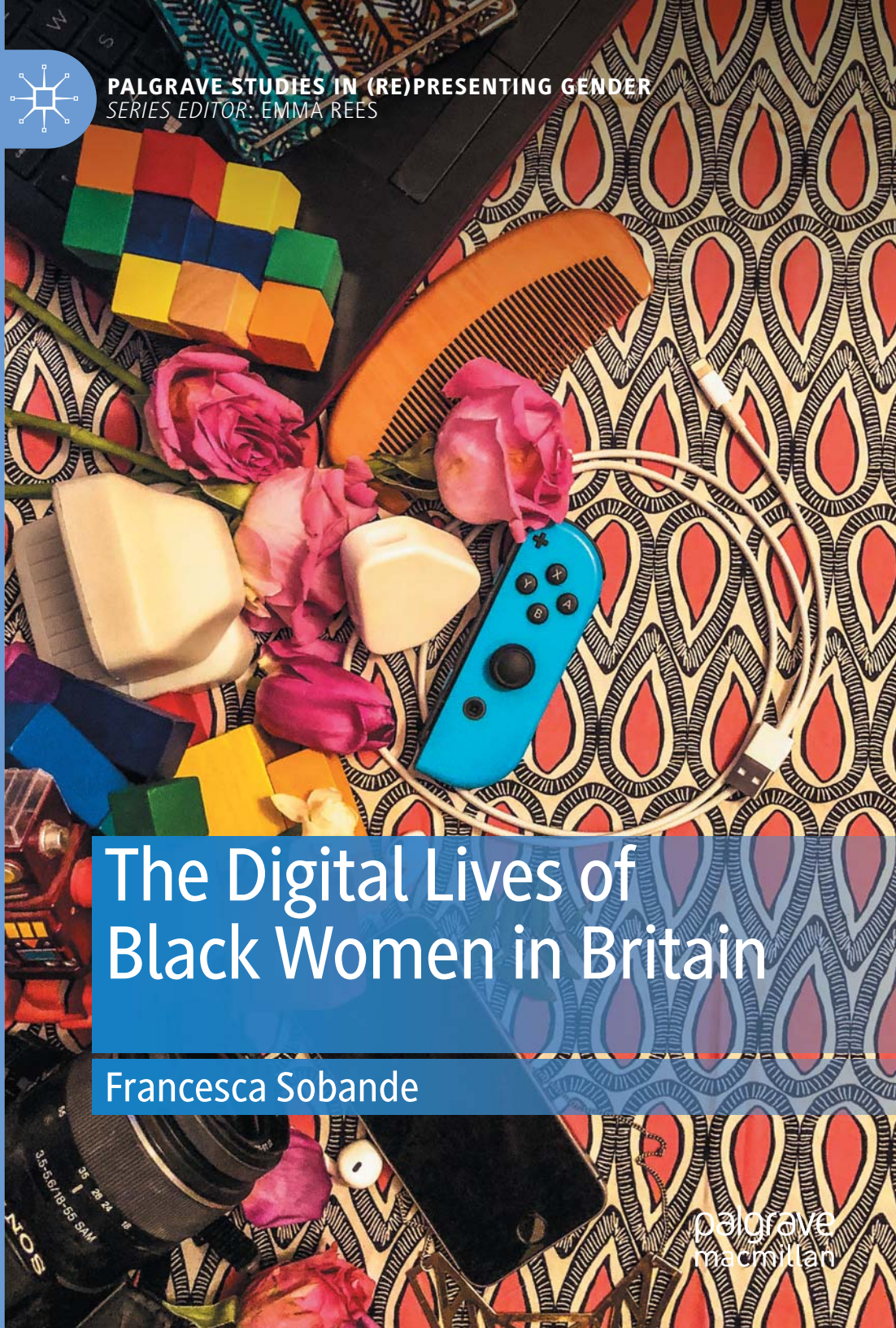

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The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain

Francesca Sobande

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To all who are (and were) (t)here.

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Contents

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

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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 descent[2] 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