms will make how some diasporic people connect with each other increasingly digital in nature. As ever, more research ‘that can illuminate and enrich our understanding of the social formation of black identity’ (hooks 2014, p. 8), as well as ‘the commodification of “blackness” is needed’ (ibid.). During the early stages of my research I saw little evidence of this commodification in the natural hair vlogs discussed in the interviews, but such vlogs have increasingly become an interesting business proposition for product manufacturers and other businesses, particularly as ‘the desire to market Black hair care products and services on these various venues, with such enormous access, is quite popular in the twenty-first century’ (Johnson 2013, p. 79).

Further studies of how Black women’s online activity influences mainstream media, last but not least, can play an important part in challenging the ‘lack of attention to race and ethnicity in the booming research field of cultural production studies’ (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, p. 179) in Britain. Online platforms such as YouTube will feed mainstream television, yet restrictions apply there. As Dhaenens (2012) observes, ‘where the margins allow more freedom, the popular is submitted to social and cultural conventions’ (pp. 444–445).

Therefore, when Black women in Britain want to see images of Black women that are rarely represented, for the time being, their chances are much better when they turn to YouTube vlogs than when switching on the television. Such alternative images will be crafted and sought out by Black women in Britain in many ways, ranging from accidentally to actively and ambitiously. Regardless of this diversity of strategies and tactics, the vlogs of Black women have become connected with the identity formation and community building of Black women in Britain, some
of whom are creating and carving out their own media experiences and, in turn, themselves.

**Note**

1. This chapter draws on material included in my article ‘Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube.’ *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2017) 20(6): 655–671. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733001. In addition, it draws on material included in Sobande, Francesca, Fearfull, Anne & Brownlie, Douglas. (2019). ‘Resisting media marginalisation: Black women’s digital content and collectivity.’ *Consumption Markets & Culture*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2019.1571491. In the months and years since these articles were published, I have become more skeptical concerning the radical and resistant potentials of much digital and media activity—particularly due to the steep and stifling constraints of capitalism. Therefore, although I include the terms ‘(medi)activism’ and ‘(medi)activist sentiments’ (Sobande 2017) in this chapter, I do so cautiously. Furthermore, I ‘maintain the position that Black women’s marketplace and media choices and production can be political, and, at times, involve struggling against their/our oppression’ (Sobande and Osei 2020, p. 15) but I ‘remain critical of claims that reductively equate Black women’s liberation with their consumer culture activities’ (ibid.). Thus, I continue to question the radical and resistant scope of actions and exchanges embedded within capitalist marketplace settings and infrastructures, while also being conscious of the many creative, collective, and digital ways that Black women are ‘re-imagining blackness and womanhood beyond technological exclusion and surveillance’ (Hobson 2008, p. 111), and are pushing against and attempting to dismantle structural power relations that breed inequalities.

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