CHAPTER 1

Why the Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain?

Abstract  This chapter outlines questions that buttress this work, such as: How is digital media implicated in the lives of Black women in Britain? In what ways do such digital experiences involve forms of creativity and cultural production? How are the intersections of anti-Black racism, sexism, and capitalism connected to this? What is the ‘digital’ in the lives of Black women in Britain, and how can it be both a source of joy and pain? How and why are Black women often identified as digital ‘trendsetters’, while being both erased and hyper-visible as creators, knowledge-producers, and social movement builders? This chapter provides an overview of key themes in this book, including digital diasporic dynamics and transnational, national, and regional relations.

Keywords  Black girls · Black women · Childhood · Diaspora · Digital · Social media

How is digital media implicated in the lives of Black women in Britain? In what ways do such digital experiences involve forms of creativity and cultural production? How are the intersections of anti-Black racism, sexism, and capitalism connected to this? What is the ‘digital’ in the lives of Black women in Britain, and how can it be both a source of joy and pain? How and why are Black women often identified as
digital ‘trendsetters’, while being both erased and hyper-visible as creators, knowledge-producers, and social movement builders? These questions buttress *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*—a book which focuses on issues, experiences, and perspectives that are seldom addressed in media, cultural, and digital studies.

This work is predominantly based on my research which commenced in 2015, but its roots developed prior to the rise of content-sharing sites and social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube. Since childhood, my mind has homed a patchwork of thoughts on Black people’s depiction on-screen and their involvement in the creation of media. I have memories of North American media imports and television shows from Britain—*Comin’ Atcha!, Bump ‘N’ Grind, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Kerching!, Harry and Cosh, Moesha, Desmond’s, My Wife and Kids, EastEnders, 3 Non-Blondes, One on One, Cutting It, Hollyoaks, Waterloo Road, The Crust, Hang Time, Girlfriends, The Story of Tracy Beaker, Sister, Sister*…the list goes on.

I watched a lot of TV—I still do, but now mostly online. Often glibly dubbed ‘urban TV’, the channel Trouble was a staple part of my childhood television diet because it offered a broader range of depictions of Black lives than those (un)available through most mainstream media outlets in Britain. As I got older, my pre-teen television musings morphed into meaning-making sparked by different expressions and experiences of Black digital diasporic culture (Everett 2009), as well as my understanding of how Black women in Britain have come together throughout history ‘to record our version of events’ (Bryan et al. 2018, p. 1).

Just as the development of television ‘altered our world’ (Williams 2003, p. 3), so too did the rise of the internet and Wi-Fi connections from the 1990s onwards (McIlwain 2020; Roberts 2019), paired with the popularity of mobile devices which enabled some people to create and communicate online and while on the move. Simple and sturdy mobile phones that were likened to indestructible bricks were gradually crowded out by slicker models with online functions and aesthetic appeal. Screen time was no longer just about the prospect of being at the cinema, in front of a television, or a desktop computer. Instead, it now included the possibility of time spent with friends crowded around one person’s mobile screen and connecting to the internet—possibly at an exorbitant cost—without needing to physically plug in a device.

I passed time on websites such as DressUpGames, Piczo, and Dollz-Mania. I created amusingly bad polyphonic ringtones, marveled at the
magnetism of Comic Sans, and made my way through Nintendo 64, Game Boy Advance, and PlayStation games—including gems from the Crash Bandicoot, Pokémon, Sims, and Tony Hawk series. Eventually, I moved on to mining Xanga for the latest ‘noughties’ emo and post-hardcore music demos, in-between wistfully browsing Fueled by Ramen band merchandise when Fall Out Boy had just started to grace the cover of Kerrang! magazine.

During my childhood, the nuances of the different digital experiences of Black girls and Black women in Britain were far from being at the forefront of my mind. This is not to suggest that I was ever oblivious to the particularities of my identity as a Black (and ‘mixed-race’)1) girl in a predominantly white society. Rather, as a child exploring the internet, I was not preoccupied with considering connections between people’s digital experiences and their racial and gender identities. Later in life, this shifted.

Since embarking on my research project, the motivation behind writing this book has not changed, including frustration at how Black women’s media experiences and creative and cultural contributions are often structurally dismissed and obstructed. I seek to reflect on the contemporary media experiences of Black women in Britain, especially those connected to internet activity—from enjoyable and enriching online encounters, to participating in digital forms of cultural production and contending with online harassment and abuse. If it is true that ‘[n]othing seems to escape capital’s control, whether affects, emotions and feelings, linguistic skills, or manifestations of desire, dreams or thought’ (Mbembe 2019, p. 43), then efforts to understand the digital experiences of Black women in Britain must reckon with how capitalist frameworks impact them. Consequently, I write these words with the aim of contributing to dialogue about the relationship between anti-Black racism, sexism, capitalism, media, the internet, and the lives of Black women of African descent2 in Britain.

Despite the relatively unchanging nature of the reasons for me doing this work, over the last decade media depictions and the digital experiences of Black women in Britain have changed, at least, to some extent (Adewunmi 2012; Amoah 2019; Gabriel 2016; Sobande 2017; Sobande et al. 2019; Wilson-Ojo 2017). Yet, the digital experiences of Black women in Britain are scarcely considered in scholarship (t)here, including media, cultural, and digital studies. Black people are often excluded—both literally and conceptually—from academia in Britain, in addition
to many different institutional and educational environments (Johnson et al. 2018; Johnson 2019). Thus, *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* was written against a societal backdrop punctuated by the structural omission and oppression of Black people (t)here, and impacted by the interlocking nature of anti-Black racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination (Bryan et al. 2018; Crenshaw 1989, 2017; Hill Collins 2000; Lewis 1993).

This book considers how media is implicated in Black women’s lives in Britain—ranging from accounts of twentieth-century activism and television representations, to experiences of YouTube, Twitter, and the internet. Drawing on Black feminist approaches, I synthesise critical understandings of digital culture, gender, race, Blackness, and Britain, to offer a text that dances between disciplinary boundaries and focuses on the lives of Black women. In doing so, this work critically contributes to media, cultural, and digital studies, particularly in Britain. Perhaps, it generatively disrupts these research fields and how matters to do with Black lives, anti-Blackness, and, specifically, Black women in Britain, are rarely addressed.

While the focus of my book is the digital lives of Black women in Britain, when addressing associated issues I affirm that digital encounters, embodied experiences, and material conditions are inherently entwined. Can lives ever be ‘digital’? What does, or can, the concept of ‘digital lives’ even mean, resemble and feel like? Any professed clean-cut distinction between online and offline ‘worlds’ and ‘lives’ is always a blurred and illusionary one, at best (Daniels et al. 2017; Emejulu and McGregor 2016; Kolko et al. 2000; Nakamura 2008). For this reason, my book does not merely focus on the online experiences of Black women in Britain. More precisely, it accounts for how digital content creation, humorous exchanges, marketplace interactions, meaning-making, and collectivity, takes shape in relation to different types of technology and digital space—in addition to so-called ‘in real life’ (IRL) contexts and cultures.

**Digital Diasporic Dynamics: Transnational, National, and Regional Relations**

Significant scholarship in the early twenty-first century on African-American experiences in cyberspace illuminates that—at that time—although ‘the virtual Black community’ (Alkalimat 2004, p. 4) had an increasingly vibrant online presence, it was still ‘in infancy barely taking
baby steps’ (ibid.). Since such crucial work regarding the digital experiences of Black people in the US, including communication studies scholar Catherine R. Squires’ (2009) research on *African Americans and the Media*, global Black digital activity has continued to develop in dynamic ways which is explored in relation to Britain in the rigorous research of emerging scholars Rianna Walcott at King’s College London and Keisha Bruce at the University of Nottingham.

Bruce (forthcoming, 2022) examines ‘the creation, circulation, and engagement with Black women’s digital visual culture’. Her work demonstrates how ‘digital diasporic identity and community is created and performed on social media through processes of visuality and affect’ (Bruce, forthcoming, 2022). Relatedly, Walcott’s research (forthcoming, 2021) examines ‘how language is disseminated between geographically and culturally disparate people who self-identify as Black, and how linguistic acts of performative identity that Black British women use contribute to the articulation of a group Black identity through shared language and experience’.

In November 2018, Keisha Bruce (@keishastweets) used Twitter to call for expressions of interest in putting together a panel on digital Blackness for the American Studies Association (ASA) 2019 Annual Meeting which took place in Honolulu, Hawai’i. Rianna Walcott (@rianna_walcott) and I (@chess_ess) responded. This led to the three of us corresponding for months at a distance online to create our panel—‘Navigating Transnational Digital Blackness: Networked Publics and Decolonized Ethnographic Approaches’—chaired by African American studies and English scholar Cynthia A. Young. We drew on paramount work on media, culture, digital and communication studies, and Black people’s online experiences in the US (Benjamin 2019; Brock 2018, 2020; Clark 2014; Everett 2009; Gray 2015; Jackson 2016; McMillan Cottom 2017; Noble 2018; Noble and Tynes 2016; Steele 2016a, 2016b, 2017), while focusing on the specifics of Black lives in Britain.

Our ASA session continued conversations that Walcott and I took part in at a panel in 2018 on ‘Bridges and Boundaries: Black (British) Digital Discourses’—chaired by communication studies scholar Jessica H. Lu. Walcott and I co-organised the panel to participate in Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black—the first national conference of the African American History, Culture, and Digital Humanities (AADHum) Initiative at the University of Maryland. We did this together with laylaroxanne hill who is a curator, artist, and organiser who advocates for
non-commodifiable collective liberation, and Melz Owusu who is a non-binary, decolonial and Black feminist thinker, a community activist, and is undertaking a PhD at the University of Cambridge—exploring the relationship between epistemic and social justice.

In sum, the scholarship of Walcott and Bruce is critically contributing to the development and direction of Black digital studies in Britain. In addition, the work of both Owusu and hill significantly shapes various movements for radical liberation on multiple fronts. Individually, we each explore different landscapes, experiences, understandings, and expressions of Black life across a range of digital spaces and offline places. Collectively, we work towards making a critical intervention concerning the erasure and articulation of Black diasporic experiences, knowledge, and cultural production—particularly in relation to the specifics of being Black in Britain, in various regions.

As is suggested by film and media studies scholar Anna Everett’s (2009) innovative research on race and cyberspace, the term ‘digital diaspora’ can be a useful one to refer to the myriad examples of how Black people around the world have connected, communicated, and created space(s) by using different digital technologies, platforms, and prowess. Black digital diasporic dialogue, including social media discussions between Black people, can facilitate the feeling that such online communication overcomes and erodes geographical borders—despite persistent barriers to the free movement of Black people within and beyond countries and digital enclaves. Put briefly, digital spaces can enable Black people in different places to communicate with each other and come together, even momentarily, and as part of ‘the online Black public sphere’ (Steele 2016a, p. 2) which among many other experiences can involve collectivity, creativity, relationality, joy and resistance (Clark 2014; Gabriel 2016; Lu and Steele 2019; Sobande et al. 2019; Steele 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

Still, social constructions of the nation-state, citizenship, ethnicity, racial identity and borders (hill 2018; Omonira-Oyekanmi 2010; Otele 2017)—which can be ‘those places where, for many of our contemporaries, the world comes undone and globalization comes up against its limits’ (Mbembe 2019, p. 22)—impact digital experiences irrespective of feelings of borderlessness. Also, ‘[i]dentity formation, the sense of being an embodied, located individual, does not occur in isolation from within a mono-logic of cultural development and formation’ (Young 2000, p. 45).
Therefore, focusing on the digital lives of Black women in Britain involves thinking about how such lives are connected to and disconnected from those of Black women in other countries.

My work considers how issues related to regionality factor into the lives of Black women in Britain (hill and Sobande 2018; Sulter 1986), both online and offline. I remain skeptical of the adequacy and specificity of describing someone or something as being located ‘in Britain’—because, where exactly? My perspective relates to an awareness of how claims of Britain’s unified nature are often effectively and ardently contested, and how stark differences between life in nations within Britain—England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales—are often ignored as part of sweeping statements about life (t)here.

In turn, and given ‘the value of cultural specificity in understanding emerging media’ (Florini 2019, p. 5), throughout my book I consider how different regions where Black women are based affect their media experiences and lives in certain ways (Kay 2010; Palma 2017; The Afro-Caribbean Women’s Association 1990). Even so, I do refer to the lives of Black women as being ‘in Britain’—while clarifying different regional experiences—but without specific reference to being ‘British’. My avoidance of the term ‘British’, unless used when referring to the chosen words of others, is partly based on recognition of ‘widespread ambivalence among some Black people about identifying themselves as British, in any unadorned, unembellished or unhyphenated sense’ (Chambers 2017, p. xvii).

My position is shaped by Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s (1998) anthropological research related to ‘why and how black identity is constituted as the mutual opposite of English and British identities’ (p. 291). Additionally, given that the concept of Britishness is often equated with experiences in England, with little to no connection to those in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, I choose to observe differences between the notion of being British and being in Britain. My decision to avoid a focus on the term ‘British’ is not intended to be dismissive of the identities and experiences of individuals who refer to themselves as such or are identified this way by others. Instead, this decision is aligned with my intention to avoid the exclusionary nationalistic sentiments that can be associated with Britishness.

What’s more, I aim to eschew undermining the different national and regional-specific ways that Black women in Britain may identify or be identified as—including English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish
(British Social Attitudes 2013; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2013a). I also intend to avoid negating the experiences of Black women in Britain who primarily identify with a sense of nationhood located outside of Britain, as well as the experiences of those who do not identify with any notion of nationhood or citizenship—including a ‘transactional model of citizenship’ (Benjamin 2019, p. 19) which ‘presumes that people’s primary value hinges on the ability to spend money and, in the digital age, expend attention … browsing, clicking, buying’ (ibid.).

To be Black in Britain can distinctly differ to being Black elsewhere. Further still, to be Black in a capital city may be to experience life in a way that contrasts with the realities of Black people living in rural settings. Still, there can be commonalities between Black diasporic experiences (Emejulu and Sobande 2019; Figueroa-Vásquez 2020; Florvil and Plumly 2018; Palmer 2011, 2016; Perlow et al. 2018; Sims and Njaka 2019; Twine 2004, 2010). In my work, the term ‘diaspora’ encompasses felt, yet, intangible and sometimes fragile connections and forms of consciousness—which along with being associated with a racialised embodied identity, ancestry, and perceived country of ‘origin’, are linked to (re)imagined and (re)presented notions of home and belonging.

Then again, I use the term ‘diaspora’ with a critical perspective of its potential to flatten distinctly different experiences (e.g. of migration, asylum-seeking, class, colourism, sexuality, gender, and religion) between Black people who are sometimes mistakenly thought to share a somewhat fixed and completely collective experience. In the words of sociologist Frederick F. Wherry (2012, p. 7):

> Just as people are born into a culture with a language and a structure of language that existed before they were born, so too do individuals find themselves by birth or by migration to inhabit a shared sense about how the world is ordered (or at least about how things ought to be ordered and done).

An example of shared struggle is navigation of the pervasive global force of white supremacy and systemic oppression faced by Black people (Gilroy 1987; Taylor 2016; Wekker 2016; Yancy 2018). Nevertheless, existence of any type of such shared struggle does not disprove differences between Black people and does not solely define what it means to be Black.
DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF BLACK LIFE

Due to systemic factors such as colourism which involves the structural favouring of light-skinned people and the contrastingly severe oppression and dehumanisation of people who are darker-skinned (Adegoke 2019; Amoah 2019; Gabriel 2007; Tate 2009, 2017a, 2017b)—including within Black communities—not all Black people are equally subjected to forms of anti-Blackness. Given the rifeness of white supremacy, coupled with their perceived embodied proximity to whiteness, light-skinned Black people—including those also identified as ‘mixed-race’—can contribute to, and, be complicit in, anti-Blackness and colourism. Accordingly, when reflecting on the digital lives of Black women in Britain it is necessary to tarry with how Black women’s many experiences are sculpted by different types of interlocking structural oppression (Crenshaw 1989, 2017; Hill Collins 2000), such as anti-Blackness, sexism, and ‘the impact of colorism (also referred to as shadeism)’ (Amoah 2019, p. 1).

I consider how digital spaces shape the identities, self-expression, and lives of Black women in Britain, and how Black women in Britain shape digital spaces, and environments beyond, but, connected to them. In agreement with the perspective of curator and writer Erika Dalya Muhammad (2001), throughout my book “digital space” is used as a deliberately elastic term to define both old-school and new-school media practices that respond to continual technological innovation’ (p. 92). One Black woman’s digital source of joy and refuge may be another’s source of stress and struggle. My book wrestles with tensions between Black women’s creation of online content sometimes being a labour of love, a form of (un)credited labour or, simply, an entertaining and enjoyable pastime.

In this context, what does ‘labour’ mean? When is it present or absent? How is it claimed and (un)compensated? When considering these questions in the chapters that follow there is acknowledgement of the intricacies of online commentaries which can circulate in an arguably transnational Black digital diaspora (Everett 2009; Sobande et al. 2019). As part of such discussion there is also recognition of how Black digital diasporic spaces can be ones where a sense of community and kinship may feel as though it exists, alongside hierarchical relations and hegemonic discourse influenced by the domination of the English language (Emejulu and Sobande 2019).
Research and writing about perceived ‘minoritarian users and makers of digital culture’ (De Kosnik and Feldman 2019, p. 2) points to how people’s identities and social relations are continually (re)produced as part of their engagement with on-screen images and media practices at different stages of their lives. My book involves contemplation concerning some of the experiences of Black girls—including constant oppressive scrutiny that they face (Dawes 2012; Halliday 2019; Okanlawon 2019)—and how media depictions they encounter as children can influence them, even in later life. I discuss how some ‘parents construct Black children’s engagement with media as being a counter-cultural coping mechanism, to temper the potential racial and diasporic discordance of their children’s identities’ (Sobande 2018, p. 37) in predominantly white societies.

Such parental management of children’s media is by no means exclusive to the twenty-first century, but the development of digital media and technology has affected how parents may attempt to manage and mediate the consumer culture experiences of their Black children, and by extension, their self-perceptions. Informed by extant studies, I use the words ‘consumer culture’ in reference to ‘the intensification of consumerism along with increasing prominence of consumption as social, cultural and economic activity that has come about with free-market capitalism and that is characteristic of late modernity, or what many refer to as post-modernity’ (Kravets et al. 2018, p. 1). Influenced by critical studies of consumer culture, this book responds to recent calls for more research on the racial and racist dynamics of media and marketplace activity to further develop understandings of how racialised subjectivities and racist interactions are experienced online and around the world (Grier et al. 2019; Lindridge et al. 2015).

Social media and online content-sharing platforms are key sites of consumer culture, as well as sites of contemporary meaning-making, including as part of recent ‘conversations about race and racial inequality’ (Anderson and Hitlin 2016, p. 2)—especially those led by Black people (Clark 2014), who have made use of networked forms of communication in ingenious ways for centuries (Brock 2020). Since the 1990s, ‘black connectivity online seems to have achieved a critical mass’ (Everett 2009, p. 10) and contributed to the formation of national and global solidarities and social movements (McIlwain 2020; Taylor 2016). Despite this, there is a relative dearth of in-depth empirical research which focuses on how the production and spectatorship of digital media and content is intertwined with issues concerning race, ethnicity, gender and, specifically,
Black life in Britain. Be that as it may, the distinct paucity of academic journal articles and books on the digital experiences of Black women in Britain should not be mistaken for an absence of Black women in Britain recording, working on, writing about and ruminating on related issues—including online.

The rise of social media and content-sharing platforms ‘which contribute to many people’s daily routines, has significantly affected contemporary British politics and public life’ (Sobande 2019a, p. 152) in ways that Black women are highly attuned to. Ergo, as I processed the (un)expected results of the General Election in Britain in December 2019, typically, it was the critical analysis of other Black women online that I turned to for incisive accounts of the history and trajectory of Britain’s political and social life. Moreover, as people and places around the world responded to the (un)anticipated COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic in 2020, which resulted in forms of government-directed ‘lockdown’ and physical distancing between people, I often attempted to make sense of what was—and was not—happening, through online conversations with Black women across a range of platforms and devices.

Black women in Britain are using digital media and spaces creatively, enabling the co-production, sharing, and documentation of knowledge in ways hardly ever afforded to them in many formal and institutional educational and academic settings. Decades have passed since leading Black feminist activist, psychosocial studies scholar, and psychotherapist Gail Lewis (cited in the Brixton Black Women’s Group and the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent 2017) poignantly wrote about ‘a time when we, as Black people, were particularly vocal, both in Britain and in the US, in expressing the need for the learning and writing of our own history, literature being central, particularly resistance literature’ (pp. 2–3). Yet, many Black women today continue to strive in the same ways and for some of the same reasons, including pursuit of ‘decolonisation of the mind’ (ibid.)—and sometimes—with the use of digital tools.

The 2018 republication of *The Heart of The Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain* by writers, educators, activists, and scholars Beverley Bryan et al. (1985) marked a key moment in Black women’s herstoricising and sustained archiving of their experiences (Akpan 2019). In the words of artist, photographer, writer, and curator Maud Sulter (1986), who penned thoughts about the book the first time it was published, *The Heart of The Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain* offered ‘us the
opportunity to take up the pen and document our histories for ourselves’ (p. 29).

Writing about Black women’s lives in Britain today is built upon the work and knowledge of Black women in previous decades; including observation of how Black women’s agency is often overlooked, as ‘we are usually portrayed as the passive victims of an historical necessity which began on the “dark continent” with the Slave Trade and eventually brought us to the inner-cities of the “Mother Country”’ (Bryan et al. 2018, p. 2). The creativity, activism, and scholarship of those such as Bryan et al. (1985), among others, undoubtedly paved the way for current and future writing on the lives of Black women in Britain.

Black women around the world are addressing issues related to digital media and technology which are pertinent to Black people and society—elucidating the digital dynamics of democracy and politics in Kenya (Nyabola 2018), reflecting on online activism that foregrounds marginalised voices in Ghana (Mohammed 2019), writing about the lives of Black women in France (Diallo 2017; Mwasi Collectif 2019), researching power relations linked to race and technology (Benjamin 2019), examining the oppressive nature of algorithms and racist content generated by internet search results (Noble 2018), and exploring the political potential of aesthetics (Osei 2019; Sobande and Osei 2020). Resultingly, the chapters of my book are rooted in the insights of Black women—past and present.

**Where I Write From**

In some ways, my book is influenced by me being born and having grown up in Scotland, residing in England when starting this book, and now living in Wales. I do not disclose these details to caveat anything included in this book or to fetishise the self-disclosure and personal essay writing of Black women. Instead, I reflect on the place(s) from where I view, write about, and experience some of the issues covered in subsequent chapters as part of my efforts to articulate elements of the different lives of Black women in Britain.

I recognise potential benefits and limitations of work such as mine. It may broaden understandings of the digital experiences and lives of Black women in Britain but can never convey the richness and varied nature of all of them. I reject the idea that any one person or perspective can encompass what it means to be a Black woman in Britain today. In writing
WHY THE DIGITAL LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN IN BRITAIN?

This book I do not claim to write on behalf of all Black women in Britain or to produce an exhaustive list of Black women’s digital, creative, and cultural contributions. However, ‘the burden of representation’ (Mercer 1990, p. 61) can loom large for a Black person in Britain, where the population of Black people is less than 5% of the total population of England and Wales (Gov.uk 2018), is approximately 1% of the total population of Scotland (National Records of Scotland 2018), and is approximately 0.2% of the total population of Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2013b).

My book draws upon Black feminist and women’s studies scholar Jacqueline Bobo’s (2001, p. xv) vital writing on how ‘Black women have confronted institutional and societal barriers in their daily lives and in their creative spaces’. Work that considerably influences mine also includes the leading research of communication, gender, and women’s studies scholar Kishonna L. Gray (2015) on Black cyberfeminism—which ‘as an extension of virtual feminisms and Black feminist thought, incorporates the tenets of interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances to better theorize women operating within Internet technologies and to capture the uniqueness of marginalized women’ (p. 176).

Gray’s (2015) Black cyberfeminist framework accounts for both the liberatory and limiting potentials of digital technology, especially as experienced, understood, and developed by Black women. As is outlined in the crucial work of sociologist and writer Tressie McMillan Cottom (2017), Black cyberfeminism can ‘interrogate how social relations of dominance are translated through digitally mediated relationships with technology, the interests that produce it, and the processes that resist them’ (p. 217). For these reasons and more, Black cyberfeminism (Gray 2015; McMillan Cottom 2017) orients much of my work.

At the crux of my research is an interest in the inseparability of many digital, material, and embodied experiences, along with an awareness of how hierarchical power relations are homed in digital spaces and made manifest in the development and use of digital technologies (Emejulu and McGregor 2016; Gregory 2017). Overall, my work is inspired by contributions from a range of what tend to be referred to as disciplines, fields, and subject areas. These include, but are not limited to, sociology, media and cultural studies, Black feminist studies, communication and information studies, visual studies, digital studies, and critical marketing and advertising studies which recognise that ‘[t]he marketplace is not simply
a place where money is made; it is a site of service, a place where crusades and social movements attempt to overturn “bad” practices’ (Wherry 2012, p. 9). My work is also moulded by my participation in ongoing collective-oriented activities which foster critical discussion and actions in response to matters concerning Black lives, digital media, and marketplace settings (Johnson et al. 2019).

As well as being the outcome of over five years of research, The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain is born of a kaleidoscope of conversations with friends, family, and loved ones. Although my book does not specifically focus on Black feminism and Black activism, it is nurtured by the writing and work of Black feminists and activists, such as Olive Gallimore, Gail Lewis, Melba Wilson, and individuals involved in the Brixton Black Women’s Group which was founded in 1973 and created space ‘to look at the questions of colonialism and the nature of capitalist society, African history and these sort of things’ (Lewis cited in the Brixton Black Women’s Group and the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent 2017, p. 1).

While my book outlines some of the ways that the digital experiences of Black women in Britain are mobilised by consciousness-raising and political intentions, it also addresses the fact that this is not the case for all. Regardless of differences between what Black women in Britain write, post about, enjoy and do online, one common component of such digital experiences is dealing with harassment (Akiwowo 2018; Allman 2019). Such harassment is often underpinned by co-dependent anti-Black racism and misogyny—namely, misogynoir, which is a term introduced in 2008 by Moya Bailey who is the digital alchemist for the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network, and whose work focuses on how race, gender, and sexuality are represented in media and medicine.

Bailey, who curates the #transformDH Tumblr initiative in digital humanities, and whose scholarship and work has played a pivotal role in critical digital humanities developments, has written about misogynoir online since 2010 (Bailey 2010). Since then, the term ‘misogynoir’ has been developed and discussed in detail by Bailey, as well as Trudy who is an artist who works as an indie creator, author, writer, photographer, curator and social critic, and is the creator of Gradient Lair—a digital space about Black women, art, media, social media, sociopolitics, and culture (Bailey and Trudy 2018, pp. 767–768). Taking heed of such work and how misogynoir and intersecting oppressions impact the lives of Black women, one of several key topics of discussion in my book is how
Black women in Britain try to navigate negative aspects of their digital experiences, such as the reality of online abuse and constant exposure to traumatic content and malicious messages that are directed at them.

**What Follows**

The themes at the centre of my book originate from 26 in-depth interviews with Black women in Britain (aged 19–47 years old), as well as interpretive analysis of resources accessed at the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in Brixton in London, at the British Library, and at Glasgow Women’s Library (GWL). Some of the interviews occurred at cafés, over the phone or via a video call, and in other cases, they took place at the person’s home. Although the chapters that follow do not include excerpts from all 26 interviews, many of the excerpts that feature encompass and echo perspectives that were expressed across most of them.

Aligned with Black feminist principles which inform my work, the methodological approach that underpins it foregrounds the experiences and knowledge of Black women in Britain, as expressed in their own words—including in interviews with me and in pre-existing written texts. Some people may think it is counterintuitive to not prioritise digital methods when researching digital encounters and activity. But, to return to previous words of mine in this chapter, I affirm that digital encounters, embodied experiences, and material conditions are inherently entwined.

I recognise researchers’ ‘dual charge to experiment with and work through new digital tools, but not take the tools so seriously that we lose sight of the very social conditions that have given rise to them’ (Gregory 2017, p. 4). In view of that, when approaching the research that led to my book, I sought to focus on the individual lives of Black women in Britain and the material and social conditions that impact them, as a prelude to understanding their experiences of digital space, media, and technology. I did not solely want to learn about how other Black women in Britain are creating and making use of digital media. Instead, I wanted to do work that involves acknowledging, understanding, and responding to Black women’s thoughts and feelings concerning such experiences, the contexts they occur within, and the lives that they are a part of—discussed with them in a setting of their choice. In other words, I principally based my book on what arose during in-depth interviews with Black women which relate to how their individual biographies (dis)connect to and from their digital experiences, as well as their shared and different herstories.
As most of the women (19) who were interviewed were in their twenties or younger, my book mainly focuses on the experiences of Black women who are part of a generation of people who are typically assumed to be very familiar with digital technology and online communication processes. All interview excerpts are attributed to pseudonyms that those who I spoke to selected for themselves. Despite my work foregrounding the thoughts and encounters of individuals who do not identify as online influencers or internet famous, there is acknowledgement of how differing levels of visibility can impact the digital experiences of Black women in Britain. After all, there are numerous examples of Black women in Britain using their digital presence and influence in creative, educational, community-oriented, and resistant ways, as well as those who focus on commercial, branding, and business opportunities (Wilson-Ojo 2017).

Throughout these pages I use the terms ‘mainstream media’ and ‘mass-media’ to refer to high-profile and longstanding corporate media organisations, outlets, and the content that they distribute (Sobande 2019b). I also understand the contestable qualities of these concepts ‘given that online content produced by non-media and non-marketing professionals is continually incorporated into prominent media and marketing endeavours’ (Sobande et al. 2019, p. 3). My use of the word ‘spectator’ is based on an understanding of the spectacular(ised) attributes of much media, as well as the active approach to watching, engaging with, and responding to it, which can be part of some people’s media viewing experiences.

The connected concept of the ‘gaze’ can bring up various connotations (Berger 2008) such as the lingering eyes of onlookers, who watch admiringly or with intent, and can be associated with a sense of scrutiny and surveillance that Black people are structurally subjected to (Browne 2015). My perspective of a gaze affirms the notion that such a form of looking is purposeful and involves people situating themselves in relation to who or what they gaze upon. The sustained intentionality at the root of someone casting their gaze upon something or letting it linger is markedly different to the ambivalence that may be associated with a cursory glance or glimpse.

My use of the word ‘practices’ in relation to digital and media activities encompasses experiences which involve a habitual element and are influenced by socio-cultural norms and the broader geo-cultural locations that people find themselves in. The phrase ‘digital media practices’ is used in reference to commonplace digital activities, including those which are particular to the lives of some Black women in Britain. In the context
of this work the term ‘practices’ also implies that such experiences are connected to collective sentiments and cultural conventions that are reinforced via certain institutional and social processes. Related discussion of digital remix culture concerns ‘how people (re)use and (re)create digital content and commentary’ (Sobande 2019a, p. 153), including as part of digital processes and practices that ‘can involve editing or adding to existing visual, audio and textual content to (re)produce something new, which is tailored to capturing specific socio-cultural views and events’ (ibid.).

Lastly, my perspective of the term race is based on the position that ‘the socially constructed nature of race doesn’t mean that our understanding of race and racial categories isn’t somehow real or that it doesn’t have real effects: quite the contrary, those categories do exist and they have tangible (and all too often deadly) effects on the ways that people are able to live their lives’ (Kolko et al. 2000, p. 2). My understanding of how race functions also echoes the explanation offered by Erika Dalya Muhammad (2001), who curated the Race in Digital Space exhibition for the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from 27 April to 1 July 2001, ‘[t]he word “race”, at once positional and relational, reflects a variety of cultural realities’ (p. 92).

The exhibition—Race in Digital Space—curated by Dalya Muhammad (2001) sought to ‘contextualize race as a dynamic power system that is further manipulated and complicated by hi-tech devices and evolving historical paradigms’ (p. 92), while also accounting for some of ‘the effects of new media on the dynamics of cultural hegemony’ and ‘cultural interchange’ (ibid.). In a similar vein, my book is intended to contextualise how power relations, digital technologies, and space impact experiences, expressions, and understandings of Black women’s lives in Britain.

When closely observing media and ‘consumption and market activities, the tangibility, reality and brutality of racial dynamics are almost impossible to miss’ (Grier et al. 2019, p. 91). Despite perceptions of the democratised nature of digital media production processes, social media and content-sharing platforms such as YouTube and Twitter still reflect and perpetuate intersecting inequalities (Noble and Tynes 2016)—including those connected to how ‘power relations of racism and sexism gain meaning in relation to one another’ (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 27). Social media contexts have been identified as digital spaces that can be used to harvest and propagate far right and white supremacist
politics (Daniels 2009, 2012, 2017; Lewis 2018). Therefore, while my work includes acknowledgement of the potential for digital environments to contribute to the lives and wellbeing of Black women in Britain in ways that are helpful to them, I also recognise that many risks and types of abuse and harm are frequently a part of Black women’s digital experiences.

Extending upon this opening chapter, chapter two considers aspects of Black women’s media encounters and lives in Britain over the last several decades. Chapter 2 outlines media developments and key matters concerning the on-screen depiction of Black women in Britain. There is discussion of self-representing and organising in relation to Black women and the media, the politics of representation in connection with forms of superficiality, conceptualising Black women’s media experiences, representations of Black women on television, and how issues regarding regionality and rurality are embroiled in this. Chapter 2 predominantly draws on archival material and pre-existing written accounts, before Chapter three’s stronger emphasis on the contemporary experiences of Black women.

Chapter 3 focuses on Black women’s present-day digital, creative, and cultural industry experiences. There is a reflection on the overlap between tacit issues concerning racial, gender, and cultural identity in online spaces, and tensions between the emancipatory, enterprising, enjoyable and extractive dimensions of the digital experiences of Black women in Britain—which are inevitably impacted by capitalist infrastructures and commercial entities.

Chapter 4 highlights issues to do with Black digital diasporic content and communication, as part of discussion of how Black women’s digital activity can be a coping mechanism which enables them to deal with experiences of oppression that are specific to their lives and in communal ways. There is a consideration of the resistant credentials of some of the digital experiences of Black women in Britain, while reckoning with potentially conflicting aspects of counter-cultural practices which exist in the context of digital consumerism. This chapter includes analysis of how Black American popular and digital culture contributes to some of the digital encounters and lives of Black women in Britain. There is also a focus on Black women’s experiences of natural hair video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube, and knowledge-sharing online.

Chapter 5, which reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 (corona-virus) global pandemic in 2020, includes discussion of the (un)definable
nature of the digital experiences of Black women in Britain, and similarities and differences between such experiences. This chapter is a closing consideration of how and why digital terrains continue to be a source of pleasure, creativity, and knowledge-sharing, as well as distress and danger for Black women in Britain.

My writing may have some form of an introduction and conclusion but the story that it is both part and a result of is a complex open-ended one which Black women continue to chronicle—online and offline. Digital (self)representations, discussion, and depiction of the lives of Black women in Britain will continue to far exceed the pages of my book. It is my hope that *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* sheds light on the experiences of such individuals and the structural issues that affect them.

**Notes**

1. The term ‘mixed-race’ is commonly used in Britain in reference to a person who is biologically related to parents from different racial backgrounds—broadly defined—including a person with one Black parent of African descent. ‘Mixed-race’ is one of many terms that has been used as part of essentialising, homogenising, racist, and purist white supremacist pseudoscience discourse regarding race and eugenics. The term ‘mixed-race’ has also been used as part of some people’s self-identifying efforts to distance themselves from their Blackness, in ways that may ultimately be rooted in anti-Black positions and a rejection of Black identity. I use the words ‘mixed-race’ with caution and an unwaveringly critical perspective of this term, including due to how it can obscure particularities of the experiences of racialised people and can function as part of rhetoric and research which upholds oppressive and racist notions of ‘racial purity’. However, I use the words ‘mixed-race’ in my book to acknowledge how my Black identity—as a child of a Black parent and a white parent—is often perceived, described, and categorised by others in the context of Britain’s history and contemporary notions of racial identity and Blackness.

2. ‘Black women of African descent’ includes Black women with African ancestry who identify as African and those with African ancestry who identify as Caribbean.
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