

Curating Digital Diasporic Intimacies: Black Feminist Approaches to Visual Cultures Online

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Abstract

Through a series of case studies that explore Black women and femmes' curation of, presence within, and engagement with digital visual cultures, this thesis illustrates how digital diasporic intimacies have been created, shared, and sustained on social media using affective processes of visibility. It brings together cecile emeke's former YouTube-based web series *strolling* (2014-16), Renata Cherlise's Instagram-based archival project @BlackArchives.co, a range of Influencer selfies uploaded onto Instagram with the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, and a genre of cartoon memes which have been remixed (edited) with Black femme aesthetics, to argue for the importance of visual culture for building diasporic communities and forming diasporic identities on social media. At the centre of this project is the term *digital diasporic intimacy*, which I use to describe moments of joy, expressions of imagined kinship, and practices of solidarity mediated by the Black diaspora on social media. Focusing on how these visual mediums resonate, create, and engage diasporic intimacies, I consider how tensions, friction, and disagreements expressed on social media also underpin the creation of online communities and can be a practice of diasporic identity negotiation too.

This project is underpinned by a methodological framework of Black Feminist Thought and Black feminist theories of visual culture and diaspora. It emerged from my own social media experiences and behaviours, and so I weave autoethnography throughout this thesis to reflect on my relationship with diasporic identity building both online and offline. Thus, as a wholly Black feminist project, I use intimate and intuitive methods to couple my own experiences of interacting with this digital material, with visual and discourse inquiry informed by Black Feminist Thought, to understand how Black women and femmes have curated visual moments for digital intimacy. Altogether, this project draws from my personal

experiences to explore how digital diasporic intimacy, presented through visual cultures, can facilitate the construction of Black diasporic (other)worlding.

This timely and experimental project contributes to the rapidly growing field of Black digital studies, as well as the fields of Black studies, studies of visual cultures, and diaspora studies to consider how digital blackness has been imagined and mediated by Black visual content creators and engagers. It addresses a gap in literature of Black digital studies as it centres visual cultures and takes a diasporic approach to discussions of digital blackness. Furthermore, the methodology I have employed is an intervention in the British field of digital studies as it challenges how we can discuss and engage with social media.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	i
Preface: A Black Grl Centres Joy and Pleasure as Everyday Praxis	ix
Introduction: A Theorisation of Digital Diasporic Intimacy	1
Chapter 1. Contextualising Diasporic Intimacies and Visual Culture on Social Media	27
<i>Interlude: Space</i>	55
Chapter 2. Digital Diasporic Encounters: Spatial Storytelling, Shared Autobiographies and cecile emeke's <i>strolling</i> (2014-16)	58
<i>Interlude: Time</i>	107
Chapter 3. Speculative Remembering: Diasporic Temporalities and Renata Cherlise's @BlackArchives.co	110
<i>Interlude: Body</i>	167
Chapter 4. You're Glowing Sis: #BlackGirlMagic Selfies, Light, and the Practice of Desire in Beauty Influencer Cultures	173
<i>Interlude: Sound</i>	208
Chapter 5. Meme Qweens: The Playful Sonic Vibrancies of Black Femme Aesthetics in Digitally Remixed Cartoon Memes	210
Conclusion: A Case for Digital Diasporic Intimacy and Future Research	254
Bibliography	263

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List of Figures

- Figure 1.** Abraham’s tightly coiled hair. Still from cecile emeke *strolling* “ep. 7, feminist med, crying, “great” Britain, reparations, Palestine & more.” Screenshot by author, accessed November 7, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7aAIAhHH1U>. 89
- Figure 2.** Loretta and Bellamy stand on the steps in front of the Duomo Di Milano, Italy. Still from cecile emeke *strolling* “passeggiando ep 1 afroitalians, italian citizenship, family sacrifices lancome & more.” Screenshot by author, accessed November 30, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCubkwdpwr8>. 97
- Figure 3.** Gladstone and Kokab stand in Hope Gardens, St. Parish, Jamaica. Still from cecile emeke *strolling* “strolling (jamaica) ep 1 patois, uptown kingston, depression, caribbean past, homophobia & more.” Screenshot by author, accessed January 22, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-065MzkR8E8&t=268s>. 97
- Figure 4.** A close-up of Rachell’s lower body and hands in New York, U.S. Still from cecile emeke *strolling* “strolling (usa) ep 2 dominican republic, haiti, class, survivors guilt, anthropology & more.” December 11, 2015, accessed January 23, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLaNdwezPAE>. 103
- Figure 5.** Rachell blurs into the background as an unnamed man across the street is brought into focus. Still from cecile emeke *strolling* “strolling (usa) ep 2 dominican republic, haiti, class, survivors guilt, anthropology & more.” December 11, 2015, accessed January 23, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLaNdwezPAE>. 103

Figure 6. Polo Silk’s photograph of an unnamed woman in a brown jacket. “@blvckvrchives. New Orleans, Louisiana. Photographs by Polo Silk @polonolaphotography.” Instagram post, uploaded February 26, 2020. Screenshot by author.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B9CvZWJ35G/>. 111

Figure 7. Sonia Fraser and Keisha Fraser in an apartment in the Bronx, New York, 1997.

Courtesy of Sonia Bruce. 112

Figure 8. In 1977 Texas, a couple are seated together in a makeshift studio. “@blvckvrchives [Submission] These are my parents at my godfather’s house in Midland, Texas (1977). I wasn’t born until 1981. They got divorced in the late 2000’s, but I love this picture because I can see the love that made me. Submitted by @Christ_ion.” Instagram post, uploaded

November 22, 2019. Screenshot by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5LvqxGFc3K>.
..... 131

Figure 9. Two boys photographed in a New York subway. “@blackarchives.co. New York. Photograph by Jimmie Mannas (circa 1970s) @jimmimannasarchives.” Instagram post, uploaded January 16, 2020. Screenshot by author.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B7Yo4NMF7F/>. 136

Figure 10. Hair braiding in Cova de Moura, Portugal. “@blvckvrchives. Cova de Moura, Portugal. Photographs by Susan Meiselas (2004) via @magnumphotos.” Instagram post, uploaded July 11, 2019. Screenshot by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BzyKqqileFh/>.

..... 140

Figure 11. A long dirt road shaded by weeping willows in Edisto Island, South Carolina.

“@blackarchives.co. “Edisto Island, South Carolina. Photographs by Walter Sanders (1956).”

Instagram post, uploaded June 1, 2020. Screenshot by author.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CA5n8yUJZPA>. 149

Figure 12. A young Veronica Walker outside in Chattanooga, Tennessee. “@blvckvrchives.

[Submission] My grandmother, Veronica Walker, in 1969. This picture was taken in

Chattanooga, Tennessee. She was 19 in this picture. Submitted by @_sydthekidwhich.”

Instagram post, uploaded November 18, 2019. Screenshot by author.

https://www.instagram.com/p/B4_MVkpFvyW. 153

Figure 13. Two girls with cowrie shells threaded through their cane rows look at each other.

“@blackarchives.co. Bamako, Mali. Photographed by Malick Sidibé (1960s-1970s).”

Instagram photo, October 21, 2019. Screenshot by author.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B38WN3qFCwI>. 156

Figure 14. Two girls wearing pink and green are photographed in New York.

“@blvckvrchives. New York. Photograph by Nico Van der Stam (1969).” Instagram photo,

April 12, 2020. Screenshot by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-4k2rrJxIg>. 158

Figure 15. My #BlackGirlMagic selfie, posted to Instagram in September 2016. “[Princess

emoji: medium-dark skin tone] always [Tulip emoji] #BlackGirlMagic [Sparkles emoji].”

Instagram photo, September 8, 2016. Screenshot by author. URL withdrawn. 173

Figure 16. @Khadija.Omarr’s #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. “S K I N [Sparkles emoji]...”

Instagram photo, August 16, 2019. Screenshot by author.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B1NU0Ezg5No/>. 195

Figure 17. @JaneeBarbre’s #BlackGirlMagic selfie. “golden [Sparkles emoji].” Instagram photo, August 14, 2019. Screenshot by author.

https://www.instagram.com/p/B1HyD_wAxEH/. 195

Figure 18. @CallHerTink’s (@AsianFongg) #BlackGirlMagic selfie. “shea butter baby [Sparkles emoji. Honey pot emoji] || #atlmmodel #igbaddie #explorepag.” Instagram photo, July 7, 2019. Screenshot by author. <https://instagram.com/callhertink>. 196

Figure 19. A photograph of Chloe and Hailey is shared onto @Grownish Instagram account. “just blessing your feed with some #blackgirlmagic. [Sparkles emoji]. #behindthescenes #grownish.” Instagram photo, July 23, 2019. <https://instagram.com/p/B0O8rVxnC0i/> .

..... 199

Figure 20. @nyc.mermaid’s #BlackGirlMagic selfie. “Thought your TL could use some magic [Sparkles emoji].” Instagram photo, July 30, 2019.

<https://instagram.com/nyc.mermaid>. 200

Figure 21. @Icyyanna’s #BlackGirlMagic selfie. “Smile [Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes emoji].” Instagram photo, August 29, 2019. <https://instagram.com/icyyanna>. 202

Figure 22. @Vanie.vanucci's #BlackGirlMagic selfie. "Do You, I Do I." Instagram photo, July 21, 2019. https://instagram.com/vanie.vanucci .	202
Figure 23. @Que_Nichole's #BlackGirlMagic selfie. "..ps, i love how the sun kisses my skin [Slightly Smiling Face emoji]." Instagram photo, July 7, 2019. https://instagram.com/que_nichole .	203
Figure 24. A compilation of Black femme remixed memes	210
Figure 25. Arthur's first meme	211
Figure 26. @NinjaLukel's remix of the Pointing Mannequin meme. "AYOOOOOOO THIS NIGGA CALLING PLANTAIN 'PLANTIN'." Tweet, August 11, 2018. Screenshot by author. https://twitter.com/ninjalukei/status/1028373883878100994?s=21&t=iOloevRIFxjh47DFJMqvLw	218
Figure 27. @BlackCindy's remix of Black femme SpongeBob. "trying to sleep the first night after u get braids." Tweet, March 29, 2018. Screenshot by author. https://twitter.com/biackcindy/status/979182630489993218?s=21&t=ZBNp-Mvg4LGdl0PPuVoVMg	224
Figure 28. Tired SpongeBob meme	225

Figure 29. @TosinShotit’s use of the Tired SpongeBob meme. “Teachers before pronouncing an African name.” Tweet, March 31, 2018. Screenshot by author.

<https://twitter.com/tosinshotit/status/979892064824545281?s=21&t=ZBNp-Mvg4LGdl0PPuVoVMg> 226

Figure 30. @DJJVMZ’s use of the Tired SpongeBob meme. “Me after I take my strap off [Face with Tears of Joy].” Tweet, March 22, 2018. Screenshot by author.

https://twitter.com/djjvmz/status/976832649720459264?s=21&t=EfLNhGYglvYCxS4M_4oaNg 226

Figure 31. @Mckenziedenisee’s use of the Tired SpongeBob meme. “me after I put the fitted sheet on my bed by myself.” Tweet, March 27, 2018. Screenshot by author.

<https://twitter.com/mckenziedenisee/status/978498251497226240?s=21&t=ZBNp-Mvg4LGdl0PPuVoVMg/> 228

Figure 32. @VillageTaker’s use of Rolf Stares Out a Window meme. “Dawg... 2008 was 10 years ago.” Tweet, April 16, 2018. Screenshot by author. URL withdrawn..... 236

Figure 33. A Twitter exchange between @playgurluzzi and @skinny_que. September 3, 2018. Screenshot by Author.

https://twitter.com/skinny_que/status/1036695383341236225?s=21&t=hUeSY3WgK9a80_iFV0CFrQ237

Figure 34. Elijah Rutland’s remix of Rolf Staring Out the Window. “People really out here thinking that I make free art...” Tweet, September 5, 2018. Screenshot by author.

https://twitter.com/fixmysole/status/1037465500945666053?s=21&t=hUeSY3WgK9a80_iFV0CFrQ. 238

Figure 35. @FUCKCHEEY’s Rolfeisha meme. “Him: I’m outside Me: Look at this dumb ass nigga at the wrong house.” Tweet, September 4, 2018. Screenshot by author.

https://twitter.com/sweetcheezy/status/1036836922646179841?s=21&t=hUeSY3WgK9a80_iFV0CFrQ. 239

Figure 36. @ZandiNokuthula uses a Rolfeisha meme to critique respectability politics.

“Older black aunties watching young black women live lives that are free of the constraints of marriage, kids & overall societal convention.” Tweet, October 28, 2019. Screenshot by author. URL withdrawn. 244

Figure 37. @LegsslikeWhoa’s use of a Rolfeisha meme. “Him: “I’m Outside [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji]” Me: “I done got all dressed up and this man looks like he’s dressed to go shoot ball”.” Tweet, September 7, 2018. Screenshot by author.

https://twitter.com/legsslikewhoa/status/1038133553450676225?s=21&t=hUeSY3WgK9a80_iFV0CFrQ.245

Figure 38. Before you get the job and after you get the job Rolfeisha meme. Created by

@KoffeeKhaan Screenshot by author. 248

Figure 39. @NikitaLawal’s use of a compilation of Rolfeisha memes. “Priscilla until she collects that 50k #LoveIsland.” Tweet, February 5, 2020. Screenshot by author.

https://twitter.com/nikitalawal1/status/1225172522863341575?s=21&t=hUeSY3WgK9a80_iFV0CFrQ. 250

Figure 40. The Instagram account @naturalhairloves shares a sampled Rolfeisha meme.

“Now this is funny [Face with Tears of Joy emoji. Face with Tears of Joy emoji].” Instagram photo, October 6, 2020. Screenshot by author. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-](https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-2oUijlEl/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=)

[2oUijlEl/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=](https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-2oUijlEl/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=). 251

Preface: A Black Grl Centres Joy and Pleasure as Everyday Praxis

It is not simple to write about Black women, and I don't think that it should be. When we explore our understanding of "Black womanhood", we ask what it means to be both gendered and ungendered, to exist at the intersection of multiple oppressed identities,¹ and to cultivate beautiful gardens on lands that were never intended for life to thrive.² And so, when we write about Black women, especially when we write from within an academic institution, we must do so with care. We must be attentive to the ways that Black women's and Black queer intellectual thought have been marginalised, extracted, dismissed, and appropriated.³ We must write in ways that recognise the category of "woman" as a misnomer; a term that we might one day abandon for it will no longer serve us.⁴ And we must research in ways that do not strip Black women's autonomy, agency, and creativity. This project, which is an inquiry into Black diasporic digital visual culture, stems from my own experiences of using social media while living as, through and adjacent to Black womanhood. It has never been my intention to write on behalf of *all* Black women; needless to say, this is an impossible task. Nor has it been my intention to collapse Black woman-ness into a singular definition, this is antithetical to its unlimited possibilities. My intention has been to research from a place of home, to write from a place of creativity and pleasure, and to theorise in community. I wanted to explore how Black women intimately engage in practices of joy and create intimate communities on social media to better understand how digital visual cultures have been used as a resource for aggregating diasporic identity.

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: The New Press, 2014); The Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement*, April, 1977, https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf.

² Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Woman's Press, 1984).

³ Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁴ Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Lola Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

As this project emerged from my own desire to articulate my identity and find community online, it is important for me to take a moment to introduce myself to you. I invite you to meet me because I am present throughout this thesis. I am present now as I write directly to you, and I am present in all passages where I share my relationship with the material and the themes which I have drawn out from them. But not only that, I am present because as you explore the cultures made visible throughout this thesis, it is almost as if you are scrolling through my social media accounts with me. You see this in the examples I have chosen, the platforms I have explored, and the ways that I *read* and engage with the material.⁵ Everything I have selected reflects my own lived experiences.

I am keisha bruce and I am a queer Black person, born and living in Britain. I was raised in Wolverhampton, in a working-class single parent household by my biracial mother until I was seven years old. Then my mother married my father, a Jamaican-born and raised man who migrated to Birmingham, UK from New York City in the early 2000s. Together we lived, migrating to middle-class, until my younger sister was born, and our small family became an intimate quadruple. I was afforded a place at university through a fair access scheme and there I began my academic learning into Black history and cultures, an education that was marked by the violence and racism I experienced there.⁶ My experience of Black womanhood has thus been shaped by my shifting social class, queer sexuality, and gender-queerness, the regions I have migrated and travelled to, and my family.

⁵ Do bear with me here as I will discuss the conceptualisation of *reading* as a method in my introduction, I will also go into depth about the function of affective methodologies for knowledge production.

⁶ Research has noted the ways that the academy is a site of violence on the individual, for more read: Azeezat Johnson, "Throwing Our Bodies Against the White Background of Academia," *Area* 52, (2020): 89-96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12568>; Nicola Rollock, "Staying Power: The Career Experiences and Strategies of UK Black Female Professors," *University and College Union*, February, 2019, https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10075/Staying-Power/pdf/UCU_Rollock_February_2019.pdf; Paulette Williams et. al, "The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding," *Leading Routes*, September, 2019, <https://leadingroutes.org/mdocs-posts/the-broken-pipeline-barriers-to-black-students-accessing-research-council-funding>.

I have been an avid social media user since I was twelve years old, using it as a space to carve out my identity in the early “HTML days” (2006-2009),⁷ and connecting with community across the Black diaspora during the emergence of social media apps and platforms (2012-2019). This thesis focuses on those later years, during the five years that bridged together 2014-2019, after #BlackLivesMatter flooded our digital networks to protest the wrongful deaths of Black people in the U.S by the hands of the police. This was a time when I actively sought out diasporic community online and was interested in exploring my identity as a person of the Black diaspora. Attentive to some of the ways that I have navigated some of the most popularly used social media platforms, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, during this period, this thesis is punctuated with anecdotes that reflect on my own experiences of growing up in an increasingly digital and connected world. It is important then, that I am self-reflexive in my methodology, and acknowledge my limitations as a researcher, the spaces I can access because of my identity, and the doubleness of my status as a researcher-participant. I do so as a reminder of my connection with this material and the topics covered, but also to acknowledge the way that this project is inextricably tied to my own investment to social media. Therefore, this project is not a completely objective analysis. It is subjective and so it cannot be an empirical analysis of *all* Black women’s social media practices. I reiterate this because it is impossible to account for all Black women, and it is also impossible to account for all the different ways that Black women might use social media. Our platforms are tailored to us; they are algorithmically catered to our interests, our specific behaviours, and our lives. This thesis is a reflection of my own.

⁷ I use “HTML days” here to signal the ways that social media websites in the early 2000s allowed users more autonomy in the creation of their pages. For instance, platforms like Piczo and Bebo allowed user to design and carve their own digital websites with the use of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and MySpace allowed users to customise their platforms with music, colour, and image. The years indicated here represent the years that I used the platforms.

This project inevitably begins at the epicentre of my social media accounts and from there it moves outwards to others'. My intention for this project is to introduce my readers to the communities that I am a part of, to expand my methods of theorising, and to seek joy in my research as I discuss the abundance of Black life online. It is important for me to honour, celebrate, and platform the communities that I am a part of because I recognise that there is an immense amount of creative work being done here. It is creative work that falls outside of the scope of 'traditional' contributions to academic research and encompasses the quotidian, the banal, and the things that are "just for fun". Considering this, I wanted to adopt non-traditional approach to conducting my research, and I'll share this with you shortly.

I articulate this project as one which is ambivalent to disciplinary boundaries, however, is mostly adjacent to the fields of Black Studies, studies of visual culture, and social media. My desire for an ambivalent approach to academic disciplines stems from my appreciation of the ways that knowledge is, and should be recognised as, borderless. Though terms like interdisciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity offer insight to ways that research can be conducted in conversation with many different disciplinary fields and reject empirical absolutism, for me, these terms are insufficient. As Kara Keeling notes, the term 'interdisciplinary' is often bound up with neo-liberalism which can restrict researchers' imaginations and knowledge production.⁸ It also does not consider for the ways that disciplinary boundaries have oppressed Black folk and our ways of knowing, and so a rejection of them entirely might instead be necessary.⁹ And yet, while I *want* to articulate this project as one which is anti-disciplinary; one that rejects disciplines and their methodologies altogether, I fall short of being able to claim that fully as I recognise that I still have work to

⁸ In Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures*, she recognises interdisciplinarity as bound up with capitalism and argues that because of this it cannot achieve the creative work that it originally intended. Building on this, I ask: what does it mean to create and centre knowledge that is not concerned with disciplinary boundaries?

⁹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

do to untangle myself from the rigidity of disciplines. I recognise that a commitment to anti-disciplinary work is a process of unlearning academic notions of what is ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ research, relearning how knowledge can be generated, and of unbecoming and becoming a researcher; my project grapples with this. My hopes then, are that this thesis is merely a droplet in the sea that constitutes my approach to relearning.

My decision to research Black women’s digital visual culture is my way of centring joy during my PhD. While my degrees in Literature and American Studies introduced me to Black feminist thought, critical race theory, queer theory and interdisciplinarity, which were all pivotal to advancing my intellectual learning, the course simultaneously subjected me to violence. The curriculum at undergraduate level was enveloped with Black pain, trauma, and suffering. Like many others, I was the only Black student on my course, and there were no Black educators within my department. As a young adult emerging in this field and attempting to navigate my own identity, I was routinely told to associate my blackness either with pain or erasure. For me, centring joy and pleasure has been a radical decision throughout my academic career to not only reject these dominant discourses of blackness and Black life that permeate the British Ivory Tower, but to protect my wellbeing as a researcher. I find light and joy in my blackness and my experiences of being Black, and so in this project I have opted to turn the gaze away from whiteness, the white gaze, and heteronormative, patriarchal assumptions of blackness to centre joy in my research process and focus on the love, care and intimacy shared by Black digital creators, engagers, and users.¹⁰

This project emerged from me seeing that something was happening in my online worlds. In a post-2013 #BlackLivesMatter digital landscape, more Black digital communities were

¹⁰ For more on the importance of decentring whiteness in academia read: Azeezat Johnson, Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Beth Kamunga, ed., *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Time of Explicit Racial Violence* (London: Zed Books, 2018); Azeezat Johnson, “Refuting ‘how the other half lives’: I am Woman’s Rights,” *Area*, (2020): 801-805.

being formed, Black people were expressing their unapologetic love for blackness on social media, and the diaspora were connecting and gathering online. I wanted to find the words to articulate what was generated by these digital connections and the impact that these had on me. I specifically wanted to give voice to the ways that I had found diasporic belonging on social media in ways that felt intimately connected to others, despite us being geographically dispersed. The visual is central to my exploration as social media is rapidly becoming more and more image oriented. I wondered what it meant to see these visual expressions of Black joy, Black love, Black aesthetics, and the mundanity of Black life on social media as part of the architecture of these digital communities. I wanted to speak on that. As you read this thesis, I invite you to have a glimpse of my experience navigating social media sites as I provide you with an insight into how I have found belonging and joy in digital communities. I hope then that my readers might find intimacy within the pages of this thesis, including within those nuanced discussion around the tensions that emerge from occupying space online as a Black woman. While I remain attentive to the intracommunal tensions that shroud these online communities, in this thesis, I ask: what are some of the ways that Black women have use the visual to curate digital diasporic intimacies?

Introduction: A Theorisation of Digital Diasporic Intimacy

When I cut off my hair in the spring of 2017, I had no idea what I was doing. By this point, my hair had been chemically relaxed every six weeks for the past eleven years and I had started to notice that my thick voluminous hair had grown thinner over the years, and that two patches of my scalp, located just above each of my temples, were developing psoriasis. It was not lost on me that the placement of these sore patches were haunted ones; permanent marks of the chemical burns that I had received six years earlier that had been aggravated ever since. When I turned eleven, I was old enough to join my mother in the upkeep of my own hair and I pleaded for it be relaxed. I had wanted long hair that laid flat like everyone else's, so I would no longer have to pretend by wrapping my school jumper over my head – a game I would play with the other Black girls at my after-school club. When I made the decision to cut off what had become thin, limp hair at twenty-two, I did not know how to tend to my afro-textures. *What products would I need? Do people still use Luster's Pink hair moisturiser? My cousin used to use Sof'n'Free... her curls are looser than mine, so I wonder whether that would be okay? How do I comb it? How do I style it? What would it look like? Would I still look professional? What would I do on my wedding day?* Internalised antiblackness and heteronormativity shrouded my relationship with my hair, and my lack of knowledge and the absence of others around me who wore their afro-textured hair made me nervous.

My decision to cut off my thinning straight hair and to grow it out again as an afro was a well thought out one that was informed by a variety of factors. Firstly, when I was a young child, untouched by secondary school, I had always imagined my adult self with thick curly hair, so I suppose that in some ways, by cutting off the dead straight hair I was fulfilling a childhood fantasy and reconnecting with that young girl. I also didn't want my hair to keep

thinning out as I continued to relax it. U.S popular culture influenced me too. At the time, Black women were taking up more space in the creative production of their images and disseminating these images to a global audience. Issa Rae's HBO series *Insecure* (2016-2021), Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (2016), and Solange's album *A Seat at the Table* (2016) and the music videos that accompanied some of her songs, contributed to a visual landscape of Black women who had cultivated their own self-images in the public sphere as an intervention on what Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins refers to as dominant 'controlling images'.¹ Discussions centred on these pop cultural phenomenon have theorised and applied a Millennial Black Feminist discourse to understand how they contribute to diversifying the representations of Black women within new media.² In each of these examples, Black women claimed space in mainstream American media to tell their truths and stories, and within each of these hair added another layer to their visual storytelling. Whether that be through the styling of hair in *Insecure*, direct conversations about the politics of Black hair in *A Seat at the Table*, or diasporic symbolism patterned into hairstyles in *Lemonade*, hair was used as part of the process of claiming space and Black women's storytelling. Inspired by these representations, I remember thinking that I didn't feel like I could advocate for blackness and 'loving blackness', if I hadn't at least tried to look after my afro hair.³ This was wholly a personal decision, and I don't wish to imply that this is or should be the case for all Black people. However, the ways that Black women were becoming more present in popular culture was affirming and inspiring and had made me want to live as my truest self, which for me was extended to how I styled my hair.

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000 reis., New York: Routledge, 2009), 76.

² keisha bruce, "Millennial Black Feminism: Black Women, Popular Culture, and Visibility in a #BlackLivesMatter Era," Master's Diss., (University of Nottingham, 2017); Francesca Sobande, "Awkward Black Girls and Post-Feminist Possibilities: Representing Millennial Black Women on Television in *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure*," *Critical Studies in Television* 14 no. 4 (2019): 435-50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019870298>.

³ bell hooks, *black looks: race and representation* (reis., 1992; New York: Routledge, 2015), 20; Lisa Amanda Palmer, "The Politics of Loving Blackness in the UK," PhD Diss., (University of Birmingham, 2010).

The images that I saw on social media were the catalyst to my ‘big chop’ and the digital communities formed around these images gave me the confidence to go ahead with it. On my algorithmically curated social media pages, particularly on Instagram, I was visually introduced to more and more Black women and femmes who were embracing their afro-textured hair. This was new for me as in the small city of Wolverhampton, there was little representation of women wearing their naturally textured hair around me. By way of popular culture and social media, I was becoming accustomed to seeing hairstyles that I hadn’t seen or worn since my childhood like two strand twists and afro puffs, and new hairstyles that I hadn’t seen before like faux locs and passion twists. Almost a year prior to my big chop I had stopped relaxing my hair altogether and watched as the roots of my hair slowly thickened. I recall running my fingers through my scalp as the two opposing textures tried to meet but instead would tangle chaotically. During this transitional period, I would regularly watch YouTube vloggers like Naptural85, GreenBeauty, and Shanique Buntyn, and documentary series and panel talks uploaded to the YouTube page Hair Unruled so that I could begin to develop my skillset, gain knowledge, and inspire my confidence. Watching these videos provided me with a sense of diasporic community and as Francesca Sobande notes in her research on Black women and YouTube, this was common for other Black girls in Britain who watched natural hair vlogs on the platform to ‘build self-esteem, develop diasporic identities and community, while boosting a sense of belonging.’⁴

Over the months, I would follow hair tutorials on social media which were predominantly led by Black woman in North America who would review products, teach basic techniques like combing and washing, more advanced techniques such as hair braiding and canerowing, and share knowledges on distinguishable features of Black hair. Eventually, I learnt how to

⁴ Francesca Sobande, “Watching Me Watching You: Black Women in Britain on YouTube,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 658.

braid my own hair – how to weave my hair with colourful hair extensions to pattern new styles – and I started doing this so that I could manage my tangled roots during the transitionary period. I had also acquired a new language to discuss my hair needs so that I could adequately shop for products, and I connected with other Black women around the world who were doing the same in the YouTube comments section. Although I had been slowly preparing for this moment in digital community with other Black women who were transitioning their hair from one state to another –straight to afro – eventually, it was my poor mental health that resulted in me taking the scissors to my hair one morning. In that moment, I felt that I was ready to be renewed.

An hour or so later, I was greeted in the mirror by a short, albeit poorly cut, afro and a fresh smile. I quietly sat in my room unknown to the rest of my family and installed a set of short box braids with the techniques that I had learnt on YouTube and left my bedroom happily. Although I had some new knowledge and skills, I still didn't feel like I confidently knew how to best look after my afro hair, and so I leant on the communities I had found online. The YouTube comments sections for my favourite vloggers and the comments sections on posts uploaded to Instagram pages that I followed, including @RespectMyHair, @4cHairDaily, @UnconditionedRoots, were spaces where I could connect with a community of Black women and femmes who were also seeking information on Black haircare and inspiration for hairstyles. During this time, I was offered the language of the “Natural Hair Journey” to give voice to my experience and to refer to a cultural movement that was centred around the reclamation and love for afro hair textures.⁵

I joined digital communities of Black women and femmes from around the world who would gather on YouTube and Instagram to share hair tips, style tutorials, and express their

⁵ Giselle La Pompe-Moore, “The Reality of the Natural Hair Journey, by Women Who Have Lived It,” *i-d.vice.com*, December 11, 2018, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/8xpkgg/the-reality-of-the-natural-hair-journey.

frustrations and joys with their own experiences. Countless times the communities I was and still am a part of would uplift one another and affirm each other's complex feelings about their hair, but sometimes these online communities were not always so supportive.

Desirability politics manifest themselves in these communities where long hair has been prioritised over healthy hair. Sometimes, trends and fashion mean that hair must look a specific way for it to be deemed beautiful, and misinformation is spread online through content creators and memes.⁶ Although the online communities could be complex to navigate, through them I had learned that my journey with my hair was my own. My "natural hair journey" signalled a journey of self-discovery, uplift, self-love, and finding community. While I thoroughly felt that my journey had become part of a digital collective as I would share hair stories and images on Instagram using hashtags that would connect me to these communities, it was also a very individual experience where I was able to better connect with myself.

Although I begin this thesis with the conversation of Black hair, this anecdote reveals how my relationship with digital visual cultures helped me to cultivate a sense of identity that was intrinsically related to a diasporic experience. It shows how the visual was used as an intimate diasporic site where I could connect with an online community and as a result, reshape and reconstruct my own offline reality.⁷ This thesis attends to these moments, where the visual offers a platform for diasporic intimacies to flourish on the internet. I focus specifically on cecile emeke's web-series *strolling*, Renata Cherlise's digital archive @BlackArchives.co, #BlackGirlMagic selfies, and memes that repurpose Black femme aesthetics, to consider how digital diasporic intimacies are envisioned visually through them, and discursively through

⁶ Kovie Biakolo, "Why Some Black Women Are Going Back to Relaxers," *Allure*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.allure.com/story/black-women-leaving-natural-hair-movement-relaxers>.

⁷ This phenomenon has also been explored in works such as: Robin J. Phelps-Ward and Crystal T. Laura, "Talking Back in Cyberspace: Self-Love, Hair Care, and Counter Narratives in Black Adolescent Girls' YouTube Vlogs," *Gender and Education* 28, no. 6 (2016): 807-820.

the conversations which surround them. Throughout this project, I want to sit with these moments, to understand how they appear, how they are constructed, and imagine what might become of them. As I have illustrated in the opening of this thesis, I use personal storytelling as a method to entwine my experiences of navigating these mediums with critical race theory and Black feminist theory to add an autoethnographical dimension to the project.⁸ I argue that this validates my innate and lived source of knowledge on digital diasporic intimacies.

Digital Diasporic Intimacy and Black Diasporic (Other)Worlding

This thesis's central argument explores the concept of *digital diasporic intimacy*, a term I use to acknowledge the moments of encounter, creative collaboration, and expressions of joy, kinship, and affirmation felt and enacted by the Black diaspora on the internet.⁹ It also accounts for when moments of difference and intracommunity tensions are negotiated through conversation, interactions, and visual discourse. Altogether, digital diasporic intimacies signal the transatlantic co-creation of cultural media online, and digital discourse where diasporic identities are negotiated and performed. While I do not claim to have coined this phrase, which is an amalgamation of the terms digital intimacies, digital diasporas, and diasporic intimacy, which I unpack fully in the chapter that follows, I understand this thesis to be the first in-depth study that reflects on the creation and maintenance of diasporic intimacies on social media, and this contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the topic.¹⁰

⁸ Autoethnography has been articulated as a qualitative method of inquiry in the following texts: Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative," *Law & Society Review* 29, no. 2: (1995): 197-226; Elizabeth Ertorre, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitising the Feminist 'I'* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁹ keisha bruce, "'Everyone Has a Pic Like This in the Album!': Digital Diasporic Intimacy and the Instagram Archive," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1-2 (2022): 246-263.

¹⁰ In the following article, I along with other digital media researchers in the UK discuss the growing body of scholarship in this field: keisha bruce, Rianna Walcott, Kui Kihoro Mackay, Krys Osei, temi lasade-anderson,

My conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacy builds on Paul Gilroy's claim that 'playful diasporic intimacy' has been a 'marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity.'¹¹ Although Gilroy refers specifically to Black music cultures, wherein Black British, Jamaican and African American people, technologies, and cultural influences come together to produce music and sound, his language is useful to account for the ways that Black people of the diaspora have collaborated to produce digital visual content on, for, and disseminated through social media. Gilroy's articulation of diasporic intimacies is at the crux of my definition as it similarly looks to creativity and transnational collaboration as that which underpins the production of cultural phenomena. While my articulation of the term emerges from Gilroy's seminal study, it complicates this work with a deviation from male, heteronormative accounts of the diaspora. Instead, I am concerned with the creative production of Black women and femmes specifically. I depart from Gilroy's articulation as I frame digital blackness through an understanding of how gender and sexuality is implicated within this.

While Gilroy looks to literature, music, and politics to explore the 'inescapable hybridity and intermixture' of diasporic Black cultures, my conceptualisation centres the digital technologies of present-day smartphones including their cameras, social media apps, and other online mediums, to explore how diasporic creative practices are mediated on social media through the rapid exchange of material and information.¹² Focusing on the ways that visual media has become entwined with social media, I locate Black diasporic visual cultures which are mediated on social media as a conduit for digital diasporic intimacies.¹³ In the case

and Francesca Sobande, "Black Feminist and Digital Media Studies in Britain," *Feminist Media Studies* (2022): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2006737>.

¹¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993; reis., London: Verso 1999), 16.

¹² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, xi.

¹³ For more on the relationship between visual culture and social media read: Elisabetta Adami and Carey Jewitt "Special Issue: Social Media and the Visual," *Visual Communication* 16 (2016): 263-270; Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (London: Polity Press, 2020).

studies presented within this thesis, Black people living in Britain, the United States, Canada, Jamaica, continental Europe, and in some cases African countries, collaborate on the creation of, and engagement with, digital visual cultures to construct and negotiate their identities and build online communities transnationally. In the following chapter, I will place my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy in conversation with wider scholarship to show how it contributes to and builds upon a field of studies on Black feminist intimacies, diaspora, and affect.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that the creation of digital diasporic intimacy is a fundamental process of *Black diasporic (other)worlding*. Though this phrase is not my central focus, I think it is useful to offer a definition here as I return to this concept throughout. Black diasporic (other)worlding refers to the ways that people from the Black diaspora demarcates and constructs interior worlds together using in-group knowledges, shared cultural expressions, and the negotiation of Black identity. These interior worlds are constructed socially, aesthetically, ideologically, and culturally and they exist outside of white Western hegemonies but are oftentimes created from a place within them, which in this case is social media. I use Black diasporic (other)worlding to refer to a practice of creating a diasporic oppositional culture, where blackness is centred, loved, and celebrated, and where the Black diaspora can (re)connect and build community using shared cultural and expressive practices.¹⁴

On social media, Black diasporic (other)worlding can also describe the process of creating a digital ‘counterpublic’.¹⁵ Nancy Fraser coined the phrase ‘subaltern counterpublic’ as a critique of Jürgen Habermas’ theories of the bourgeois public sphere to describe ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate

¹⁴ This builds on arguments made in: bell hooks, “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance,” in *black looks: race and representation* (reis., 1992; New York: Routledge, 2015), 9-20.

¹⁵ Anna Everett, “The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere,” *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 125-146; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.¹⁶ According to Fraser, subaltern counterpublics are oppositional to dominant public cultures, and within them innovation and community are foundational for the formation of identity. Similarly, I suggest Black diasporic (other)worlding is the creation of an alternative space where Black diasporic identities, expressions, and cultures constitute the markers of collective community building. However, while Fraser's 'subaltern counterpublic' focuses primarily on the dissemination of the discursive, Black diasporic (other)worlding is racially specific and can be discursive, as well as gestural, aesthetic, visual, cultural, spiritual, and kinetic. In social media research, counterpublics have been used to describe Black digital networks and online behaviours that are created outside of digital white hegemonies and challenge dominant misrepresentations of blackness and racial inequalities.¹⁷ My use of Black diasporic other(worlding) extends these conversations to argue that within digitally mediated ideological and imagined worlds, Black diasporic experiences can be affirmed, we can experience joy away from the gaze of whiteness, Black modes of knowledge are privileged, and intracommunity tensions and differences can be expressed and debated to negotiate the terms of diasporic identities. Altogether, Black diasporic (other)worlding offers Black people a space to create transnational community where we can celebrate, affirm, and negotiate our collective identities and differences. I argue that within the curation of digital diasporic intimacies we can locate the practice of Black diasporic (other)worlding.

¹⁶ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 67.

¹⁷ Shardé M. Davis, "The Aftermath of #BlackGirlsRock vs. #WhiteGirlsRock: Considering DisRespectability of a Black Women's Counterpublic," *Women's Studies in Communication* 41, no. 3 (2018): 269-290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1505678>; Roderick Graham and Shawn Smith, "The Content of Our #Characters: Black Twitter as Counterpublic," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2, no. 4 (2016): 433-449, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649216639067>; Catherine Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 446-468.

The Significance of Diaspora

Although I will have a more rigorous discussion of my theoretical framework for locating and identifying the Black diaspora in the following chapter, I want to briefly note how diasporas manifest in my research beforehand. To summarise, I use diaspora to refer to a constructed social identity that is underpinned by relationality and imagined, emotive, and creative networks between geographically dispersed Black people. Importantly, Jacqueline Nassy Brown's concept of 'diasporic resources' is foundational for my conceptualisation of diaspora within digital diasporic intimacy.¹⁸ Attentive to the ways that Black Liverpoolians have used aspects of Black American culture to undergo processes of diasporic identity formation necessary for their survival in majority-white towns and schools, Nassy Brown uses 'diasporic resources' to refer to a set of cultural, ideological, and symbolic materials that when used can help foster collective identity and a transnational sense of community. Building on this, I propose that each of the materials featured in this thesis are digital 'diasporic resources' that can be used for the purpose of Black diasporic (other)worlding

In addition to the theoretical outline that I shortly offer, I want to also position my personal anecdotes, which are scattered through this thesis, as diasporic. As a Black *grl* living in Britain with a Jamaican heritage, my experiences of being Black are fundamentally diasporic as I have long made sense of my identity through my connections with different places, cultures, mediums, languages, and materials. I offer you an insight to this in each of my chapters. I find Gilroy's ruminations on Black Britain useful for thinking through what I mean by this:

¹⁸ Jacqueline Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space," *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1998): 298.

Black Britain defines itself crucially as part of a diaspora. Its unique cultures draw inspiration from those developed by black populations elsewhere. In particular, the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean have become raw materials for creative processes which redefine what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British experiences and meanings. Black culture is actively made and re-made.¹⁹

The materials revealed in this thesis are not only reflective of my social media usage, but also illuminate some of the digital ‘diasporic resources’ that I have used to articulate my own identity and find belonging on social media.²⁰ I demonstrate how these materials shape my understanding of Black diasporic identities, and how my own lived experiences shape my engagement with them. I also reveal moments where these materials did not feel representative or risked homogenising diasporic identities, and I am transparent and vulnerable as I make my personal social media usage visible. Although many of these digital ‘diasporic resources’ were produced by, or dominantly disseminated within Black American networks, these materials were important for me as a person of the diaspora as I used them to orient my own identity and connect with digital communities intimately.²¹

Curating Diasporic (Other)Worlds Online

As my thesis title suggests, this project is interested in the ways that digital diasporic intimacy is *curated* on social media. I use this word intentionally to signal the multiple processes of selection, dissemination, presentation, engagement with, and care for the visual materials that I use to underpin my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy. In arts cultures, curation describes the act of gathering, organising, assembling, and presenting materials in a

¹⁹ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (reissued, 1987; Oxford: Routledge, 2002), 202.

²⁰ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

²¹ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

collection which all respond to a specific theme.²² These collections can take a range of creative formats including museum exhibitions, events programmes, art collections, and music playlists. Curation often signals an inclusion of the arts in some way, and this is central to my thesis as I want to communicate the presence of visual mediums in my argument.

Conversations about social media curation tend to centre the compilation of online content for digital brands and organisations to drive audience and sales.²³ In this context, the phrase ‘content curation’ has become synonymous with marketing and branding across social media. While this is useful to remind us that an aspect of social media curation includes a consideration of digital networks, audience, and the ways that material might be shared across platforms, I want to depart from these conceptions of curation to steer away from the prevalence of branding and marketing and recentre the care for and dissemination of arts and visual culture within the practice. Although on occasions within this thesis, the forms of curation I explore can be argued to be a form of personal branding, such as in chapter four when I look at influencer cultures on Instagram, I am much more interested in how these digital visual cultures contribute to the curation of digital diasporic intimacies.

As I centre visual culture in my application of social media curation, I consider how the internet has enabled marginalised people to participate in the process of curation. Nehal El-Hadi recognises that the word curator is being used flippantly to describe forms of branding online and repositions the professional role of curators as central to social media curation. She writes that, ‘curators collect and take care of objects, information, histories, traditions, knowledge. They research and categorise, organise collections into stories, present narratives about collections and highlight themes and connections.’²⁴ Although she is critical of the

²² Kelly Richman-Abdou, “What is Curating? See Why More and More People Are Interested in Becoming Curators,” *My Modern Met*, August 1, 2019, <https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-curating/>.

²³ “Why Content Curation Rules Social,” Digital Marketing Institute, last modified August 11, 2017, <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/why-content-curation-rules-social>.

²⁴ Nehal El-Hadi, “Radical Curation: Taking Care of Black Women’s Narratives,” *Model View Culture* 21, May 19, 2015, <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/radical-curation-taking-care-of-black-womens-narratives>.

internet's effect on the term, she argues that nonetheless social media has 'provided a platform for *radical curation*' as Black women have been able to participate in the act of caring for and assembling visual materials for an accessible digital collection.²⁵ El-Hadi uses Nichelle Gainer's Tumblr archive, Vintage Black Glamour, and Renina Jarmon's Tumblr blog, Black Girls Are From the Future, to describe radical curation as an intervention on the limitations of institutional spaces where groups of people have been marginalised and erased. Her articulation of radical curation contributes to a field of research that explores how Black women have curated their identities, narratives, and stories through aesthetics, art, and visual culture.²⁶

The internet has made different forms of curation more accessible.²⁷ I argue that all my case studies are curatorial practices as they compile visual materials together to present a cohesive narrative of Black diasporic identities and cultures. I draw on the ways that these evidence collaborative curations, between creator and audience, where the visual and discursive are gathered to create a narrative of digital diasporic intimacy. For this reason, I focus on social media platforms that prioritise the culmination of image and word, these are also the platforms that I have personally used most frequently in the years covered in this thesis.

Instagram and YouTube are popular platforms that centre the visual, through photograph and video respectively, and they offer digital tools for audience engagement such as comments sections and like buttons. Launched in 2010, Instagram is an image-based platform

²⁵ El-Hadi, "Radical Curation,".

²⁶ Krys Osei, "Fashioning My Garden of Solace: A Black Feminist Autoethnography," *Fashion Theory* 23, no. 6 (2019): 733-746.

²⁷ For more information on the range of alternative curatorial practices offered by the internet read: KA Bird, Paul Stewart, and Helen Hester, "A Conversation on Digital Communities, Domestic Space, and Things We Do Online," *On Curating* 45 (2019), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-45-reader/a-conversation-on-digital-communities-domestic-space-and-things-we-do-online.html#.YnrAQi8w2w4>; Dorothee Richter, "Curating the Digital – A Historical Perspective," *On Curating* 45 (2019), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-45-reader/curating-the-digital-a-historical-perspective.html#.YnrAli8w2w4>.

that has rapidly become a part of everyday digital life.²⁸ On the app-based platform, photographs and other visual ephemera such as short videos and memes are shared through registered accounts and can be organised and searched for via hashtags and key words.²⁹ It has been described as the space for ‘aesthetic visual communication,’³⁰ and more recently as CEO Adam Mosseri brands it, an entertainment and video platform.³¹ As one of the most popularly used visual-based social media apps which centres photography, video and their dissemination, Instagram is an ideal space to explore social media curation.

On the other hand, YouTube is video-sharing website created in 2005 that is used to share longform content. My engagement with YouTube has primarily been through the desktop website and not the smartphone application and so when I discuss YouTube, I consider the entirety of the platform, specifically how the comment section and users’ responses literally frames the videos that are shared. Although YouTube is largely recognised as a video-sharing tool, I still frame it as social media platform. Despite the fact that the platform’s ‘architecture that is not primarily designed for collaborative or collective participation,’ Burgess and Green argue that people have still made use of the tools and functions of it to build communities and participate in the creation of content.³² Drawing from this, and also from the ways that Instagram has moved towards visual entertainment instead of solely photo-sharing, I explore how the comments section for both platforms can contribute to the curation of digital diasporic intimacies. Both platforms enable collaborative content curation and engagement that are centred around the mediation of the visual.

²⁸ In Leaver et. al., *Instagram*, the authors chart the history of Instagram and note how it has transitioned from an iPhone-only retro camera app to a global platform that has changed the way we think about and live with digital visual cultures.

²⁹ Linnea Laestadius, “Instagram,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. Luke Sloan & Anabel Quan-Haase (London: SAGE Publications, 2016), 573-592.

³⁰ Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 41, http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/160-instagram-and-contemporary-image/instagram_book_manovich_2017.pdf.

³¹ Adam Mosseri, “Changes are Coming to Video on Instagram,” Instagram TV, June 30, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CQwNfFBjr5A/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

³² Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 63.

In the final chapter I look at Twitter, a social media platform that centres written communication rather than visual. This modal difference offers a unique site to explore the way that digital diasporic intimacies are curated through visual meanings specifically as this platform, which was originally iterated as a social networking site for short posts of 180 characters or less, is increasingly becoming reliant on the dissemination of visual media for its meaning-making. Unlike Instagram and YouTube, Twitter activity is not always oriented around responses towards a specific post because the platform's content updates so quickly. Instead, topics trend and conversations occur in ways that build upon existing knowledges and inferences, as well as through retweets, quote tweets, and replies. This structures Twitter as a more conversational and network-based platform. Each of these sites have algorithmically encoded 'platform vernaculars' that shape the ways we interact with material and one another on them.³³

While some critics have argued that digital curation across social media should only be defined as editorial or branding ventures, El-Hadi reminds us that this work is a legitimate curatorial practice that aims to recover stories that have been pushed out of dominant culture: 'Curation is not a default. The internet has created a space for the curation of subjects and objects oft-ignored. For black women in particular, radical curation has meant the validation and celebration of our existence'.³⁴ Altogether, I hope that through my use of curation, I can challenge the borders of curation, art, knowledge, and storytelling, to consider those whose narratives are underrepresented or misrepresented within formal institutions.

Social media curation has also been used to describe the ways that individuals have assembled their own spaces online through who they follow and don't, what content they

³³ Martin Gibbs et. al., "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/136911SX.2014.987152>.

³⁴ El-Hadi, "Radical Curation,".

engage with, and their own personal archives.³⁵ This form of curation appears in my thesis as the case studies I have selected are indicative of my own occupation of online spaces and the way that I have curated my social media profiles through selection, assembly, and an engagement with that I feel reflects my sense of self and community. As Caroline Dayer notes, ‘The act of curation is both a project and a projection of a specific perspective into the selection of certain works.’³⁶ While this thesis reflects how I have curated my personal social media accounts, I also wish to frame my role as a researcher as a form of curation as I have gathered these materials with the intention to present a visual perspective on digital diasporic intimacy. As I engage the multiple iterations of curation, this thesis asks how diasporic intimacies are curated through visual cultures on social media. It explores how materials are gathered and engaged as a process of Black diasporic (other)worlding, where diasporic perspectives are demarcated, and community is expressed.

Reading Across Texts Intuitively and Intimately: Black Feminist Research Methods

In the trajectory of Black feminist writers, I use the personal to connect my experiences to the social experiences of the digital Black diaspora.³⁷ As I have demonstrated in my preface and at the opening of this introduction, I use autoethnography to engage in reflective

³⁵ Xuan Zhao and Siân E. Lindley, “Curation through use: Understanding the Personal Value of Social Media,” paper presented at the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computer Systems, Toronto, Canada, April 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2556288.2557291>.

³⁶ Carolina Dayer, “Curation,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 72, no. 1 (2018): 167.

³⁷ Black feminist writers have long used the personal to connect to the social and political. Some examples of work include: Kesiena Boom, “But Some of Us Are Tired: Black Women’s ‘Personal Feminist Essays’ in the Digital Sphere,” in *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe*, edited by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (London: Pluto Press, 2019): 245-258; Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (reis, 1982; London: Penguin Random House, 2018); Briona Simone Jones, ed., *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought* (New York: The New Press, 2021); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

storytelling that outlines how I arrived at this research project and the questions I ask throughout, while it also provides anecdotes that share my own experiences of finding and engaging with digital diasporic communities and intimacies on social media between 2018 and 2020. I offer personal storytelling as a framework for this thesis as the research emerged from my own social media experiences, and so I have an intimate relationship with the materials discussed. In the words of Kathryn Church, ‘writing about myself is a way of writing about those others and about the world which we create/inhabit.’³⁸ In my thesis, that world is a Black diasporic digital world, marked by digital diasporic intimacies. Saidiya Hartman recognises that the use of autobiography ‘is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it’s not about navel gazing, it’s really about trying to look at historical and social processes.’³⁹ Though not entirely an autoethnographical project, I weave storytelling throughout my thesis as I reflect on the contexts of digital diasporic intimacies and connect this to my multi-faceted experiences living and growing up in Britain. It is also an intervention on the ways that knowledge within academia has been gatekept. To borrow the rich words of Krys Osei, through my storytelling, ‘I am able to preserve and further archive my voice and lived experiences as a direct act of humanization within the exclusionary walls of academia.’⁴⁰

Autoethnography, which underpins the structure of my chapters and the selection of the materials, is supported by a form of qualitative, intuitive, and affective engagement with the sources that I refer to as *reading*. To summarise, *reading* describes a method of literary and visual inquiry that is informed by feeling, intuited knowledges, and embodied experiences of ‘Black feminist thought’.⁴¹ It is the process of undertaking a ‘close reading’, which in

³⁸ Kathryn Church, *Forbidden Narratives: Critical Autobiography as Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

³⁹ Patricia J. Saunders, “Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2008): 5.

⁴⁰ Osei, “Fashioning My Garden,” 735.

⁴¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

literary criticism describes a precise consideration of the particulars of a passage of text. While they are similarly subjective methodologies, *reading* slightly departs from ‘close reading’ as I use autoethnography to bolster and frame my interpretations. In addition, my use of ‘reading’ also refers to a practice of accountability and observation in Black queer culture, where to ‘read’ someone means to critique them based on your own immediate perceptions.

I am wary of using terms like ‘analysis’ and ‘data’ in my project as I locate this language as scientific and empirical, and as Black feminist literary scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin writes, ‘I cannot write about black women and black women’s texts in a language I find ugly.’⁴² In addition, language like ‘analysis’ and ‘data’ risk upholding the illusion of objective study which is privileged in the idea of what constitutes intellectual academic rigour.⁴³ Instead, *reading* rejects the articulation of Black people, culture, and stories as ‘data’, and sits with my question, “what if my knowledge is drawn from speculation, imagination, intuition, or embodied ways of knowing?”. It is a transparently subjective, affective, and sensory method of engaging with materials that is informed by my personal experiences, the conversations I have with those around me, and the theories of Black feminist and queer thinkers that have preceded me. My articulation of *reading* as a method takes inspiration from Christina Sharpe, who within *In The Wake* notes how the precarities of the afterlives of slavery, ‘texture [her] reading practices, [her] ways of being in the world and of the world, [her] relations with and to others.’⁴⁴ Sharpe is explicit in the ways that her methods of engaging with material is affected by her lived experiences as a person of the Black diaspora. She cannot *read* outside of the context of her life as a Black person. Similarly, my project is shaped by my digital engagement with the materials as part of the Black diaspora and as a part of these online communities. I draw from that reserve of

⁴² Charles H. Rowell and Farah Jasmine Griffin, “An Interview with Farah Jasmine Griffin,” *Callaloo* 22, no. 4 (1999): 879

⁴³ Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

⁴⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5.

knowledge to share an understanding of what it means to long for community and feel held, affirmed, and sometimes frustrated by the intimacies that emerge within them.

As I engage an embodied *reading* of the materials in this thesis, I join a history of queer and feminist thinkers and writers who have positioned feeling and affect as legitimate practice for the creation of knowledges and theory.⁴⁵ For instance, Audre Lorde offers poetry, which she defines as the ‘revelation or distillation of experience’, to explain how the expression of feeling through language can be revolutionary.⁴⁶ She writes:

for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.⁴⁷

Lorde’s use of poetry signals how creativity and the written word can articulate the knowledges that have already been felt and experienced. The poetic figuration in my research emerges in the ways that I draw together multiple ways of knowing, such as feeling, autoethnography, and *reading* to theorise the quotidian as it is entangled with the political, but not in ways that strip it from the practices of joy that it is.⁴⁸ I am affected by the materials, and as Lola Olufemi writes, ‘affect, the ability to be moved, should never be underestimated. It is what brings us to feminist politics and what sustains us.’⁴⁹

My approach also responds directly to Katherine McKittrick’s ruminations on Black studies and methodologies. In *Dear Science*, she writes the following:

⁴⁵ adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019); bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (reis, 2000; New York: William Morrow, 2018); bell hooks and stuart hall, *Uncut Funk: A Contemplative Dialogue* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁶ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (reis., 1984. New York: Random House, 2007), 37.

⁴⁷ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 37.

⁴⁸ Emily Lordi, “Why Is Academic Writing So Beautiful? Notes on Black Feminist Scholarship,” *The Feminist Wire*, March 4, 2014, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/03/academic-writing-black-feminism-krisof/>

⁴⁹ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 86.

Black studies and anticolonial thought offer methodological practices wherein we read, live, hear, groove, create, and write across a range of temporalities, places, texts, and ideas that build on existing liberatory practices and pursue ways of living [in] the world that are uncomfortably generous and provisional and practical and, as well, imprecise and unrealized. The method is rigorous, too. Wonder is study. Curiosity is attentive. Black method is therefore not continuously and absolutely undisciplined (invariably without precision, invariably undone). Black method is precise, detailed, coded, long, and forever. The practice of bringing together multiple texts, stories, songs, and places involved the difficult work of thinking and learning across many sites, and thus coming to know, generously, varying and shifting worlds and ideas.⁵⁰

McKittrick's articulations of Black studies methodologies is useful as it centres feeling, curiosity, and experience. It also posits these methods of living, grooving, and reading as precise, coded, and disciplined. To McKittrick, to *read* is to engage multiple sites of knowledge, that are embodied, lived, and felt. My articulation of reading responds to these Black feminist modes of inquiry that understand rigorous study to be subjective, lived, and generous. *Reading* is my attempt to 'talk back' to what I have understood as the systematic pressures of the academy and is an effort centre my lived knowledges.⁵¹ It is an intervention of the separation between what it means to *feel* knowledge and *acquire* knowledge. While I understand the importance of acquiring knowledge through academic inquiry, this could only happen once I situated myself, and my community, as *already knowledgeable*.

While my thesis is concerned with the ways that intimacy is curated, I also use intimacy as an entrance to a Black feminist, pleasure-centred approach to research. I engage with the sources affectively, and I selected them based on my own intimate relationships with them. In *black looks*, Black feminist scholar bell hooks defines 'loving blackness' as an oppositional

⁵⁰ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 5.

⁵¹ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist-Thinking Black* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1989), 9.

political act that can transform our ways of knowing and being in the world as it resists the antiblackness that permeates society and instead, ‘creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.’⁵² I engage loving blackness in my thesis as I sit with and think through the ways that I am affected by and seek joy within Black cultures and intimacies online. As I engage methodologies that build upon Black feminist thought and Black Studies praxis, I practice loving blackness as theory.⁵³

Reflection: Ephemerality and the Challenge of Social Media Research

As with most social media research, I faced challenges related to the gathering, storing, and sharing of digital material.⁵⁴ I believe that it is important for me to lay bare to what these were as I have grappled with these throughout the duration of my PhD, and upon reflection I may have approached these concerns differently.

The internet is an ephemeral, fleeting place. Although I was always aware of the short-lived reality of social media, I only began to understand the impact that this would have on my research in May 2019, when cecile emeke’s web-series *strolling* was removed from YouTube. As I was presenting my research at the Midlands3Cities research festival, I had clicked on the URL to show a clip from an episode and was instead met with an error page. Although I had watched all the episodes and had made note of the themes, discussions, and visuals, I was not sure whether I could continue to talk about the series in my thesis. I asked myself whether this was indicative of emeke’s right to be forgotten and wondered whether I

⁵² bell hooks, *black looks: race and representation* (reis., 1992; New York: Routledge, 2015), 20.

⁵³ Lisa Amanda Palmer, “The Politics of Loving Blackness in the UK,” PhD Diss., (University of Birmingham, 2010).

⁵⁴ The Ethics of Internet Based and Social Media Research, July 14, 2016, https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.644904!/file/Report_Ethics_of_Social_Media_Research_Jul16.pdf ; Leanne Townsend, “Social Media Research & Ethics,” *SAGE Research Methods*, video (2017), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526413642>.

should change the chapter entirely. After a year and a half of ruminating this question and speaking with other social media researchers about the ephemerality of digital content, I concluded that this was the risk of social media research and decided to still discuss the cultural impact of the series in this thesis. Although some links and URLs featured in this thesis no longer work as the content has been removed, I maintain them as a citation practice, and stress that this project captures my social media engagement during a specific period.

As part of my Ethics Approval for this project, I indicated that I did not want to identify those who left comments and engaged with the digital material on Instagram and YouTube.⁵⁵ While I have named the content creators, – those who have produced and shared the visual materials with the intention of being seen by a large audience – I felt that it was important to maintain the anonymity of audiences who responded to these in the relevant comment sections. Twitter users referenced in this thesis are also content creators in my definition as they have a personal space for the curation of their own discursive and visual content. I also ensured that I received permission from the influencers in chapter four, to visually reproduce their selfies. As part of my rationale, I did not want to give name to people’s voices who did not necessarily intend to be identified. Furthermore, I did not want to abstract people’s lives and experiences to quantitative data and so I prioritised the qualitative approach of *reading*. As I do not want to speak for people who have engaged with these visual materials, when I reference their comments, in most cases, I write them out in their entirety, and this includes the emojis used, which I label according to their respective titles on the digital resource www.emojipedia.com and insert between square brackets. An obvious method to challenging my concerns would have been to conduct interviews with content creators and audiences, and in retrospect this could have been a valuable method to apply from the outset of my project. It

⁵⁵ Kelsey Beninger, “Social Media Users’ Views on the Ethics of Social Media Research,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. Luke Sloan & Anabel Quan-Haase (London: SAGE Publications, 2016), 57-73.

was late 2019 when I had decided to move forward with an interview process, however, the global impacts of COVID-19 meant that I was unable to actualise these.

I hope that my reflections demonstrate how I attempted to centre care in my research, challenge what is regarded as ‘data’, and have critically engaged with my own methods. In each of my chapters I explain a little more about my methodologies and reasonings as it relates to the case studies.

What Follows...

To lay the groundwork for the case studies that follow, in my first chapter I review the scholarship around diasporas, diasporic intimacies, and digital blackness. Though not exclusively, I am particularly focused on the scholarship that situate these themes within Black feminist and queer theory to locate my research in conversation with key thinkers in Black studies and Black digital studies. In the following four chapters I offer case studies of ‘diasporic resources’ that demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacies are curated.⁵⁶ The first two studies collectively explore how Black diasporic (other)worlds are constructed intimately on social media, and the remaining two examine how these communities are sustained through mediated expressions of joy and uplift. Each chapter is preceded with an interlude which offers a preliminary foundation for the theories that form the chapter which follows.

Chapter two opens my conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacies as I explore how encountering the digital diaspora and sharing stories together helps create intimate Black digital communities. I focus on the YouTube iteration of cecile emeke’s web-series *strolling* (2014-16), and read how it engages themes of place, belonging and citizenship to better understand how spatiality implicates digital diasporic intimacy. Drawing on the web-series’

⁵⁶ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

visuals, the storytellers' narratives documented within the series, and YouTube viewers' responses to the series via the comments section, I argue that digital diasporic intimacy is created affectively via emeke's *strolling* through collaborative storytelling. I use the phrase *shared autobiography* to describe this digital practice, and this accounts for emeke's visual storytelling, the stories shared within the series, and viewers' extensions of these stories within the comments section. In this chapter I ask, how is digital diasporic intimacy created through sharing stories centred around space, place, and belonging? And how are Black diasporic (other)worlds created through emotion and a negotiation of diasporic identities?

In chapter three I turn my focus to Instagram to look at Renata Cherlise's archival project @BlackArchives.co. In this chapter I am particularly interested in the ways that memory is a site of diasporic cultural and social formation, and I read Instagram posts with accompanying comments to reveal how digital diasporic intimacies are curated temporally. To understand the ways that memory, time, and photographs are amalgamated as an expression of, and a tool for the curation of digital diasporic intimacy, I explore the ways that Black Instagrammers use photographs from the past as conduits, or 'diasporic resources', for self-exploration and Black diasporic (other)worlding on social media. I coin the term *speculative remembering* to describe viewers' temporal engagements with the Instagram post. In this chapter, I locate digital diasporic intimacy within this temporal yearning, longing, and desire.

I stay with Instagram in chapter four as I explore whether digital diasporic intimacies can be found within neoliberal individualism and influencer cultures. I look at a selection of #BlackGirlMagic selfies posted onto Instagram by beauty influencers in the summer of 2019 and explore the use of light as a visual and rhetorical strategy for creating community. In this chapter, I build upon Krista Thompson's conceptualisation of the visual economy of light in Black diasporic visual culture to argue that in these selfies light is used to denote community

and celebrate Black beauty.⁵⁷ Unlike the other chapters in this thesis, the methodology I used for this case study took a different shape. Instead of looking specifically at an account or visual material, that emerged on my timeline, as I wanted to engage with a wider range of selfies, I used a hashtag as a methodological framework. However, this allows me to grapple with complex discussions about the relationship between intimacy, community, digital entrepreneurship, and commodification. I ask: can digital diasporic intimacy be located within influencer cultures and Instagram's focus on entrepreneurship, individualism and neoliberalism? How is digital diasporic intimacy created through self-visualising, self-affirmation, and community praise and uplift? And then, how is light used as an affective photographic register that articulates diasporic visibility and visibility?

Finally, in chapter five I locate digital diasporic intimacies within Black diasporic sound cultures that have been mediated through digital visual culture. Unlike the previous chapters that focus primarily on photograph and moving image as sites of digital visual culture, this chapter focuses on digitally created images: memes. Internet memes are increasingly becoming a way that we communicate and demonstrate the dominance of visual displays within digital languages. A playful and often unserious medium of digital visual culture, memes offer us a route into important conversations around identity politics, digital creativity, virality, and subsequently, digital diasporic intimacy. Focusing on a genre of cartoon memes that have been remixed (edited) to visually include Black femme aesthetics, I ambitiously posit that memes emanate a sonic vibrancy. I argue that this sonic vibrancy emerges through the creation of the memes, the circulation of them, and the engagement with them. As such, I locate digital diasporic intimacy within the playfulness and joyfulness of the

⁵⁷ Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

creation of these memes, as well as within the presence of Black diasporic sound and aesthetic cultures.

The interludes that separate each chapter do more than offer a momentary pause for my readers, they are the anchor for my conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacies. The short passages include theory, brief ruminations, summaries of material that inspired the chapter, and reflective anecdotes from my research experience to tease out the dominant themes of the chapters. In the first interlude I wrestle with the intersection between Black identities and space, in the second I reflect on the earlier years of my PhD where I grappled with themes of time and blackness, and in the third and fourth, I think through the relationship between Black embodiment and social media, and my experiences with Black sound cultures. Though their function is to separate the chapters thematically, the interludes are connected, and the messages drawn from them can be weaved through the entirety of this thesis. Altogether, the interludes help to shape the thesis argument as they reveal how Black diasporic (other)worlds and digital diasporic intimacies can be created through space, time, the body, and sound.

Chapter 1. Contextualising Diasporic Intimacies and Visual Culture on Social Media

The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement marked an important historical shift in the digital lives of Black people globally.¹ As it began with a hashtag – coined by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 – that was proliferated on Twitter to protest police brutality in the U.S, the movement connected Black people globally all in protest of the permeance of antiblackness. As the use of the hashtag sparked the creation of more social media hashtags, movements, and trends that centred Black life, creativity, and culture, there has been a steady increase in studies that reflect upon and explore Black relationships to social media. Though not central to my thesis, #BlackLivesMatter marks an important turning point in the use and study of social media. Although, as I demonstrate shortly, #BlackLivesMatter was not the beginning of Black organising via the internet, it marks an important juncture of Black digital lives that connects political organising to celebrations of Black cultures and diasporic intimacies.

An enquiry into digital diasporic intimacy is one that requires a breaking down of the key terms that contribute to the concept: “digital”, “diaspora”, and “intimacy”. As there are a plethora of perspectives and discussions on each of the separate components to this term, it is useful for me situate my research project within these discussions to illustrate where, when, and how my conceptualisation of the term relates to and departs from its predecessors and contemporaries. Then I will explain how I intend to explore the curation of digital diasporic intimacy through digital visual culture.

¹ Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

Digital

To begin unpacking what I mean by the ‘digital’ in digital diasporic intimacy, I want to offer a survey of literature that interrogates the relationship between Black communities, digital technologies, and social media. I begin with an outline of scholarship that connects blackness and technology, then I focus specifically on the relationship between race and the internet. In doing so, I will connect a partial history of Black being, organising, and social practices to the rise of computer technologies. Afterwards, I survey literature that explores Black uses of social media and explain how my thesis contributes to this growing field of Black digital studies.

Studies that explore the relationship between blackness and technology have demonstrated how African-descended people have long been subjugated by white Western developments of science and technology.² In “Race and/as Technology,” Wendy Hui Kyong Chun explains that this violent and oppressive relationship can be traced back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade where semiotic meanings were inscribed onto the bodies of enslaved Africans through racial signifiers.³ As she identifies technologies as tools, and traces the emergence of racial categories back to the eighteenth century, Chun demonstrates how race has been weaponised as a ‘mapping tool’ for capitalism and racial subjugation.⁴ In *Dark Matters* Simone Browne extends this to argue that racism and antiblackness undergird the development of new technologies. Browne traces surveillance technologies in the U.S from present-day automated facial recognition and streetlamps to nineteenth century slave passes and eighteenth century

² Ruha Benjamin, ed., *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Rayvon Fouche, “From Black Inventors to One Laptop Per Child,” in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 61-84.

³ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race,” in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 38-60.

⁴ Chun, “Race and/as Technology,” 40.

lantern laws to illustrate how these technologies are informed by practices of racial subjugation that police Black life.⁵ However, while she recognises these as inherently anti-Black practices of technological subjugation, Browne also illustrates the ways that Black communities have used their experiential knowledge and insight of surveillance in order to resist it.⁶ She uses ‘dark sousveillance’ to describe ‘an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices.’⁷ She plots Black performative and creative practices as sousveillance acts that enabled people to participate in reimagining and cultivating their own freedom.⁸

Importantly, while Browne’s study identifies and locates a long history of technological subjugation informed by antiblackness, she simultaneously centres Black agency as she acknowledges the ways that Black people have creatively resisted technological domination as they observe and then exploit the intended functions of technologies. I invite my readers to sit with Browne’s concept of sousveillance as you read this thesis. Sousveillance offers an important framework for our understanding of Black engagement with social media as it encourages us to be attentive to the ways that Black cultures are hypervisible and hypersurveilled online, while also drawing our attention to the ways that Black people creatively resist this. I return to the concept of sousveillance within my chapters to locate it as a practice of intimate community building.

The emergence of the internet in the late twentieth century presented new grounds for scholars to study the entangled relationship between blackness and computer technologies. Charlton D. McIlwain, for example, offers a two-part study in *Black Software* that explores how computer technology was on one hand designed to ‘destroy black agency by nullifying

⁵ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁶ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 22.

⁷ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 21.

⁸ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 22.

black people's hopes and dreams, aspirations, human potential, and political interests,' but on the other hand, was used by Black hobbyists, entrepreneurs, digital organisers, and activists to further 'our own personal, communal, and political interests.'⁹ This duality of technological violence and then Black resistance and innovation is one that has been long explored; despite digital inequalities Black people have still created new technologies and practices that help them to overcome engineered oppression.¹⁰ Like Browne recognises with 'sousveillance', technological subjugation can be thwarted with performative and creative practices and social media offers us a space to explore this.

Social media researchers have demonstrated the ways that race and racism are constructed, performed, and enacted online. 'The Internet is a place where race happens,' writes Lisa Nakamura in her seminal study on digital race.¹¹ Researched and authored in the early twenty-first century, when the visual dominance of image-based social media platforms had not yet come to fruition and thus real-life pictures of people were seldom used, Nakamura argued that although physical bodies were hidden, 'race has a way of asserting its presence in the language users employ, in the kind of identities they construct, and in the ways they depict themselves online, both through language and through graphic images.'¹² Although in my project I look specifically at when Black bodies and visual aesthetics are made visible online, Nakamura's assertion that race can assert its presence without the visual is important as I also focus on how these images are produced and engaged with and how these reflect Black ways of being and diasporic (other)worlding.

⁹ Charlton D. McIlwain, *Black Software: The Internet and Racial Injustice, from the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7.

¹⁰ Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); S. Craig Watkins et. al, *The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

¹¹ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2002), xi.

¹² Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 31.

Nakamura's study on race online offers a foundation for us to consider the ways that racial identity is performed online, but she also recognises how race can also be co-opted and appropriated by white internet users. She coins the term 'cybertypes' to describe 'the distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism.'¹³ And as she focuses on the ways that racial fantasies and desires are mediated through the internet, she uses the term 'identity tourism' to describe how white social media users engage in racial passing online through avatars and racial stereotypes.¹⁴ Nakamura's concept of identity tourism, provides a starting point for us to consider the dialogues of digital blackness, blackfishing, and cultural appropriation on present-day social media.¹⁵ These terms give name to some of the ways that the hypervisibility of Black culture can lead to co-optation and erasure. In addition, 'misogynoir',¹⁶ 'trolling',¹⁷ 'shadow banning',¹⁸ and 'algorithmic oppression',¹⁹ offer more examples of the ways that Black visibility online can result in threats of racism and antiblackness.

The context of technologies' mediation of race and racism is important for, though not central to, the shape of my thesis, as it lays out a contextual framing for some of the issues that the Black diaspora have to contend with by simply existing online. Although I have not offered an exhaustive list of the ways that racism, antiblackness and appropriation are enmeshed in the technologies, the internet, and social media, I have demonstrated how

¹³ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 3.

¹⁴ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, xv.

¹⁵ Lauren Michele Jackson, *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); Wesley E. Stevens, "Blackfishing on Instagram: Influencing and Commodification of Black Urban Aesthetics," *Social Media + Society* (2021): 1-15.

¹⁶ Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

¹⁷ Rachelle Hampton, "The Black Feminists Who Saw the Alt-Right Threat Coming," *Slate*, April 23, 2019, <https://slate.com/technology/2019/04/black-feminists-alt-right-twitter-gamergate.html>.

¹⁸ Salma El-Wardany, "Like Our Society, Instagram is Biased Against Women of Colour," *Refinery 29*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2020/12/10150275/shadow-ban-instagram-censorship-women-of-colour>.

¹⁹ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 4.

despite this, Black people have still found ways to use social media in ways that reject, refuse, and resist these realities.

Throughout this thesis I explore the ways that Black people across the diaspora have used social media creatively, innovatively, intimately, and expansively to connect with one another, build communities, create new self-images, affirm Black ways of knowing, and ultimately engage in practices of Black diasporic (other)worlding. While I am attentive to these technological uses of social media, I note, signpost, and signal to the underworkings of antiblackness, racism, appropriation, and erasure that are technologically mediated. My research project explores some of the ways that Black people have used social media in ways that the platforms were not necessarily intended to be used. This includes: using social media to connect disparate communities and intervene on institutional erasure in the media industry (see chapter two); recover and circulate archival photographs to help curate a public archive that disrupts the erasure of Black history and archival gatekeeping (see chapter three); create social media campaigns to challenge media representations and redefine economics of beauty (see chapter four); and generate and disseminate new images to create community through humour and ultimately reject outsider surveillance (see chapter five).

As such, my research is in conversation with a myriad of thinkers, scholars, activists, and social media users, who discuss how Black social media usage illustrates the innovative technological ways that Black people have used social media platforms in ways that they were not intended to be used but are reflective of Black diasporic cultures, desires, behaviours, and knowledges.²⁰ This includes Feminista Jones who recognises that as Black women have ‘tinker[ed] with Twitter’ to create ways to ‘communicate that are more in line

²⁰ Catherine Knight Steele, “The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116683205>; Catherine Knight Steele, “Signifyin’, Bitching, and Blogging: Black Women and Resistance Discourse Online,” in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 88.

with our own norms', Twitter 'adapted its platform to how we tweet, from creating the current mechanisms for threading to incorporating GIFs in tweet options.'²¹ It also includes Jolynna Sinanan's research on how local Trinidadian idioms, to maco and bacchanal, are mediated through Facebook, and Meredith D. Clark who traces cancel culture to Black vernacular traditions of accountability.²² As André Brock argues, 'Black folk have a natural affinity for the internet and digital media.'²³

In 1999, internet researchers Kollock and Smith predicted that social media networks would 'renew community by strengthening the bonds that connect us to the wider social world while simultaneously increasing our power in that world.'²⁴ Drawing on their edited collection of authors who gathered to discuss what form communities would take online, they argued that digital groups would have real-world impacts. Contemporary studies have since demonstrated some examples of how digital networks can help create online communities which can be utilised to uplift marginalised groups, centre counternarratives, and alternative images.²⁵ In Bock and Figueroa's discourse analysis on Facebook pages and political communities they write that 'an Internet user's ability to self-select and choose what groups to join cultivates a sense of collective identity in online communities.'²⁶ In doing so, they posit that self-affiliation with digital groups is what creates a sense of community. While this study is important as it recognises that self-identification is important for the culmination of

²¹ Feminista Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 42.

²² Meredith D. Clark, "DRAG THEM: A Brief Etymology of So-Called "Cancel Culture," *Communication and the Public* 5, no. 3-4 (2020): 88-92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562>; Jolynna Sinanan, *Social Media in Trinidad: Values and Visibility* (London: UCL Press, 2017).

²³ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 5.

²⁴ Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith, "Communities in Cyberspace," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

²⁵ André Brock, "'Who Do You Think You Are?': Race, Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces," *Poroi* 6, no. 1 (2009): 15-39, <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1013>; Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, Brooke Foucault Welles, "#GirlsLikeUs: Trans Advocacy and Community Building Online," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 5 (2018): 1868-1888, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817709276>.

²⁶ Mary Angela Bock and Ever Josue Figueroa, "Faith and Reason: An Analysis of the Homologies of Black and Blue Lives Facebook Pages," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 9 (2018): 3099.

online communities, their focus on Facebook pages limits what constitutes a digital community, as users join groups and pages oriented around specific themes and content. Furthermore, their study relies on the dialogical exchanges that occur in these Facebook groups. In my thesis, I focus on ways that digital diasporic communities are created in response to images that have been posted onto social media.

Centring the visual on social media opens discussions on what constitutes online communities and subsequently digital diasporic intimacies. Imani Perry recognises that in the present day, ‘the structure of social media consists largely of “posting,” as a form of presentation. However, it is a form of presentation that immediately becomes “representation,” as the post instantaneously at once is an artifact that represents one and is repeated on the screens of others who follow or are connected with one.’²⁷ Taking up Perry’s assertion that contemporary social media is more concerned with posting material than it is about engaging in dialogical exchange, I explore how digital diasporic intimacies are curated in response to posts. Specifically, I focus on visual posts as Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz note, ‘images play an important role in how we experience being in the world and increasingly, due to the ubiquity of online interaction, how we “shape” our world.’²⁸ I am particularly interested in the ways that meaning, community, and culture is oriented around digital visual cultures and this project allows me to tease this out in relation to Black diasporic intimacies and the digital mediation of Black identities and culture.

Much of the contemporary scholarship that explores the mediation of Black identity online and the creation of Black digital communities has a strong focus on the social media platform, Twitter.²⁹ Specifically, Black Twitter describes a digital network of Black users on

²⁷ Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 132.

²⁸ Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gómez Cruz, “Selfies, Images and the Re-making of the Body,” *Body & Society* 21, no. 4 (2015): 79.

²⁹ See: Brock, *Distributed Blackness*; Sarah Florini, “Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin’: Communication and Cultural Performance on “Black Twitter”,” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2015): 223-237.

the platform who are connected culturally, visually, and linguistically. Research on Black Twitter has shaped the ways that we talk about the internet, and research and theorise Black social media communities.³⁰ For instance, Meredith D. Clark's dissertation on Black Twitter was the first to locate it as a subcommunity that was developed by Black users as 'an identifiable, influential meta-network of communicators with the ability to impact news media coverage on Black American life.'³¹ In addition, Sarah Florini's research on Black Twitter identifies blackness as that which is performed online.³² Research also acknowledges the ways that Black Twitter has shaped contemporary social media activism, internet trends, and practices of media consumption.³³ As Regina Duthley writes, 'the contemporary public sphere is digital, thus creating a space where more people can more easily engage in subversive rhetorical acts.'³⁴ Although dominant conversations on Black Twitter centre Black American users, there are distinctive regions of Black Twitter that centre different diasporic Black communities.³⁵ Although my thesis does not attend to Black Twitter specifically, though in chapter five I do locate a particular form of visual culture as having emerged from this space, research around Black Twitter demonstrates how Black community can be created on a platform through posts where community, intimacy and organising were not necessarily intended to occur.

³⁰ André Brock, "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 1012-1020; André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 529-549. Meredith D. Clark, "To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Online Phenomenon 'Black Twitter,'" PhD Diss., (University of North Carolina, 2014).

³¹ Clark, "To Tweet Our Own Cause," xi.

³² Florini, "Tweets, Tweepers, and Signifyin'."

³³ Anna Everett, "Scandalicious: Scandal, Social Media, And Shonda Rhimes' Auteurist Juggernaut," *The Black Scholar* 45, no.1 (2015): 34-42; Felicia L. Harris and Loren Saxton Coleman, "Trending Topics: A Cultural Analysis of Being Mary Jane and Black Women's Engagement on Twitter," *The Black Scholar* 48, no. 1 (2018): 43-55; Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space*; Marc Lamont Hill, "Thank You Black Twitter: State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance," *Urban Education* 53, no. 2 (2018): 286-302; Sanjay Sharma, "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion," *New Formations* 78, no. 2 (2013): 46-64, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.78.02.2013>.

³⁴ Regina Duthley, "Black Feminist Hip-Hop Rhetorics and the Digital Public Sphere," *Changing English* 24, no. 2 (2017): 202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2017.1310458>.

³⁵ Rianna Walcott, "A Tweet at the Table: Black British Identity Expression on Social Media," PhD Diss., (King's College London, 2022).

As an intervention on the dominance of research on Black Twitter, Florini explores the ‘multimedia and transplatform character’ of Black digital networks.³⁶ She examines how Black internet users create a multimedia and transplatform network as they ‘participate in debates, discussion, and sociality within the network by moving across platforms and employing combinations of text-based, audio, and visual media.’³⁷ Florini’s research is useful as it attends to the ways that Black digital networks are created in conjunction with a variety of digital materials and social media platforms. Similarly, my research explores the multimedia mediation of digital diasporic intimacy and how this is engaged on three social media platforms and their affordances. However, while Florini’s research focuses on politics, protest, and news, I focus on the mundane and everyday digital behaviours and politics for my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy.

Similarly, André Brock focuses on the everyday libidinal aspects of Black digital culture in *Distributed Blackness*. His arguments on Black digital practices, the libidinal economy, and the function of joy online resonate with my understanding and argument that digital diasporic intimacies have shaped practices of Black diasporic (other)worlding through everyday affective media. Brock offers critical technocultural discourse analysis as a methodology to ‘understand how digital practitioners filter their technology use through their cultural identity rather than through some preconceived “neutral” space.’³⁸ In doing so, he centres Black culture, knowledges, and meaning in his inquiries about digital technologies. He focuses on the libidinal economy of Black digital practice, which he refers to as a form of energy and summarises ‘Black digital practice as vitality, energy, and occasionally, joy.’³⁹ He continues to outline how these digital economies of Black pleasure and joy shape and are

³⁶ Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.

³⁷ Florini, *Beyond Hashtags*, 4.

³⁸ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 2.

³⁹ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 15.

shaped by digital media. ‘While these libidinal impulses may become commodified or surveilled, the embodied cognition expressed preexists the digital platforms on which they are visible, published, and deemed appropriate for consumption.’⁴⁰ Brock’s research attends to the ways that the libidinal is present within Black digital culture, but also considers how Black culture is mediated through digital media and how it can be commodified on a public platform. I expand on this research as I similarly centre the quotidian and the everyday through affect, and I also attend to the ways that this can be implicated through capital and commerce, but I focus specifically on the experiences of women and femmes online specifically.

Although there has been a growing body of research that I pointed to above which contributes to the field of studies of blackness and technology, these studies homogenise blackness as there is a central focus on Black men’s creativity and digital production. Kishonna Gray’s ‘Black cyberfeminism’ provides a framework to understand how inequalities are mediated and challenged within digital spaces with a specific focus on intersectionality.⁴¹ In addition, in Catherine Knight Steele’s recent scholarship on digital Black feminism she gives voice to the ways that ‘Black women operate online and in digital spaces in ways that far surpass the possibilities imagined for them.’⁴² By positioning Black women at the centre of her research on digital technologies, Steele considers the technological ingenuity of Black women from the nineteenth century to the present day to offer an intervention on how Black women’s digital labour and creativity are theorised. Gray and Steele’s research contributes to a lexicon of Black feminist digital studies that are shaping the ways that we discuss Black women’s digital creativity and intersectionality

⁴⁰ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 15.

⁴¹ Kishonna Gray, “Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory,” in *Produsing Theory in a Digital World 2.0: The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Rebecca Ann Lind (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 175-192.

⁴² Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 4.

online.⁴³ Although my research does not focus specifically on digital Black feminists, nor does it focus on Black feminist movements on social media, my research applies Black feminist frameworks, approaches, and theories to the study of visual digital cultures.

Francesca Sobande's study on the digital lives of Black women in Britain has shaped my thesis. In her research she asks how Black women's lives are digitally mediated through social media, and also considers how Black women's digital identities can be shaped by the digital diaspora.⁴⁴ My research similarly deplores these questions but focuses on digital visual culture at the centre. Researchers who focus on Black women's digital lives in Britain have also explored how social media has been used to create alternative modes of digital communication, express identities online, and create digital communities.⁴⁵ Rianna Walcott has also argued that sometimes for elderly Black communities these digital networks are shaped by overcompensation and fearmongering due their distrust to mass media and the government.⁴⁶ My research contributes to this scholarship as it centres my own social media practices from a British perspective, to consider how identities are constructed online, how communities are developed, and how these are implicated by notions of a digital diaspora.

Although as I have demonstrated above, there is a wealth of growing scholarship on Black women's relationships to social media, there are limited explorations of transnational community building, organising, and joy online as most of the research focuses solely on a U.S context. My research focuses specifically on digital diasporas to think through ways that

⁴³ keisha bruce, Rianna Walcott, Kui Kihoro Mackay, Krys Osei, temi lasade-anderson, and Francesca Sobande, "Black Feminist and Digital Media Studies in Britain," *Feminist Media Studies* (2022): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2006737>; Tressie McMillan Cottom, "Black Cyberfeminism: Intersectionality, Institutions and Digital Sociology," in *Digital Sociologies*, ed. Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016); Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space*.

⁴⁴ Francesca Sobande, *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁴⁵ Deborah Gabriel, "Blogging while Black, British and Female: A Critical Study on Discursive Activism," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 11 (2016): 1622-1635, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1146784>; Rianna Walcott, "A Tweet at the Table: Black British Identity Expression on Social Media," PhD Diss., (King's College London, 2022).

⁴⁶ Rianna Walcott, "Whatsapp Aunties and the Spread of Fake News," *Wellcome Collection*, July 7, 2020, <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/Xv3T1xQAAADN3N3r>.

online communities are created through affective visual cultures that transcend geographical spaces.

A digital diaspora is the term that has been given to a phenomenon whereby a diaspora of people use the internet to connect with their homeland and build community.⁴⁷ Leurs and Ponzanesi argue that digital diasporas can be created through engagements with digital materials: ‘In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination.’⁴⁸ I take up their position to argue that notions of digital diasporic intimacies are created through digital visual cultures and shared cultural understandings of their meanings.

Digital visual cultures can offer a liberatory space to redefine images of blackness for the Black diaspora, as Janell Hobson notes, ‘what Twitter does for black political rhetoric, Instagram does for black aesthetic politics and visual culture.’⁴⁹ Yet, while it can offer celebration and validation for some, the Black diaspora can still be stereotyped through digital visual imagery.⁵⁰ In response to this, I argue that challenging these images, and collectively redefining and shaping narratives transnationally can help curate digital diasporic intimacy. In her seminal study *Digital Diaspora*, Anna Everett argues that the liberating features of cyberspace include its ability to help the African diaspora collaborate to politically organise, connect across space, and redefine representations of blackness.⁵¹ Adopting a Middle Passage epistemology, Everett notes how in the seventeenth century displaced Africans created ‘self-sustaining virtual communities’ through a range of

⁴⁷ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi, “Mediated Crossroads: Youthful Digital Diaspora,” *M/C Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.324>.

⁴⁸ Robin Cohen, “Diasporas and the Nation State: From Victims to Challengers,” *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1996): 516.

⁴⁹ Janell Hobson, “Black Beauty and Digital Spaces: The New Visibility,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 10 (2016), <https://doi.org/7264/N39C6VQK>.

⁵⁰ Melissa Wall, “Africa on YouTube: Musicians, Tourists, Missionaries and Aid Workers,” *The International Communication Gazette* 71, no. 5 (2009): 393-407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048509104988>.

⁵¹ Anna Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

‘paralinguistic and transnational’ communication strategies, such as dance, songs and oral stories and maps this onto the creation of digital diaspora on the internet.⁵² She argues that on the internet ‘not only do national borders increasingly disappear in cyberspace, they are replaced by new kinship structures now predicated on the fluidity of cybernetic virtual communities and homelands.’⁵³ Everett posits this fluid diasporic connectivity at the epicentre of digital Black identities. She argues that cultural resources which are created and exchanged across the digital Black diaspora produces a hybrid Black diasporic consciousness that de-centres any sub-group of the Black diaspora, such as Black Americans, in favour of a hybridised Black digital consciousness that is like those formed in response to the Middle Passage. Everett’s arguments about the digital diaspora offers insight into how the internet provides a space for the Black diaspora to reconfigure their connective tissues and forge a distinct digital Black diasporic consciousness.

While Everett’s articulation of the digital diaspora is useful to articulate how cultural resources that have been shared online can create a collective community, Francesca Sobande argues that ‘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.’⁵⁴ Sobande importantly recognises the ways that borders are shaped by national power, economic power, and technological infrastructures. This is mediated through what and how cultural conversations, hashtags, and materials are produced and engaged with. She continues, ‘Black digital diasporic dialogue is contoured by Black people’s disconnections and differences, as well as connections and commonalities.’⁵⁵ Sobande’s articulations are important to grapple with the ways that the Black digital diaspora is just as much marked by difference and disagreements. In my research, although I am interested in how digital

⁵² Everett, *Digital Diaspora*, 2.

⁵³ Everett, *Digital Diaspora*, 2.

⁵⁴ Sobande, *The Digital Lives*, 104.

⁵⁵ Sobande, *The Digital Lives*, 104.

diasporic intimacy is created through the engagement of people living in different places, I cautiously reveal how the large presence of Black American users, cultures, and resources shadow any sense of a decentred diasporic consciousness. I also attend to the ways that difference and oppositionality shapes the digital diaspora.

Diaspora

Diaspora is a contentious term, but one that requires unpacking so that I am able to locate the ‘diaspora’ in my conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacy. Scholars of cultural studies, social studies, and anthropology have conceptualised the creation of a diaspora of people as a product of displacement, dispersal, and migration.⁵⁶ These theories tend to understand diasporas in relation to an attachment to, or a longing for an original or imagined homeland.⁵⁷ Discourse around African diasporas similarly emphasise the role of African cultures, countries, and heritages as homelands, and disaggregate the concepts of Black diasporas from African diasporas. For example, Malawian Historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza notes that Black and African diasporas are not interchangeable; instead, he writes that it ‘makes more sense to talk of “black” and “African” diasporas as complementary, but not coterminous collectivities.’⁵⁸

While the idea of an original homeland is apparent in many theorisations of diasporas, conversations on Black diasporas require a theorising that aptly unpacks the role of forced displacement and migration, as well as a consideration of the networks of cultures, heritages, and languages which move across these geographies.⁵⁹ Accounting for the ways that the

⁵⁶ Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity* (London: SAGE, 2005).

⁵⁷ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (reis., 1994; London: Routledge, 2005).

⁵⁸ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Reconceptualizing African Diasporas: Notes from a Historian,” *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2010): 76.

⁵⁹ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302-338.

Black diaspora has been formed through the forced displacement of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, cultural theorists Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Stuart Hall have complicated dominant understandings of diasporas to argue that the Black diaspora can be understood, located, and defined through a shared set of resources and practices, both politically and materially.⁶⁰ Instead of centring an original homeland in the creation of diasporas, they identify the Black diaspora as that which can be expressed and experienced through shared creative practices, materials, symbolism, and the transmission and hybridisation of cultures transnationally.

Although Gilroy, Gates and Hall's studies provide the foundations for us to consider the Black diaspora through notions of cultural exchange across nations, these articulations were homogenous in their philosophical conceptualisations of blackness. As such, their theorisations have been critiqued for the ways that they conceptualise blackness 'in isolation from gender and sexuality', and limit it to a 'particular national, cultural, and linguistic border.'⁶¹ In other words, their theories privilege male, heteronormative and anglophone perspectives in their concepts of diaspora with a dominant focus on the triangular Black Atlantic network of the Caribbean, Britain, and the United States, and this raises questions about who gets to be regarded a Black diasporic subject.

In her essay "The Crowded Space of Diaspora", Tina Campt invites us to engage the concept of the Black diaspora 'with awareness of its limits in regard to those black communities whose histories and genealogies do not necessarily or comfortably conform to dominant models.'⁶² Campt focuses on the ways that Black Germans have positioned

⁶⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222-37.

⁶¹ Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4-5.

⁶² Tina Campt, "The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation," *Radical History Review* 83 (2002): 98

themselves as diasporic subjects, and argues that ‘the concept of diaspora does not constitute a historical given or universally applicable analytic model for explaining the cultural and historical trajectories of all black populations.’⁶³ Instead, Campt argues that the Black diaspora is better understood as a system of relations. Campt’s essay builds on arguments made by anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown in “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space” where she critiques Gilroy’s concept of diaspora to ask which Black communities are on the ‘margins of diaspora.’⁶⁴ Specifically, Nassy Brown locates women and regional communities in Britain in her theories of Black diasporas to reconfigure the borders of Black diaspora studies. While in the remainder of this section I focus on Nassy Brown and Campt’s articulations of diasporas to orient my own ideas, there is a growing body of scholarship in Black Studies that centres Black women, queer people, disabled people, and people living in underexplored places in their theorisations of diaspora which also inspired this thesis and I engage with them more closely in subsequent chapters.⁶⁵

Campt and Nassy Brown similarly recognise that notions of an original homeland in articulations of diasporas do not always apply as cohesively to the Black diaspora where forced migration and land dispossession have shaped spatial experiences. Instead, Nassy Brown refers to the Black diaspora as a ‘racialized geography of the imagination’ in which racial signifiers are mapped onto geographical ones to offer the ‘illusion of referring to physical rather than social locations.’⁶⁶ In my use of diaspora in *digital diasporic intimacy* I

⁶³ Campt, “The Crowded Space,” 98.

⁶⁴ Jacqueline Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1998): 297.

⁶⁵ Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016); Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021); Bianca C. Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

⁶⁶ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 291.

similarly engage the term as a social identity opposed to a geographical one. On social media, where communication and creative engagements across national borders have become freer flowing, I propose that diasporic identities and communities are produced expressively. In the examples that I draw upon in this thesis, people identify themselves as part of a diaspora through language and visibility and they engage with visual materials to participate in Black diasporic (other)worlding.

While Campt and Nassy Brown's understandings of Black diasporas are closely aligned with Gates, Gilroy, and Hall's ideas as they similarly centre the spatial, imagined, and ideological movements of social, cultural, and political materials, they acknowledge that imperial, national, and geographic privileges and powers are entangled within these movements and argue that these have been unaddressed. Nassy Brown recognises the cultural hegemony of Black America within discourses of Black diasporic identities and asks, 'when does the unrelenting presence of black America actually become oppressive, even as it inspires?'⁶⁷ This is a question that I sit with throughout my thesis as I remain aware of the dominance of Black America cultural artefacts, vernacular, and creative production in my case studies. I reveal the moments where I feel that my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy privileges Black America and I also highlight examples where Black Americans have also grappled with their own complex understandings of U.S imperialism.

Importantly, Nassy Brown critiques Gilroy's argument that Black diasporic cultures are hybridised to contend with the ways that this might homogenise blackness in specific ways:

despite the obvious appeal of a hybrid, though unifying, transnational culture that could invite belonging among blacks everywhere, merely celebrating the ideal without attending to the power relations that thwart its realization invites a familiar

⁶⁷ Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool," 297.

brand of policing – one similar to the nationalist projects that Gilroy himself deplores.⁶⁸

This critique is important as it reminds us to be attentive to the ways that diasporic relationships have been romanticised without a consideration of how they are sometimes fraught with tensions marked by nationality and essentialism. Though I find Gilroy's argument useful to consider how social media behaviour and expressions are oftentimes transnationally hybrid, collaborative, and unifying, I think through the ways that national powers have impacted this. For instance, in chapter four I look at #BlackGirlMagic selfies on Instagram, but it is not lost on me that this cultural movement was produced by Black Americans and oftentimes centres specific types of blackness that relate to the nation of America. Furthermore, I am also aware that the global reach of the hashtag was possible because it was an American product and I acknowledge the many ways that it was able to permeate different media industries because of this. As such, acknowledging Nassy Brown's critique, I remain attentive to the ways that digital visual cultures are mediated through the global power flows of media production, and within these specific contexts in my thesis these generally centre the U.S. While I grapple with this, I still understand these visual cultures to be useful for people who do not live in the U.S., and so as I acknowledge how they might uphold 'a familiar brand of policing', I also acknowledge how this has been challenged.⁶⁹

Desire and longing are important aspects of my understanding of Black diasporas. I propose that digital diasporic intimacies cannot be created without some form of desire for belonging and community, and this framework can explain why U.S cultural production might still be useful for the Black diaspora elsewhere. This argument is shaped by Camp's proclamation that any discussion of transnationality and diasporas requires an

⁶⁸ Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool," 296.

⁶⁹ Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool," 296.

acknowledgement of the tenants of aspiration and yearning. She writes: ‘while identification with African and black communities elsewhere often serves as an initial starting point, such identifications must always be deconstructed to unearth the layers of projection, desire, and longing that shape these complex relationships.’⁷⁰ Although Black American cultures and creative productions are featured dominantly in this thesis, I make note of the ways that people have used them to express desires for community and digital kinship. Nassy Brown’s concept ‘diasporic resources’ is useful to explore the complex relationship between diasporic identities, transnationalism, desire, and longing.⁷¹ Each of the materials featured in this thesis are digital diasporic resources and they communicate elements of desire and longing for diasporic identities, digital communities, and belonging. However, while Nassy Brown focuses specifically on the movement of resources from the U.S to the UK, my use of digital diasporic resources looks at the multidirectional movement of resources; for example, the use of visual resources created in Britain and their resonance with Black people living in continental Europe, photographs taken in Mali and how they are discussed in a U.S context, and cultural symbols produced in the U.S and how they are used by those living in the UK.

As I consider how digital diasporic intimacies are formed by way of desire and longing, I also argue that Black diasporas can be produced through shared feelings and expressions of familiar emotions. African American novelist and literary critic, Ralph Ellison argued that the Black diaspora is created through passion and feeling, opposed to any other biological factors:

It is not culture which binds the people who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an identity of passions. We share a hatred for the alienation forced upon us by Europeans during the process of colonization and

⁷⁰ Campt, “The Crowded Space,” 100.

⁷¹ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

empire and we are bound by our common suffering more than by our pigmentation.⁷²

Ellison's argument that shared feeling triumphs biology in the creation of Black diasporas is helpful as it challenges any homogenisation of blackness, Black ethnicities, cultures, and heritages and recentres individual agency. Similarly, philosopher Tommie Shelby critiques notions of a collective Black identity as they often centre African American cultures and heritages and marginalise others; instead, he urges the Black diaspora to identify with each other through common oppression.⁷³

My conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacy is underpinned by a related idea that feeling connects the Black diaspora. However, unlike Ellison and Shelby I am not only interested in feelings of anger and frustration as they emerge in response to oppression; I also focus on feelings and expressions of joy, playfulness, longing, celebration, and nostalgia, to name a few. It is a disservice to only think through blackness through the lens of hatred for oppression as it suggests that our existence is shaped by whiteness and subjugation. While I do not deny that a hatred for alienation and oppression can help to shape a diasporic identity, I want to shed light on the ways that joy and creativity is enmeshed within this. adrienne maree brown's use of 'pleasure activism' points us to the ways that social justice can be a pleasurable experience, and I argue that this applies here too.⁷⁴ I do not wish to imply that the visual cultures presented in this thesis are forms of activism, – although each of them do challenge whiteness and intervene on racism and misogynoir in media and cultural industries in their own ways – but I do propose that through feeling and expressing pleasure on social media, Black diasporic (other)worlding can be created and affirmed. In the following chapter,

⁷² Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (reis., 1964; New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 263.

⁷³ Tommie Shelby, "Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?," *Ethics* 112, no. 2 (2002): 231-266.

⁷⁴ adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019).

I will unpack this further as I consider how my research engages, expands on, and departs from existing research on affect and visual cultures, diasporic intimacies, and Black joy on social media.

Intimacy

Intimacy and affect are ultimately the central framework for my thesis. As I ask how the Black diaspora can create digital communities, find belonging, and articulate a sense of self on social media, I am really grappling with how feeling structures diasporic longing, desire, and identity, and then how this is mediated through digital visual cultures. As such, I join scholars who similarly locate intimacy, feeling, closeness, affection, kinship, and comradeship in their theorisations of the Black diaspora.⁷⁵

The critical intervention that underpins my framework of diasporic intimacies is derived from Nairobi-based independent scholar, Keguro Macharia, who figures ‘the black diaspora as proximity and rubbing rather than descent.’⁷⁶ Macharia argues that the Black diaspora is oriented by intimacy and uses the term ‘frottage’ to describe the frictions and tensions that are formed by these diasporic intimacies. In his own words, he explains:

Frottage tries to grasp the quotidian experiences of intra-racial experience, the frictions and irritations and translations and mistranslations, the moments when blackness coalesces through pleasure and play and also by resistance to antiblackness. More than simply proximity, it is the active and dynamic ways blackness is produced and contested and celebrated and lamented as a shared object. It is bodies rubbing against and along bodies. Histories rubbing along and against

⁷⁵ Bimbola Akinbola, “African Intimacy and Love with No Pretense: The Erotics of Diaspora in Zina Saro-Wiwa’s *Eaten by the Heart*,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1-2 (2022): 68-85; Jessica Maree Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

⁷⁶ Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 12.

histories. It is the shared moments of black joy and black mourning. It is what is known on Twitter as #diasporawars, when Afro-Europeans and Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Americans and Africans gather, often angrily, to work through difference. At such moments, little is taken for granted. Except we know that the difficult work of working through difference is necessary for our survival and our pleasure. Taking nothing for granted, we explore and create new ways to imagine and be with each other.⁷⁷

In this beautiful passage, that considers the smooth grooves and sharp ridges of diasporic encounter and engagement, Macharia attends to the multitude of ways that the Black diaspora coalesce to disperse to coalesce again. His use of frottage theorises the tackiness of the Black diaspora, its wholeness and its residues, as bodies, histories, and cultures rub alongside one another. Thus, frottage acknowledges that friction and tension is a necessary component of quotidian Black diasporic engagement as it emerges within an incessant climate of global antiblackness.

Macharia's frottage is useful for my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy as it reminds us of to be attentive of the complexities of diasporic community building. As he centres the everyday, Macharia teaches us that diasporic worlding is enacted in many mundane moments. As I centre visual cultures mediated through social media, I similarly centre quotidian acts of Black diasporic (other)worlding and like Macharia suggests, I aim to demonstrate the multi-layered experiences that constitute diasporic intimacy. I not only focus on how digital play, celebrations of self, and an investment in exploring intracommunity similarities can structure diasporic intimacies, but I also wrestle with the ways that these are sometimes caught between the tension of unnegotiable differences, opinions, values, and perspectives. The Black diaspora is not homogenous, and so diasporic intimacies emerge in different ways.

⁷⁷ Macharia, *Frottage*, 7.

Bianca C. Williams' theorisations of diasporic encounter, longing, and desire are also important for my conceptualisation of diasporic intimacies. In her ethnographic study, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Williams seeks to understand how Black women from America travel together to Jamaica to practice diasporic, sexual, and emotional belonging. Borrowing from Diane Wolf, Williams uses 'emotional transnationalism' to map the travelling women's 'desires for girlfriendship, diasporic connectivity, and pleasure.'⁷⁸ She recognises how these women practice diasporic relationship building through affect as they express their emotion through tears of happiness, their sexuality, their feelings of desire and their longing to be desired in Jamaica. Digital diasporic intimacy also draws on feelings of longing and desire. These yearnings for diasporic community are best seen in my chapter two and three where the desire for diasporic community, encounter, and belonging are expressed through responses to a web-series and archive.

Like Macharia, Williams does not neglect to account for the ways that diasporic intimacies are built upon an architecture of both pleasure and pain. She posits that diasporic contact zones are rich sites for 'demonstrating how both connections *and* fractures, similarities *and* differences, harmony *and* conflict, are embedded in African diasporic relationships.'⁷⁹ We see diasporic relationship-building happen within these spaces of juxtaposition. If we articulate social media as a potential 'contact zone' then we similarly see how both harmony and conflict structures diasporic relationship building. In addition, Williams' study asks the important question: 'how do their nationalized understandings and performances of Blackness inhibit or facilitate the creation of diasporic community and connectivity?'⁸⁰ In grappling with national politics, identities, and differences, she accounts for the ways that the creation of intimacies is entangled with global powers. Fundamentally, she reminds us to ask,

⁷⁸ Bianca C. Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 6.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Pursuit of Happiness*, 68.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Pursuit of Happiness*, 68.

who can access diasporic intimacies and in what ways are they affected by these intimacies? I wish to take up Williams' question as a provocation for my conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacy, reading it through a different lens and site of analysis, that being digital visual culture.

Macharia and Williams importantly demonstrate how affect structures diasporic interrelations. Their theories ground my conceptualisation of intimacy in digital diasporic intimacies as they attend to the ways that the Black diaspora can be experienced through feeling and tension. Building upon these texts, my project considers the 'when' and 'where' I enter the diaspora and how this is something that is felt and desired.

Digital Diasporic Intimacies and Digital Visual Cultures

As I mentioned in the introduction, I do not claim to have coined the phrase "digital diasporic intimacy". The term is an amalgamation of many others and is informed by the scholarship above that ultimately connects the digital to the diaspora and the diaspora to intimacy. While this remains the case, some scholars, thinkers, and avid internet users have spoken specifically on the function of digital intimacies and diasporic intimacies on social media that are useful for my own understanding.

In Imani Perry's *Vexy Thing*, she writes that 'the virtual world is a constant companion.'⁸¹ Here, Perry refers to the way that the virtual world, by way of our smartphones, is always present and nearby, accessible with the swipe of a screen. However, rather than perceiving the virtual world as something to be accessed, it is described as a friend as if it accompanies us through different stages of our lives. Referring to the virtual world, accessed immediately through our smartphones, as intimate friends is not unusual. It is a space in which we

⁸¹ Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 129.

construct our digital identities, and one where we can connect with ourselves, our immediate friends and family, and with other people around the world. My use of digital diasporic intimacy takes seriously the ways that our phones are reflective of a constant and cherished connection with ourselves and the communities that we find ourselves in online.

Though dated now, in 1999 Wellman and Guila posed the question of whether it is possible to create intimate and close connections with people online. In their study that grappled with notions of attachment, friendship, virtual community, as well as digital over-saturation and diversity, they conclude that though complex, ‘even when online groups are not designed to be supportive, they tend to be.’⁸² Over the past twenty years, social media researchers and theorists have solidified the claim that digital intimacies and affect is possible online.⁸³ There is a recognition of the ways that social media creates dialogical community, brings people together, and ultimately helps shape real world relationships. Perry argues that at the crux of digital intimacies is the presence of desire. She writes that digital media

produces desire; it promises to endow us with interpretive frameworks for every aspect of our lives — to educate us, titillate us, shame us, and provide us with therapy and spiritual guidance. It is church and palliative care, yet also stimulation and excitement. We communicate with others through it, increasingly and incessantly.⁸⁴

By centring desire, Perry understands digital media as that which responds to our individual and collective wants and needs. I similarly want to centre desire in my understanding of

⁸² Barry Wellman and Milena Guila, “Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999), 173.

⁸³ Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton, *Emotion Online: Theorizing Affect on the Internet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Rickard Grassman and Peter Case, “Virtual Intimacy: Desire and Ideology in Virtual Social Networks,” in *Virtual Social Networks: Mediated, Massive, and Multiplayer Sites*, ed. Niki Panteli, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 175-193; Magda Tyżlik-Carver, “Diasporic Intimacy,” *Ecologies of Intimacy*, March 19, 2016, <https://ecologiesofintimacy.wordpress.com/2016/03/19/diasporic-intimacy/#:~:text=Notion%20of%20diasporic%20intimacy%20is%20inspiring%20when%20thinking%20about%20intimacy,feel%20like%20home>.

⁸⁴ Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 130.

digital diasporic intimacy, as I suggest that it is the desire for community and to articulate a sense of self that structures the use of the ‘diasporic resources’ in this thesis.⁸⁵

Although I propose that digital diasporic intimacy reflects these desires, researchers have written about the ways that notions of care and intimacy have been complicated by the neoliberal mechanics of social media. For example, in her study on Black girls and digital creativity, Renina Jarmon reminisces about the intimate forms of dialogical community building that she experienced on Tumblr in the late 2010. She writes:

The irony is that I think that this kind of organic interaction is less likely to take place in 2013 and beyond because of how noisy social media has become. Often times it seems as though everyone is promoting something rather than attempting to engage and build relationships.⁸⁶

Jarmon’s reluctance to suggest that intimacy can be found through organic connections on present-day social media stems from the ways that contemporary use of the platforms deprioritises groups, networks, and communities in favour of individualism. This also relates to the ways that notions of care, community, and intimacy are commodified on the internet through brands and marketing.⁸⁷ Ultimately, contemporary social media is oversaturated with visual content that promotes, platforms, and markets, however I argue that even within this neoliberal context, digital diasporic intimacy can still be located.

Overall, in this thesis I posit that the Black diaspora is created through a shared set of digital ‘diasporic resources’ that help people to think through and *feel* their identities and ideas of belonging.⁸⁸ Although to make my claim I focus primarily on the anglophone Black

⁸⁵ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

⁸⁶ Renina Jarmon, *#BlackGirlsAreFromTheFuture: Essays on Race, Digital Creativity and Pop Culture* (Washington: Jarmon Media, 2013), 55.

⁸⁷ Francesca Sobande, “‘We’re All In This Together’: Commodified Notions of Connection, Care, and Community in Brand Responses to COVID-19,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 6 (2020): 1033-1037, <https://doi.org/10.1177/136759322294>.

⁸⁸ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

diaspora, dominantly those living in the United Kingdom and the North American continent, I also feature people who live in European countries as well as African countries. These people appear in visual imagery or as they engage with the material on social media platforms. However, while I include the voices of people living in European and African countries, all communications have been shared in the English language. These language limits are reflective of the limits of my own knowledges, and it also reflects the ways that the English-speaking Black diaspora can oftentimes monopolise conversations on diasporic cultures. Altogether, I explore how the digital diaspora is connected through a myriad of feelings: laughter, memory, longing, desire, nostalgia, curiosity, pride, frustration, disappointment, anger, sadness, annoyance, and mourning. It is these feelings that structure digital diasporic intimacies. In this thesis, I explore how these feelings are oriented through and mediated by digital visual cultures where the combination of image, word, and affect, culminate to create and harness Black diasporic (other) worlding.

Interlude: Space

Place: A tangible, fixed location often defined by geographical co-ordinates

Space: The dimensions of which all things exist

I have always been intrigued by the ways that space and place doubly impact perceptions, notions, and feelings around blackness and Black identity. Living as a Black person in Britain, I have a heightened awareness around the places I can and cannot enter, the spaces that mark and are marked by my blackness, and the layered differences between my own spatialised Black identities in comparison with my other Black friends and family. Before I travel abroad, I *always* do a Google search about racism in the countries I'm visiting. As I'm currently brainstorming ideas for a cross country move, I'm ensuring that I know of the cities and towns that have a connected Black queer community that I can thrive in. When I moved from Wolverhampton to Birmingham, and then to Nottingham, I quickly learnt that my blackness was shaped regionally, and along with that, class, colourism, gender, and sexuality were also spatialised. The longer I live and the more I explore, the further my eyes open to the innerworkings of how my blackness and the intersections of my identity are networked across place and space. And so, I love being involved in the creation of spaces rooted in Black feminist praxis within my personal and professional life, because I understand that this access to Black-majority, queer, intersectional, collaborative, and creative spaces can literally save lives.

My intellectual interest in this relationship between space and Black folk globally was heightened when I was introduced to Katherine McKittrick's work on Black geographies during the first year of my PhD. In the opening of her seminal research, *Demonic Grounds*,

she asserts that ‘Black matters are spatial matters,’¹ to acknowledge the ways that blackness is inevitably produced vis-à-vis space and place. This resonated with me. I understood wholly that what it meant to be Black was inextricably tied to geographical land, was impacted by movement and access, as well as ideological and rhetorical spaces. McKittrick eloquently put into words what I have felt throughout my life and yet struggled to articulate:

Black geographies are located within and outside the boundaries of traditional spaces and places; they expose the limitations of transparent space through black social particularities and knowledges; they locate and speak back to the geographies of modernity, transatlantic slavery, and colonialism; they illustrate the ways in which the raced, classed, gendered, and sexual body is often an indicator of spatial options and the ways in which geography can indicate racialized habitation patterns; they are places and spaces of social, economic, and political denial and resistance; they are fragmented, subjective, connective, invisible, visible, unacknowledged, and conspicuously positioned; they have been described as, among other things, rhizomorphic, a piece of the way, diasporic, blues terrains, spiritual and Manichaeic. The complexity of these geographies is found in the ways they reveal how ideas—black and nonblack— get turned into lived and imaginary spaces that are tied to geographic organization.²

In her definition, McKittrick highlights the complexities within discussions of Black spatiality. It isn’t easily definable, and Black spatiality isn’t always geographical located. McKittrick’s definition demonstrates the ways that blackness is not only produced vis-a-vis space and place, but how this production organises the everyday life. Black geographies are multi-layered and not only take into consideration the physical spaces that Black people inhabit, but the processes of seeing and knowing that underpin conceptual spaces, such as the

¹ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiv.

² McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 7.

gender paradigm and the environmental gravity of white supremacy.³ These material and representational Black geographies inform self-governance and diasporic worlding, how we see ourselves, the world, and how we operate within it.

In a world marked by Black geographies, what does it then mean for the Black diaspora to find belonging? When we ask this question, we inevitably engage a question that grapples with the complexities of identity politics, heritage, nation, citizenship, community, access, membership, and space. When we invite blackness into that question, we cannot help but wrestle with a long history of forced migration, land dispossession, ideological nation building, class politics, gender identity, disability, and sexuality. For many of us marked by these geographies, community and belonging can be achieved in the online world by way of building digital communities.

‘Diaspora is not a deterritorialised state. Diasporic people make places and places make diasporic people – we are not just passing through.’⁴

- **Patricia Noxolo**

‘Space and place are political, and digital spaces are not neutral or disentangled from the complex racial, cultural and sexual ideologies that shape society.’⁵

- **Regina Duthley**

³ For more on the environmental gravity of white supremacy see: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁴ Patricia Noxolo, “I am Becoming my Mother: (Post)Diaspora, Local Entanglements and Entangled Locals,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 13, no. 2 (2020): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2020.1751411>.

⁵ Regina Duthley, “Black Feminist Hip-Hop Rhetorics and the Digital Public Sphere,” *Changing English* 24, no. 2 (2017): 205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2017.1310458>.

Chapter 2. Digital Diasporic Encounters: Spatial Storytelling, Shared Autobiographies and cecile emeke's *strolling* (2014-16)

On October 19, 2018, I logged onto YouTube via my web-browser and when the familiar algorithmically curated home screen appeared on my screen, I searched for “cecile emeke’s, strolling”. I can’t remember exactly when I first came across the documentary web series, but I do remember that I’d heard about it through digital dialogue on social media years earlier. If you search ‘cecile emeke strolling’ on Twitter, there are still remnants of these conversations and reflections preserved online. In late 2018, I rewatched the series as I read more critical and theoretical scholarship around Black spatiality and digital blackness...

strolling, ep 3, idolatry of black American culture, reparations, chicken shops & more
Play.

The instrumental of Tupac Shakur’s classic hip-hop song “Do for Love” (1994) plays in the video’s background when we are introduced to Lydia, a young Black woman living in London in 2014. Our first encounter with her is facilitated by the camera’s focus on her style: she wears pink and grey Nike Air Max Thea, large gold squared earrings, and a black leather jacket. The background music along with her style choice visually situates her at the intersection of global and local Black urban cultures. Less than fifteen seconds into the video Lydia is removed from focus and the screen bursts with a blur of colour: yellow with a touch of brown, greens in a variety of shades, deep purples that are almost black, bright purples that are almost red, shiny silvers, and salmon pinks. As the camera begins to refocus, the colours mutate into recognisable items; we are at a fresh food market, and as the video’s description states, we’re in Catford, South East London. The camera slowly pans across the variety of

fish and vegetables which are arranged in almost symmetrical patterns. This visual offers an invitation for us to virtually visit the vibrant and bustling London marketplace, with Lydia as our guide.

This opening scene is taken from the third episode of the web series, *strolling*. Produced by British-Jamaican artist and filmmaker cecile emeke, the documentary series ‘follows the dialectical ruminations of people of the [B]lack [A]frican diaspora whilst walking in their locality.’¹ In videos of varying lengths, viewers step into the narrative world of a storyteller, like Lydia, who collaborates with emeke to share autobiographical anecdotes that draw on their experiences of living in their respective countries. Typically, these narratives focus on the multiplicities within the Black experience as the storytellers discuss the ways that their blackness intersects with their gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, disability, and environment. The storytellers use their videos to critique different ideological and institutional systems such as education, healthcare, and the government to consider how they spatially uphold and perpetuate anti-black racism. Filmed between 2014 and 2016 in the UK, France, Italy, The Netherlands, USA, Jamaica, and Belgium, emeke walks with her subjects to explore the ‘physical manifestations of these intimate yet global discussions.’² Underpinned by an intersectional Black feminist framework, the short film series introduces viewers to a selection of disparately located diasporic Black people and the spaces they inhabit, navigate, and traverse.

During the intimate video interviews, emeke, who remains voiceless and imageless behind the camera lens, walks alongside, behind, and in front of her storytellers around their respective cities. Throughout the episodes, emeke ‘takes a deliberately subjective approach’ to filmography as her camera lingers on different features of the storytellers as well as the

¹ cecile emeke, “strolling (2014-16),” accessed March 14, 2022, <https://cecileemeke.com/strolling/>.

² emeke, “strolling (2014-16)”.

environments and spaces that they occupy.³ In the introductory scenes for most of the episodes, the storytellers' identities remain unidentifiable for approximately the first five to ten seconds of the film. During these initial moments, our introductions to the storytellers' distinguishable features are delayed as emeke gracefully shoots their clothing, shoes, limbs, hair textures, or hands, and this is a style that is iconic to the series. Discussing her creative practice in an interview with Ashley Clark at *Vice*, she shares how she uses filmography to help shape an intimate audible and visual dialogue between herself, her subjects, and the places they walk in:

I threw out the conventions of documentary filmmaking, which often, though not all the time, is quite objective, with a clear narrative, and clean-cut shots. I do everything handheld, with really intimate close-up shots: We see people's hands, ears, faces, and arms. I really try to focus on the person, their subjective, individual story. I think the universality [of *strolling*], and the way it resonates with people comes from the fact that the approach to each episode is very specific.⁴

emeke's decision to primarily introduce her viewers to the storytellers' isolated and anonymous features, captures their individuality while it simultaneously maps out a collective and connected approach to diasporic storytelling. In these moments, we might find familiarity in the storytellers' fashion, hair style, and skin tones.

Her subjective approach to filmmaking is also demonstrated as she obscures her own voice and image from the final piece. Although it is noticeable that she is engaged in 'a back-and-forth conversation' with her storytellers because of the ways that the videos are edited and because segments of dialogue seemingly continue unheard discussions, her choice to omit her

³ emeke, "strolling (2014-16)".

⁴ cecile emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk Through the Joys and Struggles of Black People Across the World," interview by Ashley Clark, *VICE.com*, November 26, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/9bgvg7/strolling-is-a-thoughtful-walk-through-the-joys-and-struggles-of-black-people-across-the-world-555

own presence invites her audience into a conversational dialogue with the storyteller instead.⁵ emeke shares that her interview style takes the format of a ‘genuine chat like you would in real life’, and this enhances the feel of intimacy within the series. Because of her editing, it is as though we take up emeke’s place in the conversations to stroll alongside the storyteller in these new cities, transcending both space *and* time to visualise and be witness to their worldviews.⁶

After the scenic introduction to Catford in episode three, eventually the South East London marketplace fades out of focus and is replaced by a close-up portrait shot of Lydia. As she engages in a dialogue with the unseen and unheard emeke, she reflects on the invisibility, fetishization, asexualisation and hypersexualisation of Black women in the media and the ways that Black men have contributed to these misrepresentations on social media:

Black guys posting images of beautiful black women on Twitter, they feel like they are empowering you by posting these pictures but really you feel demeaned by it. They are being exoticified and fetishized in the exact same way, now the only difference is, now it's a darker woman in those pictures.⁷

By opening the video with a reflection on misogynoir within visual culture, Lydia’s identity as a Black woman is foregrounded and her visual presence can be interpreted as an audio-visual intervention on the ways that Black women have been contained as what she describes as ‘an invisible part of society.’⁸ Two minutes into the episode, she extends her reflection on her gendered and racialised invisibility to include the topics of citizenship and belonging and

⁵ emeke, “‘Strolling’ is a Thoughtful Walk,”.

⁶ emeke, “‘Strolling’ is a Thoughtful Walk,”.

⁷ cecile emeke, “strolling, ep 3, idolatry of black American culture, reparations, chicken shops & more,” June 29, 2014, accessed October 19, 2018, YouTube video, 07:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-aP5Lyds00&t=140s>.

⁸ emeke, “strolling, ep 3”.

discusses the ways that her identity as a Black woman in Britain has been constructed and is imagined:

My parents always tell me that if people ask you should tell them you're a British-born-Jamaican. But having said that, yeah, British is stamped on my passport and that's where I was born, but at the same time I don't feel like I belong here. And if I was to go back to Jamaica I would for sure as hell not belong there either. They make you— society makes you believe that you don't belong here.⁹

Set against the backdrop of a lively multicultural city, Lydia expresses an underlying feeling of unbelonging in Britain as well as in Jamaica. This tension she describes illuminates the ways that space, place, citizenship, and belonging are entangled in her understanding of blackness and Black identity.

As I joined the twenty-six thousand other viewers who watched on YouTube as Lydia reflected on the ways that her identity has been shaped and perceived, I found myself grappling with similar feelings of displacement and unbelonging in Britain and Jamaica... Between the ages of seven and sixteen I would visit Jamaica annually with my family for what my father referred to as “going back to the island”. For him, the journey to Jamaica was a journey of return. Having grown up in Jamaica, my father’s journeys to the island were his long-awaited visits to a homeland where he could reconnect with family, nourish himself with the island’s foods, sounds, and sun, and find bliss in the tropical landscapes of Home. For my mother, younger sister, and I, all born and raised in the heart of England, these annual visits to Jamaica offered us an entry to recover our forgotten histories and travel into our *un-memories*.¹⁰ Our Jamaican heritage and our British passports, which mark us as citizens of the British Empire living in the heart of the Commonwealth, have provided us access into the

⁹ emeke, “strolling, ep 3”.

¹⁰ I use the term ‘un-memories’ here to signal that we have either lost or have never held memories of our own. Instead, we have inherited memories from others to help shape our attachment to the land.

homeland and the means to reclaim Jamaica as our point of return. However, even at a young age I was wary of calling Jamaica, a place I have neither lived nor visited for an extended period, “home”. Like Lydia, I had always been conscious of the difference between my Jamaican ancestry and the right to claim Jamaica as my ancestral home; while I am Jamaican, my Jamaican-ness is shaped spatially by my accent, my (lack of) knowledges, and my British passport.

The conflict of recognising somewhere as home while simultaneously knowing that you are marked as “Other” is what Lydia refers to when she expresses her discontentment with her British nationality. Throughout history, Britain has violently posited Black life as “Other” and has wrapped them up in a colonial imagination.¹¹ For instance, in Lisa Palmer’s essay on the British media’s treatment of MP Diana Abbott, she notes how processes of colonialism and imperialism continue to police and subjugate Black women in British social and political life.¹² In addition, Kennetta Hammond Perry’s study on post-Windrush Britain documents the ways that Black people have fought culturally and politically to be regarded as British citizens.¹³ Lydia’s dialogue takes us into the lived reality of these discussions around blackness, space, and belonging and teases out the ways that geographies have been inscribed onto the bodies of Black people and locate us within historical, social, and political contexts. ‘Critique’, Lola Olufemi writes, ‘is central to emeke’s strolling series.’¹⁴ The episode continues, and Lydia goes onto discuss the idolisation of Black American cultures in Britain, the gentrification of South London, and the need for reparations for the Slave Trade.

¹¹ Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Women’s Bodies and The Nation: Race, Gender and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹² Lisa Amanda Palmer, “Diane Abbott, Misogynoir and the Politics of Black British Feminism’s Anticolonial Imperatives: ‘In Britain too, it’s as if we don’t exist’,” *The Sociological Review* 00, 0, (2019): 1-16.

¹³ Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 83.

As I watched Lydia discuss the relationship between her blackness and belonging and the varied dimensions of this, I was reminded of my own experiences navigating my Black identity as a child of the African diaspora. The episode helped me to find a degree of comfort and solidarity in our shared experiences, and in that moment, I found a sense of rhetorical belonging in an oversaturated digital world. Other viewers of the episode used the YouTube comments section to similarly reflect on their experiences, thank emeke and Lydia for offering and sharing this story, and Lydia responded to one of these comments to share her social media handles writing “you can follow me on Twitter if you wanna know me!”, which offers extensions to build community across other platforms.

Lydia’s audio-visual story, captured through emeke’s *strolling* series, forms part of what I refer to as, a diasporic *shared autobiography*: a digital practice of Black diasporic encounter and engagement on social media that helps create digital diasporic intimacy. I offer this term for us to understand how a Black diasporic (other)worlding can be intimately and communally expressed and negotiated through collaborative storytelling. The “shared”, in *shared autobiography*, signposts how Lydia shares/tells her story with emeke, how emeke shares/disseminates the stories via the internet, and how Lydia’s story shares/contributes to a collaborative and nuanced diasporic story with those featured in the other episodes. As I scrolled down the comments sections for each video, I saw how Black YouTubers engaged with the themes of the stories and extended the *shared autobiography* on the digital platform as they gave testimony to, and shared with one another, their own lived experiences and reflected on their identity and how they navigate belonging in their countries. There are many dimensions to the act of sharing within the shared autobiography, and I discuss this further in the chapter. Focusing on the relationship between *strolling*’s interior world – captured through the emeke’s filmography and the storytellers’ stories – and its exterior world – represented by Black viewers’ discussions posted onto the YouTube comments section – I explore the digital

co-creation of intimate and interwoven diasporic stories to explore how digital diasporic intimacy can be curated through storytelling.

This chapter opens my inquiry into digital diasporic intimacy by asking how the Black diaspora find, navigate, and articulate belonging online. It draws from the interior and exterior world of emeke's *strolling* to explore how diasporic intimacies have been mediated and experienced through personal and collective discussions of Black diasporic identities and their relationship to space and place. While I have opened this chapter with a brief account of Lydia's story in episode 3 to introduce you to the themes of this chapter, I use the following section to delve deeper into the contextual history and digital landscape of emeke's *strolling*. I discuss emeke's intentions for the short films, her use of YouTube to disseminate the interviews, and how YouTube's platform affordances have enabled an audience's online engagement with the series. Following this, I position the shared autobiography in relationship with other terms and scholarship on Black diasporic storytelling to demonstrate how it builds upon and departs from other terms. In this section I also provide in-depth detail of my methodology for this chapter, explaining how I chose to engage with the series to grapple with themes of the digital diaspora and belonging. I return to Lydia's story in episode 3 to offer examples from the episode and the comments section collectively to offer insight into the function of the shared autobiography for building community.

Then, with a reading of the ways that space, belonging and citizenship are discussed, envisioned, and negotiated through the series' narrative content, the visuals, and the YouTube comment section, I suggest that *strolling* presents a site for us to see how digital diasporic intimacy is curated spatially. I argue that it is through the use of the shared autobiography on social media that the digital Black diaspora can come together to discuss our identities and explore the relationships between our spatialised experiences, learning more about one another in the process. This, I argue, demonstrates how digital diasporic intimacy is created

through online sharing and encounters. However, throughout this chapter I maintain a discussion of the ephemerality of these digital spaces as I consider emeke's removal of the series from YouTube in 2019. I sit with the question of what it means when digital diasporic communities are removed almost overnight, and consider how this shapes our understanding of the boundaries of digital diasporic intimacy? Altogether this chapter asks, how can digital diasporic intimacy be curated spatially through storytelling and shared autobiographies? And what are some of the ways that Black belonging and nonbelonging have been articulated online as a process of Black diasporic (other)worlding?

Scrolling/Strolling to Find a Digital Diaspora

strolling is a diasporic visual project that radically centres the quotidian; it lives up to its title as emeke films the interviews as she walks with her storytellers in their respective cities, and viewers can visually join them by way of the internet. While *strolling* undeniably focuses on centring and reclaiming diasporic voices, which I will discuss shortly, its radical contribution also derives from the ways emeke focuses on the street and other public sites as potential spaces for diasporic connectivity. Researchers interested in the relationship between blackness, technology, urban planning, environmental justice, and social politics have noted how cities and public spaces were not designed for the gathering of Black people, nor were they designed for Black leisure and experiences, and we witness this reality being enforced through confinement systems such as policing, surveillance technology, and gentrification and individual action, such as physical violence.¹⁵ On the other hand, first emerging in early modern French literature, 'the flâneur' was the name given to white men who leisurely

¹⁵ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Rashad Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Joy White, *Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City* (London: Repeater Books, 2020), 8-9.

strolled in the city and observed urban Parisian life.¹⁶ The term was undeniably gendered and racialised as the flaneur was emblematic of a literary archetype and methodology for engaging with the metropolitan in a way that is wholly related to whiteness, European notions of masculinity, and wealth.¹⁷ There is an inherent dichotomy between the way that the city has been accessed historically by white people and Black people. Linguistically signposting this European term, the episodes of *strolling* that were filmed in France called *flâner* subverts these dominant and historic conceptions of the flâneur by offering a diasporic Black feminist gaze to walk around the metropolitan, and observe public life in the Parisian cityscape.¹⁸ Traversing the European and American countries and cities that constitute the series, emeke uses public streets and parks as sites for diasporic (re)connection, and disrupts white hegemonic claims of ownership over public spaces. In these public spaces captured by emeke's camera, the storytellers engage viewers with discussions of blackness, citizenship, and belonging, among other socio-political themes, and challenge ideas of where Black people can have these discussions and how we might engage with the public sphere.¹⁹

In interviews and conversations about the cultural impact of *strolling*, emeke credits her inspiration for the series to her general curiosity about the Black diaspora. In her interview with Clark, she acknowledges her privilege living in London, where there is a larger demographic of Black people in comparison to the rest of the UK, because it had given her the space to 'have powerful, transformative conversations about so many subjects.'²⁰ The

¹⁶ Keith Tester, ed., *The Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁷ David Frisby, "The flaneur in social theory," in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), 82.

¹⁸ An episode of *Flâner* has been preserved and is available to watch online with the British Film Institute here: <https://network.bfi.org.uk/postroom/network-picks/flâner>.

¹⁹ Black barbershops and beauty salons have long been articulated as private spaces for Black socio-political thought. For more information read: Karis Campion, "Cutting Through the Pandemic: The Value of Black Barbershops," *The Runnymede Trust*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/cutting-through-the-pandemic-the-value-of-black-barbershops>; Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

²⁰ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

series began as a way for her to capture and share these everyday dialogues in her city, and eventually she extended these to include Black people living in other countries:

The black diaspora is everywhere, and there's much I don't know about other people that I'd love to know. I want as many black people as possible, of all different backgrounds, to be aware of these stories. I think seeing *strolling* once will change how you view what it means to be black, just seeing that one episode of black girls in Italy, or seeing one black boy in Paris, and to share in his experiences.²¹

In this excerpt, emeke shares her desire to help disseminate individual stories and connect the Black diaspora through shared experiences. She positions Black geographies and diasporic spaces as central to the project, suggesting that diasporic community can be experienced affectively regardless of geographical barriers and national borders. Her creative project was fueled by what she felt were her own gaps of knowledge about Black diasporic experiences, and so it ventures into the heart of questions around what it means to belong in the world as a Black person and find diasporic community.

Similar ruminations on the relationship between blackness, geography, and diasporic belonging have been long theorized and explored in the field of Black Diaspora Studies. Dionne Brand, a Trinidadian-Canadian essayist and poet, interrogates themes of Black diasporic identity and belonging in her experiential memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001). At the beginning of the book, she recalls a moment in her childhood where she was eager to learn more of her ancestry: when she was thirteen years old, she had asked her grandfather what people they had descended from, and although her grandfather seemed to want to answer this question, he couldn't as he never remembered. She writes that from that

²¹ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

moment ‘a small space opened in [her]’ which she carried from then on.²² This small space which was broken apart by the unknown and then left vacant from the effects of unbelonging affected Brand’s sense of self and her relationship with her grandfather. She refers to this space as ‘a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being’ and ‘also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.’²³ The rupture is characterised by her lack of knowledge of her diasporic ancestry, as well as her insatiable hunger for it. According to Brand, this rupture reveals the ‘Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another.’²⁴ It reveals geographical displacement, ancestral disconnection, and symbolises a loss of stories.

Drawing from Brand’s work, I propose that emeke’s series ventures into a similar rupture to find and relay stories from across the Black diaspora, while also considering how global experiences of xenophobia and racism are tied up in diasporic experiences of space and place. In an interview with Laura Arowolo for *i-d Vice*, emeke shared that the series was produced to (re)connect the Black diaspora through the creation of a new space where these disparate stories could be shared. In her own words, she describes *strolling* as a

documentary series that aims to provide a platform and a space for honest and open intra-communal dialogue within the global black diaspora. Our stories are scattered all over the world, and we want to connect them, in order to learn and celebrate both the differences and similarities.²⁵

In this definition, *strolling* is articulated as a digital project intent on using conversation to bridge the geographical separation of the Black diaspora caused by a history of colonial

²² Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 4.

²³ Brand, *A Map*, 8.

²⁴ Brand, *A Map*, 8.

²⁵ cecile emeke, “cecile emeke explores cultural appropriation in new film ackee & saltfish,” interview by Laura Arowolo, *i-d.vice.com*, March 31, 2015, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/j5mvp8/cecile-emeke-explores-cultural-appropriation-in-new-film-ackvee-saltfish.

displacement and ethnic erasure. It offers a platform to unite these stories and bring communities together through affective dialogue exchange.

Contending with the ways that some projects had further marginalised subgroups of the Black diaspora, emeke recognised that she wanted her visual project to give voice to people who were often overlooked, including everyday working-class people, women, and those living outside of the United States.²⁶ She expressed that her desires were also rooted in platforming voices that were relatable to her own sense of identity.

I also felt like wherever there was a “voice” that I was meant to identify with, it was normally an older black male voice, which I did not relate to. I wanted to be part of helping extraordinary ordinary black women have a voice. [*strolling*] is definitely, unashamedly focused on telling black female stories in particular.²⁷

By centring Black women’s everyday stories, emeke’s project articulates a diasporic Black feminist approach to storytelling. Two years later, in a separate interview with Alexis Okeowo at *The New Yorker*, she expressed that she ‘was tired of seeing the phrase ‘African diaspora’ thrown around without ever really attempting to address the _entire_ diaspora.’²⁸ As an intervention on this reality, emeke had reached out to her Twitter networks to connect with potential storytellers in advance of the filming and connected with new people from different places. Altogether, emeke’s aims for and the production of *strolling* illustrate how

²⁶ cecile emeke, “I Want to Give a Voice to Young Black People – ‘Strolling’ Web Series,” *Afropunk*, August 27, 2014, <https://afropunk.com/2014/08/feature-i-want-to-give-a-voice-to-young-black-people-strolling-web-series/>.

²⁷ emeke, “I Want to Give a Voice to Young Black People.”

²⁸ Alexis Okeowo, “Watch “Strolling,” A Powerful Web Series About the African Diaspora,” *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/watch-strolling-a-powerful-web-series-about-the-african-diaspora#:~:text=In%20%22Strolling%2C%20Emeke%20is,to%20young%20natives%20of%20Kingston.>

geographical ruptures can be exposed and explored, and through this, members of the diaspora can (re)connect and diasporic belonging can be found with the help of the internet.

Around the same time that the series was publicly posted onto her now deleted project website, www.strollingseries.com, the episodes were individually uploaded onto her personal YouTube channel, which enabled viewers to interact with the episodes and with one another via the comments section, the like and dislike buttons, and cross-platform sharing tools. emeke's aim to connect diasporic stories was amplified by YouTube's platform as more people from across the diaspora could build upon the storytellers' narratives while sharing their own experiences. emeke expressed that her use of the internet was integral for her approach to filmmaking, the *strolling* project, and its accessibility for Black viewers. Although she acknowledged that in publishing her filmography online, she ran the risk of devaluing her work, she argued that the industry's 'bureaucracy' and 'traditional hierarchies' are 'largely set up to only support, distribute, and serve whiteness'.²⁹ As a disruption of this, she expressed that 'the online space as a format is important for someone like myself – a black woman.'³⁰ While the internet was crucial for her to identify and connect with her storytellers and disseminate the short films, its mass accessibility also provided a free tool for education for her Black viewers:

strolling isn't just a film series for many people in the black diaspora – it's more than that. For me to go down traditional routes with the concept, while gaining more prestige in the film space, would have meant withholding basic access to information from people about their own culture. The online space completely breaks that down, because all you need is internet access: *strolling* might pop up on your news feed, someone might send it to you, or you might read an article about it.³¹

²⁹ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

³⁰ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

³¹ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

The internet democratised the *strolling* series insofar that the project was not bound by institutional gatekeeping, it offered a radical diasporic education by platforming everyday Black voices and offered a platform for diasporic Black people to connect with one another and find belonging online. In her study where she conducted interviews to investigate how Black women in Britain use YouTube vlogs for haircare practices, Francesca Sobande found that ‘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 primarily white contexts.’³² I propose that this is a similar case for those who engaged with *strolling* on YouTube. In addition, in Indrani Ashe’s reflections on *strolling* they note the importance of publicly sharing affective personal storytelling to counter dominant mainstream narratives:

The subversive knowledge garnered from affective experience needs to be shared and spread as aggressively as possible in environments where algorithms erase sentiments of a less than mainstream disposition. Online distribution is a political tool.³³

As Ashe notes, telling and retelling stories from personal experiences and then sharing these vastly on social media has the capacity to challenge dominant harmful narratives of blackness and Black people. As it does this, it also brings people together through the telling of these stories, allowing people to better articulate themselves and find belonging online.

As a YouTube-based series, *strolling* welcomed the Black digital diaspora to encounter different Black experiences across the globe. In this leisurely act of strolling and scrolling, we

³² Francesca Sobande, “Watching Me Watching You: Black Women in Britain on YouTube,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no.6 (2017): 660

³³ Indrani Ashe, “Exploring the Multiplicity of the Black Experience in Europe with Cecile Emeke’s *Strolling*,” *AQNB*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.aqnb.com/2017/05/02/exploring-the-multiplicity-of-the-black-experience-in-europe-with-cecile-emekes-strolling/>.

witness the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of the Black diaspora. In Krista Thompson's study on diasporic visual cultures that explores how Black people in Jamaica and the U.S have recorded themselves and disseminated their image with the intention for global distribution, she writes that 'by becoming like a unit of representation, a visual technology, [the Black diaspora] can transcend the constraints of daily life and be transmitted and transported elsewhere, to other spaces and states. They can become diasporic subjects by becoming photographic.'³⁴ Thompson argues for the existence of a figurative, performative and transcending blackness; a Black existence that is unplaced and one which can migrate across geographies by *becoming* like technology using visual media. Similarly, the storytellers within *strolling* become visual units of representation and voice that move, spread, and migrate across digital platforms. They too become diasporic subjects through their capture, dissemination, and digital ability to have their stories travel across spaces. While viewers travel as we partake in watching the videos, the storyteller's travel as their images and stories are shared globally.

Although the internet and public accessibility was foundational for *strolling*, in May 2019 emeke's YouTube channel was deleted, and along with it, *strolling* and her wider body of work, were erased from public view. Unfortunately, the details as to why have not been publicly disclosed, and to respect her artistry and privacy, I do not wish to speculate. Although no longer publicly accessible, I retain my focus on the YouTube iteration of *strolling* in this chapter as it was a pivotal moment in Black British and Black diasporic filmmaking as well as digital content creation. I am interested in the digital social space offered by the social media platform by way of the comments section, and how digital

³⁴ Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 149.

diasporic intimacy had been mediated through the act of virtually gathering sharing stories online.

When I revisited the series in late 2018, emeke had over thirty-three-thousand subscribers to her YouTube channel, which was eponymously titled “cecile emeke”. She utilised the playlist function of her channel to geographically organise the entire *strolling* collection by country.³⁵ Her six *strolling* playlists included: “*strolling (uk)*” which included thirteen London-based interviews uploaded onto YouTube between April 4, 2014 and June 24, 2015; “*flâner*” which is the French word for ‘to stroll’, and included four interviews filmed in multiple locations around Paris, France, uploaded onto the channel between January 18, 2015 and May 27, 2015; three interviews featured in the “*wandelen*” playlist which is the Dutch word for ‘to walk’. These were mostly recorded in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and were uploaded online between August 25, 2015 and September 22, 2015; “*passeggiando*” which is Italian for ‘walking around’ and featured two interviews filmed in Milan, Italy, and uploaded to YouTube on October 12, 2015 and November 4, 2015; three interviews in the “*strolling (usa)*” playlist filmed mostly in New York City and uploaded between November 17, 2015 and December 22, 2015; and finally, the last recorded interview featured in “*strolling (jamaica)*” and uploaded to YouTube on February 9, 2016. The title of each short film began with “strolling”, or the loosely translated term when applicable, and then they succinctly listed the themes discussed by the storyteller within it, for example episode three of *strolling uk* which featured Lydia, was titled, “strolling, ep 3, idolatry of black American culture, reparations, chicken shops & more”.

As the interviews were organised geographically and thematically on YouTube, viewers of *strolling* were able to select the countries they desired to travel to and learn more about and have an already established awareness of what topics were to be discussed beforehand.

³⁵ This was accurate as of April 28, 2019.

However, two anomalies to emeke's geographical categorisation include the final episode of *wandelen* which was filmed in London, UK, and the final episode of *strolling (usa)* which was filmed in Brussels, Belgium. The storyteller for the latter episode was Dorrie, an African American woman who permanently lived and worked in Belgium. emeke's choice to situate Dorrie's narrative in the *strolling (usa)* playlist, even though she had migrated to Belgium fifteen years prior to filming, positions Dorrie as an African American woman living in Belgium, rather than a Black woman living in Belgium. This suggests that in this instance Dorrie's African American identity is at the forefront of her blackness, indicating that perhaps for emeke birthplace is a key signifier of the relationship between blackness, geographies, and belonging in the series.

Although the interviews were organised geographically by country, most of the interviews featured in those countries were filmed in the same city, and these were oftentimes capital cities or major global cities, predominantly in Europe. While this meant that there was a rich focus on the Black diaspora living in Europe – a history and narrative that is often obscured – the hypervisibility of global cities omits voices from people of the Black diaspora who live in rural areas or in cities where Black communities are few and far between. When she was asked by Clark about the expectations of production and how this was affecting her, emeke expressed that the project was costly and time-consuming, and this was likely a factor in determining what locations she could visit to film:

It is quite exhausting. My passion for it has carried me through so far, but I'm getting to that place where it is quite draining. Basically, you're shooting films with no money that other people shoot for \$10-15,000. After doing that for so long, you realize why that money is so necessary. We rely a lot on donations. What makes it all worth it is connecting with people around the world.³⁶

³⁶ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

emeke makes clear that funding for Black filmmakers in Britain is scarce. As the project relied on donations, this inevitably would have impacted the project outputs.

Although access to funding was a major barrier for the global reach and accessibility of *strolling*, YouTube's platform affordances helped to enhance the project's diasporic goal in two ways. Firstly, the interviews, which had been filmed in the English language, had been translated into other languages by a small team of translators who were credited in each individual video biography. These translations were offered as subtitles available through YouTube's closed captions feature. They were mostly European languages that are spoken across the Black diaspora, including Spanish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Italian and German, however, in the earlier episodes of the UK series, subtitles were also available for Swahili, Kinyarwanda, and Turkish. This tool provided access to the series for a wide range of non-English speakers.

Secondly, despite emeke not being able to travel to and film interviews with people outside of major global cities, the YouTube iteration of the series helped fill in some of these geographical gaps through its comments section. As viewers from different countries and cities contributed their perspectives and stories, they extended *strolling's* narrative world via the comments section. emeke recognised the power of this form of digital engagement and articulated that it was an outcome of the project which was beyond her control. The following exchange was taken from her interview with Clark:

You have an incredible communion with your viewers in the online space. The comments sections on YouTube, for example, are an integral part of the experience – productive and cathartic.

Some of the feedback and comments I get are overwhelming – from people who feel like they've never been affirmed in the way that they have through the series, or they never knew so many people out there thought like them. It's bigger than me,

I think, because the conversation carries on after I'm not there, whether it's in the comments, on social media, or whether it's people meeting up after an episode. I don't think you need a face or a leader for any kind of movement, so that it has this effect is really powerful.³⁷

As she decentred herself in the series' production, emeke acknowledged how *strolling* became a community project. In the YouTube comments section, the leisurely pace of strolling became the banal motion of scrolling. As we scroll through these comments, we can encounter, connect with, and enter into dialogue with other people from the Black diaspora who share their own stories. As viewers share and disclose their experiences with one another, digital diasporic intimacy emerges through this practice of collaborative storytelling, made accessible through the YouTube iteration of the series.

Shared Autobiographies and Diasporic Storytelling

Oral storytelling has long been recognised as a practice of affirmation, self-articulation, community building, and for the creation of historical record in Black diasporic cultures.³⁸ Through sharing folktales, musical lyricism, spiritual rituals, and everyday wordplay such as playing the dozens, oral storytelling has been a creative means of preserving history, passing on lessons, and fostering a collective identity in Black cultures.³⁹ Across West Africa, and spanning the Americas, the esteemed profession of the community Griot was, and still is, to document and share stories often using music as a vehicle. Griots are understood to be a living archive and a teller of 'history and education', who can 'reunite the distant and near

³⁷ emeke, "'Strolling' is a Thoughtful Walk,".

³⁸ Alexis Pate, *In the Heart of The Beat: The Poetry of Rap* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.: 2010); E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁹ Janice D. Hamlet, "Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture," *Black History Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (2011): 27-31.

past with the immediate present and the imminent future.’⁴⁰ Their respected role across Black communities demonstrates the culturally rooted importance of the oral tradition. Stepping into this long tradition of storytelling, emeke uses her filmography to platform Black stories and give testimony to the lived experiences of her storytellers, and she does so to teach, share, and create diasporic community.

As well as oral traditions which have been rooted in Black diasporic storytelling, written autobiographies are a literary genre that have been used across Black diasporic cultures to reclaim narrative agency and self-hood in a worldly climate of antiblackness, engage and shape politics and social movements, document resistance and demand self-recognition.⁴¹ With similar aims for the preservation of histories and the dissemination of knowledge, the roots of Black diasporic autobiographies have been traced to African oral traditions, making direct links between the two genres of storytelling.⁴² Paul Gilroy discusses the importance of autobiography as an African American literary form and writes that they ‘express in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of self-creation and self-emancipation.’⁴³ Autobiographies then, are a method of defying dominant narratives and claiming agency. In Kenneth Mostern’s study on the genre’s relationship with Black identity politics, he defines the autobiography as ‘an articulation based on the determinate memory and recall of experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics.’⁴⁴ Mostern dispels

⁴⁰ Issiaka Ouattara, “The Griots of West Africa: Oral Tradition and Ancestral Knowledge,” trans. Charity Fox, in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 151.

⁴¹ Angela A. Ards, *Word of Witness: Black Women’s Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015); John W. Blassingame, “Black Autobiographies as History and Literature,” *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 4 (1973): 2-9; Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

⁴² Adetayo Alabi, *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

⁴³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993; reis., London: Verso 1999), 69.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10.

any arguments that Black autobiographies are simply a regurgitation of personal experiences, but instead argues that they are an informed and intentional form that work to illuminate racial politics.

In addition, focusing specifically on Black American and Canadian women's literature, Anh Hua notes how a Black feminist approach to storytelling includes 'giving testimony and bearing witness to multiple histories and experiences to counter multiple oppressions and silencing.'⁴⁵ Although not a writer, emeke's filmography positions intersectionality as a core framework, as she centres Black women's voices and across the series a range of topics related to the storytellers' multi-faceted identities are platformed. Her efforts to capture and give testimony to a range of stories and intersections of Black identities makes visible marginalised narratives and creates a space for a multitude of Black experiences to be discussed together. Collectively, these definitions and ruminations on Black autobiographies, stories, and oral traditions provide a context for the ways that *strolling* contributes to this long history of diasporic storytelling. In the series, storytellers use autobiography to articulate their realities, disrupt dominant narratives around blackness, and reveal racial politics in their countries. Across the comment sections, viewers engage in traditions steeped in African oral traditions, such as call and response to affirm and extend the stories in the videos, and this is something I will demonstrate shortly.

Although Black orality and communication broadly has been a reoccurring point of focus in digital media studies, little research has explored the function of autobiography and storytelling online.⁴⁶ In their essay on joy and Black orality on social media, Jessica Lu and

⁴⁵ Anh Hua, "Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 6, no. 3 (2013): 41.

⁴⁶ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweepers, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2015): 223-237; Catherine Knight Steele, "Signifyin', Bitching, and Blogging: Black Women and Resistance Discourse Online," in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 73-93.

Catherine Knight Steele argue that collective storytelling can be a method of reclaiming agency online and intervening in dominant narratives of Black identity.⁴⁷ Similarly, Feminista Jones has discussed how through the use of hashtags on Twitter, storytelling has facilitated practices of Black feminist resistance in socio-politics.⁴⁸ However, this scholarship does not explore how Black storytelling and autobiographies might be a tool for building diasporic communities and sustaining digital intimacies. Addressing this gap in literature, I use the term ‘shared autobiography’ to signal the ways that autobiographies are written collaboratively and shared online as a method of creating digital intimacies and community. I have chosen to use ‘autobiography’ rather than ‘biography’ within this term to signal an interplay between the individual and the collective, and to acknowledge the ways that autonomy and agency is integral to this form of collaboration.

In my articulation of the shared autobiography, multiple people communicate their experiences online by telling, retelling, and disseminating anecdotal narratives. The shared autobiography not only refers to the act of sharing personal narratives with others via social media, but also includes the act of digitally sharing others’ narratives through hypertext and share buttons and collaborating to create these extended stories. Bertram D. Ashe describes Black diasporic oral storytelling as a practice that is ‘intimately concerned with audience’, and I want to extend this to the shared autobiographies across *strolling*.⁴⁹ The ‘share’ in shared autobiography simultaneously refers to the act of doing with others, giving to others, intimately participating with one another through storytelling, uploading material online, and disseminating online material. It is the expansiveness of the term that underpins its usage. Shared autobiographies can be textual – as illustrated by the comments section – and/or

⁴⁷ Jessica Lu and Catherine Knight Steele, “‘Joy is Resistance’: cross-platform resilience and (re)invention of Black oral culture online,” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 823-837.

⁴⁸ Feminista Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

⁴⁹ Bertram D. Ashe, *From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African-American Studies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

audio-visual – as illustrated by the series – and I propose that they are a tool of encounter and education. I argue that for those of the Black diaspora who have experienced those feelings of unbelonging that I discussed at the opening of this chapter, through the process of sharing autobiographies vis-à-vis the YouTube-based *strolling* series, an audience can intimately connect with one another.

Between October 2018 and January 2019, I re-watched the entirety of *strolling* on YouTube in preparation for this study. As I watched the series, I transcribed each of the episodes verbatim using NVivo. Afterwards, I conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of all episodes and coded each interview segment thematically using sixty-six key themes which had emerged across the series. This revealed that themes of belonging, environment, citizenship, gentrification, and comments on institutional and theoretical spaces such as archives, museums, and social media were the most frequently discussed as part of a shared autobiography. The interview segments that I have chosen to focus on in this chapter derive from those that discuss these spatial themes. As I delved deeper into these segments, I read them alongside the YouTube comments sections to see if and where Black YouTubers would directly respond to or extend these discussions. As I noted in the thesis introduction, I have chosen not to include the names of the Black YouTubers who wrote comments partly because these comments have now been deleted, but also because want to extend them anonymity. However, without giving name to the individual commenters, I engage with the entirety of their comments so not to abstract their voices or perspectives.

Polyvocality, Emotions, and “Affective Exchange”

To offer my first example for how the shared autobiography functions across *strolling*, I want to return momentarily to episode 3 of the UK series which features Lydia in Catford, London who discussed themes of Black women’s representations, citizenship and belonging,

gentrification, and reparations. When she expressed that her parents told her that she should refer to herself as a ‘British-born-Jamaican’, she discursively located herself in a space of in-between, belonging neither here in England, nor there in Jamaica. Despite having these two nationalities signposted within her identity, Lydia expresses that on one hand, British ‘society makes you feel like you don’t belong here’, while Jamaican communities have not helped her to ‘feel like [she] was accepted’.⁵⁰ Discourses of belonging and citizenship reoccur throughout *strolling* as storytellers and commenters discuss what it means to belong neither here nor there. Lydia declares that ‘it’s crazy for the kids of the diaspora, like, we’re displaced man, it’s like... You feel like you’re in limbo.’⁵¹ In this statement, she uses spatially coded language to emphasise her feelings of unbelonging and unsettledness as it relates to her Black identity. As she describes herself as ‘displaced’ and existing in a ‘limbo’, she positions her blackness as that without a physical, geographical home. As an extension of these feelings, in the comments section underneath this video, Black YouTube users respond to Lydia and shared their own experiences with this sentiment:

“As a Jamaican-American, she speaks right to me. Stuck in a limbo between the United States and Yaad.”

“Everything she said is so real. As an African-Spanish that is how I feel as well.”

“I’m a [sic] “African American” (slavery...etc..we all know that story) and I feel the same way with somethings probably compounded. I dont feel American and when I do its kind of snatched away but then i dont feel African because I’m not sssoo [sic] I’m basically left in constant limbo like she was talking about.”

⁵⁰ emeke, “strolling, ep 3”.

⁵¹ emeke, “strolling, ep 3”.

Although each of the YouTube users have different heritages and live in different countries, their experiences with their blackness and belonging are similar insofar that they express the duality of their identity and claim their own feelings of unbelonging.

As these YouTube users extend Lydia's story and share their stories with one another, they contribute to a collective story wherein they affirm one other's experiences and find commonalities amongst their differences. As a result, they claim their right to belong in the comments section. In the above examples, YouTube users reveal parts of their Black identity, express how Lydia's words resonate with them, and offer an insight into how feelings of displacement impact them. Through this emotive declaration, they exchange their stories and generate digital diasporic intimacy. They also demonstrate how repetition is useful within shared autobiographies, as it centres the viewers' collective yet individual experiences to create diasporic intimacy. In these examples, the YouTube users retell sections of Lydia's story and adopt her language to configure themselves in relation to her discussion of displacement and unbelonging. Reflecting on the use of reiteration and repetition in her storytelling, Haitian American author Roxanne Gay in her essay collection *Bad Feminist*, writes:

I tell some of the same stories over and over because certain experiences have affected me profoundly. Sometimes, I hope that by telling these stories again and again, I will have a better understanding of how the world works.⁵²

Although there is not one narrator within *strolling*'s shared autobiography, nor is there a singular narrative being told, these comments build upon each another using repetition to tell a similar story but from multiple perspectives. In doing so, they connect Lydia's statement to other Black diasporic experiences to develop a wider connected story about what

⁵² Roxanne Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (St Ives: Corsair, 2014), 3-4.

displacement and unbelonging might look like globally. As the commenters use repetition to declare the duality of their spatial identities – “As a Jamaican-American”, “As an African-Spanish,” – they assert their right to belong within the comments section and express intracommunal familiarity with one another’s experiences. They reflect and give name to their personal experiences to contribute to a process of Black diasporic (other)worlding which, as they articulate, exists in a space of limbo.

Shortly after her segment on belonging and displacement, Lydia cites W.E.B Du Bois concept of ‘double consciousness’ to articulate her experience of living in Britain.⁵³ She says, ‘I do feel like I have to adopt double consciousness. I do feel that sort of pressure to sort of be someone else almost. It’s almost to survive really.’⁵⁴ In his essays and musings on Black life in America in the early twentieth century, Du Bois discusses the psychological effects of being Black in white America. Double consciousness describes a ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’⁵⁵ Thus, in his context the term signals a life at the margins within oppressive dominant cultures where there is an impenetrable barrier between blackness and American identity. While Du Bois focused specifically on a North American context, in *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy extends the concept to transatlantic geographies marked by the Middle Passage, specifically Britain and Jamaica.⁵⁶ The comments above extend the concept even further as they demonstrate the existence of a double consciousness beyond a Middle Passage epistemology. The YouTube users label their spatialised identities and gesture towards their own double consciousness to acknowledge that they also reside in a space marked by displacement and a conflict between identity and belonging. Du Bois and Gilroy’s theories of double consciousness have rightly been criticised for their gender-

⁵³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

⁵⁴ emeke, “strolling, ep 3”.

⁵⁵ Du Bois, *Souls*, 3.

⁵⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

specificity, and as Hazel Carby notes, within that they privilege ‘only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity’.⁵⁷ In other words, in these theories, queer people, trans people, and women’s experiences are overlooked. Invertedly interrogating this junction of invisibility within these dialogues, emeke’s *strolling* creates space for individuals who occupy different intersections of Black identity to give voice to their experiences. By contributing to a shared autobiography that grapples with these feelings of belonging, emeke, Lydia and the YouTube users help shape an intimate online community.

Polyvocality is central to my conceptualisation of the shared autobiography. Within this form, many voices come together to share, elaborate upon, and affirm or challenge their own stories as well as one another’s. In doing so, a collaborative diasporic story is weaved together. For example, as Lydia’s story progresses, she turns to discuss the ways that Black youth culture in Britain is influenced by Black American popular culture and sympathetically critiques this as a form of identity formation.

When you look on the TV and you see young black people, they're always African American. So, when that's the only thing you see, you attach yourself to it, because there's nothing else, sort of, out there for you to relate to. Let's not lie, like a lot of us are, sort of, influenced by media and it's got a crazy influence on the mind and it's a subconscious thing as well. You don't even realise it's happening to you. All of a sudden you say "y'all" and you're not even American, you know?

As she continues, she describes the adoption of Black American cultures and dialects by some Black British young people as a form of idolisation, wherein the desire to be American is a conscious one. In the comments section, YouTube users reflect upon Lydia’s words and contribute to the shared autobiography by adding their own experiences to that narrative. One

⁵⁷ Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1998), 10.

commenter expands Lydia's testimony by discussing American imperialism, but also British imperialism and the privileges associated to the diaspora who live in those countries:

"I really feel her on the idolatry of black American culture. I feel as though it's not something that happens only in Black British communities but even African communities, because american [sic] culture is very imperialistic and ubiquitous in world culture in general, thus African-Americans [sic] in being American, are placed on a pedestal. Furthermore, African-Americans [sic] define this seemingly universal 'blackness', and often have more forms of representations/platforms in the world. There is privilege in nationality, I feel. Ama in Mampong, Ghana [sic] is less likely to be heard or paid attention to than Emily from U.S.A or Britain and as a British-Ghanaian, I recognize that privilege and just how much power the 2nd passport has. I love this show because I think it's nice to finally see more people I can relate to, and hear things that I've also thought about, but also because it enfranchises groups that are usually ignored by giving them a voice. However, I also hope to one day give Africans themselves a means to be heard and seen, outside of a colonial or western-defined gaze."

Another commenter, who grew up in Germany, challenges Lydia's argument of U.S idolisation to share how for them the fascination with Black American cultural idioms and materials has been necessary for survival in a white dominated environment:

"I love this series so so much. I am also a child of the African diaspora, born and raised in Germany and can identify with everything she said in this video. Just goes to show how universal these feelings are when it comes to being black in this world. The part about feeling displaced and not fully belonging to either cultures [sic] especially. It can be a dangerous place to live in. Also the part about wanting to adopt black American culture. Growing up in Germany in the 1980's, 1990's I could pretty much count all the black people in my city on my hand. Which of course meant that everyone around me was even more ignorant about racism than I was. The very few tv shows with black actors they showed on German TV like 'the cosby

show' and 'prince of Bel Air' and later musicians were my only connection to other black people and I held on to them for dear life, until I was old enough to leave the country. I have since traveled and lived in many places but have yet to find a place I can call home.”

These commenters offer different geographical perspectives to Lydia’s story to help shape a nuanced shared autobiography. While they both affirm Lydia’s story and celebrate emeke’s filmography as it allows for rich everyday conversations by those who are usually unheard, they partake in the shared autobiography and disassemble any notion of the one singular voice for the many. Instead, multiple voices come together to share in intimate storytelling that combines the personal with the global.

Across *strolling*’s shared autobiography, polyvocality is enriched by the expression of emotion and feeling. Thus, digital diasporic intimacy can be created through these shared emotions. In his study on YouTube videos, their comments sections, and affect, Reginold Royston uses the term ‘affective exchange’ to describe ‘an embodied diasporic practice that produces “real-time” sociality.’⁵⁸ Across *strolling*, affective exchange is generated through the comments section where shared emotions and contradicting feelings are expressed and explored, and I argue that this helps to facilitate the creation of digital intimacies. On some occasions the YouTube users demonstrate what they had learnt from the videos and use these knowledges and perspectives as a point of departure to discuss their own experiences in their respective countries. They discuss the similarities and differences between their experiences and the one’s displayed in the series and use this to negotiate a diasporic Black identity. The use of emotive language, as well as the displays of empathy and emphasis on collective feeling within the series and across the comments section illustrates how digital diasporic

⁵⁸ Reginold A. Royston, “At Home, Online: Affective Exchange and the Diasporic Body in Ghanaian Internet Video,” in *Migrating the Black Body: The African Diaspora and Visual Culture*, ed. Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez, (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 2017), 267.

communities can be curated through intimate, and sometimes tense dialogue exchange. For instance, in some episodes of *strolling*, as the storytellers give voice to their experiences of belonging and unbelonging in certain spaces, their feelings of anger, frustration, and exasperation become apparent through their tone of voice and their body language. In response to this, some YouTube users pick up on these gestures and tones and evoke them within their comments, and the following examples will unpack this further.

In episode 7 of *strolling uk*, titled “feminist men, crying, “great” britain, reparations, palestine & more,” emeke interviews a young man called Abraham in Hackney, East London. Filmed at a jubilant and colourful fairground, he visually contrasts against the pop of bright colours that are blurred behind him as he wears a light grey T-shirt with the slogan ‘ARMY’ written across it, rolled up jean shorts, and a pair of black and red New Balance trainers. In what was the most viewed episode of the UK playlist, and the second most viewed of the entire series, Abraham begins by passionately discussing his identity as self-proclaimed feminist and his process of unlearning patriarchy as a Black man, as well as the legacies of the British Empire and the colonial systems of oppression. As he connects patriarchy to wider colonial origins of knowledge and language, he rhetorically asks ‘who called Nigeria Nigeria? I don’t know but it weren’t Nigerians. Who called Africa Africa? I don’t think it was Africans’.⁵⁹ Audible in the background are the faint joyful screams of Londoners who are on the thrilling rides while in the foreground, Abraham criticises British imperialism and colonialism while revealing the ways that organised religion and internalised antiblackness within the Black community are results of this. He refers to this as ‘infuriating’, and his dialogue is littered with cursing, raised eyebrows and frowns as he visibly displays his feelings.

⁵⁹ cecile emeke, “strolling ep 7 feminist men, crying, “great” britain, reparations, palestine & more,” August 4, 2014, accessed November 7, 2018, YouTube video, 13:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7aAIAhHH1U>.

As the video draws to a close, Abraham ends with a discussion of Black hair in relationship to gender politics, colonialism, and institutional spaces. In the stills in between, the camera focuses on his rich, dark textured hair (**Figure 1**). He says:

I used to feel a lot of pressure to cut my hair. I mean like, it all starts from primary school and secondary school. They would have been like, you can't grow your hair longer than a certain length. No canerows. All of that stuff tells you that my hair isn't good and I think it's really interesting as well because people, me included, I was one of those people, we talk about Black women, we talk about weave, and talk about like relaxer, but we're blind to the fact that hold on... my hair doesn't ever ever grow past a certain point and I won't allow it to. And if it does, I've got to comb my hair or I've got to texturize it because I need to somehow appease the white man's idea of me and not be too threatening. I think it's unfair that there's so much pressure on women to have their hair a certain way and men not to. How a woman has their hair so strongly defines how their day's gonna go, it's ridiculous.⁶⁰

As Abraham reflects on his own learning and shares how he has had to assimilate within institutional spaces in Britain, he gives voice to how misogynoir has been entwined with discussions of hair. He shares that to exist in some spaces as a Black man in Britain, he has had to look a certain way to avoid being perceived as 'threatening'. At the same time, he recognises that Black men have criticised Black women's hair styles when they have not worn their afro hair textures and thus he reveals this hypocrisy. While Abraham acknowledges the ways that British

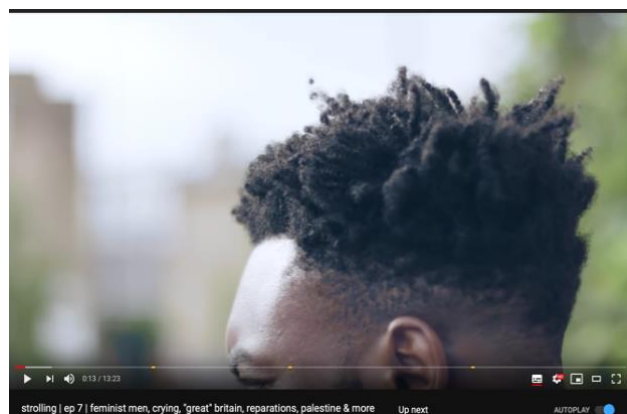


Figure 1. Abraham's tightly coiled hair (Screenshot by author).

⁶⁰ cemeke, "strolling ep 7".

schools have been responsible for creating policies that uphold and embed antiblackness, he also discusses how the Black community have internalised antiblackness as it pertains to hair, arguing that not all Black spaces are safe for all:

I've had people say my hair's wild. I've had people say I look like a drug addict or a drug dealer. Most of the time these are people of the same ethnicity as me. They've internalised the things that people say about them. The fact that someone can say that if my hair's like this I'm more likely to be a crackhead than a banker, it's ridiculous.⁶¹

When Abraham speaks, his passion travels. His words are animated by his facial expressions and body gestures as he rolls his eyes, smirks at the absurdity of his words, and furrows his brows. In his dialogue, he demonstrates how, as Katherine McKittrick puts it, 'racism and sexism are also spatial acts'.⁶² As he continues to share his reflections and insights, his voice is decorated with tonal inflections, pauses, and expressions that help to communicate his annoyance:

I shouldn't have to cut my hair when I turn thirty and wear a suit, no. But I think it's really interesting that my hair's "different" and "weird" and "strange" and "wild" and "exotic" because my hair grows like this. No, it's not. My hair's frickin' normal, **your** hair's weird to me, it's so straight and flat and weird colours. When it goes in water it sticks to your face. That's weird to me. Can I touch your hair? Can I play with your hair? This is my default.⁶³

⁶¹ emeke, "strolling ep 7".

⁶² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xviii.

⁶³ emeke, "strolling ep 7".

I emphasise the ‘your’ in bold here, because at this point Abraham’s tone shifts to an accusatory one. From there on, Abraham addresses a white gaze directly and challenges the view that his blackness is subaltern. As he says, ‘that’s weird to me’ he shrugs his shoulders, and his eyebrows are raised high as a look of confusion is unmistakably visible across his face. Throughout his contribution to *strolling*’s shared autobiography, Abraham wields his frustration and expression of annoyance as a tool to communicate his experiences, and his feelings are infectious.

As I scrolled through the comments section of this video, it quickly became apparent that Abraham’s expressive dialogue and display of emotions influenced the ways that some people interacted with the video. For one viewer, Abraham’s emotive storytelling offered them a space to reflect on their personal yet similar experiences around internalised antiblackness, sexism, and colonialism. They write:

“I can feel so much anger when he talks. Legitimate, conscious anger; the type of anger that makes you want to change things. I came to the realizations (Who called Nigeria, Nigeria?), Africa’s history of colonialism, male privilege... as I grew up. I’m Cameroonian, and so many people look down on our culture, our difference. Women reject natural hair, people bleach, we uplift white people and lighter skin. We internalize sexism, racism, and eurocentrism. Well, it all makes me furious, and I could feel it in his voice. We should all be furious.”

In this YouTube user’s contribution to the shared autobiography, they reveal their frustrations with the socio-cultural life and antiblackness present within Cameroonian culture – a culture that was not featured within the *strolling* series. But before they share their own experiences, they acknowledge and affirm Abraham’s emotions of ‘legitimate, conscious anger’. At the end of their comment, they express that they can *feel* Abraham’s frustration and anger and it is this familiar feeling that they use to reveal their shared experiences. In Audre Lorde’s essay “Uses of Anger”, she articulates anger as an appropriate reaction and a useful resource to

challenge racism.⁶⁴ Underpinned by Black feminism, she writes that, ‘focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change’ and articulates said change as a ‘radical alteration’ of reality.⁶⁵ Lorde’s framework understands anger to be a feeling ‘loaded with information and energy’, and in the above examples, anger is not only used to reveal the absurdity of racism, but it also harnesses an energy that connects the two stories in *strolling*’s shared autobiography.⁶⁶

Although Abraham speaks specifically about his experiences of racism and antiblackness as a ‘British-born-Nigerian’, the YouTube users’ comment extends this story to reflect on their experiences in Cameroonian context. Though their spatial differences are hinted at within their comment, the YouTube user writes that their personal experience of internalised antiblackness “makes me furious, and I could feel it in his voice.” Structured in this way, the sentence suggests that the commenter’s Cameroonian experiences are the source of anger that they could detect within Abraham’s voice. In this way, they connect their emotions to Abraham’s and recognise their experiences as shared diasporic ones. Ralph Ellison’s articulation that the Black diaspora are connected by an ‘identity of passions’ is actualised in this example where shared frustration with the effects of colonialism are a unifying force.⁶⁷ As the commenter flits between their own voice and Abraham’s, they illustrate how expressions of familiar feelings and embodied knowledges can create illusions of geographical closeness. Also, in this example, an ‘affective exchange’ takes place between emeke’s storyteller and the commenter, and feelings are legitimised and affirmed as a process of mediating digital intimacies.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984; reis., New York: Crossing Press, 2017), 129

⁶⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 127.

⁶⁶ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 127.

⁶⁷ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1964; reis., New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 263.

⁶⁸ Royston, “At Home, Online”, 267.

In their contribution to the shared autobiography, the Cameroonian commenter uses emotion to intertwine their experience with Abraham's and I posit that it is this use of affective writing and structuring that helps them to establish themselves as part of a digital diasporic community. They conclude their comment with the demand that 'we should all be furious', and in writing this, they attempt to extend the narrative outwards from Abraham's story and their own to the rest of the global Black diaspora. This suggests that to them, the Black diaspora is entitled to anger and frustration, and these feelings are something that connects the digital diasporic community. However, not every Black person shares the same sentiments. In response to the episode, another YouTube user criticises Abraham for his contradictory rhetoric. This commenter argues that Abraham generalises his experiences and attempts to speak on behalf of the rest of the Black diaspora when his lived reality does not apply to their own: "The danger of your talk is that you have generalised most of the points that you raised. If this is your personal experience it would have been best to use "I" and "me" rather than "we" and "us"."⁶⁹ Then, drawing on their own experiences of having afro-textured hair while living in an undisclosed African country, they acknowledge some similarities with their experiences, but largely dispute Abraham's testimony:

"The whole thing about hair is actually crap! I grew up in African countries and the maximum length you could hold your hair was 1 cm, regardless of your gender or race. These schools were not guided by westerners who hated African hair. It was a dress code which was adopted because education boards felt that students were spending too much time on their hair as opposed to their books. When I used to meet white people or albinos I would ask them to touch their hair and skin NOT because I thought they were not human but because I was curious. Maybe that white person who asks to touch your hair was simply curious! A racist would never ask

⁶⁹ I am unable to reference the entirety of this comment as it was over seven hundred words long. Instead, I have chosen to cite the section where they speak on Abraham's generalisation and include the excerpt where they speak specifically on Black hair.

to touch your hair. Think about it, if every black girl had natural hair, wouldn't the afro be the look of lawyers and bankers too? Wouldn't less and less white people think it “weird” that our hair is “wild” because they would see it every day? The fact is, the biggest Afro haters are in fact within the Black people! A lot of black women wear weaves and hair extensions, white people do not force them to do that. They do it out of choice. Some black men give out comments like “you look nice but would look better in a weave”. Compare that to a certain white person’s comment of “your hair is wild” Which is worse? Maybe you should watch Chris Rock’s *Good Hair*.”

Although the recommendation for Abraham to watch Chris Rock’s 2009 documentary film *Good Hair* has aged poorly in light of the comedian’s ableist joke about Jada Pinkett-Smith’s hair loss at the 2022 Oscars, throughout their comment this YouTube user makes it clear that they do not share Abraham’s views or experiences. However, their comment still indicates feelings of frustration and annoyance through their repeated use of exclamation marks, rhetorical questions, and denial, but this appears to be directed towards Abraham specifically. It is a tense dialogical moment that directly contrasts with the Cameroonian commenter’s response to the episode that I referenced earlier and as such it reveals how *strolling*’s shared autobiography is not always harmonious.

This inharmony is further explored as a separate YouTube user responds to the comment that criticises Abraham to offer a third perspective. They write the following:

I think you make some valid points we all need to share our own opinions. I think in the video the speaker was extremely biased but his voice still matters.

His points on the hair I do get what you are saying there are many contradictions, pressures and hostility towards women with african hair that is unnecessary. Why do we have to objectify women based on things that are so personal! This is an example of white supremacy where the "dominant race " feels entitled to comment and pressure women of color to be more like the ideal beauty which is white hair. I found your

perspective on hair interesting but in the western world where people are constantly prejudiced [sic] based on their looks, try to look more affluent and just fit in our culture is forcing women to change their hair. I feel like for some women its the only choice to feeling [sic] beautiful because women of color leader [sic] embrace weaves and taming black hair.

After they have affirmed the original commenters' viewpoints and acknowledged Abraham's bias, they iterate that Abraham has a right to voice his own experiences and then have those platformed through the *strolling* series. This third voice adds a layer of nuance to the discussion to argue for everyone's right to agency and representation within *strolling*'s shared autobiography, including their own. Digital diasporic intimacies are created and shaped through moments like these, just as much as they are during times where shared experiences and emotions are expressed. As Keguro Macharia reminds us, diasporic intimacies cannot exist without friction.⁷⁰ In tense moments where people of the Black diaspora work through difference and challenge visible narratives of blackness and diasporic identities, disagreements and displays of emotion can both contribute to the curation of intimate communities.

Visual Storytelling: Mapping the Digital Diaspora

The visual imagery available throughout *strolling* is another place where the shared autobiography comes to fruition, as ideas of space, belonging and nation are revealed through emeke's filmography. As I briefly noted in the chapter introduction, the videos in *strolling* have approximately four or five sections of speech that are separated by thirty-second intervals where emeke records the storytellers as they walk around their cities. emeke

⁷⁰ Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

alternates between close-up shots of the storytellers' bodies, portrait shots of their faces, and wide-angle footage of them standing or sitting amidst their surroundings in stasis.

Occasionally she dedicates time to film the landscape without the storyteller's presence.

However, when the storyteller is talking *emeke* reduces the amount of camera movement and focuses solely on them allowing for a form of intimacy to be envisioned between the storyteller and the viewers. During the intervals when the storytellers are neither speaking nor present, the viewers are shown a range of camera shots that capture scenes and city landscapes. Thus, *strolling* reveals how Black people and their stories are interlocked with geographies and the places and spaces they inhabit, because as McKittrick reminds us, 'Black matters are spatial matters.'⁷¹ We cannot thoroughly conceptualise blackness, nor can we conceptualise digital diasporic intimacy, without considering how they are produced through, alongside, and as a result of space and place.

Through the visuals, *strolling* presents a collective diasporic story where threads of diasporic experiences are weaved together through image and narrative. In this section, I bring together episode one of *passeggiando*, and the solo episode of *strolling (jamaica)*, which both feature two storytellers in each video who collaboratively discuss the ways that space and place is entangled with their identities in their respective countries. I read these episodes together as they are two of the three episodes that feature multiple storytellers, and these two specifically include frames where the storytellers are positioned in the middle of historic geographical locations. This offers an opportunity to bring into context the spaces made visible across *strolling*, to unpack the ways that they shape the dialogue and how they are connected through *emeke*'s filmography.

In episode one of *passeggiando*, uploaded to YouTube on October 12, 2015, and titled "afroitalians, italian citizenship, family sacrifices lancome & more" two Black women,

⁷¹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiv.

Loretta and Bellamy are filmed in Milan, Italy as they discuss the intersections between citizenship, migration, careers, and blackness in their country.⁷² Midway through the episode during a segment where there is no dialogue, they are captured by emeke for a moment as they stand facing one another in the middle of the grand stairs of Duomo di Milano – Milan Cathedral (**see Figure 2**). In this segment, Milan’s busy environment is inescapable and there is continuous movement of people who walk in and out of shot behind them. In this populated cityscape, Loretta and Bellamy are the only Black people present. Against the white architectural designs of the cathedral, they stand, forefront and visible.

In a similar visual composition, in St. Andrew Parish, Jamaica, duo Gladstone and Kokab occupy space in Hope Royal Botanical Gardens, a two-hundred-acre park which was a section of the Hope Estate, a former sugar plantation (**see Figure 3**). In the episode, which is titled, “ep 1 patois, uptown kingston, depression, caribbean past, homophobia & more”, Gladstone and Kokab discuss identity as it relates to language, nationality, disability, and sexuality.⁷³ In Jamaica, the lush vegetation travels far beyond and around Gladstone and Kokab’s frame. The greenery simultaneously draws the focus from and then to the



Figure 2. Loretta and Bellamy stand on the steps outside of the Duomo Di Milano, Italy. (Screenshot by author).



Figure 3. Gladstone and Kokab stand in Hope Gardens, St Andrew Parish, Jamaica. (Screenshot by author).

⁷² cecile emeke, “passeggiando ep 1 afroitalians, italian citizenship, family sacrifices lancome & more,” October 12, 2015, accessed November 30, 2018, YouTube video, 09:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCubkwdpwr8>.

⁷³ cecile emeke, “strolling (jamaica) ep 1 patois, uptown kingston, depression, caribbean past, homophobia & more,” February 9, 2016, accessed January 22, 2019, YouTube video, 11:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-065Mzkr8E8&t=268s>.

storytellers. While in Milan, Loretta and Bellamy are framed by the rigidity of the white cathedral walls, in St. Andrews Parish, Gladstone and Kokab stand amongst a garden that does not seem to end. emeke's use of wide-angle shots frame the storytellers within historical geographical spaces as they discuss the ways that legacies of colonialism and racism, and sometime internalised racism, shape Black experiences in their cities. This focus on the imagery of space and place within these episodes visualises what McKittrick refers to as the 'material physicality of the diaspora.'⁷⁴ Although emeke and the storytellers do not often give name to the places present within the episodes, through the visuals we are invited to grapple with the impacts that the ownership of these spaces and the symbolism of these geographies have on conceptualisations of Black identities throughout the diaspora.

In the mid-twentieth century Duomo di Milano, one of the world's largest cathedrals, was erected as the final structure that still stands today. The cathedral is one of the most famous Catholic churches in the world and has been constructed and renovated since the fourteenth century. However, the nineteenth century 'saw great activity on the construction site' and this coincided around the time of the founding of the Italian colonial empire, when East African countries including Libya, Ethiopia, Somali and Eritrea came under Italy's colonial rule.⁷⁵ Serving as the frame for Loretta and Bellamy's walk around the city of Milan, Duomo di Milano offers a classical European, white-bricked backdrop that contrasts against the deep brown hues of the women's skin tones. However, the gothic architectural background also serves as a visual reminder of Italy's history of imperialism, its colonial conquest for power in East Africa, and its fascist regime that was deployed through Italian nationalism. Residues of colonial histories, like this architecture, linger across some of the episodes of *strolling*. Throughout the series, Black identities are set within or are juxtaposed against these

⁷⁴ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 12.

⁷⁵ "The Cathedral," Duomo di Milano, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.duomomilano.it/en/infopage/the-cathedral/53/>.

persisting reminders of white imperialism, visually drawing viewers' attention to the legacies of white supremacy as well as the prevalence of Black resistance and agency within these spaces.

Similarly, in St. Andrew Parish, in Kingston Jamaica, Gladstone and Kokab are filmed in multiple locations within Hope Royal Botanical Gardens. In 1655 when the British defeated the Spanish for rule over Jamaica, colonial settler and commander for the British Army, Major Richard Hope received a large plot of land to commend his victory.⁷⁶ This land was claimed as The Hope Estate and was used as a sugar plantation to farm, produce, and cultivate molasses, coffee, and livestock. Records show that by 1832 there were 374 enslaved people working on the estate's plantation.⁷⁷ After the Slave Compensation Act in 1837, The Hope Estate was gifted to the 2nd Duke of Buckingham and Chandos as payment for the loss of his slaves. Eventually, in 1874 two-hundred acres of the estate became a public park and botanical collection. Amongst the tranquil lush green spaces of the gardens that have been captured in the episode is a harrowing history of land ownership, colonialism, commodity, and slavery in Jamaica, however, its history goes unspoken. Neither Gladstone and Kokab, nor emeke give voice to the histories of the Hope Estate, instead it is a history that manifests within the episode's visual register.

Between the five thousand miles that separate Milan, Italy and Kingston, Jamaica, *strolling* makes visible the far-reaching echoes of European colonialism and imperialism that have distinguished and subjugated blackness as 'Other' and subaltern.⁷⁸ These echoes which are captured through *strolling*'s visual register illustrate how diasporic intimacies are

⁷⁶ "History," Hope Gardens, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://hrbg.org.jm/about-us/history/>.

⁷⁷ "Estates," Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/estates/>.

⁷⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271-313; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

connected and created spatially. When Saidiya Hartman visited Elmina Castle, a historical port for slave ships based in Ghana, she was surprised by the locals who were seemingly unfazed by the legacy of the slave trade that haunted the Gulf of Guinea. She writes: ‘I had presumed that the black world shared a thread of connection or a common chord of memory based upon this, our tragic past.’⁷⁹ In emeke’s *strolling*, Hartman’s assumptions are realised as the past, marked by the histories of the cities and countries we stroll within, become a thread for diasporic intimacy that is sewn together by emeke’s filmography to produce a visual shared autobiography. History, legacy, and ‘chords of memory’ are embedded into the fabric of the videos by way of the geographical sites.⁸⁰ To borrow language from anthropologist Bayo Holsey, emeke uses her filmography to ‘explore what it means to live, quite literally, in the shadows cast by’ geographies of colonialism and imperialism.⁸¹ These shadows manifest themselves not only through the episodes’ visuals, but also through the storytellers’ the narratives.

In the dialogue of these two episodes, Loretta and Bellamy and Gladstone and Kokab discuss the ways that their access to certain ideological spaces and physical places in their respective countries have been shaped by the residues of colonialism. For Loretta and Bellamy, this is via their Italian citizenship:

Bellamy: We are a reality, you know?

Loretta: Yes!

B: We are a reality, so whether you like it or not, we are here, we are in front of you, you can't deny, you can't reject us for that much longer because, I mean, we are here. Italian is not... Italy is not a patriotic country at all.

L: At all!

⁷⁹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 73.

⁸⁰ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 73.

⁸¹ Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

B: Italians become patriotic when it comes to football and when it's time to protest against foreigners.

L: Yes!

B: You are really trying to deny us even though you see us every single day. We are in front of you. We walk by you every single day. You see us walking in supermarkets. You see us playing soccer. You see us everywhere. But you see us as foreigners, you see us as an immigrant.⁸²

In the above excerpt, Loretta and Bellamy engage in call and response as they share their frustration with being denied their social and political citizenship status in Italy. Loretta affirms Bellamy's words as she demands to be seen and recognised in Italy. Their dialogue and the visuals that accompany it challenges notions of where Black people can live and reside.

In Jamaica, Gladstone and Kokab reflect on the ways that British imperialism shapes the education system and class politics. Kokab reflects on the disparities between uptown and downtown Kingston and the ways that those of a lower class are policed and subjugated. She then goes on to reflect on the ways that this manifests through language:

A lot of lower-class people speak Patois. In upper-class that's considered vulgar. When this is a language, that well a majority of Jamaican people, speak and interact. A lot of our test scores here for English are crap because they don't test us in the language that we speak they test us in English. We go to school we write paragraphs in standard English but we go home and we talk Patois with our parents and our family because that's the language that we know. I know they were trying a Patois thing- a thing where they were trying to give tests in Patois now, but because we don't know how to write or read Patois we only speak it. So, they have to teach people how to write and read Patois which is a whole 'nther thing again.⁸³

⁸² emeke, "passeggiando ep 1,".

⁸³ emeke, "strolling (jamaica) ep 1,".

Kokab reveals how access to and success within institutions such as the education system is monitored and policed through the legacies of the British Empire. She reckons with how this is reflected within class politics, revealing how antiblackness has been inherited from the island's history. In both narratives where the place is not mentioned or spoken of directly, the shadows of colonialism and imperialism haunt the narratives. The visual world, though silent, is rendered visible and audible through the storyteller's narratives.

Through her filmography, emeke offers us a visual compilation of Black diasporic experiences that move between and around spaces which include plantations in Jamaica, the Louvre in France, and streets in The Netherlands. The stories told are interwoven with the visuals, and diasporic people are connected visually through the landscapes. In some instances, the visuals encourage us to ponder on whose stories are told and whose stories are not included in *strolling*'s narrative world. In episode two of *strolling (usa)*, Rachell walks around Brooklyn, New York and discusses her relationship with blackness as a Dominican who migrated to the U.S with her family. She grapples with the homogenisation of blackness in the U.S, the history of Dominican Republic and Haiti, and problematises anthropology degrees in universities to share her experiences of Black identity in multiple aspects of her life.⁸⁴ During an interval of her dialogue she is visually captured at the intersection of Malcolm X Boulevard in Brooklyn. In the first few seconds of this frame, emeke focuses her camera on the lower half of Rachell's body and her hands are brought into focus, then within seconds the camera focus shifts from Rachell's hands to an unidentified man who stands across the street and looks to be watching the filming take place (**see Figure 4 and Figure 5**). We never learn the name of the man, who stands outside of a barber shop, nor do we hear his

⁸⁴ cecile emeke, "strolling (usa) ep 2 dominican republic, haiti, class, survivors guilt, anthropology & more," December 11, 2015, accessed January 23, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLaNdwezPAE>.

story, but for a brief few seconds he becomes the focus of our attention. When I watched this episode and saw as emeke's camera moved between Rachell and the unnamed man, I wondered who he was and what stories he would tell. I imagined the intersections of where his and Rachell's stories would connect and depart from one another's. In this visually intimate moment, emeke reminds viewers of the threads of connection that join the Black diaspora and it as almost as if she is encouraging us to listen to the stories untold.



Figure 4. A close-up of Rachell's lower body and hands in New York, U.S. (Screenshot by author).



Figure 5. Rachell blurs into the background as an unnamed man across the street is brought into focus. (Screenshot by author).

Conclusion

This chapter introduced my conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacy by exploring the ways that Black people have used cecile emeke's *strolling* to encounter one another, negotiate their diasporic identities, and build digital community. I offered the language of the *shared autobiography* to describe the ways that collective storytelling, in this case facilitated by the YouTube-based web-series, can be used to create diasporic intimacy. Attentive to how the shared autobiography is created within emeke's filmography, the storytellers' narratives, and the YouTube users' engagements within the comments section, I posited that the YouTube iteration of *strolling* curates intimacy through the way she connects the Black diaspora and creates space for the negotiation of diasporic identities. As the audience

scroll/stroll with emeke and the storytellers, the series illuminates the diverse, yet interconnected lives of those living as part of the Black diaspora. In response to the ways that the Black diaspora have been disconnected through processes of forced migration and colonialism, emeke uses her filmography and intimate interviews to interrogate the relationship that Black people have with the places they reside in, and these articulations have been extended within viewer's responses in the comments section. As I focus on the ways that the digital diasporic intimacy is created through polyvocality, emotive storytelling, and the series visuals, I argue that *strolling*'s shared autobiography illuminates how blackness cannot be understood without a consideration of how it is spatialised geographically, conceptually, and politically.

Importantly, *strolling* exposes the ephemerality of digital diasporic intimacy. In Summer 2019 when emeke deleted her YouTube channel, the series, the visuals, and the comments all disappeared from public view. Initially, I was saddened by the removal of a web series that had introduced me to new people, stories, and places, but I simultaneously understood the need for Black creatives to self-archive, platform, and preserve their art on their own terms. Ethically, I was conflicted on how this development would impact this chapter. On one hand I felt like it might be best to completely remove this discussion of the series from my thesis, however as a participant of the community it created, I couldn't forget. I attempted to contact emeke a few times during the research period, however my attempts were unsuccessful, and I had learned that the time I reached out was not a suitable one for her. This will be something I attempt again during my post-project stage, to offer a richer discussion about the relationship between creator, storytellers, and viewers. I made the decision to keep this series in my thesis as a testament to the ways that visual cultures have a digital, personal, and social legacy that extend beyond the creator. *strolling* happened. It was a moment, a dialogue, and

one that is worth remembering and honouring. So, thank you cecile, thank you storytellers, and thank you fellow viewers.

The sudden removal of the series invited me to think more closely about the ephemerality of digital communities, mediums, and subsequently, digital diasporic intimacy. It provoked me to ask: What does it mean to construct a digital space, for it to then disappear without trace a few years later? Is there any importance of the temporality of these spaces, or might we only see these as a hinderance for the development of digital intimacies? And finally, what does it mean to exist temporally; to build something within a specific moment, and for a specific moment? For the viewers of *strolling* and those who contributed to the series' shared autobiography, digital community is imagined, and digital diasporic intimacies are curated within the moments when you realise that you are not alone. In those moments when you share emotions, contribute your own experiences, grapple through difference, and connect your own realities with others, community is not simply defined as a locatable place, but a *feeling* to be shared with others. This is an argument that I continue to explore throughout this thesis where I look to other examples of how, where, and when digital diasporic intimacy is curated and the shapes that it takes.

Although emeke's removal of the series marked a loss of publicly available Black British independent film as well as a site for digital diasporic intimacy, it influenced the emergence of other digitally disseminated materials. When digital content is removed from public view, other creatives may be inspired to pick up the baton. For instance, Nate Van Dor's *The Afro Australian* is self-described as a 'continuation' of *strolling* on his YouTube channel.⁸⁵ The four episode web series takes emeke's intimate interview format and relocates this to domestic spaces in Australia to explore Black identity in the Eastern hemisphere of the world.

⁸⁵ Nate Van Dor, "The Afro Australian – Ep. 1: Blackness in Australia / South African vs Australian Racism," June 16, 2019, accessed September 2, 2021, YouTube video, 09:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQbjp_rmv6Q&t=367s&ab_channel=NateVanDore

strolling's legacy is ongoing. For those who watched the *strolling* series during its active years, there is still love and respect for emeke's work. To this day, some viewers use other social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, to reminisce about the series and express the things that they had learnt from the storytellers. A Twitter search of "cecile emeke strolling" will bring up tweets where people remember the episodes, long for the series' continuation, and discuss the importance of the series for them.⁸⁶ Years after the series conclusion, and even a couple of years after its removal from YouTube, viewers still share the insight they learned from the series and reminisce about the ways it connected us. emeke's *strolling* demonstrates how digital diasporic intimacy can be curated collaboratively and can move beyond any fixed digital space; it takes forms in unexpected ways, and it does not have to be permanent to constitute processes of Black diasporic (other)worlding.

⁸⁶ I have decided not to include these tweets here as I wish to leave them in their original iteration for you to see them how they were intended to be seen, as part of wider dialogues on blackness, diaspora, and community.

Interlude: Time

Time is a contested concept for the Black diaspora.

During one of my graduate workshops, I shared a work-in-progress with other graduate students and as I presented my research for feedback I was asked by another student, “are you going to discuss how your work challenges the idea of Black people as ‘primitive’ and ‘backwards’?” I was frustrated and yet perplexed by this question. I thought to myself, “I have never viewed myself as backwards”, and “Why would I need to discuss this?”. Personally, I couldn’t understand where they were coming from, I didn’t understand why they had felt that my research on digital blackness needed to grapple with perspectives of a voice that were not central to my understandings and experiences of being Black.¹ My experiences of blackness and technology have always centred Black innovation and creativity... That strange encounter back in my first year of the PhD did provoke questions and thoughts that were necessary for the development of my project. I asked myself, is my research always only going to be viewed (by some) as a direct challenge to white colonial assumptions of blackness and Black being? Why is it that for some, research on and about Black people is only seen from a binary perspective of trauma and resistance, and not within its fullness, its beauty, and its fluidity? And finally, do I have to be invested in these discussions to “legitimise” my research? I sat with these questions as I began to think through my methodology.

Across literature, media, and popular culture which explore themes of Black futurity, Black speculative worlds, spirituality and Afrofuturism, Black people have creatively

¹ Louis Chude-Sokei recognises the humour in these binary alleged oppositions of privileged/civilised when discussing Black relationships to technology. He posits that while these conversations on Black technological inferiority were taking place, Black people ‘in the Caribbean, America, and Europe were busy generating the most sophisticated electronic music and technology-obsessed music subcultures in history.’ See: *Black Sound Cultures: Diaspora and Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 6.

portrayed ourselves as extra-terrestrial, and as beings who exist outside of the construction of linear Western timelines.² I'm deeply interested in these portrayals, where Black spacetime is constructed as otherworldly, ethereal, and disconnected from whiteness. I think that Black people have always existed in ways that reject notions of Western linear time. We occupy a space in the future and live within it, playfully creating fashions, languages, phrases, and dances, before they're "on trend".³ We connect intimately with the past, warping time to commune with our ancestors on this plane.⁴ Our existence in the world continuously fragments the construction of past and future as our stories intervene on archival histories whereby Black communities, people, and voices are intentionally erased.⁵ My worldview of Black people has never been one that considers us 'primitive'; instead, I have a lived understanding of what it means to exist and create outside of the binaries of old and new, indigenous and technological.

Social media offers a space for us to play with the notions of time, especially as it relates to blackness. Online, the past, present, and future are forever entangled and here we can witness the deconstruction and recalibration of time. In the contemporary moment, social media platforms continuously encourage us to value the temporal through the ways that they prioritise immediacy and capitalise on time spent online. Through their taglines they centre time as a marketing strategy and encourage us to always be engaged with the platforms. For instance, the short-form video sharing platform, TikTok, uses the slogan "Make every second count" as it commodifies time and seconds for the creation of content. Twitter's slogan, "It's

² For creative work that explores this relationship see: *Lovecraft Country*, season 1, episode 7, "I Am," directed by Misha Green, aired September 7 on HBO (Burbank: Warner Bros. Television, 2020); *Black is King* directed by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, aired July 31 on Disney + (Los Angeles: Parkwood Entertainment and Walt Disney Pictures, 2020); Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979; reis., London: Headline, 2018); Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; reis., London: Penguin Random House, 2016).

³ Renina Jarmon, *#BlackGirlsAreFromtheFuture: Essays on Race, Digital Creativity and Pop Culture* (Washington: Jarmon Media, 2013).

⁴ Jacqui M. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵ Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2020).

what's happening" centres the present and values immediacy, inciting users to keep up with discussions and news in real time. Finally, Instagram's tagline "Capture and share the world's moments" invites users to upload photographs and videos to archive what's happening in the world, moment by moment. These examples demonstrate that social media is wholly interested in the commodification of digital time.

I am interested in the ways that digital time interplays with Black time. For instance, I am always captivated when I encounter old photographs of Black families, experiences, and communities on social media. There is something physically and emotionally engaging about the act of *looking* at this visual material in a fleeting digital space, where images were not intended to remain.

When the past and present become intertwined on social media, Black diasporic (other)worlding, digital community building, and self-imagining is disentangled from linear time.

Chapter 3. Speculative Remembering: Diasporic Temporalities and Renata Cherlise's @BlackArchives.co

February 26, 2020.

I've just woken up from a late Winter sleep, which means that I'm a little groggy and dazed from the solemn darkness outside. Mid-yawn and mid-stretch. In an almost routine-like fashion, I roll over, pick up my phone that's placed on the dressing table beside me, check my notifications, and open the Instagram app. There's no particular reason why this is part of my morning routine, other than it being an unhealthy habit. As I scroll down my algorithmically generated Instagram feed, waking up my brain for the morning ahead, I quickly swipe my finger upwards past selfies, photographs of groups of friends who are smiling into the camera, images of stunning sceneries taken in countries far away. I stop occasionally to look momentarily at the post before scrolling on. This morning though, one photograph posted by one of my favourite accounts, @blvckvrchives, captures my attention for longer and holds me in stasis...

A young woman stands centre of the frame with her legs slightly parted, and her left hand confidently hooked into her waist. The other hand is placed on her thigh with her fingers spread slightly to draw attention to her long white curved acrylic nails. She wears shiny black leather trousers, a navy-blue button-up checked shirt, and an oversized leather-look chestnut bomber jacket with POLO written in a large white font visible along her one sleeve. A gold mini bag is attached to her leather waistband by two clips, and it matches the gold rings that decorate her fingers. Her skin – a deep reddish brown, a shade only slightly darker than her jacket – is illuminated against the hand-painted white material that constitutes the ephemeral photography studio dedicated to the American fashion brand Ralph Lauren Polo (see Figure.

6). It is the early nineties and the well-connected local picture man, Polo Silk, had taken his camera and custom backdrops to New Orleans street corners and night clubs to document a ‘seminal moment in time in New Orleans hip hop and bounce’ scenes.¹ As I looked at this photograph, I gazed back on a particular moment of Black Southern American cultural history captured through the street photography, and indicated within the posts’ caption which read, “New Orleans, Louisiana. Photographs by Polo Silk

@polonolaphotography”. The unnamed woman’s clothing and hair signals a Black diasporic, temporal style politic: while her glossy black hair styled into a

curled half-updo evokes the eighties, her clothes which fuse together aesthetical elements of streetwear, country, and punk fashions encompasses the innovative and blended style of the early nineties that we still recognise, reuse, and repurpose today. When I scrolled down my Instagram feed in February 2020, this photograph immediately caught my attention. There was something about this photograph and its visual vibrancy that instilled a feeling of warmth, familiarity, and closeness within me. But as a British-born and living, 1994-baby, I wondered how these feelings of familiarity were logically possible? Why and how did this photograph command my gaze and pull me back to a space and a time which was not accessible to me? What was the emotion that I felt in that moment and how might I begin to put it into words?



Figure 6. Polo Silk’s photograph of an unnamed woman in a brown jacket. (Screenshot by author).

¹ Jeremy Cooker, “Polo Silk, the Picture Man,” *Go Nola*, March 18, 2019, <https://gonola.com/things-to-do-in-new-orleans/polo-silk-the-picture-man>.



Figure 7. Sonia Fraser and Keisha Fraser in an apartment in the Bronx, New York, 1997. (Courtesy of Sonia Bruce).

As I continued to look at this photograph of the unnamed woman my mind naturally wandered to my mother. A woman who entered adulthood in the mid-1990s. A woman who joyfully rode the wave of the global explosion of hip-hop as it penetrated the sound systems across the UK's West Midlands. A woman who took pride in her dress and took pleasure in dressing her daughter. A woman with style, radiance, and an attitude of care. In the Summer of 2020, during the midst of the global pandemic, I had been searching through my mother's photo albums to organise and index our family history. As we rummaged together through the boxes of ephemera, accompanied by my younger sister, R., we found an album of photographs that documented my mother's time spent living in New York City in 1997. One photograph reminded me of the photo of the unnamed woman I described above. In this photograph, my mother poses with one hand similarly hooked into her waist as she leans cross-legged against the door frame inside of our Bronx apartment. I – here a child of three years old – stand beside her wearing a silver puffer jacket, red trousers, and a children's walking harness. My leg is bent in what appears to be an attempt to imitate my mother's pose. Our style similarly signals the long decade of the extra-large: oversized jackets, sweaters, logos, and gold hooped earrings. Alike the photograph of the unnamed woman, my mother couples her oversized sweatshirt with leather-look pants (**see Figure 7**). Although I can only assume that these photos were taken a mere few years apart – as the photograph of the unnamed woman is not referenced with a date – and in different geographical spaces with different contextual histories, there is a common energy that travels between the stillness of the snapshots. This

energy transcends time and space to hold an attitude of confidence and an unwavering reverberation of Black life felt across the diaspora. Looking at the photograph of the unnamed woman reminds me of my mother. It reminds me of finding photographs of her when she was in her early twenties, when I was a young child who was enamoured by her presence, her style, and her beauty. It is this energy that I carry with me now.

The photograph of the unnamed woman is the first featured image in a short series of photographs uploaded to the popular Instagram account, @BlackArchives.co (formerly known as @BlvckVrchives). The account, which I refer to as a social media archive, was founded by African American researcher and curator, Renata Cherlise in July 2015 and it aims to document, preserve, and disseminate archival photographs and videos from across Black history. Cherlise's popular visual project first began as a website, where she would upload photographic essays that would offer an alternative archive to nationally remembered stories. The first photo essay published onto the site, titled "Los Angeles Unrest: 91-92", was posted in July 2015 and focused on the preserving the story and memory of Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American girl who was shot and killed by Korean-American convenience store owner, Soon Ja Du, over a carton of orange juice in the early 1990s. Du was sentenced for manslaughter but received no jail time, in a similar story to that of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was murdered twenty years later. Often overlooked in dominant historical accounts, Cherlise centres Harlins' story as a catalyst for the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Her decision to centre this story and the memory of Latasha Harlins in this history illustrates @BlackArchives.co's roots in a Black feminist archival practice as she centres the story of a young Black girl marginalised in history. It is unsurprising then, that @BlackArchives originated at the same time as the #SayHerName movement began, which aimed to raise awareness of Black women and girls who have been victims of anti-black violence and police brutality.

On an earlier version of the website, Cherlise referred to her archiving project as a ‘curated visual journey through history’, as she centres visual media as a tool for, and a process of learning and encountering Black histories.² When the accompanying Instagram account emerged and gained traction, it offered viewers the opportunity to interact with the archive by leaving comments, liking posts, and sharing the visual media across the image-based platform and on other social networking platforms. As Cherlise did not publish the full written photo essays on the Instagram account, the visual media became a focal point of the archive and viewers would regularly leave comments that engaged the photograph and the people featured in them. Eventually, Cherlise offered followers of the account the opportunity to have their family histories featured in the archive. Speaking directly to her followers through her posts’ captions, she would encourage them to send in high-quality scanned photographs to a private email address for future publication onto the Instagram account. Social media moved the digital archive into the terrain of a community archive, where professional historical photography taken in places across the global Black diaspora are featured alongside submission-based vernacular snapshots taken in homes and communities predominantly in the U.S. This collaborative method challenges our understanding of history, archival practices, and whose stories are allowed to be preserved. By compiling archival material derived from institutional, public, and private collections to display them on a social networking site, @BlackArchives.co creates and sustains a digital community which is centred around the preservation of Black histories.

On February 26, 2020, the archive uploaded two posts that each consisted of a ten-part series of snapshots taken by New Orleans-based street photographer Sthaddeus “Polo Silk” Terrell. These snapshots captured the style and vibrancy of New Orleans’ Black community

² “A Curated Visual Journey Through History,” Blvck Vrchives, accessed July 6, 2020, <http://www.blvckvrchives.com/>

at his ephemeral street studios in the early 1990s. Digital copies of the snapshots had been uploaded onto Terrell's personal Instagram account, @PoloNolaPhotography, but they were recirculated by @BlackArchives.co, which had over 250,000 followers at the time of my initial encounter.³ The recirculation of these snapshots were a part of Cherlise's collaborative multi-media project with Jamaican-American artist Russell Hamilton titled 'Bury Me With The Lo On'. In the first of the two Instagram posts, Cherlise shares that the project features 'photographs from Polo's archive intercut with archival home-video footage.' She continues, 'it's our way of showing our appreciation for preserving the spirit of New Orleans and Black culture.'⁴ As part of this project, the photograph of the unnamed woman became a part of many Instagrammers' introduction to Terrell's photography. When I first saw the snapshot, I had struggled to find the language that would give voice to the feelings of familiarity and kinship that I had felt. However, as I had thought of my mother in New York, I was not the only person who looked at Polo Silk's photographs and imagined a kinship with the people captured, nor was I the only person who had used these images to orient a diasporic identity.

To articulate their feelings, Black Instagrammers used the comments section to express the familiarity that they felt with the people and scenes that were present in the snapshots. For some of them, these feelings of familiarity were rooted in their lived experience of New Orleans and/or their lived experience of the 1990s: "Oh yeah... THIS is the New Orleans that I remember!"; "This has 93 or 94 written all over it. Very nostalgic for me."; "I can hear their accents rn [right now] omg, I'm living for these pics." Other followers of a younger generation expressed their desires to have lived during this period, "Wherever this was I wish

³ While researching and writing this chapter, @BlackArchives.co's following count increased from approximately 250,000 to over 490,000 and they have had collaborations with corporations such as Adobe, LinkNYC, and the NBA.

⁴ Renata Cherlise (@BlackArchives.co), "Polo Silk: Bury Me With The Lo On," Instagram Photo, February 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/B9CWkS2JJdf/>.

o [sic] wish I was there. I know it was lit af”,⁵ or became inspired to travel to New Orleans, “I want to go New Orleans !!! [Smiling Face with Heart Eyes emoji. OK Hand emoji: medium-dark skin tone] What’s [sic] the best time to come? Salute from Paris France #BlackCultureWorldwide”. Also, like how the snapshot of the unnamed woman reminded me of my mother, many Instagrammers wrote of kinship, family, and connections in response to the photo series. While some would speculate on the dates the photographs were taken using their family as reference, “I have family that look like this and it was taken around 99”, others would tag their friends and family members in the post writing that the snapshots reminded them of each other, “tell [sic] this ain’t you and Bianca back in 93 lmao”. The fashion and style were also reoccurring focal points for Instagrammers interested in having discussions about the aesthetics of authentically Black social identities: “THE FLAVOR!!”; “Can’t fake da funk [Hundred Points emoji. Fire emoji. Fire emoji. Fire emoji. Red Exclamation Mark emoji]”; “Iconic. Early 90’s urban style is being mimic’d [sic] (badly) by the mainstream & a lot of young Black kids now don’t even understand where the style originated from.”; “URBAN CULTURE ORIGIN [Sparkles emoji. Purple Heart emoji. Raising Hands emoji: medium-dark skin tone]”. Demonstrated by the varied ways that viewers interacted with the Instagram posts, these thirty-year-old snapshots represent Black kinship, authenticity, and an unparalleled style innovation that is co-opted and appropriated across mainstream culture today. In these engagements, where viewers find ways to connect with the archival images, memory and imagination are used as conduits for digital diasporic intimacy.

Drawing from a range of engagements across @BlackArchives.co’s comments section, where followers orient their diasporic identities in relation to the archival images, in this

⁵ In African American Vernacular English “lit” refers to something that is exciting and energising. “AF” is an abbreviation for “as fuck”.

chapter I explore how digital diasporic intimacy is curated outside of notions of linear timelines and progression narratives. In *Physics of Blackness* Michelle Wright notes that ‘our constructs of Blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative’.⁶ She goes onto explain how this narrative is a dominant discourse in theories of Black history and culture and it suggests that there is a chronological account for Black racial progression and achievements. However, she also notes how this narrative of blackness was ‘first invented by Western thinkers, politicians, scientists, and fervent advocates of a racialized slave trade.’⁷ Thus, Wright critiques these linear progressive timelines as a conceptualisation of blackness and Black experiences for three key reasons. Firstly, these timelines rely on an absolute origin: A Middle Passage epistemology often frames these narratives and so the Transatlantic slave trade is marked as the beginning and Black history prior to colonisation and slavery is obscured. Secondly, these narratives prioritise a hierarchal means of representation and regularly centre the stories of cis-heterosexual Black men. And thirdly, within linear progress narratives ‘Black actions are always *reactions*’ to whiteness, and this makes ‘Black agency highly contingent and ambiguous rather than a celebrated given.’⁸ Instead, Wright offers *epiphenomenal spacetime* as a term that accounts for the multidimensions and multitemporalities of blackness, outside of Western constructs of time. She writes, ‘whereas linear time understands the past, present, and future as chronological, Epiphenomenal time understands one spacetime: the moment of the now, through which we imagine the past and also move into future possibilities.’⁹ Building on Wright’s criticism and theory, I argue that digital diasporic intimacy is constructed outside of linear notions of past and present, and I

⁶ Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

⁷ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 43.

⁸ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 47.

⁹ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 145.

use @BlackArchives.co as a case study to demonstrate how linear timelines can be destabilised as an intimate practice of Black diasporic (other)worlding.

I suggest that comments written across @BlackArchives.co demonstrate how archival photography shared online offers a means to create digital diasporic intimacies which are organised through the disruption of linear timelines. Within @BlackArchives.co's comments sections, some Instagrammers have used the visual stimuli to help shape their identities temporally and create community irrespective of time and space. Sharing their emotions with one another in the comments section and expressing sentiments of community and kinship with those captured within the footage, these Instagrammers have imagined themselves, their lives, family members, friends, and contemporary perspectives in relation to the photographs and the stories that they perceive them to hold. In doing so, I propose that they make sense of themselves and their diasporic identities in ways that destabilise notions of linear time by breaking apart and reassembling the realities of their lived world experiences and those held within the interiors of the archival images. In other words, within these moments of temporal encounters, imagined kinships and shared feelings facilitated publicly by Instagram, the people, fashions, and scenes captured within the visual archive do not remain locked in the past; instead, within the comments section the past and present are joined in a delicate dance of diasporic world-making and self-imagining. As a result, I suggest that the assumed proximity and kinships that are imagined regardless of linear time generates diasporic intimacy.

Speculative Remembering

I want to offer us the language that I feel adequately describes the strategy of Black diasporic (other)worlding engaged across the @BlackArchives.co comments section; a term that encapsulates how we might use our own memories and knowledges to imagine stories

and realities which *root* us into the visualities of archival images while simultaneously *lifting* what was captured into the present. For this, I offer the term *speculative remembering*. When I first looked at the snapshot taken by Polo Silk, I remembered my mother and by association I imagined myself and the spaces that I would have occupied beside her. I recalled my childhood and the sounds of Aaliyah, Destiny's Child, Brandy, and Tupac that would have boomed out of the large stereo system in our living room, and so I speculated on what the unnamed woman would have listened to, where she was going, and who might have accompanied her, if anyone at all. As a process of diasporic orientation where I assembled my identity as part of a global blackness, I engaged speculative remembering to not only ponder on the unnamed woman's happenstances, but to consider my own identity as a Black girl of the diaspora.

Speculative remembering signals a process of accessing, creating, and sustaining diasporic memory. It describes the act of imagining what one thinks *might have been* as one draws upon their own memories as well as the resources of a Black diasporic memory, which in this example are the photographs posted to @BlackArchives.co. It fuses together the acts of speculation and memory – guessing and recalling – to call on the imagination and draw from the once lived and the living to create new realities; realities that are disentangled with time. Speculative remembering describes the act of looking within during the present, while looking at the past and then proceeding to imagine, together. When one actively engages speculative memory, they can merge the known with the unknown, the individual experience with the perceived collective one. They trace the lines of what *was* to make it so that it *is*. I want to keep my definition of speculative remembering open-ended to acknowledge that there is not one singular example of what constitutes it; rather, I argue that it is a temporal method used to engage with diasporic material in a way that facilitates identity building. I propose that

speculative remembering is an intimate practice of orientation and relationality which creates diasporic community intergenerationally and cross-temporally.

Like speculative remembering, there is a wide depository of terms that similarly draw on memory, pastness, and rearticulation as a means for intimate identity building, narrative worlding, and community marking. Nostalgia, for example, describes the act of yearning and longing for something past. While desire and sentimentality, which both mark nostalgia, can also be features of speculative remembering, the terms differ because while nostalgia is a passive process of feeling, and speculative remembering is actively engaged. To elaborate, while the senses such as smell, sound, and touch might passively evoke nostalgic feelings and sentimentality, speculative remembering is enacted through an active engagement with these senses as a route for speculation. In my own encounter with Terrell's snapshot, rather than simply having memories of the 1990s, I flitted between past and present, to orient my current identity. In other words, speculative remembering is an active process of orientation which takes place after nostalgia has been evoked.

Black feminist theorists have similarly conceptualised relationships between history, archives, memory, and method as active processes. For instance, Saidiya Hartman uses 'critical fabulation' as a creative historical practice where narrative fiction is used to fill the gaps caused by archival erasure.¹⁰ In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* she 'elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open' the archive to fabulate the stories of young Black women.¹¹ Critical fabulation and speculative remembering similarly use conjecture to give voice to what might have been, however Hartman's term is focused on the recovery of stories and life from systemic erasure in archives, whereas my term is concerned with the self-defined orientation of diasporic identity and community. Similarly, Toni Morrison's term

¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 26 (June 2008): 11.

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), xiv.

‘rememory’ describes the act of ‘recollecting [...] members of the body, the family, the population of the past’ using memory when historical record is absent.¹² While ‘rememory’ is a useful term to signal how speculative remembering is also a reassembling of memory, Morrison’s term implies the existence of a former memory, and this is not necessary for speculative remembering to occur. Instead, my term relies on the imagination of memories.

Intentionally offering an incomplete yet expansive definition of speculative remembering, this chapter explores how digital diasporic intimacy is created temporally through processes of speculative remembering as it relates to archival images featured on @BlackArchives.co. It explores the ways that some followers of the account use the photographs to embed themselves into Black histories and to articulate their own Black diasporic identities in ways that unbinds dominant Western understandings of time. Interested in the ways that notions of linear time are disrupted to curate digital diasporic intimacies, this chapter specifically asks how Cherlise’s Instagram archive is used by Black Instagrammers as what Jacqueline Nassy Brown refers to as a ‘diasporic resource’,¹³ which can help to shape diasporic memory, self-imagining and collective identity. Nassy Brown posits that diasporic resources ‘may include not just cultural productions such as music, but also people and places, as well as iconography, ideas, and ideologies associated with them.’¹⁴ Adopting this definition, I suggest that while the photographs uploaded to @BlackArchives.co are diasporic resources, so are the fashions, scenes, and cultures captured within them.

Similarly adopting this term, in this chapter I consider how archival photographs capturing the Black diaspora posted onto social media are ‘diasporic resources’ which can help Black folk to make sense of their identities and their lived experiences in relation to one another and across time. Thus, I argue that digital diasporic intimacies can be organised around this

¹² Toni Morrison, *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), 324.

¹³ Jacqueline Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (August 1998): 298.

¹⁴ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool,” 298.

untethering of Western time. Drawing on my reading of selected comments left on @BlackArchives.co that engage speculative remembering, I suggest that for the Black digital diaspora, time moves in different directions; it ebbs and flows through discourses and visualities, digital time, real time, and the interior time of the images. According to Trouillot, whom I came across by way of Christina Sharpe, ‘the Past – or, more accurately, pastness – is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past.’¹⁵ Trouillot reminds us that the past is only in existence because there is a present and therefore time itself is better understood as an orientation. Considering this, I am interested in how @BlackArchives.co’s archival materials that capture the past are used to intimately orient diasporic identities in the present.

This chapter proceeds with a brief review of scholarship on the interrelation between photography, pastness, and memory. I explore how these facets have individually and collectively been understood as mediators of identity broadly and then Black cultural identities specifically before I consider the ways that these are engaged on social media. Following this, I will reintroduce Cherlise’s @BlackArchives.co, the Instagram account I focus on within this chapter, to provide a wider context surrounding its creation. Although this chapter is not intended as a discussion solely of @BlackArchives.co, the context of its emergence and popularity are necessary to understand the landscape where I locate this iteration of digital diasporic intimacy. Thereafter, I closely *read* selected photographs alongside comments which engage speculative remembering to demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacy is curated temporally. As I explore the Instagram comments section, I focus on the ways that Black folk have engaged with the photographs to: create intergenerational community as they imagine kinships with one another and with those featured in the archival material; express their sensory responses to the material in ways that

¹⁵ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

pull apart notions of linear time; and finally, signal the fashion and style presented within the photographs as diasporic material worlds which warp and fragment constructions of past, present, and future. While I argue that these examples demonstrate how digital communities can be created intimately by way of temporal Black diasporic (other)worlding, I complicate this with a continual discussion of the ways that Black memory might be homogenised on @BlackArchives.co and the impacts that this has on the construction of digital diasporic socialities and intimacies. I specifically discuss these tensions as it relates to the erasure of Black queer, trans, and non-binary folk within these visualised histories, and the proliferation of respectability politics within the comments section where violence is enacted against Black women and the working class.

Photography, Memory, and the Instagram Archive

The relationship between photography and memory has been frequently explored in studies of visual culture and identity. It is commonplace for photography – both in terms of the act of taking images and as material objects such as the camera and the photograph – to be articulated as that which captures and holds memory.¹⁶ In 1859, inventor Oliver Wendell Holmes famously described photography as a ‘mirror with a memory’,¹⁷ and researchers of visual culture and technology have routinely returned to this analogy to think through the ways that the medium encapsulates the act of remembering.¹⁸ Holmes’ analogy suggests that there is an inherent, authentic truth to photography, and camera conglomerates have capitalised on this by marketing photography as a medium of preservation. However, while

¹⁶ Olga Shevchenko, “‘The Mirror with a Memory’: Placing Photography in Memory Studies,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, ed. Anna Lisa Tota, Trevor Hagen (London: Routledge, 2015), 272-287.

¹⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and Stereograph,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (1859): 738-749.

¹⁸ Corydon Ireland, “The ‘mirror with a memory’,” *The Harvard Gazette*, April 15, 2013, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/04/the-mirror-with-a-memory/>.

the camera and its photographs might capture memory, a critical discussion is also needed to consider the ways that the medium might simultaneously obscure original memories. For instance, photographs are often staged, and a repeated viewing of these photographs can result in these stagings, replacing memories of the events that had actually occurred. Ultimately, memory is fickle. Though not always the case, if we believe that photographs accurately hold memory, then this assumption may conceal the real circumstances, places, people, and events from that time. While photographs shape memory, and memory shapes photographs, there is much more to be discussed about the staging of images and its relationship with diasporic intimacies and I will discuss this specifically in the following chapter. For now, I suggest that an adequate understanding of the complicated relationship between memory and photography is a starting point for us to explore the nuance within discussions of Black life, photographs, memory, and digital diasporic intimacy.

Memory and photography are similar avenues for us to conceptualise or think through what it might mean to be part of a Black diaspora. In Tina Campt's discussion of the Black diaspora as a system of relations, she writes that 'memory plays a central role in constituting diasporic identity and community'.¹⁹ According to Campt, memory is an evocative resource that strengthens diasporic lineages and helps a diaspora to negotiate a collective identity. She writes:

The direct and inherited memories of diaspora define and sustain both a sense of relation to real and imagined homelands as well as among and between communities separated spatially. This complex technology of memory as an act of both remembrance and commemoration engages strategic forms of forgetting imposed institutionally from without as well as individually and collectively within specific communities. In this way, it is important to recognize that memory provides

¹⁹ Tina Campt, "The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diaspora Relation," *Radical History Review* 83 (2002): 101.

the source of the defining tension of diaspora and diasporic identity: the dynamic play of originary and imaginary homes, and the complex networks of relation forged across national, spatial, and temporal boundaries.²⁰

Importantly, Camp's articulation posits that 'direct' *and* 'inherited' memories constitute diasporic worlding and this is essential to my understanding of how speculative remembering is utilised across @BlackArchives.co to construct and envision a diasporic identity. While not every Instagram user has direct memories with the photographs posted, they might inherit those that they perceive the photograph holds to articulate their own diasporic identities. Inherited memories are of great importance to the digital Black diaspora as histories have been lost, forgotten, and intentionally erased, in national consciousness, and sometimes cultural consciousness. As a response to structural erasure, lack of representation, archival violence, and lack of accessibility within institutional archives,²¹ those with an interest in Black history and curatorial experience have turned to social media to curate digital archival spaces that intervene on the limitations of institutional archives and commemorations.²² As Saidiya Hartman notes, 'the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them.'²³ And so, as a way to satisfy this craving, these social media spaces work as publicly accessible archives where material is easily distributed, exchanged, and accessed.

Memories, direct and indirect, also help the Black diaspora to forge connections with one another. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson asserts that the mind has an important role in community formation.²⁴ Acknowledging that within national communities, each

²⁰ Camp, "The Crowded Space of Diaspora," 101.

²¹ Ashley Farmer, "Archiving While Black," *Black Perspectives*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.aaihs.org/archiving-while-black/>.

²² As well as @BlackArchives.co, other Instagram pages doing similar work include Karis Beaumont's @BumpkinFiles, Krü Zireael Maekdo's @BlackLesbianArchives, Jason Okundaye and Marc Thompson's @BlackAndGayBackInTheDay, Julia Cabrera and Iris María Sastre-Rivero's @afroespana, and Danny Dunson's @MyGranddaddysCloset.

²³ Hartman, "Venus," 8.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; reis., London: Verso, 2006).

person cannot truly know one another, Anderson argues that an imagined community is performed through perceived mental affiliations. Memory and history are a part of those mental affiliations, and for the Black diaspora I argue that this includes inheriting, accessing, and relating to one another's memories as an intervention on imposed systematic forgetting and to create community together. Similarly, visual studies scholar, Leigh Raiford, argues that 'memory is an active and integral element in the composition of social and political communities', and this supports the idea that memory can be used to forge a collective identity.²⁵ However, while memory offers a method to intimately create community, intracommunity tensions are exacerbated within the power dynamics associated with dominant memories as well as the ways that memory can be wielded and utilised as a form of oppression, and this is something that I will explore in relation to speculative remembering on @BlackArchives.co.

As aforementioned, Black memory can be used as a method for cultural resistance in oppressive environments. The act of remembering is an active process in which people can reimagine, recollect, recall, and represent the past and utilise this to intervene on structures in the present. With a focus on memory and photography, bell hooks considers how remembering is a practice of identity formation and community building to resist oppression and cultural suppression:

The word *remember* (*re-member*) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative,

²⁵ Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (Dec 2009): 119.

redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye.²⁶

hooks understands that the liberatory potential of memory and photography as an intentional one which can be used to destabilise the colonial gaze and reclaim a power of oneself and for marginalised communities. Historically, photography has been used for imperial and colonial purposes, including to document the perceived racial inferiority of Africans and to justify racial separation.²⁷ Building from this haunted history, hooks iterates that time and the ideas around what constitutes ‘the past’, like photography are similarly rooted in coloniality and so these are necessary to disrupt. Her articulation of a ‘redemptive memory’ signals the reconstruction and reimagining of self and community using photography and recognises the past as that which ceases to be fixed but is usable and changeable. In this chapter I expand on hooks’ articulation by asking how our affective engagements with archival photographs online disrupt linear notions of time and memory to facilitate a process of intimate self-imagining? And how does speculative remembering allow for a temporal engagement with digital diasporic intimacy?

Taking this conversation about photography, time and memory to a digital landscape incites more conversation around accessibility and community collaboration. On an earlier version of Cherlise’s website, she wrote that her aim for @BlackArchives.co was to create a counternarrative to the mainstream misconceptions of Black life using photography. She wanted to ‘replace [these misconceptions] with collective memories of everyday life shared through fictive kinships,’ and she had hoped this digital documentation of the Black quotidian

²⁶ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 64.

²⁷ Eugenicist Louis Agassiz’s photographs of fifteen enslaved Black people contribute to this violent history. In the 1850s fifteen enslaved Black people in South Carolina were forced to strip naked and sit for daguerreotypes which would afterwards be used to evidence and legitimise the racial inferiority of Africans.

would ‘preserve the spaces of future narratives.’²⁸ Virtual collaboration, diasporic imaginations, and non-linearity structure the digital archive. It was created for the future, in the present, and about the past, and thus it is an ideal space to explore how speculative remembering helps curate digital diasporic intimacy. Although the archive has been framed as a diasporic project and includes material from disparate diasporic locations, there is undeniably a dominant focus on Black American histories as the majority of photographs uploaded to the Instagram account are American based. This focus might have been shaped by Cherlise’s identity as a Black American curator or the accessibility of materials from across the diaspora. Nonetheless, this is something that I remain attentive to throughout my chapter as I ask, what is implicated in notions of a temporal digital diasporic intimacy when engagements with the past are mostly by way of a Black American narrative?

My captivation with the imagery posted to @BlackArchives.co not only stems from the way that they disrupt time on social media by positioning the past alongside the present, but also because the archive and the comments left underneath the posts structure memory, remembering, and misremembering to communicate lineages of Black self-hood, community, Black style politics, celebrations of family, and practices of joy as components of diasporic world-making. Collectively, the images and comments ask, who is remembered in this way and how, and the answers are not always limited to the people captured in the photographs themselves. In a post uploaded to @BlackArchives.co on June 14, 2019, Cherlise gathers a compilation of previously posted photographs and deviates from the standard format of the captions to directly address her followers to share how she grapples with the function of photography and the impact it has on memory and the uses of the Instagram archive. She writes:

²⁸ “A Curated Visual Journey Through History,” Blvck Vrchives, accessed July 6, 2020, <http://www.blvckvrchives.com/>

“WHERE ARE THEY NOW?” This is a comment that I see quite often on the posts that I share. And, I’m still amazed at how this thing works. Photography, nostalgia, and community has allowed me to use this platform as a function in various ways — but the manner in which our stories intertwine with one another through time and space always pauses me and forces me to reflect on the reasons why. [...] I’ll keep this brief as I trust there will be another way to unpack all of this. But for now, just know that through a moment’s time, we meet people where they are through these visuals. Sometimes their stories continue on their own and other times, we carry their stories for them.²⁹

Articulated in this passage, Cherlise is aware of the affective function of the platform and recognises that oftentimes the stories captured by the photographs are entangled with those shared by the account’s followers. She acknowledges how the archive had become a digital community and has facilitated explorations of identity and diaspora by way of time and space. My decision to focus on @BlackArchives.co derives from these questions she raises. I am interested in how she has framed the archive as a space for fictive kinship, and how it has garnered such a rapid increase in followers since its creation.

In this chapter I *read* selected visual material posted across @BlackArchives.co alongside comments that indicate how we can utilise time and memory to navigate our ways into the images. I am interested in the ways that people find meaning within archival photographs by way of speculative remembering, and I explore this phenomenon through images specifically because they illustrate how people create meaning irrespective of actual written fact of what occurred in these moments, but through speculation. I refer to those who engage with the material as ‘followers’ of @BlackArchives.co, and although I recognise that not all commenters will necessarily follow the account, I do this because the ways in which they

²⁹ Renata Cherlise (@BlackArchives.co), “WHERE ARE THEY NOW?,” Instagram Photo, June 14, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bysn0pnFNhV/>.

interact with the photographs and with one another suggests that they are frequent visitors of the page and are in dialogue with a wider community.

“I Be Feeling Hella Connected to All These Photos”: Feeling, Kinship, and Digital Intimacies

When I scroll through the comments section on some of my favourite @BlackArchives.co posts I feel joy as I connect with other followers who share their excitement with the histories captured and presented in the images. I learn from those who recall their own memories and use the comments section to offer further insights into these histories. I have my feelings affirmed by others who similarly express the indescribable connections that they feel with the archival images. While the photographs represent moments in the past, the comments section offers present-day reflections which subsequently become assembled into the amalgamation of images. Reading the two together – images and comments – to explore the temporal dimensions of digital diasporic intimacy reveals how the fixity of past vs present is ruptured to forge an affective diasporic connectedness. This rupturing, where archive becomes social media, and social media becomes archive, is facilitated by the photographs, and thus enables explorations of diasporic relationality centred on time and sociality. Thus, photographs serve as both a social and archival function and so together, they underpin the terms of digital diasporic intimacy here.

Like cecile emeke’s *strolling* on YouTube, Cherlise’s @BlackArchives.co on Instagram has been used as a digital resource for Black folk to articulate and negotiate their diasporic identities spatially. However, more pointedly, the archival images posted onto @BlackArchives.co have resulted in followers utilising the comments section to locate themselves within an axis of space and time to create intergenerational kinship with one

another and with those featured within the photographs. Building and sustaining digital diasporic intimacy by way of time, pastness and memory, many followers use the comments section to search for family members, recall forgotten memories, and familiar landscapes – imaginatively and sometimes quite literally – and inherit lineages to orient their diasporic identities. They navigate routes into the visual material and expose the limitations of Western notions of time to speculate, remember, imagine, and envision a diasporic belonging which is untethered, expansive, and timeless.

In November 2019, @BlackArchives.co published a snapshot that was submitted by one of their followers who recalled that the image captured her parents four years prior to her birth at her godfather’s house. In the image, a young man and woman are seated beside one another in what appears to be a makeshift music studio in someone’s home. The caption details the submission and the words of the person that donated the image: “[Submission] These are my parents at my godfather’s house in Midland, Texas (1977). I wasn’t born until 1981. They got divorced in the late 2000’s, but I love this picture because I can see the love that made me. Submitted by @Christ_ion.” As it indicates, it is 1977 and we are transported to Midland, Texas. The couple wear identical short afros as they similarly have one leg crossed over the other. His arm is wrapped around her shoulder in a warm, intimate embrace and they both bare their white teeth as they smile at the camera. The photograph has a sepia hue overlayed, blurring out all distinguishable colours aside from their denim blue jeans and their brown skin (see **Figure 8**). In the comments section, a follower responds to the domestic intimacy captured in this photograph and



Figure 8. In 1977 Texas, a couple are seated together in a makeshift studio. (Screenshot by author).

writes, “omg everyone has a pic like this in the album [Sparkling Heart emoji].” This response, as well as my experience detailed at the opening of this chapter, indicate that for some followers, @BlackArchives.co is navigated and approached with an experience of flicking through family photo albums.

While the tactile materiality of photo albums is lost with the social media archive, a haptic resonance remains, and I suggest that this forms the basis of digital diasporic intimacy across @BlackArchives.co. Tina Campt argues that the Black diasporic photographs have ‘haptic registers’ which are structured by a ‘tripartite sense of touch’ which is indexical, physical, and affective.³⁰ It is this tactility that sustains intimate acts of curation, engagement, and the transmission of photos. While snapshots framed on the interior walls of Black homes have been articulated as ‘gallery spaces’,³¹ and ‘maps guiding us through diverse journeys’,³² family photo albums are private curatorial collections that document stories, facilitate intergenerational retellings of family histories, and organise ephemera of Black pasts.³³ They are collated visual materials intended to be touched, held, and used for the social gathering of people. Many of the snapshots included in albums have been touched by pens as words and dates have been scribbled onto their reverse or captured in the album frames. In Black cultures, family photo albums are intimate retellings of diasporic lineages and histories packaged and stored, ready for easy travel, ‘to be discovered at another time’.³⁴

As a child, I loved to trawl through family photo albums as my mum sat nearby. Although she anxiously anticipated the mess that I would inevitably create as I unpacked the boxes upon boxes of albums, precariously yet methodologically stacked on top of one another, she

³⁰ Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 43.

³¹ hooks, *Art on my Mind*, 59.

³² hooks, *Art on my Mind*, 60.

³³ Christian Walker, “Gazing Coloured: A Family Album,” in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: The New Press, 1994), 65-70.

³⁴ hooks, *Art on my Mind*, 60.

would never decline my offer when I promised to clean up as best as I could afterwards. My mother would tell me stories behind the images, remind me of forgotten faces, and nicknames she had for me as a baby. I enjoyed this experience so much that at a young age I started to create my own albums taking photographs with disposable cameras at school trips, birthdays, and family events. Once the images had been printed, I would keep the blurred photographs, the accidental photographs, and my least favourites in the paper envelope that they came in, and I would take the desirable ones, just enough to fill an album, and use my favourite glitter pens to write names, dates, and fitting captions on the little paper slips that would frame them in the album. The practice of curating the album was just as important as taking the photographs was. There was always an order, always a story. In 2004, when my mother and father married in Jamaica, their wedding photographs were uploaded onto a video cassette. This signalled a decline in the curation of physical photo albums in our home as we moved towards digital methods of preservation. While we still have physical albums of my younger sister who born in 2006, much of the footage from her toddler years was recorded digitally on phones, and so were lost in the rapid migration from video to CD, and CD to SD disk. Regrettably, printing, organising, and indexing photo albums is a curatorial intimacy that I seem to have forgotten in the digital age. But alike the follower who left the comment about the family albums, the snapshots posted to @BlackArchives.co offered me a similar feeling to what I felt when I explored my family albums. A feeling that is shaped by affective touch.

When snapshots are uploaded onto digital platforms, the tactile intimacy offered via the physical materiality of photographs is remediated through technologies and their affordances. In other words, the physical touch of the photograph transforms into the physical touch of the smartphone. Thus, the haptic registers are reshaped. Likewise, the indexical contact is built into software such as Instagram's caption tool, comments section, and other digital tools that we use to share, discuss, frame, and recirculate the material. These tools restructure the image

and reorient how an affective emotive touch is experienced and expressed. Although Campt acknowledges that not all photographs constitute haptic images, she notes that the haptic registers specifically within domestic photographs

derive from their capacity to solicit a relay of social transactions that evoke sensate, embodied, and affective engagements. These engagements triangulate, imbricate, and implicate their viewers, their subjects, and their makers through the multisensory forms of optical, tactile, and emotive interactions that constitute the act of viewing a domestic photograph.³⁵

Campt recognises that domestic photographs are experiential. The act of taking photographs and then sharing them is a social one, and so uploading these images onto social media adds another dimension of their haptic registers. The snapshot of the couple in Texas captures a cherished scene between the submitter's parents, and the caption posted with it frames the image to centre a love that is not fixed to 1977, but still engaged today. Although the woman who submitted the photograph shared that her parents are no longer in a relationship, she moves this private family photograph to the public sphere, expressing that this love still resonates today through her. Other followers write in the comments section that this encapsulates Black love, using raised fist and black heart emojis to signal a diasporic solidarity shared through love and intimacy. Snapshots move and are moved by our engagements with them, physically and emotionally. It is this affective hold that we similarly experience when browsing through family photo albums, that becomes amalgamated into this Instagram account. What is engaged is an emotive act of looking at, listening to, and being with photographs?³⁶

³⁵ Campt, *Image Matters*, 44.

³⁶ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

The follower who left the comment which read, “omg everyone has a pic like this in the album [Sparkling Heart emoji]”. She refers to the genealogies of Black family photo albums as a singular entity: ‘the album’. In doing so, she draws together geographically and culturally disparate Black family’s photographic and archival practices to propose that they are collaborative, as though together we are quilting a collective diasporic memory through our photo albums. Suggesting that there are universal similarities between disparate Black family photo albums, this follower’s comment implies that a diasporic kinship exists between Black families globally and that it can be traced through photography and memory. As one of Cherlise’s original aims for @BlackArchives.co was to help curate ‘fictive kinships’, this comment suggests that there is nothing fictive about it; it is a reality that can be seen and felt through our creation, curation, and engagement with photographs. Using the analogy of ‘the album’, this follower orients herself in a way that positions her as part of a collective, diasporic story and memory. She intimately connects herself to the couple featured in the snapshot as well as to ‘everyone’ else. However, this use of ‘everyone’ to address other Black folk may homogenise Black memory as it leaves little room for the stories, memories, and family dynamics that do not align with the narrative predisposed by the image. It is not accurate to suggest that every Black person has a similar photograph in their photo album. I propose then that this follower does not mean that the actual people, pose, setting, and framing of the photograph is the same across Black family photo albums, but instead they are referring to the haptic register that the photographs captures. It is a haptic resonance that she recognises within the snapshot, and it is this that she draws upon to speculate on the ways that she might be oriented alongside others. Thus, the family photograph remediated online becomes a resource to *feel* digital diasporic intimacy.

Affective engagements are also expressed by followers via the comments section in ways that directly discuss diasporic relationality and family ties. For instance, some followers

communicated that they felt intimately connected to the people captured in the images and visualised kinship with these people, making sense of their identities through discourses of positionality and relationality. They engage speculative remembering to address how diasporic community is experienced through an entanglement between themselves and their present-day realities, and the images and the memories they perceive them to hold. The ways that followers of @BlackArchives.co use the visual material to search for, imagine, and sometimes even locate family, demonstrates that digital diasporic intimacy exists irrespective of Western laws of time. It illuminates how the construction of linear time does not deter the development of digital diasporic communities, as they are formed on an intimate connectivity that moves in rhizomatic directions. The following example will demonstrate this.



In a photograph taken in the 1970s by African American photographer Jimmie Mannas, two teenage boys are captured in a New York city subway at Uptown & Bronx. The black and white image, which was reposted from Mannas' Instagram archive onto @BlackArchives.co on January 16th, 2020, features one boy with his afro picked and neatly shaped standing behind another who is sat on a subway bench. The seated boy's tongue is pressed against his bottom lip and his arms clasped around his stomach. They look intently into the camera lens as though they have been instructed to do so (see **Figure 9**). In response to the

scene, one follower writes: "I be feeling hella connected to all these photos." Without providing any context to explain why, this follower acknowledges his feelings of a deep familiarity with this photograph and others featured on @BlackArchives.co. The images evoke an embodied affect, which is engaged temporally and multidirectionally. By this, I

suggest that to feel ‘hella connected’ is to feel rhizomes of sporadic diasporic intimacies that resurface in unpredictable, irregular ways. It is a feeling that transcends linear time and memory, one that is deeper than nostalgia, and moves beyond fiction. Thus, I offer ‘hella connected’ here as a framework to understand how @BlackArchives.co provides diasporic belonging that goes beyond any restrictions of linear time, it is an affection that in its multiplicity can be felt in many different directions.

Another comment posted underneath this photograph demonstrates this further as it envisions familial kinship between present day Instagram users and the boys who, for her, rhizomatically move through time: “They could be your dad your uncles or any of my friends from the block those 70s [Raising Hands emoji: medium-dark skin tone. Raising Hands emoji: medium-dark skin tone]”. Addressed to the readers of her comment, this follower, who implies that she was around the same age as the boys in the 1970s, states that they could either be her friends, or “*your*” elder family members. In doing so, she not only presumes @BlackArchives.co audience to be Black, but also foregrounds a kinship between herself and other followers by way of the photograph. She engages speculative remembering to imagine an intimate diasporic relationship that is multidirectional. She locates the boys in the present-time as grown men who could be ‘your dad’ or ‘your uncle’, however she simultaneously positions them in the 1970s as she reminisces about her childhood and speculatively remembers them as her ‘friends from the block’. For this woman, these boys concurrently exist in the past and present and are simultaneously young and old. This multiplicity allows her to also assert her identity in a way that is unhinged from the fixity of past and present as she speculates what *could have been* during her youth and how these boys might be socially coded today. She melds together the interior time of the photograph with the exterior time of the viewers’ world to imagine a space-time where the boys and herself become *we*. Furthermore, as she refers to the boys as ‘your’ dad or uncle, she separates herself from what

she assumes to be the dominant generation of Instagram users. She scripts an intergenerational kinship whereby she positions herself alongside close authoritative family members, thus places herself in a position of familiar proximity as if she were a digital aunty.³⁷

Speculative remembering enables a digital and visual exploration of diasporic kinships. In this example, the comments section underneath Mannas' photograph is a space for affective dialogue exchanges where relationality and proximity can be felt, negotiated, and explored. While Anderson argues that communities are imagined,³⁸ the commenters demonstrate how this digital community is not only fictive, but real. While speculation takes place to help orient individuals within these communities, kinship is formed, expressed, and found in the comments section. There are restorative and reconnective possibilities that are enabled by the archive, and this is demonstrated not only the moments when commenters expressed their speculative connections with one another, but also in moments when they realise their actual relationships with each other. In another comment, one follower realised and then shared the news that one of the boys pictured in Mannas' photograph is her father: "@blvckvrchives this is my dad (sitting down) and his friend.. my mom just confirmed for me". There are multiple instances where followers of @BlackArchives.co recognise and claim family members across the account. They might witness people that resemble family members, place their family within the dates and places mentioned in the caption, or trace their surnames and lineages with one another in the comments section. For some, @BlackArchives.co is a social network that enables intimate connections to be discovered, negotiated, and celebrated. Photographs

³⁷ I use 'digital aunty' to signal a practice in Black social media networks where digital diasporic intimacy is created through familial language. For instance, on Black parenting pages and children's accounts, followers are addressed, or refer to themselves, intimately as (e-)aunties and (e-)cousins. An example of this includes the children featured in La'Ron Hines' TikTok series titled "Are You Smarter Than a Preschooler". When these videos go viral on Black Twitter, the children JaBria McCullum, Lauri Norah, Zan Perkins, Jadon Washington and others are commonly referred to as 'our nieces and nephews'. Naming people in close family proximity, but with no blood relation as aunty, uncle, and cousin, is a cherished practice of Black interior worlding that is well known and practiced across diasporic Black cultures, so much so that it has been remediated to the online world.

³⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

not only hold diasporic memories, but they represent the possibilities to entangle the past and present in ways that fracture linear constructions of identity and community building.

While the boys in Mannas' photograph were a departure point for followers to speculate on their kinship with one another, an intimate connection was expressed with other aspects of the photograph. For instance, some comments left on the photograph shared how it resonated with their experiences of living in New York City: "The Bronx don't be playing [Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes emoji. Woman Gesturing No emoji: medium skin tone] to my grave." These expressions of a relationship with the city reflects the high number of Black American followers present in the comments section. Furthermore, there is a dominant representation of Black American histories across @BlackArchives.co, and so it can be argued that many of the comments that express familiarity and kinship with what is captured in the photographs might stem from a lived experience of Black American culture and geographies. While it is important to recognise and grapple with the hypervisibility of African American historical narratives in the archive, other images featured on @BlackArchives.co which capture histories and memories from other countries and continents across the diaspora demonstrate how diasporic memory, speculative remembering, and speculative kinships are enacted in the comments section regardless of geographical space.

In a series of photographs that were uploaded onto @BlackArchives.co in July 2019, documentary photographer, Susan Meiselas, captures Black life in a small-town Northwest of Lisbon in Portugal. Many comments left by North American and British followers expressed their surprise that Portugal has long had a Black community: "Wow I've never seen that side of Portugal [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji. Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji.]" Some followers use speculative remembering to imagine the interconnectedness of their shared diasporic memories and experiences. In first photograph in a ten-part series dated

2004, a young woman is having her hair braided by two other women. Sat outside in front of a dusky grey graffitied wall, she holds the blonde and black braiding hair in both hands. The proportions prepared for the threading and weaving of this hair into the hair growing from her scalp. The woman on her right has the intricate job of parting the hair for her box braids and starting the plaits with the new hair, and the woman on her left, who is multi-tasking and talking to another woman, is finishing each individual plait that has been prepared (see Figure 10). Though this scene



Figure 10. Hair braiding in Cova de Moura, Portugal. (Screenshot by author).

has not been described in the caption, my familiarity with Black hair braiding has given me an insight into this beauty regime. I have regularly been the woman in the chair, from childhood through to adulthood, and am now becoming the woman who braids the hair. As I look at this image, I feel the weight and textures of the hair in my hands. In one hand I hold a thicker portion of hair, and in the other I have a smaller segment ready to be threaded into one single braid.

Drawing on the similarities between Black communities separated by the Atlantic, followers of @BlackArchives.co have used the comments section to articulate the ways that diasporic memory can be untethered from specific geographical spaces. As one Black American follower writes: “Growing up around my mom, Gmom [sic] & aunts this was always seen in the kitchen! [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji. Raising Hands emoji: medium-dark skin tone; Raised Fist emoji: medium-dark skin tone]”. In his comment he recognises the four Afro-Portuguese women in the photograph as his family members and is transported to his childhood family kitchen. He moves between this act of viewing the scene

captured in the photograph and his memories of observing the scene in his childhood kitchen to identify a time and space where the two diasporic memories meld together. Another follower interpreted Meiselas' series as a scene from the present-day and altered the interior time of the photograph in their comment: "Omgggg this looks like any black community in the US". Although in this comment the follower does not rhetorically place themselves within the photograph, they parallel this fifteen-year-old image with present-day communities in America. This blurs the separation between the time captured in the interior world of the photograph and the exterior time of the follower's real world. In a separate comment, one follower expressed their emotive response to Meiselas' photo series in seven succinct words: "We. Everywhere. Beauty. Family. Universe. Us. Love. [Sparkles emoji. Purple heart emoji]". Their use of the collective pronouns "we" and "us" positions the follower as part of a collective Black diaspora. As they express what this means for them, they use the word 'universe' which I propose can be read as constituting all forms of space *and* time. Similarly, in Michelle Wright's musings on blackness and spacetime, she writes that blackness 'is simply too many things to be anything but everything.'³⁹ However, in these assertions that blackness can be everything and that there is a universal diasporic identity, fundamental diasporic differences can become glanced over, and hierarchal representations can be privileged.

Although there are clear attempts to articulate diasporic intimacies across @BlackArchives.co and its comments sections, there is a risk of followers homogenising the Black experience or obscuring and erasing memories that do not align with dominant narratives of black stories documented and shared by dominant media, and this poses a limitation regarding who is included in expressions of digital diasporic intimacy. For example, in a post uploaded in October 2019, nine photographs are shared that were taken by

³⁹ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 3.

“The Sanity Inspector” at an Atlanta-based spring break party, Freaknik. In the images people were photographed in cars, cameras in hand, and partying with one another. In response to the series, a follower pondered, “I wonder were their [sic] a big presence of gay men back then. [Thinking Face emoji]”. Although there have *always* been a presence of Black gay men and Black queer people throughout history, this comment raises questions around queer acknowledgement and visibility in Black archives, who is remembered, and in what ways. Referencing Matt Richardson’s study, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, Treva Ellison writes that:

‘The queer limit of Black memory explains how maintaining the socio-spatial boundaries of racial Blackness is often accomplished by constructing certain modes of gender and sexual indeterminacy as impediments to Black racial progress.’⁴⁰

Ellison demonstrates how queerness has been marginalised and erased in Black memory narratives because it is regarded as deviant and a threat to linear narratives of racial progression. Within archives representations of Black queerness are limited, and Western structures of linear timelines and notions of heteronormative progression narratives further suppress queer stories.

Black queer, trans and non-binary people have been erased from accounts of Black history despite the presence of queerness within indigenous African cultures,⁴¹ and despite Black queer people being active social and political organisers throughout history.⁴² While it

⁴⁰ Treva Carrie Ellison, “Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Gender,” *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019): 8.

⁴¹ Matthew Blaise (@matthew.blaise), “9 Queer Practices in Ancient Africa That Makes Queerness More African than Queerphobia,” Instagram photo, June 1, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPlpXixshvD/>; Chidera Ihejirika, “Fuck Your Gender Norms: How Western Colonisation Brought Unwanted Binaries to Igbo Culture,” *Gad-Dem*, February 19, 2020, <https://gal-dem.com/colonialism-nigeria-gender-norms-lgbtq-igbo/>; Gloria Wekker, “Mati-ism and Black Lesbianism,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1996): 11-24.

⁴² Black queer people have been at the forefront of many Black social movements and protests despite Black LGBTQ+ activism being marginalised. For instance, of the three Black women who founded the Black Lives Matter movement, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, two of them are queer. Despite this, queer

is incorrect to presume that one's sexuality and gender can be identified by looking at them, the hypervisibility of heterosexual couples, the visible performance of regimented gender conformity, and the lack of visibility of Black queer social spaces across @BlackArchives.co maintains an illusion that the Black queer, trans and non-binary communities were scarce across Black history, and thus removed from this iteration of digital diasporic intimacy. Expressing his frustration with the erasure of Black queer folk in portrayals of Black history, activist and journalist Alvin McEwen stresses that some people within the Black community view Black queer folk as subaltern. He writes that 'the erasure of our voices and faces from [B]lack history is proof of this because it is an example of how they deny us our heritage and our place at the table on our own terms rather than the terms of their fearful and misguided perceptions.'⁴³ McEwan's sentiments reveals how diasporic intimacy can also be cultivated through these difficult intracommunity conversations, holding one another accountable for the erasure of and ambivalence towards some sub-communities. He gives voice to a tension which cannot go ignored in considerations of the digital diaspora. Homophobia, transphobia, and respectability politics offer explanations as to why certain Black queer histories are erased from archives.⁴⁴ This is not to say that these are the reasons why these narratives were not frequently featured across @BlackArchives.co, however, it does speak to the silence of these histories within institutional archives, where the majority of images were sourced from.

lives have been marginalised in wider reach of the movement. For more information read: Sony Salzman, "From the Start, Black Lives Matter Has Been About LGBTQ Lives," *ABC News*, June 21, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/start-black-lives-matter-lgbtq-lives/story?id=71320450>. Other Black activists who are queer too have included former Black Panther, Angela Davis, and Cecil Belfred Clarke, the co-founder of a London-based civil rights organisation, The League of Coloured Peoples.

⁴³ Alvin McEwan, "The Erasure of 'Gay' From Black History and the Black Community Must Stop," *Huffington Post*, June 10, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-erasure-of-gay-from-b_b_5936568.

⁴⁴ Dagmar Brunow, "Naming, Shaming, Framing?: The Ambivalence of Queer Visibility in Audio-Visual Archives," in *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilising Affect in Feminist, Queer and Anti-Racist Media Cultures*, ed. Anu Koivunen, Katariina Kyrölä, and Ingrid Ryberg (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 175-195; Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Nonetheless, Black queer, trans and non-binary folk, still access these digital archives as sites of diasporic memory but some have created counter archives which specifically document Black queer histories. For example, Instagram archive @BlackAndGayBackInTheDay, founded by Jason Okundaye and Marc Thompson, similarly gathers ‘buried’ visual ephemera to create a digital archive which can ‘evoke memories, connect old lovers and educate younger Black queers about the spaces that have existed in the past.’⁴⁵ Platforms like Okundaye and Thompson’s are a necessary intervention on the dominance of cis-heterosexual narratives shared across @BlackArchives.co, and demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacy might occur in different Black interlocutors across the internet.

Sensory Engagements and Archival Resonances

While the comments section across @BlackArchives.co’s posts have been used by followers to envision diasporic relations through kinship, many followers also help curate digital diasporic intimacy when they place themselves within these images without focusing on any imagined familial connections. In these examples, belonging is found within the photographs through their affective, sensory registers, and I propose that engaging with the images in this way is just as important for sustaining digital diasporic intimacy as expressing diasporic relationality through kinship is. Although I have briefly signposted this in my discussion above, I will now consider the ways that followers of @BlackArchives.co present themselves as active participants of these visual archives through their sensory engagement with the photographs. I will demonstrate how speculative remembering can be accessed and

⁴⁵ Jason Okundaye and Marc Thompson, “‘This is Radical Love’ – The History of Black Queer Britain in Pictures,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/mar/22/this-is-radical-love-the-glorious-rich-history-of-black-queer-britain>.

enacted through a viewer's haptic entanglements with the photographs, and I argue that this produces digital diasporic intimacy which draws on temporal and emotive speculations.

The followers' expressions of a deep desire to be part of the scenes and stories captured in these photographs demonstrate how the images can affectively engage viewers at a juncture between the past, present, and future. In May 2020, in response to a @BlackArchives.co post that featured a selection of Gordon Parks' colour photography taken in Mobile, Alabama in 1956, one follower writes: "How rich and beautiful. I want to step inside of these pictures and into these moments with them so badly. [Yellow Heart emoji. Sparkles emoji]". For them, their desire to 'step inside' of the photographs is motivated by the rich beauty that they perceive to have belonged to this space. The original series of photographs were taken for *Life* magazine to capture segregation in the South. The @BlackArchives.co post includes ten photographs from the series which show scenes such as an outdoor church gathering, a small church choir, two young girls playing in a puddle, a young boy collecting a pail of water at an outdoor pump, and a woman harvesting collard greens.⁴⁶ Between the textures of Alabama's red clay dirt, the colours of the dark green foliage, and the movements of the Black community, a rural haptic resonance is emitted, and some followers who feel these sensory affects express them in the comments section: "There's so much air in his photos. How did he do that?", "These photos are amazingly beautiful. I feel so much warmth from this. [Red Heart emoji]". For the follower who desires to 'step inside' of these photographs, they express a yearn to time travel; to be of and with these moments and the diasporic intimacy that is held in the image.

Discussion of Black time travel in fiction has invited concerns about historical racial trauma and Civil Rights within these stories.⁴⁷ These questions and concerns reinforce linear

⁴⁶ (@BlackArchives.co) "Alabama. Photographs by Gordon Parks (1956) @gordonparksfoundation." Instagram photo. May 31, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA3hiDnpFmp>.

⁴⁷ Sherronda J. Brown, "I want Black time travelers to be a threat to the status quo," *Black Youth Project*, June 11, 2019, <http://blackyouthproject.com/i-want-black-time-travelers-to-be-a-threat-to-the-status-quo/>.

models of Black progress narratives, suggesting that Black people cannot undergo time travel in fictional stories in fear of violent abuse and racial subjugation. When the person who desired to “step into” Parks’ photographs’ left their comment on the post, they were challenged by another follower who reminded them of the presence of Jim Crow, “believe me in reality you do not [wish to step into these images]. That was the time of Jim Crow”. To this, the original follower responded: “With respect to the era in which they are taken, my emphasis is more on these quiet and intimate space captured where, in the moments, we were most free to just be; it was just us.” This exchange reveals that for some followers of @BlackArchives.co, linear progressive timelines can still be useful. However, for others linear timelines can be rejected; instead, the past can be haptic, material, and useable. Within this moment of conflicting viewpoints where these two followers work through their different perspectives, they unpack the differing ways that time shapes their understanding of Black identity and community.

The original commenter’s desire to be a part of the captured histories disrupts the belief that time travel is inaccessible for Black people due to traumatic pasts and erased histories, and instead they centre agency, joy, and peace as their motivation to travel within this photograph. According to their comments, they experience a contradictory feeling of wanting to exist within the photograph’s moment, but not necessarily wanting to exist within that moment in U.S national history. Instead, they are focused on a past that negates the white gaze, whiteness, and colonialism. Thus, they locate intimacy in that *what* of time as opposed to the specifics of the *when*. As they note in their comment, it is the captured moments of rural Black intimacy which calls to them and holds them, not the dangers and traumas of the time. This suggests that for them these two axes can exist separately. As Wright puts it:

‘We experience time in moments: moments of thought, observation, conversation, action, listening, daydreaming, fright, love— sometimes all at once. Some moments are very long to us as we pursue a thought or activity; others incredibly brief.’⁴⁸

If time is experienced through moments, then to partake in multidirectional time travel, to speculate and to remember, requires us to centre ourselves in these self-selected moments. Inferred from this follower’s comment, time can still be determined by years passed, however, moments that we can step into are abstracted from this progressive concept of time.

Experiential moments can be captured in photographs through our senses. Similarly, our senses help us to feel closeness and relationality, and this underpins our intimate relationships. In other words, intimacy can be experienced through touch, scent, sight, taste, and sound. It is an engagement with the senses that allow us to “step inside” these photographic moments. The ability to capture the sensate beyond sight is an unspoken power of the photograph. Engaging a sensory reading of the archival photographs to find belonging is an intimate practice of speculative remembering. Uploaded to @BlackArchives.co in June 2020, a series of photographs taken in Edisto Island, South Carolina by Walter Sanders in 1956, capture scenes of rural life which are similar to those captured by Gordon Parks in that same year. A follower responded to these images by expressing how smell functions as a tool for them to intimately connect with the archive: “I can smell these pics [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji. Repeated three more times]”. Another follower left a similar comment on Parks’ series of photographs: “I can smell Alabama when I look at these photos.” For these viewers, the photographs allow them to see and experience scent. The photographs create a form of synaesthesia that helps the viewers to intimately connect with the people, places, and moments captures. An engagement with the senses draws on memory’s tangible textures, its

⁴⁸ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 145.

lucid smells, and echoing sounds. These examples demonstrate that speculative remembering is not always concerned with the visibility and sight of other people, but also sensory perceptions.

As well as scent, sound has the capacity to evoke the memory of spaces and places. In Tina Campt's *Listening to Images*, she suggests that we can hear the frequencies of a photograph to attune with their affects. Extending Campt's study, I similarly argue that photographs have sonic registers, and these registers have the capacity to pull us into the histories captured in the images. Campt refers to the aural aesthetic of photography as an "echo of memory" that reverberates through the patterning visual field of photographs.⁴⁹ While Campt's articulation draws on the visual patterns of seriality enmeshed in the production and assemblance of studio photography, I wish to think through how the "echo of memory" occurs within @BlackArchives.co's posts in ways that enable followers to envision a sense of belonging with the visual material and to one another; one which is connected through the sounds of Black diasporic experiences. I propose that across @BlackArchives.co visual aurality is a reoccurring method for followers to find ways into the images and subsequently, to become a part of the digital archive. At the centre of this provocation is the question: how can listening to photographs through their sonic registers evoke a kind of diasporic intimacy that centres the act of longing for, recognising, and reimagining pasts and subsequent futures?

Alike Parks' Alabama series, Sanders' photographs document different aspects of country living in Edisto Island. These include photos of a horse drawn carriage, a woman and child stood outside washing clothes, and scenes at a church. In a similar response to Parks' series, one follower expresses their desire to time travel: "Your IG page brings me so much joy. This is absolutely beautiful, it makes me wish I could time travel to these wonderful time periods

⁴⁹ Campt, *Image Matters*, 135.

and witness the ancestors, traditions, and happy times [Black Heart emoji]”. The final image in Sanders’ Edisto Island series captures a long dirt road that is partially shaded by large weeping willows; it is a silent photograph, aside from the faint footsteps of a barefooted woman who walks away from the camera (**Figure 11**). One follower responds to this image to express that that she can hear her childhood: “Oh wow [Black Heart emoji. Repeated four more times] I can hear my granny’s voice calling down that dirt road.” For this woman, the photograph captures a sonic memory of her youth and experience growing up in the deep South. It captures a moment in time where she

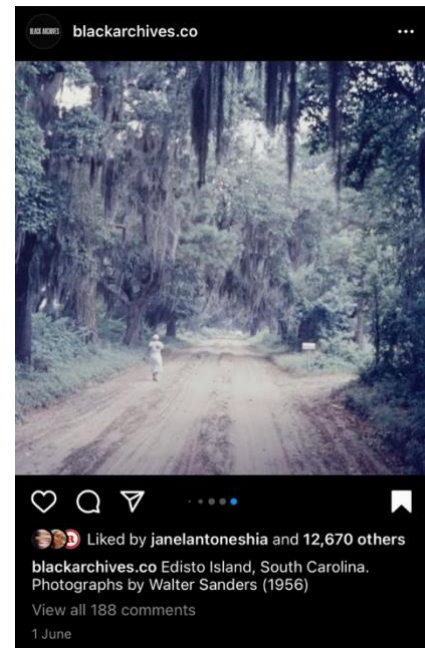


Figure 11. A long dirt road shaded by weeping willows in Edisto Island, South Carolina. (Screenshot by author).

plays outside, and her grandmother’s voice echoes between the trees calling her back home. But this moment is not left in stasis, as emphasises by her use of the present tense: “I can hear”. As she speculatively remembers this scene, she reveals that it is not a moment that is reserved to her past; it is moving, reverberating, and echoing. The sounds of the rural Black American South become intertwined with the sounds of the digital Black diaspora who take to the comments section to hear, listen to, and repeat the sounds that they imagine are hosted by this photograph. The ‘*echo of memory*’ caves into the comments section where sounds and memories are relayed and revisited: “Last picture speaking volumes..”, “Looking at these pictures just brings back great memories from my childhood. I can see my cousin running down the dirt road bare feet with the chickens and hens chasing behind us. (They were so mean) lol... Just enjoying our innocence. [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji. Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji.]”

Our understanding of ourselves is inextricably attached to our memory and across @BlackArchives.co some followers have accessed their memories through their sensory engagements with the photographs. The feeling of familiarity and kinship goes beyond what is visually depicted in the images to include what is sensorially felt and this is sometimes a focus for the followers' ruminations. As one user writes: "Idk why I've never experienced country living but this is giving me serious nostalgia [Weary Face emoji. Smiling Face with Heart Eyes emoji]". Another writes, "I absolutely love these pictures. It takes me to a time that I feel in my soul and yearn for their simple yet complex life. Thank you for sharing my/our people from a different lifetime." While the scenes and places captured in the photographs are not always familiar to the viewers, the photographs' sensory registers make it possible to fall into and desire the images and scenes that have not been physically available to them. Some followers would even draw direct comparisons between the community in Edisto Island and other Black communities across the diaspora: "Beautiful Pictures, last picture reminds me of my maternal Village in East Africa....Peaceful and Calm", "The African Connection is undeniable [Raising Hands emoji: medium-dark skin tone]", "So beautiful and reminiscent of the Caribbean [Red Heart emoji]", "Never seen Black American Look So African [Red Heart emoji]". As these followers find familiarity with the photographs through naming other Black cultures and communities, they help to curate digital diasporic intimacy. Speculative remembering enables this type of looking at and with the images in ways that pull on our sensorial memories. Thus, these images and viewer's memories are repurposed as 'diasporic resources' for digital community building.⁵⁰ Through remembering and speculating, our sensory engagement with archival photographs has the capacity to destabilise notions of linear time as we create digital community. For instance, in response to Sanders' photographs, one follower writes, "Wow some of those

⁵⁰ Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool", 298.

photos you can't tell if it's 1956 or 1865. Wow. Our ppl are resilient.” According to their comment, the years are not fixed, time is flexible, and Black diasporic worlds and memories are unbound by any temporal restrictions.

Nostalgic Yearnings for Black Diasporic Fashions and Style

In the opening of this chapter, I briefly discussed the ways that the style archives presented across the @BlackArchives.co account had been used as a ‘diasporic resource’ for speculative remembering.⁵¹ Alike the process of imagining unnamed people as family members and orienting oneself in images vis-à-vis sensory experiences, fashion and style denotes another semiotic method for followers to articulate digital diasporic intimacy. In this section I posit that a style archive is captured within the photographs across @BlackArchives.co and communicates temporal registers of Black selfhood. It gives name to the way that diasporic histories, cultures, and stories are interwoven into the fabric of Black fashion, garments, hairstyles, and aesthetics. Thus, I propose that the style archive and photographic archive both constitute layers of the Instagram archive, which all work in tandem with one another.

The Black style archive is a diasporic space and a ‘diasporic resource’.⁵² It has the capacity to visualise, hold, and articulate a diasporic way of being and creating in the world; it is an archive that is reliant of the visual materiality of style and subsequently the cultural memory of the Black diaspora. In his essay “Dilemmas in African Diaspora Fashion”, Van Dyk Lewis argues that:

⁵¹ Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool”, 298.

⁵² Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool”, 298.

Diaspora fashion acts as an *aide-mémoire* of the black experience and as a coping strategy against the onslaught of out-dated modernist agendas. The [d]iaspora uses its interrelation with fashion objects to signify the [d]iaspora's emergent state and as a measure of social well-being.⁵³

Lewis' articulation posits that diasporic fashion is temporal and exists outside of Western notions of linear time. His choice to code diaspora fashion as that which goes against 'out-dated modernist agendas' highlights Black fashion and style's ability to disrupt the *now* of the present day which is enforced through society's norms, values, trends, and capitalist agendas. In other words, diasporic fashion denies this power of white Western, capitalist time.

Signifying the diaspora's state of emergence, Black diaspora fashion and style is in a constant state of flux. It is ever-changing, forever on the edge, and its existence envisions Black futurity. For example, the ephemerality of Black hairstyles showcases its rapid changeability; the creative style innovations that become "new" mainstream fashion trends years after their emergence in Black communities demonstrate how Black style exists ahead of Western time; and the increase in young diasporic Black women and femmes fashioning headwraps that signify and call upon African ancestries illustrate how Black style is indebted to a diasporic cultural memory.⁵⁴ When it concerns Black diaspora fashion and style innovations, time is malleable. These select few examples demonstrate that for the Black diaspora, fashion and style punctures the fixity of Western time, its prioritisation of linearity, and its "current" commercial trends. This refusal of Western capitalist time through Black fashion and style can be an intimate actualisation of diasporic self-imagining and world-making.

⁵³ Van Dyk Lewis, "Dilemmas in African Diaspora Fashion," *Fashion Theory* 7, no. 2 (2003): 173.

⁵⁴ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (2001; reis., New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014); Emma Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).



Black fashion and style exist before, after, adjacent to, and beyond the boundaries of Western, capitalist time, and acknowledgements of this allow for digital diasporic intimacy to be sustained. On a post uploaded to @BlackArchives.co on 18 November 2019, a young woman is photographed looking just beyond the camera lens. She wears small gold hoop earrings, and her hair is styled into a bun with her baby hairs curled and laid around her head (see Figure 12). The image was submitted to the archive by an African American woman, who shares that this woman was her grandmother. The caption reads: “My grandmother, Veronica Walker, in 1969. This picture was taken in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She was 19 in

this picture”. In comments underneath, followers acknowledge grandma’s hairstyle and writes: “Edges laid back then! Black women really are the worlds trend setters! Yasssss grandma! [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji]”, “Your grandmother’s style was ahead of it’s [sic] time”, “Beautiful. Classic. The hairstyle she’s wearing then, is the same what girls are doing now,. I keep telling people fashion just repeats itself. She’s beautiful”. These followers are referring to grandma’s baby hairs that are delicately swept along the edges of her face, predating the current mainstream “trend” for “laid edges”. For many Black girls of the diaspora, sweeping, gelling, combing and grooming baby hairs is a rite of passage. However, only in recent years, after they had been popularised to the masses by the Kardashian family, Instagram models, and fashion shows, sleek baby hairs have become trend style for non-Black women. Alike many other Black style aesthetics, styled baby hairs were

deemed ‘ghetto until proven fashionable,’ as Chelsea Rojas from the podcast *Black Girls Texting*, notes.⁵⁵

The follower’s acknowledgement of Black women as the world’s trend setters demonstrates that by way of style technologies, Black aesthetics, and specifically Black femme aesthetics exist outside of Western constructs of time. As British-Nigerian artist mzmz raps in “101 FM” where she reminisces about growing up in London’s rap game, she was ‘slicking down baby hairs way before Insta’.⁵⁶ Little Simz, Rojas, and these followers similarly recognise how Black style and fashion prelude and steer current mainstream trends, and so they are ahead of capitalist time. In his article on how enslaved Africans helped chart direction of fashion, Jonathan Michael Square elaborates on this to situate diasporic fashion as temporal. He writes that:

The very definition of fashion is attached to time. To dress fashionably is to style oneself with contemporary and future sartorial references in mind, even if that means subverting and ignoring those temporalities.⁵⁷

If fashion is a marker of time, and specifically an engagement with the past, present, and the future, then for the Black diaspora who gaze upon these photographs and use the comments section to express their relationship to Black style creativity, they might witness how Black fashion has always existed outside of Western notions of timeliness and trends; it is created and sustained by its own waves, patterns, and cycles.

Photographs that remind viewers of the lineages of Black styles, such as this one, can be affirming in a world that denies legitimacy to Black creativity and this is expressed by

⁵⁵ Shalwah Evans, “Baby Tress and Black Girls Texting Talk Edge Styling and Appropriation,” *Essence*, last modified December 6, 2020, <https://www.essence.com/hair/is-baby-hair-grooming-on-the-edge-of-appropriation/>.

⁵⁶ Little Simz, “101 FM,” track 6 on *GREY Area*, Sony Music Entertainment, 2019, digital download.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Michael Square, “How Enslaved People Helped Shape Fashion History,” *Guernica Mag*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.guernicamag.com/how-enslaved-people-helped-shape-fashion-history/>.

followers who leave comments in awe of Grandma's style. These images showcase the ways that the Black diaspora have lived creative and full lives outside of dominant cultural hegemonies. They allow us to speculatively remember all the ways that we are connected through style and dress, reminding us that together we push towards the future and exist on our own timeline.

This temporal push and pull through the style archive illustrates how digital diasporic intimacy is temporal. On October 23, 2019, the account uploaded a selection of photographs taken between the 1960s and 1970s in Bamako, Mali by photographer, Malick Sidibé. The series of black and white photographs depict Malian's posing for studio portraits in their suits and bell bottoms, swimming in a large body of water, and posing in large groups. In these photographs, their fashion is emphasised by the black and white overlay which sharpens the contrasting tones of their clothing patterns, and they pose in ways that draw attention to the flow of their garments. In response to the fashion and style presented in the series, one follower wrote, 'Damn, will y'all please take y'all foot off my neck?' Addressed to the people in the photograph, this comment metaphorically refers to the physical force that the diasporic style archive has on the present. The follower speaks to them as if they are in their contemporary moment. With their foot on his neck, this follower is held, bound by the past; their style is a creative force that ruptures time.

One photograph featured in the series, entitled "On se regarde! hum?"/ "We look at each other! hum?", garnered individual attention within the comments. The photograph depicts two girls, sat side by side as they gaze at each other, faces in profile. Alike Sidibé's other photos it is in black and white, and this hue highlights the intricate details of their hairstyle. White cowrie shells are threaded into their black canerows that meet at the centre of their head like starfish. Their dark skin contrasts the white vests that they wear, and they each wear a necklace made of beads (**Figure 13**). Responses to this image demonstrate how Black folk

might use the style archive to orient their own contemporary diasporic identity through beauty and fashion: “Sooooo those cowrie shells on the braids is about to be my next look [Red Heart emoji]”. In this comment, the follower finds inspiration for her new hairstyle, recycling and repurposing what she has seen into the present-day. Campt recognises that ‘seeing a photograph is always an encounter with the present, the past, and the future,’ and I argue that this also applies to the style archive that is captured within the images.⁵⁸ This follower’s intention to revisit and repurpose diasporic fashion and style illustrates the temporality of Black fashion, hair, and cultural aesthetics. Commenting on the photographic series, another follower writes that the images represent “fashion .in its cosmic essence. origin. in its trillest form.” They recognise the Malian fashion as the “trillest” form of Black diaspora style, and use AAVE to situate it as authentic, real, and genuine. Furthermore, if, as Riello and McNeil write, fashion is ‘a flux in time’,⁵⁹ then we can interpret the follower’s articulation of Malian fashion as diasporic style in its ‘cosmic essence’ as an understanding of the ways that it is unbounded by the restrictions of linear time.

As well as recognising that Black diaspora fashion exists outside of Western linear time, it has also been articulated as a material extension of linear time because of the way that memories are weaved into the fabrics and thus the garments can call back to previous years and trends.⁶⁰ Many scholars have written about the ways that history can be told through

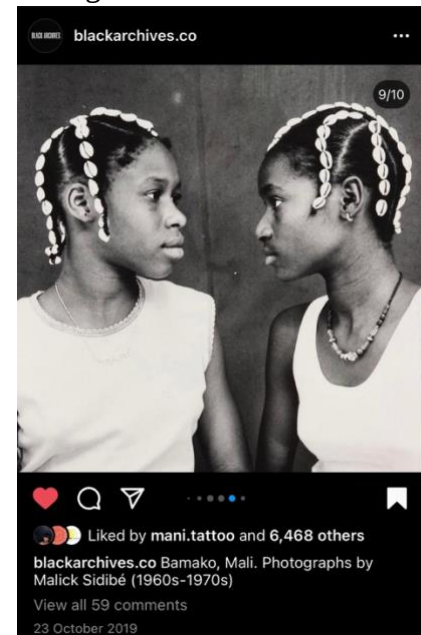


Figure 13. Two girls with cowrie shells threaded through their cane rows look at each other. (Screenshot by author).

⁵⁸ Campt, *Image Matters*, 290.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

⁶⁰ Jasmine Sanders, “A Black Legacy, Wrapped Up in Fur,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/style/fur-black-women-history.html>; Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politic of Soul* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

dress, style, and fashion, and fashion studies scholar Heike Jenss notes the relationship between memory and fashion as it relates to entropic notions of time:

In its nonlinearity, partiality and revisionary capacity the workings of memory, or remembering, not only share similarity with the visual and material culture of clothing and fashion, but clothing and fashion can be understood as constitutive components of personal and cultural memory, or remembering.⁶¹

Jenss' discussion of memory and fashion by way of nonlinearity emphasises the entropic nature of style and suggests that it has the capacity for identity building, community marking and world-building. Similarly, in her memoir on the power that fashion has in her life, Tanisha C. Ford argues that 'clothes are never just garments.'⁶² Ford recounts moments of her family history to consider the ways that Black style and fashion shape and are shaped by a cultural and collective Black identity. She concludes: 'Our garments are archives of memories—individual and collective, material and emotional—that tell these rich, textured stories of our lives.'⁶³ Across @BlackArchives.co, the style archive exists as another layer of the photographic archive, holding and shaping memories through its haptic resonance.

Across @BlackArchives.co's comments sections, followers use and depart from the depicted style archives to speculatively remember and co-create stories that intimately cultivate diasporic identity. On 12 April 2020, Cherlise uploaded a photograph onto the Instagram account of two young girls dressed in matching attire in New York City in 1969. The photograph was taken by Dutch photographer Nico van der Stam and in it, the two girls are dressed in military-inspired double-breasted coats which are fastened with six large gold

⁶¹ Heike Jenss, *Fashioning Memory: Vintage Style and Youth Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 5.

⁶² Tanisha C. Ford, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019), 6.

⁶³ Ford, *Dressed in Dreams*, 8.

buttons up to the top of their necks. The top right button on the breast is attached by a thick gold chain to a seventh button that fastens together the collar at their neck. They are both wearing cat-eye glasses: one pair white and the other black. Their glossy pressed hair is covered by a beret-style hat that is made from the same textured fabric as their coats. The only feature that differentiates these two identically dressed girls is the colours of their garments. The tallest of the two is dressed in apple green; a green that punctuates, lifts, and breathes life. The smallest of the two wears pink; a delicate, clean rose (see Figure 14). The flamboyant, yet soft, contrast of the green and pink illuminates the @BlackArchives.co feed, which often features visual material in sepia or black and white tones.

An attentiveness to the visual function of style in these photographs brings light to the ways that speculatively remembering is engaged through fashion. It also encourages us to consider the ways that we can be moved by the style archive. The responses to this Instagram post demonstrate the way that fashion might be a symbiotic material for collective memory. While many of the comments celebrate the young girls' style, a few compare their coat colours to Cosmo and Wanda, the cartoon fairies from Nickelodeon's *The Fairly OddParents* (2001–2017): “Cosmo and Wanda ain’t never too far !”. I feel it is useful to highlight this comparison as it suggests that many of these followers are millennials and had grown up in the late 1990s and early 2000s watching Cartoon Network. Thus, they reflect on their own childhood memories to make sense of what they are seeing.



Figure 14. Two girls wearing pink and green are photographed in New York. (Screenshot by author).

Indebted to the style archive, some followers begin to imagine a ‘style narrative,’⁶⁴ for the girl as they collaboratively construct a story that speculates on the circumstances of the photograph. In *The Birth of Cool*, Tulloch describes a style narrative as that which communicates genealogies of Black diaspora style as it relates to the social, transnational, and historical contexts, as well as individual identities. Like the form of engagement used in the YouTube comments section for emeke’s *strolling*, across @BlackArchives.co’s comments, followers gather to co-write a style narrative, but use speculative remembering and fabulation to intimately create diasporic stories. The constructed style narrative is one that imagines the girls attending church as they are wearing their Sunday best. One follower responds: “Beautiful! Takes me back when a little girl! (sic) Always on point for Easter [Smiling Face emoji].” Here, she indicates that the girls’ style enables her to reminisce about her own childhood. Interestingly, she assumes that this photograph was taken on Easter Sunday, and she was not the only one to write this into the comments section. Below are three more comments written by followers who speculatively remember the girls’ Easter Sunday:

“Black people was (sic) never easy when it [came to] Easter back in the day [Cherry Blossom emoji. Leaf Fluttering in Wind emoji. Hibiscus emoji] this makes me smile & I know it was well planned out, these outfits!”

“Easter Sunday fashion. Ready for church vibes”

“Easter Sunday has always been a reason for Black people to show up and show out!”

⁶⁴ Carol Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

Within the post's caption and the photograph itself, there is no confirmation, or even indication, that this photograph was taken on Easter Sunday, or that the girls were even going to church. Nonetheless, many comments underneath assumed that this was the case, corroborating one another on the Easter reality. For many, this "reality" was inferred, not through the photograph or the indexicality of the image, but through the girls' style and the diasporic cultural memories that are perceived to be held within the style archive. Speculative remembering is enacted as the followers collaboratively imagine narratives and stories, corroborated with their memories and by one another's.

The story of the young girls attending church on Easter Sunday was oriented around and within the clothing that they wear. It is their style that enables the telling of this story and so it is the memory that is held within the clothing that provokes the imagination; it is the fashion that operates as a gateway into a diasporic memory. The story that is constructed within the comments suggests that the girls' outfits were planned out in advance by their mother – who some speculate might have been a member of Howard University's Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority due to the matching colours – although there is nothing to indicate that these two young girls are even sisters, let alone that they had familial ties to the AKA sorority. The followers also begin to imagine the food that these girls will have eaten after their day at church, they list food that is commonly associated with African American cuisine: "Easter Sunday after church on their way to eat that good Easter Ham/Chicken/Mac n Cheese/Collard Greens Amen." Collectively, these followers script a narrative for the girls that preludes and extends beyond the captured, static moment. This example illustrates how speculative remembering allows for the extension of time, the photographic frame, and memory.

While the photographs allow explorations of diasporic identity and community, the use of these photographs to fulfil contemporary narratives and perspectives has been steeped in remarks shrouded in respectability politics. The term, respectability politics was coined by

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in 1993 and gives name to an aspirational practice that has been taken up and deployed by Black folk across different social strata.⁶⁵ An example of this includes W.E.B Du Bois' 1903 popularisation of the understanding that the 'talented tenth' – which referred to the one in ten Black men who would become leaders of the Black community, wielding their class privilege and access to education – could 'uplift the race'.⁶⁶ Although later in life Du Bois parted from these ideas, contemporary iterations of this concept still exist and are shared digitally in manners such as #BlackExcellence which celebrates Black exceptionalism as a means of justifying Black humanity.⁶⁷ Moreover, the influence of the Christian church, migration and assimilation, and class all influence the prevalence of respectability politics in the West. However, this aspiration to be a respectable Black person often disguises structural inequalities that prevent Black social mobility, encodes misogynoir, homophobia, and transphobia, and stifles Black creativity and expressions. Furthermore, adhering to respectability politics and Black exceptionalism cannot erase antiblackness.

Across @BlackArchives.co's posts, some followers left comments which employed respectability politics as a method to distance themselves with what they perceived to be the damaging present and align themselves with a romanticised past. They use speculative remembering to position their ideas of what it means to be Black and to police the ways that Black folk *should* act. For example, while many comments left on Sidibé's Mali series that I signposted earlier celebrated the fashion and style, one follower writes:

⁶⁵ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶⁶ W.E.B Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," accessed September 1, 2021, http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/documents/Talented_Tenth.pdf

⁶⁷ Janice Gassam Asare, "Our Obsession with Black Excellence is Harming Black People," *Forbes*, August 1, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2021/08/01/our-obsession-with-black-excellence-is-harming-black-people/?sh=743e31722fd9>

“With all the rump shaking and black on black disrespect that is flooding this platform your page is my favourite and a breath of fresh air. Keep on elighting [sic], inspiring and reminding me of our people’s greatness!”

While this follower rightly acknowledges the diasporic tensions that occur within Black Instagram communities, they partake in the creation of tension here by proposing that ‘rump shaking’ and ‘black on black disrespect’ is antithetical to Black ‘greatness’. In doing so, they position the past as perpetuated by some @BlackArchives.co images, as a romanticised reality readily available for them to articulate as that which represents the best of the Black community. The following comment left in response to a photograph of a college band in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1980s echoes this sentiment, but instead blames the media for denigrating Black folk:

“Not trying to be funny..but I didn’t see not one breast hanging .no ass showing...the men were all polished. No pants hanging off the ass..wow what a difference 2 decades and others controlling our media makes”

While this follower is right to acknowledge the ways that dominant media perpetuates damaging images of Black folk, they employ respectability politics to undermine the agency of those Black folks who choose to have their ‘breast hanging’ and ‘ass showing’ in the present. According to them, the passing of time evidences a linear narrative of declining Black respectability. Their projections fetishize the past and uphold ideas of Black progress as being defined by how well respectability is performed.

The comments above, although posted on two separate images and made by two different people, similarly denounce displays of Black femme bodies, expressions of Black sexual agency, and they use class-based discrimination to police Black behaviour and dress in public online and offline spaces. They are particularly attentive to the role

that they believe the media has had on this portrayal of Black folk and view @BlackArchives.co as a platform which offers a counterimage. The following comments posted across a random selection of photographs demonstrate how gender, sex, and class are recurrently scrutinised and policed across the account:

“Wow! No wigs flying, no ass cheeks clapping about the place, no violence (that we can see lol) just pure cultured fun [Jamaican Flag emoji. Grenadian Flag emoji. United Kingdom Flag emoji]”

“So pretty. Makes me miss the days when black women confidently and elegantly displayed their natural, unique beauty. Now, it’s all about fake everything and looking like clones.”

“That’s what I’m talking about [Thinking Face emoji] what happened to real black women no weave fake eyelashes or fake butts”

I came across these comments as I scrolled through beautiful photographs of studio portraits, street gatherings, and images of mother and child. I always found it strange to think about how these commenters’ assumptions came about. Clearly there had been an abstraction of some sort for them to assume that there was no violence or “fake” hair in those days. While I resisted the urge to respond to these comments like other followers did – who were notably women – and shed a light on their misogynoir and damaging respectability politics, I considered what this meant for them in terms of time and Black diasporic identity politics. These followers mourn the loss of an authentic Black past as they express their disappointment with their contemporary Black community, and while they are entitled to speculatively remember in their own way, at least their views did not go unchallenged.

These tensions that derive from responses to @BlackArchives.co highlight how digital diasporic intimacy can be experienced through tense discussions where difference is

negotiated. While some followers recognise the past and present as an intertwined moment, this is not a homogenous viewpoint, as according to other followers, the past and present are two separate spaces where the past is delineated as hosting an authentic and respectable blackness. Either way, Black people have used the comments section and engaged speculative remembering to project their ideologies, memories, and lived perspectives onto the images in ways that helps them to make sense of their own identities in the present. These moments of tension draw our attention to the over-valorisation and fetishization of similar experiences that occurs within digital spaces. They create room for difficult intracommunity discussions, and they remind us to reject hegemonic narratives of the Black experience, all essential for digital diasporic intimacy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the temporal dimensions of digital diasporic intimacies. After an engagement with comments left across @BlackArchives.co posts, I used the term *speculative remembering* to describe moments where followers would use their memories and imagination as part of their response to the photographs to articulate a diasporic belonging. I was particularly interested in the ways that their memories and imaginations might become shaped by the photographs and how they might also shape the photographs as process of Black diasporic (other)worlding. Although there were many ways that followers found belonging in the photographs, my focus on kinship, the sensory, and fashion illustrates how intimacy can be curated temporally.

I recognised the diversity of the Black community and acknowledged how speculative remembering can be engaged differently depending on the person, their memories, what they take from the photographs, and their understanding of time. This was demonstrated by my discussion of respectability politics and the obscuration of

Black queer and trans narratives. My decision to focus on @BlackArchives.co had impacts on the direction of this chapter and what conversations I had around digital diasporic intimacy. When I first began to follow the account back in 2018, there were noticeably more photographs of Black communities from across the globe, from Africa, to Europe, to the Caribbean. Currently, in 2022, there are fewer depictions of these histories, although they are still shared every now and then. Perhaps this change in direction, from global and diasporic to regional and national, was influenced by Cherlise and her team's accessibility to images, funding opportunities, partnerships with U.S corporations including the NBA, or even personal interests. Nonetheless, the lack of specificity on *who* is included in their account of Black history is a space of contention. While other Instagram accounts that do similar work recognise and label their archives as they relate to specific regionalities, for example the Black Spanish experience (@AfroEspana), or the British Black experience outside of London (@BumpkinFiles), @BlackArchives.co, in its titling and framework monopolises blackness in its title, but dominantly draws from specific African American experiences. I am not suggesting that because of this Cherlise's @BlackArchives.co ceases to offer a radical contribution to Black women's digital visual culture, because the accessibility and distribution of these materials is a profound one. However, as a person of the diaspora who had enjoyed to compilation of Black histories from across the globe in the earlier days of the project, I found this direction to be somewhat a loss, despite me still enjoying the account.

I chose to centre Instagram to make my argument on temporality and digital diasporic intimacy because I was interested in the ways that archival images are interacted with on contemporary platforms and how spaces are curated to enable this. Yet I might have had different outcomes if it were based on a different platform. For instance, on Twitter, where digital engagement is marked by "what's happening",

images are fleeting, and the curation of a distinctive archival space is limited by its focus on the written word and a lack of a comprehensive depository. Instead, Instagram offers an intentional curated space for the collage of images, ideal for this project.

Overall, this chapter argued that digital diasporic intimacy is affected by and experienced through time. Speculative remembering underpins this form of intimate worldmaking which is untethered from the constraints of Western, linear time. I argue that this was achieved through the followers' language choices, notably AAVE, the use of a contemporary platform to showcase archival images, and the gathering of followers to give voice to their own memories and understandings of the images. Speculative remembering has the capacity to bring us together to celebrate lineage, honour blackness and community, and it also invite us to think through and grapple with diasporic differences.

Interlude: Body

The smartphone is a mirroring technology...

Representations of Black women's bodies in the media have long been fraught with damning stereotypes, misrepresentations, and distortions. Hazel Carby argues that the purpose of these stereotypes is 'not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations.'¹ These heavily circulated images have justified the mistreatment and violence enacted upon Black women.² As Moya Bailey writes in her seminal text *Misogynoir Transformed*, images of Black women 'can be distorted in ways that perpetuate misogynoir and ease the consciousness and line the pockets of everyone else.'³ These images and stereotypes are not only used to justify the mistreatment of Black women, but are also wrapped up with capitalism and commerce.

These abstracted misogynoiristic visual representations of Black women, contribute to a collective imagery of Black women's bodies. They demonstrate how ideas of Black women's bodies exist apart from Black women's physical selves. As Alrick Cambridge argues, 'The black body is not only a natural, physical body, but a political and cultural body upon the surface of which are already imprinted multiple historic subjections.' Cambridge described the Black body as 'a surface of traces', a 'mark of exclusive difference' and 'the basis upon which identification—and the claims to identity—can be formed.'⁴ Similarly, in Harvey

¹ Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 22.

² Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

³ Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 6.

⁴ Alrick Cambridge, "Black Body Politics," in *Where You Belong: Government and Black Culture*, ed. Alrick Cambridge, Stephan Feuchtwang, J. Clarke, and J. Eade (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 110.

Young's study on the Black body, he demonstrates that a figurative Black body exists outside of any literal one:

When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of *the black body*. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of a racializing projection.⁵

Cambridge and Young similarly articulate that the notion of a Black body is abstracted and devoid of any real truth; it is a conceptualisation that has been imprinted with meaning and symbols that have had narratives of antiblackness projected onto them. For Black women and femmes, the imagery attached to their Black bodies have been fuelled by misogynoir.

In a digital media context, misogynoir is mediated not only through individual behaviours and encounters, but also through internet technologies. In Safiya Noble's research on algorithms of oppression she argues that this bias is intentionally designed.⁶ Noble's research gave voice to experiences that I had long had when I read it in 2018. When I was in my teenage years, whenever I would search for something about Black girls on Google, I was confronted with pornographic and explicit images of Black women, as well as images that perpetuated harmful stereotypes; either these would appear, or the search would result in nothing. But I also remember that as a young girl, I would see these results (or lack of) and then simply close the page and move on, disturbed by the images, but not voicing anything, because ultimately and sadly, that was how I had been taught to see myself and my

⁵ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.

⁶ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

community. These were the images that had long been exposed to me. Bailey writes that ‘Misogynoir is the visual representation of anti-Black misogyny not only through caricature and false representations of Black women that inform how Black women are treated, but also through the omission of Black women and girls from view altogether.’⁷ Like many young Black girls who had come-of-age with the internet at their fingertips, misogynoir was fed to me.

For Black women and femmes whose bodied are effected by a dominant culture of misogynoir, policing, harm, and misrepresentations, digitally mediated selfies can transform a public self-image, subvert the photographic gaze, redefine and reclaim Black beauty. Ultimately, Instagram selfies have the capacity to intervene on the media industry’s ‘controlling images’ through a carefully constructed performance.⁸ However, being visible online does not automatically reduce the impact of harm, instead it risks making Black women and femmes susceptible to digitally mediated forms of misogynoir, such as being trolled, harassed by the alt-right, susceptible to algorithmic biases, and having their connect shadow banned.⁹

Melissa Harris-Perry discusses the strategies that Black women have undertaken to challenge negative images. She writes: ‘when they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up.’¹⁰

⁷ Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*, 6.

⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000 reis., New York: Routledge, 2009), 76.

⁹ Seyi Akiwowo, “Amnesty’s Latest Research Into Online Abuse Finally Confirms What Black Women Have Known For Over a Decade,” *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/amnesty-online-abuse-women-twitter_uk_5c1a0a2fe4b02d2cae8ea0c1; Feminista Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); Chanté Joseph, “Instagram’s murky ‘shadow bans’ just serve to censor marginalised communities,” *Guardian*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/08/instagram-shadow-bans-marginalised-communities-queer-plus-sized-bodies-sexually-suggestive>; Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*; Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Melissa Harris-Perry, “Black Women Are Standing in A Crooked Room,” *Jezebel*, January 19, 2012, <https://jezebel.com/black-women-are-standing-in-a-crooked-room-5873870>.

Harris-Perry's allegory of the crooked room represents the complex relationship that Black women might have with their misrepresentation in dominant media, and she articulates how finding oneself within this crooked room requires a balancing act of navigation and rearticulation in order to see 'which way is up'.¹¹ Similarly, Lorraine O'Grady recognises that to see oneself is a radical act of re-envisioning. She writes: 'To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us, this will not be easy. So long unmirrored in our true selves we may have forgotten how we look.'¹² Evoking Harris-Perry's allegory of the crooked room, O'Grady's concept of the 'unmirrored' recognises how dominant images of Black women have historically been distorted and unrepresentative of Black women's agency. It suggests that Black women have not had their own reflections presented in mainstream media. Therefore, in a culture of visual domination, I suggest that taking and curating selfies can be understood as a practice of confronting the crooked room to ultimately become mirrored. By taking selfies, Black women can assert their agency over their self-presentation and can disseminate their images on their own terms.

Building on O'Grady's use of 'unmirrored', I wish to argue that the smartphone is a form of *mirroring technology* whereby Black women can curate their self-images with their personal cameras, and then with the technological affordances offered – such as applications like Instagram and photo editing software – they can share these images in new ways. While Black women have been 'so long unmirrored' in Western media, the smartphone offers the potential to see ourselves and craft our image for the public in ways that we desire to be seen.¹³ Though not all the time, taking selfies can be an intimate practice of self-actualisation; it is an intimate act of looking at oneself, through the smartphone, to consciously curate how

¹¹ Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹² Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage* 20, no. 1 (1992):

14

¹³ O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid," 14.

you desire to be seen in the world. O’Grady centres the process of looking and being looked upon as sites of Black women’s performed resistance to visual domination. Extending this, visual studies scholar Janell Hobson recognises that ‘mirroring’ has been used as a visual device in Black feminist art to signal the practice of seeing and being seen. In the examples she provides, she notes how mirrors are used literally or figuratively to ‘[remind] viewers of the power of seeing and unseeing, of becoming and unbecoming.’¹⁴ In these Black feminist works, mirrors and mirroring challenges Black women’s lack of agency over their image in dominant media and circumvents this by centring their authorship in their own individual presentations.

Mirroring is a practice that articulates and prioritises selfhood. It is a call to be seen in the guise of one’s own creation. Evelyn Hammonds conceptualises mirroring as a method for ‘negating a legacy of silence’.¹⁵ To counter visual domination and the widespread erasure of Black women’s cultural production, simply *being visible* is not enough. Instead, Hammonds asserts that the ‘politics of articulation’ is a necessary requirement to counter the ‘politics of silence’.¹⁶ This politics of articulation is expressed through agency, self-actualisation, and self-definition. Like Hammonds, I argue that this is at the crux of mirroring. To mirror, is to communicate one’s selfhood. Conceptually, mirroring is a Black feminist approach to visual culture which signals how an articulation of self is a necessary intervention on the misrepresentations in media. With this in mind, I stand firm in my conceptualisation: the smartphone is a mirroring technology.

Our smartphones are a mirror of us. They not only reflect our desires, intimate communities, and interests, but they also offer us a means to engage in a practice of what

¹⁴ Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2005; reis., New York: Routledge, 2018), 116.

¹⁵ Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Subjectivity,” in *The Black Studies Reader*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel (New York: Routledge, 2004), 312.

¹⁶ Hammonds, “Black (W)holes,” 312.

Bailey refers to as ‘digital alchemy’. She describes digital alchemy as the ways that ‘Black women, and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks in particular transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media that recode the failed scripts that negatively impact their lives.’¹⁷ She continues, ‘digital alchemy shifts our attention from the negative stereotypes in digital culture to the redefinition of representations Black women are creating that provide another way of viewing their worlds.’¹⁸ Altogether through mirroring technologies and digital alchemy, those most marginalised can carefully construct our image to our own standards. However, I do not wish to argue that mirroring is concerned with ‘authentic’ and ‘truthful’ representations. Instead, I posit that mirroring is focused more on a process of self-idealisation, performance, and image construction.

Imagine yourself standing in front of a mirror; in some ways your reflection is the pinnacle of truth; an authentic, unwavering representation of yourself. However, it is not the actual mirror that creates that presentation, it is you – the actor – who assembles that image through whatever performed routine takes place when you stand before the mirror. You might adopt a poised stance, adjust your posture, elevate your chin, or adjust your gaze. You present yourself in the way that you want to be seen. When I use mirroring, I invite you to not only think of the materiality of the mirror technology – so in this case the smartphone – but also the performance that takes place in front of the mirror. Ultimately, mirroring describes a reflection of how Black women desire to be seen and desire to see themselves.

¹⁷ Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*, 24.

¹⁸ Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*, 24.

Chapter 4. You're Glowing Sis: #BlackGirlMagic Selfies, Light, and the Practice of Desire in Beauty Influencer Cultures

In September 2016 I uploaded a selfie onto my Instagram account and captioned it “[Princess emoji: medium-dark skin tone] always [Tulip emoji] #blackgirlmagic [Sparkles emoji]”.¹ At the time I was travelling in Thailand and was approaching the end of a two-month trip, so to bring the adventure to a close I was going to celebrate with the four Black

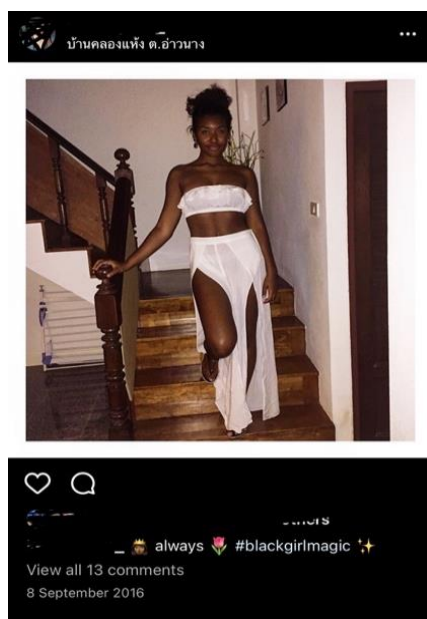


Figure 15. My #BlackGirlMagic selfie, posted to Instagram in September 2016. Screenshot by author.

mixed-race women who I had travelled with. In the intentionally posed photograph, I descend a staircase and my right hand is placed upon the wooden banister while my left falls flat to my side.² Purposely, there is limited lighting in the frame other than the flash of the smartphone camera which reflects on the glossy wooden staircase and the cream-coloured walls behind me. I am wearing a white two-piece loosely fitted trouser outfit that is split at the legs and my torso, arms, shoulders, and right leg are exposed to the light. My dark brown tanned skin glows responsively to the camera's flash (**Figure 15**). This

optical contrast of my brown skin juxtaposed against the stark white clothing and walls, and then illuminated by the camera light is the visual offering that I want to draw your attention to, for now.

When I uploaded this photograph onto my Instagram account, I had been reflecting on my experience travelling in Southeast Asia as a young Black woman and was attentive to the

¹ I use 'selfie' loosely to not only encompass photographs that people take of themselves, but also to include photographs whereby the subject of said photographs have been wholly involved in the presentation of themselves in the image.

² It is a vulnerable act to share a photograph of oneself to an audience who were never intended to see it.

multiple forms of racism and colourism I had encountered over the past two months. The former I had mostly been subjected to by white British travellers who I had met in travel groups, and the latter was from Thai locals who had expressed their disdain to darker skin tones, which were unattractive and undesirable to them. Yet, in the moment when I took the photograph with the help of a friend, I was in awe of my brown skin and its capacity to darken, glisten, and shine after only a few months of tropical sunlight.³ I wanted to proudly emphasise and capture this pride in my blackness and for me the visual glow of my dark skin symbolised that. When I uploaded the photograph onto Instagram, I sought to insert myself into a digital community of Black women, girls, and femmes where I could centre and celebrate my blackness through my self-image. So, when I captioned the image “[princess emoji: medium-dark skin tone] always [Tulip emoji] #blackgirlmagic [Sparkles emoji]”, I intentionally used the hashtag and the visual signifier of light by way of the sparkles emoji, to *position* myself as a Black woman, *see* myself as part of a diasporic community of Black women and femmes, and to ensure my followers *witnessed* my blackness as I stood in it confidently and radiantly. My selfie was a digitally intimate practice of being seen, seeing myself and reclaiming my self-image. I intentionally used the sparkles emoji to emphasise the glow of my skin tone as it responded to the camera light. Overall, within my Instagram post, which includes the photograph and the caption, I practiced visibility to counter invisibility.⁴

This invisibility that I experienced on this trip was felt through the ways that I was repeatedly marginalised and silenced. For the first leg of my trip, when I was part of a larger

³ Play: Beyoncé, Blue Ivy, SAINT JHN, WizKid, “BROWN SKIN GIRL,” track 15 on *The Lion King: The Gift*, Parkwood and Columbia Records, 2019, digital download.

⁴ The invisibility of Black women has been a reoccurring discussion in Black feminist literature as it relates to politics, social worlds, media, culture, and justice. For more, see: Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené, ed., *Loud Black Girls* (London: 4th Estate, 2021); Paula Cooze, “Poet Claudia Rankine: ‘The Invisibility of Black Women is Astounding’,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jun/29/poet-claudia-rankine-invisibility-black-women-everyday-racism-citizen>; bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982); Jane Tanner, “Bringing Visibility to Black British Women,” *Runnymede Trust*, June 11, 2017, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/bringing-visibility-to-black-british-women>; Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (reissued, 1978; London: Verso, 2015).

travel group, myself and my friend had to fight against the racist treatment we received from white British travellers, and our complaints were often ignored and brushed aside by the travel leads. On top of this, from the moment I stepped foot into the airport terminal upon arrival in Bangkok, I was greeted with giant billboards that advertised the ‘perfect skin’ via skin bleaching creams. In *Sister Outsider* Audre Lorde writes about the function of invisibility and visibility for Black women: ‘where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism.’⁵ Although Lorde’s articulation is specific to a U.S context, it is helpful to consider the entwined aspects of (in)visibility that I experienced when travelling. In the weeks that lead up my proud assertion of my #BlackGirlMagic, I was marked by the hypervisibility of being one of the only Black people in the room making me a target for misogynoir and mistreatment.

For me, my selfie and the context surrounding it embodied a visual politics of refusal.⁶ In my silent image and succinct sparkling caption, I refused the damaging discourse around blackness and darker skin tones that I had been routinely exposed to on my trip through everyday conversations, media, and misogynoir-fuelled harassment. Instead, as I refused to give voice to these experiences, I declared an act of unapologetic self-love and reclaimed my blackness and my beauty via my illuminated selfie. I used my Instagram selfie to curate digital diasporic intimacy as my use of lighting in the photograph and within my caption became an aesthetic resource that announced my presence online and I had felt that this would help insert me into a cultural aesthetic landscape of Black women and femmes who

⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984; reis., New York: Crossing Press, 2007), 42.

⁶ Tina Campt discusses how the politics of refusal can emerge in Black visual culture. She recognises it as a practice of refusing to explain, to accept dominant narratives, or to be silenced. For more, read: Tina Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal,” *Women & Performance*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt>.

were doing the same. Janell Hobson used the term ‘magical intervention’ to describe how Black women and femmes refuse dominant narratives and reclaim and rearticulate their selfhood and agency.⁷ Employing this term, my selfie *magically intervened* on the damaging dialogues surrounding blackness, Black femininity, and beauty that I had been exposed to during the months that I had dedicated to my leisure as I carved out my own digital ‘maroon landing site of respite.’⁸ I used the lighting in the photograph and the sparkles emoji in the caption to draw attention to the beauty of my dark skin, and I used the geotag of the Thai location to inform my followers that I was currently travelling, also the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag helped me to insert myself into a community of Black women and femmes who were similarly uplifting and celebrating themselves and one another. Collectively, I intended the post to read: *I am living confidently, leisurely, and freely in the fullness of my blackness and femme-ness*. Against the backdrop of antiblackness and misogynoir that I had experienced on my travels, this post reinvigorated my sense of pride as I visualised and embodied self-articulation and collective solidarity through the lighting and the social tools offered by Instagram’s platform. It was a magical intervention that resisted the dominant narratives that told me who I should be, how I should look and be looked upon, how I should feel about myself, and where I am able to exist.

Overall, my selfie spoke back to the negative encounters that I had experienced to reassert my agency and restore my confidence. Taking and uploading the photograph was an intimate practice of self-imaging and community building as it relied on unarticulated knowledges about the function of light for illuminating and accentuating the beauty of dark skin tones which I explain further within this chapter. While the post captured the intertwined facets of (in)visibility, self-articulation, and imagined community that I embodied as a travelling

⁷ Janell Hobson, “Foreword,” in *Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag: Twenty-First-Century Acts of Self-Definition*, ed. Julia S. Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), x.

⁸ Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 23.

young Black woman, it would be remiss to underestimate the ways that privilege and power by way of nation and capital are reinforced through travel and tourism,⁹ and how desirability politics and beauty agendas are reified within Instagram's digital space.¹⁰ While I was still doing this radical work of refusal, my slender figure and the way I displayed it through my clothing conformed to socially constructed values of desirability. Although for me, my post was a practice of a liberative Black beauty politic, in some ways it still leant into notions of dominant Western desirability politics because of the way that antiblackness, colourism, and fatphobia persists within society.¹¹ I recognise that by claiming my selfie to be a practice of a liberative beauty politic I risk contributing to the erasure of bodies most marginalised in dominant media. While this remains the case, my experiences of desirability and misogynoir have been marked by exoticisation, fetishization, and eroticisation as anti-Black misogyny takes many forms and is inflicted differently upon many bodies.¹² This is a complex discussion that I will continue to grapple with as I consider what digitally mediated selfies can tell us about desire, community, selfhood, and diasporic intimacies.

Method and Chapter Outline

Departing from my own selfie, in this chapter I explore how digital diasporic intimacy can be produced through self-imaging on social media. I focus on selfies of Black women that

⁹ Patricia de Santana Pinho, *Mapping Diaspora: African American Roots Tourism in Brazil* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2018); Bianca C. Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Janell Hobson, "Black Beauty and Digital Spaces: The New Visibility," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 10 (2016), <https://doi.org/7264/N39C6VQK>.

¹¹ The degradation and dehumanisation of fat Black women's bodies is a form of misogynoir which has harmful effects that can be seen across society in media, healthcare, and social worlds. For more, read: Tori Justin, "Fear, Freaks, and Fat Phobia: An Examination of How My 600lbs Life Displays "Fat" Black Women," *Feminist Media Studies* (2021): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1999296>; Terah J. Stewart and Roshaunda L. Breedan, "'Feeling Good As Hell': Black Women and the Nuances of Fat Resistance," *Fat Studies* 10, no. 3 (2021): 221-236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2021.1907964>; Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019);

¹² Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*.

have been uploaded to Instagram to understand how diasporic intimacies might be tied to visual displays of self-articulation, processes of seeing oneself and being seen, and collective celebrations of Black beauty. #BlackGirlMagic offers an important methodological framework for this chapter. I had followed the hashtag on Instagram for a few years prior to the original research period and so I was already familiar with its use to categorise and share selfies. Sourcing selfies through the hashtag meant that I was able to locate an array of selfies outside of my immediate, private social network. Every morning, between the hours of 9am and 10am, during July and August in 2019 I logged onto my Instagram account and searched the results for the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic and then documented the top five posts of the day determined by Instagram's automatically generated algorithms in the Top Posts feed, this resulted in a total of three hundred and ten posts.¹³ I then manually documented the selfies and photographs of Black women that appeared within this selection which resulted in a series of selfies from people who were in different countries around the world.¹⁴

Many of the #BlackGirlMagic selfies that emerged from this research period were uploaded by Black Instagram influencers and this reflects the current climate of Instagram where influencer culture, entertainment, and personal branding are entwined.¹⁵ Borrowing Wesley E. Stevens' definition of Black influencers to describe them as those who 'explicitly recognize Black identity as part of their self-promotional strategies, content, or audiences', I read influencer selfies to discuss the relationship between diasporic intimacies, entrepreneurship, commodification, and racial economies of beauty, as well as the power

¹³ Most of the time, the hashtag was featured in a separate comment under the selfie, left by the Instagrammer, and were not featured in the caption. Using hashtags in this way means that Instagrammer's can make use of the caption and hashtags that will categorise their posts separately.

¹⁴ Many of the Instagrammers used geotags as a digital tool to locate themselves. Although not all posts were geotagged, many of them tagged countries, cities, and places in the caption. The posts dominantly derived from the United States, other popular countries included France, Sweden, Canada, Namibia, Nigeria, and Brazil. Overall, the posts revealed that the tag was being used across a minimum of five continents.

¹⁵ Rendan Liu and Ayoung Suh, "Self-Branding on Social Media: An Analysis of Style Bloggers on Instagram," paper presented at the 4th Information Systems International Conference, Bali, Indonesia, November 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2017.12.124>.

dynamics of desirability politics.¹⁶ After I compiled the selection of selfies and engaged a preliminary reading of the reoccurring aesthetics within and compositions of the photographs, their captions, and the hashtags that had been used to share them publicly, I noticed that light was being used as a visual and discursive resource in the photographs in fun and illuminating ways. And not only this, but the hashtags that were frequently positioned alongside #BlackGirlMagic also rhetorically denoted light to symbolise the essence of Black beauty. I was reminded of my own Instagram photo that I uploaded three years prior, and remembered how within the composition of that selfie, I wielded light as a diasporic resource and as a practice of visibility. Drawing from this and my general awareness of the use of light in photographs of Black people, this chapter emerged as I wanted to understand why the use of light was a reoccurring practice featured in Black women's selfies.

Drawing on this selection of diasporic Black women's Instagram selfies, I argue that light and lighting can be used in social media photography as a cultural and embodied resource to challenge scripts of beauty politics. I read the composition of these selfies alongside their captions and use of hashtags to explore how digital diasporic intimacy can be curated through self-presentation on Instagram. I accompany my reading of the selfies with their captions because these discursively structure the way that the Instagrammer wish to be seen. Captions are the primary method for Instagrammers to build, maintain, and interact with their online community. Within the captions, the semantic field of light, including words and emojis that signify the presence of light, such as "glow", "shine", and "sun", are commonly used, and this illustrates how light is used as a community building strategy centred around celebration, empowerment, and solidarity. I am interested in how this illuminating practice extends the visual vocabulary of #BlackGirlMagic to portray embodied forms of resistance and self-

¹⁶ Wesley E. Stevens, "Black Influencers: Interrogating the Racialization and Commodification of Digital Labour," PhD Diss., (Temple University, 2022), 31.

imaging, and then how it shapes and is shaped by neoliberal individualism and influencer cultures. Attentive to this relationship between light, blackness, and self-images, this chapter asks: how might the practice of taking selfies be understood as an intimate practice of self-imaging? How is light and lighting used visually and discursively within these selfies to curate a digital diasporic intimacy that is centred on processes of self-visualising and collective celebrations of blackness? And is it possible for digital diasporic intimacy to be curated within neoliberal cultures of influencers and commodification?

Though I focus specifically on light and lighting as a signifier of digital diasporic intimacy, the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic plays an important role in this chapter as it offers a methodological and contextual framework of the selfies. As such, in the following section I offer a brief overview of the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag and its relationship to selfies and influencer cultures. In this section I address the relationship between the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag and influencer culture to demonstrate how commodification and neoliberalism are entwined within the two. Afterwards, I offer a contextual discussion on the history and use of lighting within Black visual culture, as well as the social function of self-imaging as a practice of diasporic intimacy. Drawing on Krista Thompson's seminal research on the visual economy in light in Black diasporic visual cultures, I similarly argue that light is a diasporic resource that signals a culture of seeing and being seen.¹⁷ I demonstrate how the selfies build upon visual practices that have long been engaged within Black communities to argue that although they are enmeshed with neoliberal regimes, they still contribute to a long history of Black visual cultures.

Finally, drawing from examples, I argue that the visual and rhetorical use of light – aesthetically within the photographs, symbolised using emojis in the caption, and mentioned

¹⁷ Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diaspora Aesthetic Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

rhetorically through hashtags and captions, – adds to a culturally-coded repertoire of illumination that celebrates Black beauty and empowers Black visibility. I demonstrate how the visual composition of the photographs, including the use of lighting, communicates a desire to be seen and reclaims Black women’s agency in their image production. I also briefly discuss how the use of hashtags to share these selfies similarly communicates a desire to establish digital diasporic intimacy. However, I also consider how Instagram exposure does not necessarily equate the existence of an intimate digital community because of the proliferation of neoliberalism. I argue that the visual and rhetorical use of light and lighting across these Instagram selfies demonstrates how intimacy is curated through a celebration of Black beauty, however I also critically engage with the ways that desirability politics and neoliberalism are shaped by and shape the social media platform and influencer culture.

#BlackGirlMagic, Beauty Economies, and Influencer Culture

The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic first emerged on Twitter approximately one year after Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded the viral political hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. As a cultural movement, #BlackGirlMagic was intended to celebrate and elevate the everyday experiences of Black women, femmes, and girls during a time where mass digital attention focused on the social, political, and historical injustices faced by Black people. While ideas of a Black girl’s magic is a phrase that has been returned to within Black feminist literature, the popular digital iteration of the phrase was coined in 2013 by CaShawn Thompson who tweeted that ‘Black girls are magic’.¹⁸ Thompson’s intention in her tweet was

¹⁸ Black feminist literature has used the phrase ‘Black girl magic’ to denote a spiritual, ancestral, and creative reservoir of energy that has the capacity for resistance, transformation, and self-love. For more, see: Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 36-37; Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1999), 93; Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (London: The Woman’s Press, 1984), 241-242;

to ‘uplift and praise the accomplishments, beauty and other amazing qualities of Black women’, and shortly afterwards the phrase was shortened into the viral hashtag #BlackGirlMagic that intended to do the same.¹⁹ After the widespread proliferation of the hashtag which saw Black women and femmes using it to celebrate their achievements, beauty, and community, it quickly became embroiled in legal battles around copyright and corporate ownership as the phrase was used to sell merchandise and cultural products.²⁰ Despite the hashtag’s commercialisation, commodification, and co-optation, #BlackGirlMagic had enabled Black women and femmes to curate digital diasporic intimacies based on the celebration of blackness and its use to create a space for restorative justice through cultural reformation is something which transcended into offline spaces.²¹

On Instagram the hashtag has primarily been used to share selfies and other material that people felt visually embodied #BlackGirlMagic. However, over the years it has increasingly been used as an algorithmic tool to increase posts’ exposure and to promote businesses, and this coincides with the increased commercialisation of the phrase.²² Back in 2016, I had used the hashtag to share my selfie on Instagram to contribute to and convey a radical attitude of refusal and intervention while celebrating my blackness, yet today the hashtag is frequently

¹⁹ CaShawn Thompson, “Bio,” accessed April 12, 2021, <http://cashawn.com>.

²⁰ Shortly after the widespread usage of #BlackGirlMagic, Thompson started to produce and sell t-shirts and sweaters with the phrase ‘Black Girls are Magic’ printed across them. Despite starting the social media movement, Thompson did not trademark the phrase and in 2014, Beverly Bond, the founder of *Black Girls Rock!* registered to trademark the phrase. In 2016, Essence also attempted to trademark the phrase as ‘Essence Black Girl Magic’. In the midst of this legal dispute Thompson’s creative production was erased, and the social movement had been embroiled in commercialisation. For more on this read: Corinne Coleman, “Trademarks and Social Media Movements: #BlackGirlMagic,” *Funderburg Law*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.funderburglaw.com/trademarks-and-social-media-movements-blackgirlmagic>; Clover Hope, “Who Gets to Own ‘Black Girl Magic’?”, *Jezebel*, April 7, 2017, <https://jezebel.com/who-gets-to-own-black-girl-magic-1793924053>.

²¹ Aria S. Halliday and Nadia E. Brown, “The Power of Black Girl Magic Anthems: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and “Feeling Myself” as Political Empowerment,” *Souls* 20, no. 2 (2018): 222-238, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2018.1520067>; Alude Mahali, “‘Without Community There is No Liberation’: On #BlackGirlMagic and the Rise of Black Women-Centred Collectives in South Africa,” *Agenda* 31, no. 1 (2017): 28-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2017.1351093>.

²² While the hashtag was created in 2013, by the beginning of summer 2019 there were 15 million posts shared using #BlackGirlMagic on Instagram, at the end of that summer there were 18 million, and two years later, by the end of summer 2021, the number was rapidly approaching 30 million. This vast increase in shares using the hashtag is indicative of the ways that the tag has been used irrespective of its original aims, but to increase exposure of Instagram posts.

accompanied with a myriad of other hashtags which discursively categorise Instagram posts. The use of a variety of hashtags on posts not only help to diversify the meanings of the posts, but it also helps to ‘support visibility engineering’ by exploiting Instagram’s algorithms to maximise exposure.²³ Furthermore, it also demonstrates the existence of visual marketability and self-branding.²⁴

Although as a platform affordance, hashtags can help Instagram users access and exploit social media’s ‘attention economy’, this does not necessarily mean that they are always stripped of their socio-political meanings.²⁵ For Black women and femmes, hashtags can serve ‘as a site for redefinition.’²⁶ Kandace L. Harris argues that hashtags are important for Black women Instagram users who want to use them to facilitate identity construction and engage in practices of community building. She argues that the intentional use of hashtags allows Black women to participate in community building and writes that knowing how to utilise these platform tools can not only raise ‘awareness of and add value and relevancy to [Instagrammers’] individual brand[s],’ but also contributes to creating a ‘collective message and/or narrative.’²⁷ In the case of #BlackGirlMagic, selfies that utilise the hashtag are constructing a brand of Black womanhood that celebrates and constructs collective images of Black beauty. However, this brand has been critiqued for its displays of Black exceptionalism and for its function in (re)territorialising Black beauty standards in unproductive ways.²⁸

²³ Kelley Cotter, “Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 4 (2019): 902.

²⁴ Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, “Self-Branding, ‘Micro-Celebrity’ and the Rise of Social Media Influencers,” *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017): 191-208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>.

²⁵ Asher Joy, “The Attention Economy: Where the Customer Becomes the Product,” *Business Today*, February 18, 2021, <https://journal.bustoday.org/bt-online/2021/the-attention-economy-asher-joy>.

²⁶ Ololade S. Hassan, “#Melanin: How Have Dark-Skinned Black Women Engaged in Social Media Hashtags to Affirm, Validate and Celebrate Their Beauty,” PhD Diss., (Georgia State University, 2018), 44.

²⁷ Kandace L. Harris, “‘Follow Me on Instagram’: ‘Best Self’ Identity Construction and Gaze Through Hashtag Activism and Selfie Self-Love,” in *Women of Color and Social Media Multitasking: Blogs, Timelines, Feeds, and Community*, ed. Keisha Edwards Tassie and Sonja M. Brown Givens (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 136.

²⁸ Linda Chavers, “Here’s My Problem With #BlackGirlsMagic,” *Elle*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.elle.com/life-love/a33180/why-i-dont-love-blackgirlmagic/>; Hobson, “Black Beauty and Digital Spaces,”.

In their research on the relationship between digital communities and commodity, Kreps and Pearson argue that social networking sites ‘are no longer hobby activities but large commercial enterprises.’²⁹ Digital communities can produce resources that can be exploited, and the commodification and neoliberal absorption of #BlackGirlMagic illustrates this. However, while the commodification of the hashtag has become inescapable on social media platforms, this does not entirely reduce its function as a cultural intervention on images of Black women and femmes and a tool for empowerment.³⁰ In Wesley E. Stevens’ research on Black influencer cultures, she contends with the duality of hashtags which can both function as counternarratives and as commodified resources. She writes that while hashtags ‘allow marginalized groups to create, shape, and circulate narratives about issues facing their communities [...] the popular currency of hashtags (i.e., their ability to “trend”) makes it easy for corporations, competing voices, and users with larger followings to access, use, and distribute the tag in question, spotlighting their own voices at the expense of the initial group.’³¹ Stevens wrestles with the doubleness of hashtag usage, and writes that those with large followings, which includes Black influencers, can also contribute to the dilution of socio-political hashtags. This can lead to implications such as those I mentioned above, including the reiteration of desirability politics, beauty standards, and the reification of heteronormativity and ableism. These critiques generate important questions regarding processes of being seen on Instagram and how the use of #BlackGirlMagic in Instagram

²⁹ David Kreps and Erika Pearson, “Community as Commodity: Social Networking and Transnational Capitalism,” in *Virtual Social Networks: Mediated, Massive, and Multiplayer Sites*, ed. Niki Panteli (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 166.

³⁰ Researchers have written about the relationship between Black empowerment, entrepreneurship, and capitalism, and the following have argued that the presence of capitalism does not negate the cultural work taking place, instead we must critique it in a nuanced way that allows for the existence of both, but acknowledges the implications of neoliberalism: Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Taylor Leigh Tate, “Contemporary Love Stories: Love in the Trap, Hookup and Consumer Culture,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1-2 (2022): 292-307.

³¹ Wesley E. Stevens, “Blackfishing on Instagram: Influencing and Commodification of Black Urban Aesthetics,” *Social Media + Society* (2021): 2.

selfies might communicate more about digital exposure, neoliberalism, influencer cultures, and beauty politics than they do about a desire for curating digital diasporic intimacy.

Throughout this chapter I grapple with this context as I explore the ways that digital diasporic intimacies are mediated through but are also in opposition to self-branding on social media.

Selfies, Lighting, and Black Diasporic Visual Cultures

Throughout Black histories, self-portraiture and self-imaging have been important aspects of visual and aesthetic cultures that have been used to affirm Black self-hood, celebrate Black beauty, and honour Black agency.³² This counters a long history of Black portraiture and imagery that has been used to justify the harm and violence inflicted upon Black women and their bodies.³³ For instance, in *Venus in the Dark*, Janell Hobson locates the ill treatment and visualisation of Saartjie Baartman within a contemporary imaginary and imagery of Black women's bodies, not to negate the differences within Black women's experiences, but to 'interrelate us within the rubrics of a diasporic community of "blackness"' for those 'with a shared history of racial and sexual objectification and embodied resistance'.³⁴ Although Hobson recognises the differences between Black people, she acknowledges how Black visual subjugation has been shaped by colonial histories of race, science, photography, and imagery. As a challenge to these histories of visual oppression, the misrepresentations and

³² Alexis S. McCurn, "'Keeping It Fresh': How Young Black Women Negotiate Self-Representation and Controlling Images in Urban Space," *City & Community* 17, no. 1 (2018): 134-149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12274>; James Smalls, "African-American Self-Portraiture: Repair, Reclamation, Redemption," *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001): 47-62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576899>.

³³ Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 24.

³⁴ Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2005; reis., New York: Routledge, 2018), xiii.

distorted images in the media, antiblackness and misogynoir, self-imaging, self-visualisation, and self-portraiture redefine Black identity and are a tool of self-affirmation.³⁵

Self-portraiture visually communicates desire and performances of selfhood. In *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, Leigh Raiford argues that ‘Black photographic self-representation must be understood then as a constant dialectic between private and public, personal and political, fiction and biography.’³⁶ Raiford asserts that Black self-images are not simply images, but are entwined with aspirations, intentions, longing, and community. She writes that visualising Black freedom is ‘a performative kind of work. Performative in that it’s iterative,’ and continues to posit that ‘a lot of Black practices of photography are often really invested in the project of enacting something.’³⁷ Centring performance and intentionality, Raiford’s articulations are important as they illuminate how desire is entangled within the creation of self-images. Desire manifests in both the longing to be seen as well as through the presentation of how one wants to be seen.

Although self-imaging has long been a practice of self-affirmation across diasporic Black cultures, the rise of Instagram has popularised the medium of photographic self-portraiture into a global phenomenon. Both Instagram and selfies, have challenged hierarchal notions of image production, branding and marketing, as they enable anybody with access to a smartphone and the internet to ‘reclaim photography as a source of empowerment.’³⁸ Some

³⁵ Self-portraiture has long been used as a Black freedom practice. For example, in the 1860s Sojourner Truth sold her portraits to fund her abolitionist work, titling them “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance.” For more on how photography has been used to challenge dominant misrepresentations of Black people read: Samantha Hill, “How Black People in the 19th Century Used Photography as a Tool for Social Change,” *The Conversation*, February 26, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-black-people-in-the-19th-century-used-photography-as-a-tool-for-social-change-154721>; Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 15.

³⁷ Hrag Vartanian, “How Do We Photograph Freedom? A Conversation with Leigh Raiford,” *Hyperallergic*, June 21, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/572314/photographs-freedom-liegh-raiford/>.

³⁸ Sarah Gervais, “Does Instagram Promote Positive Body Image,” *Psychology Today*, January 22, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/power-and-prejudice/201301/does-instagram-promote-positive-body-image>.

social media researchers and bloggers have argued that Instagram's focus on self-representation and self-branding evidences a culture of narcissism and is a behaviour that entices competition rather than community building.³⁹ However, this viewpoint has been contested by gender and sexuality scholars who argue for the potential of Instagram as a tool where people can subvert the dominant visual gaze.⁴⁰ For Black women, whose public body has been 'marked' by misogynoiristic representations,⁴¹ Instagram selfies can be used as a tool to subvert the photographic gaze, redefine Black femininity, express Black agency and selfhood, and create digital community.⁴² For example, Harris notes how Black women use Instagram selfies to redefine beauty norms and 'celebrate self in communities of difference.'⁴³ In addition, Tiera Chanté Tanksley centres the platform's affordances in her research on the ways that Black girls' selfies challenge misogynoir. She writes that Instagram's 'malleable, minimalist structure likely contributes to its popularity as a site of quick-witted image critique.' She continues, 'by offering a platform that resembles a more user-driven TV screen, Instagram can readily be operationalized as a tool to critique, remix, and respond to what were one inaccessible, unalterable TV images.'⁴⁴ Tanksley's articulation is useful as it posits that it is not only selfies that do this work, but also the platform.

Instagram selfies are playful, and often sporadic, presentations of the self that announce one's existence in cyberspace. As Erin Tatum puts it: 'Selfies challenge the idea that you

³⁹ Jang Ho Moon, et al., "The role of narcissism in self-promotion on Instagram," *Personality and Individual Differences* 101 (2016): 22-25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.05.042>; David G. Taylor, "Putting the 'Self' in Selfies: How Narcissism, Envy and Self-Promotion Motivate Sharing of Travel Photos Through Social Media," *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 37, no. 1 (2020): 64-77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2020.1711847>; Jessica Winter, "Selfie-Loathing," *Slate*, July 23, 2013, <https://slate.com/technology/2013/07/instagram-and-self-esteem-why-the-photo-sharing-network-is-even-more-depressing-than-facebook.html>.

⁴⁰ Cat Mahoney, "Is This What a Feminist Looks Like? Curating the Feminist Self in the Neoliberal Visual Economy of Instagram," *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1810732>.

⁴¹ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

⁴² Hassan, "#Melanin,".

⁴³ Harris, "Follow Me," 140.

⁴⁴ Tiera Chanté Tanksley, "Education, Representation, and Resistance: Black Girls in Popular Instagram Memes," in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 248.

need a justification to be seen'.⁴⁵ While Black self-portraiture has been used as an intentional visual medium to intervene on misrepresentation and reclaim Black agency, selfies are quotidian images uploaded onto Instagram for a variety of reasons, including just for fun. Tatum recognises that selfies as a medium often used by women and argues that because of this the critical discourse of selfies harbours misogyny. She notes that in Western societies 'we romanticize self-loathing in women as an indicator of extreme virtue', and she suggests that selfies challenge this as they enable women to create their own representations of themselves, rather than those scripted by a patriarchal, misogynistic society.⁴⁶ While Tatum's analysis of selfies is useful as it centres agency and self-representation, she does not account for the ways that misogynoir specifically effects Black women, and how Instagram reifies a beauty politics that centres whiteness.

Similarly understanding the ways that selfies enact a process of recreating images in a culture of dominant visual narratives, in *The Selfie Generation*, Alicia Eler defines the selfie as, amongst other things, 'an embodiment of surveillance culture' as they can be interpreted as an attempt to regulate one's own image in a culture of surveillance.⁴⁷ While I agree that this is an important function of the selfie, Eler's analysis of selfie-culture lacks an intersectional analysis of the ways that antiblackness, anti-queerness, and misogynoir are coded within surveillance culture and the policing of women's bodies. As Simone Browne writes in *Dark Matters*, 'surveillance is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness'.⁴⁸ On the internet where Black femme bodies are under surveillance, policed, and scrutinised, shadow-banning and misogynoir fuel the policing of Black femme bodies. Browne coins the term 'dark sousveillance' to refer to a 'site of critique' which 'speaks to

⁴⁵ Erin Tatum, "Selfies and Misogyny: The Importance of Selfies as Self-Love," *Everyday Feminism*, April 28, 2014, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/04/selfies-as-self-love/>.

⁴⁶ Tatum, "Selfies and Misogyny".

⁴⁷ Alicia Eler, *The Selfie Generation: How our self-images are changing our notions of privacy, sex, consent, and culture* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017), x.

⁴⁸ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

black epistemologies of contending with antiblack surveillance'.⁴⁹ It is a practice of subversion, co-optation, and appropriation where tools of antiblack surveillance are reconfigured to facilitate cultural survival. I propose that hashtags which encourage Black folk to upload selfies such as #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackBoyJoy, and #BlackOutDay, are forms of dark sousveillance as they use the tools of surveillance (the hashtag and the selfie) to challenge dominant media misrepresentations of Black folk, create digital collages of the vibrancy of Black life, and saturate the digital public with counterimages of Black folk as a way to practice 'unapologetic black self-love'.⁵⁰

In Janell Hobson's study on blackness, beauty and popular culture, she argues that because Black women have been marginalised and excluded from wider celebrations of beauty and femininity, 'beauty becomes a significant site for political resistance and aesthetic transformation in which black women, whose beauty has been contested in dominant culture, strive to redefine their bodies by means of reasserting their womanhood and, possibly, their humanity.'⁵¹ This practice of redefinition is an affective visual practice that articulates desire. Applying this context to Instagram, Harris argues that the mastery of choice of hashtags combined with appealing visuals 'are fundamental to conveying the narrative imagery of our sometimes silenced, or ignored, voices and promotion of an act of understanding through presentation of "maximised perception" of our "selves".'⁵² Instagram is about posting images of your "best self" and sometimes this means concealing truths, however for Black women this can be an effective means to create a counternarrative of Black womanhood and resist the dominant gaze. It centres desire, curates personal modes of seeing and being seen, and enables a connection to a wider community through hashtags and visual signifiers.

⁴⁹ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 21.

⁵⁰ Kwanzaa Imani, "the power of the selfie: #blackoutday and the need for unapologetic black self-love,' *For Harriet*, March 17, 2015, <http://www.forharriet.com/2015/03/the-power-of-selfie-blackoutday-and.html>.

⁵¹ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 7.

⁵² Kandace L. Harris, "Follow Me on Instagram," 141.

While self-imaging and photography offer opportunities for liberation, the physical technologies still contain bias and assume whiteness as the default.⁵³ As Raiford writes, antiblackness is ‘imbued in the technology, in the apparatus, and to a certain extent in the photograph itself.’⁵⁴ One way that this is evident is through the lighting technologies present within cameras.

Discussions of racial bias within photography and film have long emphasised how the lighting within these technologies have privileged the representation of whiteness, as a result photography has been used as medium to uphold whiteness as the universal norm and have been used to evidence the beauty of lighter skin tones.⁵⁵ Kodak’s Shirley Cards are an example of photography’s standardisation of lighter skin tones. First developed in the 1950s, the cards which pictured a white woman, were used to configure the camera lighting, and calibrate skin tones and shadows in the printing process. As a result of this technological bias, oftentimes Black people have found themselves captured by the camera in a presentation of what Syreeta McFadden refers to as ‘flattened blackness’: where the textures of our complexion are reduced to a dark, matte, unidentifiable outline.⁵⁶

In the mid-1990s, Kodak released a multiracial Shirley Card which featured a white woman, an Asian woman, and a Black woman. Despite this seemingly progressive step forward in camera technologies, conversations about photographic lighting and dark skin tones are still present today. For example, in 2020, U.S. gymnast Simone Biles was photographed by white photographer, Annie Leibovitz, for her cover on Vogue magazine.

⁵³ Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

⁵⁴ Vartanian, “How Do We Photograph Freedom?”.

⁵⁵ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (reis., 1997; New York: Routledge, 2013); bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995); Sarah Lewis, “The Racial Bias Built into Photography,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/lens/sarah-lewis-racial-bias-photography.html>; Lorna Roth, “Making Skin Visible Through Liberatory Design,” in *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*, ed. Ruha Benjamin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 275-307.

⁵⁶ Syreeta McFadden, “Teaching the Camera to See My Skin,” *Buzzfeed News*, April 3, 2014, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/syreeta-mcfadden/teaching-the-camera-to-see-my-skin>.

The published images were heavily criticised by many Black Twitter users because of the way that Biles' dark brown skin appeared washed out and flattened because of the bad lighting.⁵⁷ While camera conglomerates have attempted to adjust their technological configurations to account for darker skin tones, many Black Twitter users expressed the importance of having Black photographers behind the camera to authentically capture the dynamic textures and beauty of dark skin. It is not only the technologies but also the techniques used when photographing Black people which reveal what bell hooks refers to as a 'colonizing aesthetic.'⁵⁸

While poor lighting, the absence of light, and racial bias in camera technologies have been a tool of photographic subjugation for Black folk, light has also been used in Black visual culture as a diasporic visual practice that communicates desires to be seen. In Krista Thompson's study of African diasporic visual cultures, she explores the way that visual technologies mediate how the African diaspora imagine themselves as part of a transnational community. Concerned with the centrality of visual technologies in cultural expressions across the U.S and Caribbean, Thompson concludes that it is the light which centres these technologies, such as the video light, camera flashes, and representation of light in street art, which 'has the power to bring geographic transcendence and social ascendance' for the Black diaspora.⁵⁹ She argues that practice of seeking out the light in diasporic visual culture is a desire being seen and thus it communicates the longing to be visible, to have one's image circulated, and thus, become known. Thompson highlights the role that geographical transcendence and social ascendance has within this visual practice and acknowledges how light enables this. She writes that those 'in the African diaspora who engage in these practices

⁵⁷ J'na Jefferson, "Annie Leibovitz Bashed for Simone Biles' Vogue Photos, Fans and Critics Call for More Black Photographers," *The Root*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.theroot.com/annie-leibovitz-bashed-for-simone-biles-vogue-photos-f-1844375368>.

⁵⁸ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 62.

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Shine*, 6.

have created their own visual economy, a shared system of value that circulates across geographical boundaries and that revolves in part around the visual production and recognition of light.’⁶⁰

The visual economy of light is an important precedent to ground my articulation of the use of light in Black women’s Instagram selfies. Borrowing from Thompson, I similarly argue that light and lighting are used within the composition of these selfies to practice visibility, and I also argue that it is used as a cultural resource which celebrates Black beauty and encodes digital diasporic intimacy.

Light/Lighting Illuminates Black Beauty

In Syreeta McFadden’s essay on light and photography, she eloquently posits that ‘photography is balancing an equation between light and documentary. Beauty and storytelling. Honesty and fantasy.’⁶¹ Her description of photography centralises light in the production of images and the creation of meaning and understands this to be a portrayal of desire, creativity, and imagination. However, she also grapples with the ways that dominant notions of beauty and fantasy have been constructed by way of camera light which has long resulted in bestial representations of Black people. If then, as McFadden suggests, the frame ‘says how the photographer sees you’, then within the selfie medium where people are individually in control of how they are seen, the frame communicates how you wish to see yourself and how you want to be seen by others.⁶² It is a practice of desire that is entangled with visibility. In this section I argue that lighting, featured within the selfies’ frames, can

⁶⁰ Thompson, *Shine*, 24.

⁶¹ McFadden, “Teaching the Camera”.

⁶² McFadden, “Teaching the Camera”.

reorganise diasporic imaginations as it relates to fantasy, and storytelling. In these selfies, light communicates Black beauty.

Light and lighting is an illuminating technique. I offer this provocation to provide a way to begin to think through the ways that light can be used in selfies to command attention and encourage viewers to focus on certain features of Black beauty, such as emphasising brown skin tone and glossy lips. When light is signalled in the caption of these selfies, it albeit unintentionally, references the racist history of lighting dark skin tones in photography and challenges meanings about beauty and desire. I argue that digital diasporic intimacy is curated when lighting is used to affectively engage with one another and signify upon processes that render Black beauty visible.

While a range of different emojis are used to caption the selfies, one is frequently featured within the Instagram captions, and I argue that this has become symbolic of Black beauty and darker skin tones. The *sparkles emoji* - the three yellow stars positioned so that they evoke a glittery flash of light – when attached to these selfies signifies more than a pictorial image of glittery flashes; rather, it symbolises light and lighting as it relates to diasporic celebrations of Black beauty. The three captions below, posted by influencers based in the U.S and Canada, illustrate some of the ways that the emoji does this:

“puff puff [Sparkles emoji]” (@abbyjahaira)

“S K I N [Sparkles emoji]” (@Khadija.Omarr)

“golden [Sparkles emoji]” (@janeebarbre)

In these examples, the sparkles accompany short, direct nouns that point to specific features of the influencers; bodily features that are central to thinking about the construction of beauty ideals. For instance, @abbyjahaira’s caption “puff puff [Sparkles emoji]”, draws attention to

her hair which is styled into a high afro puff and composes half of the selfie's frame. The repetition in the caption emphasises this natural afro hairstyle and highlights the volume of her hair. While there is no direct source of lighting within the photograph, nor is there any specific use of visual lighting, light is used symbolically within the caption, via the emoji, to signal her hair texture. I propose that in this example the emoji is used as a discursive spotlight to locate her hair as central to the selfie, thus she uses the meaning of light to elevate her blackness and her beauty. While the study of emoji usage in Black digital communities is under-researched, it is useful to explore this quintessential mode of online communication specifically for Black internet users because of the ways that Black orality subverts and encodes meaning.⁶³ In this case, the emoji is used as a diasporic symbol for beauty.

While the emoji visually captures the relationship between light and Black beauty, it can also be used to represent the role that lighting has in the construction of these selfies. Canadian blogger, @khadija.omarr's caption, "S K I N [Sparkles emoji]" uses the emoji to direct her viewers to appreciate the tones of her brown skin, but it simultaneously symbolises the sunlight which provides her selfie with texture and a glow. Khadija uses the natural sunlight as a visual tool to illuminate and soften the textures of her skin tone. Purposefully, she takes the photo at what appears to be a window, allowing the sunlight to gently fall on her, and as a result encloses the background in darkness. Her orange headscarf contrasts with her dark blue t-shirt to blend with and accentuate her skin complexion. As the sunlight falls onto the headscarf, it further highlights the amber glow of her skin. This use of lighting – the sunlight that glows from her clothing and skin complexion – is a strategy that centres her within the camera frame (**Figure 16**). Shadows fall intentionally around the circumference of

⁶³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

her face to illuminate the bridge of her nose, mouth and cheek bone, and her natural-look make-up brightens her eyes and lips. While her emoji instructs viewers to gaze upon her glowing skin, it also alludes to lighting which contributes to the natural look she has constructed through the colour palette of her clothing and her earth tone make-up. Light and lighting are fundamental for her selfie. They work concurrently via the emoji and the sunlight to accentuate her beauty as it relates to her brown skin. Using light to emphasise this natural glow of brown skin is a marked visual characteristic of many of these selfies.

The selfie that accompanies the caption “golden [Sparkles emoji]” also signals a natural glow aesthetic. While it does not initially seem to point to a particular feature like the above two captions, closer engagement with the selfie shows that it points simultaneously to her hair, skin, and the lighting. In the image @janeebarbre, an influencer from Atlanta, Georgia, sits on the stairs outside of a house and her loose brown curls compliment her skin tone which is a similar complexion (**Figure 17**). Sunlight shines through the unseen trees and bounces off her exposed legs and arms. “Golden” then appears to refer to her skin complexion and hair colour, but it can also refer to the role that the sunlight has in emphasising these brown hues.

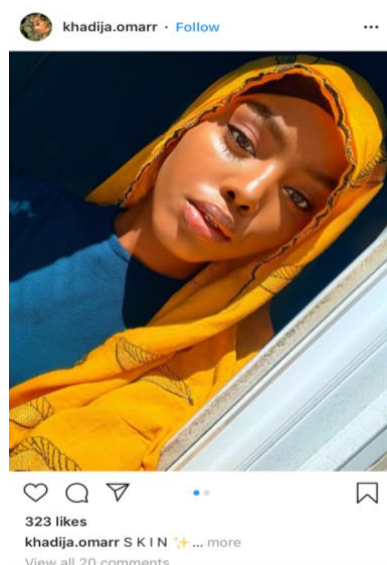


Figure 16. @Khadija.Omarr’s #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. (Screenshot by author).



Figure 17. @JaneeBarbre’s #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. (Screenshot by author).

A similar lighting technique is used in @CallHerTink's selfie, who was then known as @asianfongg. In her selfie, the sunlight glows through the window, and the shadows from the frame are cast across her face. Her brown skin, the bridge and tip of her nose, and her glossy lips are brought to the forefront of the selfie, while everything else are pushed to the back as the sunlight touches her skin (**Figure 18**). In this striking selfie, the sunlight illuminates her features. McFadden notes that lighting makes up photography's ability to communicate fantasy and desire, and within this selfie, desire is communicated through the focus on her facial features as well as in the caption and through @CallMeTink's gaze.

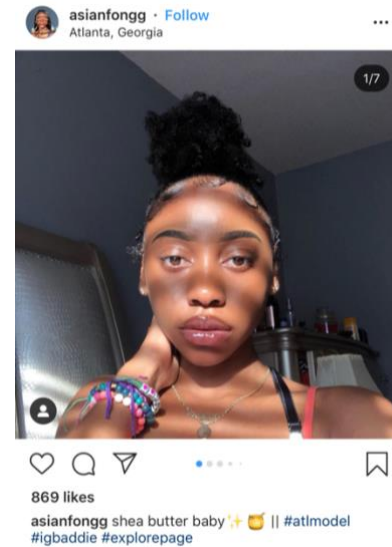


Figure 18. @CallHerTink's (@Asianfongg) #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. (Screenshot by author).

Her caption reads “shea butter baby [Sparkles emoji. Honey Pot emoji] || #atlmodel #igbaddie #explorepage” and it illustrates how her beauty and blackness are celebrated as part of her self-brand. Her desire to be featured on Instagram's Explore Page, and her self-articulation of being an IG Baddie centres her blackness and beauty.⁶⁴ The caption references R&B/Soul artist Ari Lennox's 2019 song “Shea Butter Baby” where she sings about pleasure and intimacy by using her dark brown skin and her sensual treatment of it as a metaphor.⁶⁵ The song is a sensual anthem and referenced in this caption alongside the sparkles and honey pot emoji, can be evoked to communicate desire, self-love, sensuality, blackness, and beauty. In these examples, the sparkles emoji embodies the practice of ‘loving blackness’ as a strategy of visual resistance and reclaiming agency, and I argue that this helps to cultivate digital diasporic intimacy that is created from the communal celebration of Black beauty.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The term “IG Baddie” is generally used to refer to beautiful women on Instagram who wear the latest trends and beauty styles popular on the platform.

⁶⁵ Ari Lennox, “Shea Butter Baby,” track 5 on *Shea Butter Baby*, Dreamville, 2019, digital download.

⁶⁶ hooks, *black looks*, 20.

In “Beauty Is a Method”, Christina Sharpe discusses how the practice of constructing beauty can be a Black feminist act that reorders our ways of knowing while building on intergenerational knowledges. She writes:

I learned to see in my mother’s house. I learned how not to see in my mother’s house. How to limit my sight to things that could be controlled. I learned how to see in discrete angles, planes, plots. If the ceiling was falling down and you couldn’t do anything about it, what you could do was grow and arrange peonies and tulips and zinnias; cut forsythia and mock orange to bring inside.⁶⁷

In this excerpt, Sharpe centres the self within beauty practices. She recognises how beauty can be cultivated and curated through a restructuring of how we see and navigate the world. Beauty then, is a radical choice of unseeing and seeing, of unbecoming and becoming. Similarly, hooks argues that beauty is a radical praxis, she writes that ‘learning to see and appreciate the presence of beauty is an act of resistance in a culture of domination’.⁶⁸ In these selfies, constructing self-articulations of beauty is a method of resilience and a process to cultivate Black diasporic (other)worlds. The function of light signals Black beauty and controls what is and what is not illuminated.

While light and lighting in Black women’s selfies has been used to emphasise Black beauty, the general desire for high resolution photographs and selfie aesthetics on Instagram has become synonymous with having “good lighting”. This common desire for good lighting in selfies is best illustrated by the frequently used hashtag #GoldenHour, which doubly refers to the hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset as these are the hours that have been recognised as the best time to take selfies because the natural lighting is soft and warm. The

⁶⁷ Christina Sharpe, “Beauty Is a Method,” *e-flux journal*, December 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/105/303916/beauty-is-a-method/>

⁶⁸ hooks, *Art on my Mind*, 124.

popularity of #GoldenHour selfies – there are over twelve million posts at the time of writing, consisting of selfies from mostly white women – demonstrates how good lighting contributes to Instagram’s social currency. This demonstrates that the importance of good lighting is not only associated with Black women. However, I still maintain the argument that it contributes to a visual diasporic resource, as Thompson notes.⁶⁹

The Use of Hashtags and Light in Black Diasporic (Other)Worlding

While light and lighting has been used a resource in these selfies to represent a desire to be seen and to see oneself as well as to illuminate Black beauty, I posit that it is also used to signal a broader diasporic community and announce one’s participation in said community. This, I argue, is a practice of Black diasporic (other)worlding, where the rhetorical use of light within the selfies’ captions marks out and speaks to an online community that is centred around the celebration and uplift of Black women.

In *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne recognises that historically, light has been used as a surveillance technology to subjugate Black people and disallow them from gathering in groups. Drawing on the history of lantern laws that were enacted in New York in the eighteenth century, Browne writes that these laws ensured that Black bodies were ‘constantly illuminated from dusk to dawn, made knowable, locatable, and contained within the city.’⁷⁰ I share this to further demonstrates the complex history of how Black people have not only been subjugated by the lack of light within their captured image, but also in the over surplus of light which has been used to police Black communities. In the captions of these selfies, light is used as a signalling resource, to bring the Black diaspora together and to announce

⁶⁹ Thompson, *Shine*.

⁷⁰ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 79.

one's presence online. This meaning subverts meanings encoded within historical subjugation to centre Black agency and digital community.

In its simplest form, light brings visibility to that which was previously unseen. Thompson argues that light offers social ascendance in Black diasporic visual cultures, and refers to the ways that light draws attention, captivates, and captures to emphasise this.⁷¹ As a result of this function of light, she argues that literally stepping into the light creates an opportunity to be seen, and to an extent, known. Similarly, the rhetorical and symbolic use of light in these Instagram photos articulates a participation in a digital

community and asserts one's presence on screen. For example, in a photograph of singing duo Chloë and Halle Bailey uploaded by the account @Grownish, the caption reads "blessing your feed with some #BlackGirlMagic. [Sparkles emoji] #BehindTheScenes #Grownish." In the photograph the sisters are on set of teenage sitcom *Grownish* (2018 – present), and they hold one another as they beam into the camera (**Figure 19**). The sun's rays illuminate the photograph,

bestowing light upon the two girls. In the caption, the word 'blessing' has a double meaning. On one hand, it

symbolises a presence of the divine, and on the other it can be interpreted as a gift, and in this instance, the gift is the magic that these two girls embody. In both cases, the 'blessing' is visibly represented through the presence of the two as they appear on viewers' Instagram feeds. The sparkles emoji symbolises the shimmer of magic as we are blessed with their image on our screens. Illumination then is a means of asserting a presence and this coincides



Figure 19. A photograph of Chloe x Halle is shared onto @Grownish Instagram account. (Screenshot by author).

⁷¹ Thompson, *Shine*.

with #BlackGirlMagic's aims to provide visibility and to celebrate Black women's beauty. This example demonstrates how digital diasporic intimacy is curated when light is used as a discursive signal of community and solidarity.

Similarly, in a photograph uploaded by New York-based blogger @nyc.mermaid, she writes "Thought your TL could use some magic [Sparkles emoji]." The image captures the blogger and her friend who clasp their arms around each other and pose for the camera (**Figure 20**). Like the photograph of Chloë and Halle, the sparkles emoji doubly represents their magic and I also argue that it symbolises the presence of their beauty as the post is shared onto Instagram. In her study on Black beauty, Shirley Anne Tate writes that 'when we think of beauty, we think of the pleasure we get from gazing at its source.'⁷² Tate recognises



Figure 20. @nyc.mermaid's #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. (Screenshot by author).

that beauty is affective and associated with 'the positive affect of pleasure, fascination and desire.'⁷³ However she also notes how this has historically been affected by racism and anti-blackness, which has resulted in racist binaries of ugliness and beauty, and internalised 'Black beauty shame'. In both examples above, Black beauty shame is challenged and subverted, as #BlackGirlMagic and these women and girls' beauty is presented as a source of pleasure that has been bestowed onto a viewing audience through photographs of Black girls embracing one another. The use of the sparkles emoji symbolises this

fascination and desire. Thus, in this context, digital diasporic intimacy is indicated through the reference of light as it is used to announce a presence within a specific digital community and communicate the pleasure that one should feel after looking at these Black girls.

⁷² Shirley Anne Tate, *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 19

⁷³ Tate, *Black Beauty Shame*, 19.

Thompson's argument that light can create social ascendance is useful here, as it invites us to consider how light used in Instagram selfies is a tool to increase their digital presence.

Influencers also use hashtags centred around light to build digital communities and obtain a following from those intending to celebrate Black beauty. Alongside the #BlackGirlMagic tag, the Instagrammers often accompany their selfies with other tags, some of which draw upon the importance of light. #Glow, #GlowingSkin, and #Glowing and are examples of this at work. However, these hashtags are not only shared by Black women, but are reflective of a broader Instagram culture that is centred around beauty. Many of the selfies in my initial research were also accompanied by hashtags that referred to the Instagrammer's skin tones. #Melanin, #MelaninPoppin, and #FlexinMyComplexion were frequently used, with #Melanin being used in over thirty percent of all posts from my initial search. This demonstrates how skin complexion has been used to create a counterpublic focused on platforming darker skin tones. Bailey describes hashtags as 'a metadata tool for linking similar content on social media.'⁷⁴ And Feminista Jones refers to hashtags as a call to attention.⁷⁵ In this case, the hashtags 'alerts people it is time to gather and participate in a community conversation', albeit a visual one, which celebrates and reclaims Black beauty.⁷⁶

In Annalisa's (@icyyanna) selfie, who is based in London, she uses #melanin alongside other hashtags like #4cNaturalHair and #BlackGirls in her comments section to signal a community of Instagrammers who are looking for specific content related to Black beauty **(Figure 21)**. Black girlhood is central to the way that she has framed her selfie and ultimately the content that she wants to be associated with. Similarly, @vanie.vanucci, who lives in Germany, uses the hashtag #melanin alongside others that celebrate her Congolese heritage, including #CongoleseBeauty, #CongoleseGirlsRock, #CongoloseAndProud, and hashtags that

⁷⁴ Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*, 23.

⁷⁵ Feminista Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 16.

⁷⁶ Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space*, 16.

centre her hair such as #BlackBraids and #ProtectiveStyles (**Figure 22**). Although the use of hashtags on Instagram posts is a common tool for all Instagrammers, I argue that the use of hashtags in this way harnesses digital diasporic intimacies as their use is shaped by desire: the desire to be seen in a specific way, the desire to redefine beauty, and the desire to for their content to be inserted within a depository of other content like their own.

#Melanin, and other hashtags that build upon this, are used to redefine notions of beauty.⁷⁷ It is a reoccurring framing device that validates Black beauty and specifically the beauty of dark-skinned Black women. As a process of Black diasporic (other)worlding, the rhetorical use of ‘melanin’ is lifted out of its biological origins to become a testimony for dark-skinned beauty, a compliment, a validation, and a discursive symbol for the black diaspora.

#MelaninPoppin, a hashtag that was featured in over ten percent of the posts, combines the celebration of dark skin tones and the ‘diasporic resource’ of light to further emphasise and validate dark-skinned beauty.⁷⁸ Focused on the way that dark-skinned Black women have



Figure 21. @icyyanna’s #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. (Screenshot by author).

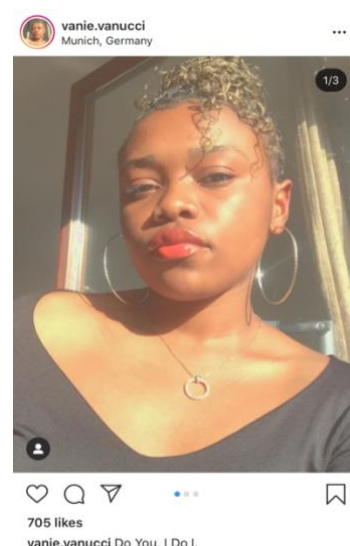


Figure 22. @vanie.vanucci’s #BlackGirlMagic Selfie. (Screenshot by author).

⁷⁷ Hassan, “#Melanin.”

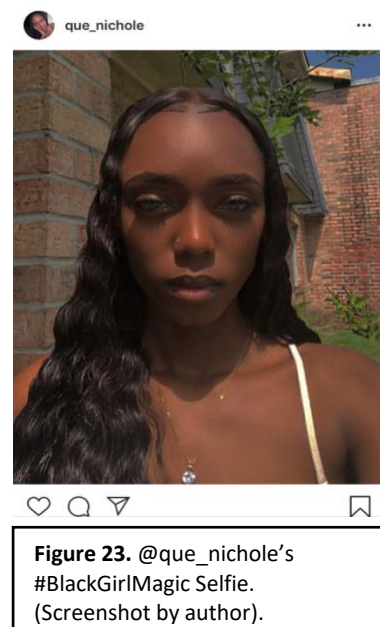
⁷⁸ Jacqueline Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1998): 298.

used hashtags on social media to validate their beauty, Ololade S. Hassan writes that #MelaninPoppin and similar hashtags

are redefining, and recreating individuals' sense of self, by encouraging self-affirmation, testimonials, thought-provoking quotes by influential black leaders, and allowing users to present images of the "best" selves – whether it is their personal images, celebrities, or images pertaining to the black race in general.⁷⁹

Hassan recognises how the hashtag has been used to not only challenge anti-Black constructions of beauty in the mainstream media, but also within the Black community, where externally constructed notions of beauty and ugliness has resulted in internalised antiblackness.

In my initial research, one influencer continued to appear throughout the two months, and she used the similar hashtags in each of her selfies. @Que_Nichole, a Louisiana-based influencer often posts selfies and art on her account, deleting them, and then refreshing them with new images. In one of these selfies, posted on July 7, 2019, she uses the following hashtags: #melanin #melaninart #melaninpoppin #melaninqueen #melaninmagic #black #blackgirl #blackgirls #blackgirlmagic #blackgirlsrock #sunkissed #queen #goddess. She captions her selfie, “..ps, i love how the sun kisses my skin [Slightly Smiling Face emoji]” (**Figure 23**). Although she references the sunlight in her caption, she does



⁷⁹ Hassan, “#Melanin,” 45.

beauty of her dark skin which is touched by the sun, and the entirety of her caption is oriented around her skin.

In Shirley Anne Tate's study on Black beauty, she reveals how beauty is socially constructed, racialised, and is constantly implicated within 'political economy, societal racial structuration, inequality regimes, knowledge production, representational regimes, and affective economies.'⁸⁰ Focusing specifically on Black Britain, she argues that the construction of beauty is anti-Black. Tate's study reminds us to be attentive to the specific contexts and spaces upon which beauty is constructed and the social, economic, cultural, and political mechanics that shape these contexts that these are created. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, Instagram, offers a space to consider how beauty is constructed on an internet saturated with images in the global marketplace. Within this context, the cultural knowledge of these meanings, and the fascination with Black beauty have been used as a marketing strategy for Black women in the beauty industry. @dartistebydodos is a Black woman make-up artist who uses Instagram to share her looks as well as those that she has created on her clients, who are often dark-skinned Black women. In captions posted to a portrait shot of a client's face on July 24, 2019 she writes of her artistry:

“All that MELANIN! [Face with Heart-Eyes emoji. Face with Heart-Eyes emoji]
Still in the business of making that brown skin glow like the sun [Sun emoji]
What's not to love!” (July 24, 2019)

While she celebrates the woman's dark-skinned beauty by capitalising and emphasising her melanin, @dartistebydodos promises that her artistry will help make 'brown skin glow like the sun'. She relies on the discursive power of light to promote and affirm her business model, rearticulating notions of Black beauty to then capitalise off it. While the presence of

⁸⁰ Tate, *Black Beauty Shame*, 21.

neoliberalism, capitalism, and economics risks devaluing the forms of intimacy that are created through counternarratives and processes of Black diasporic (other)worlding, Black entrepreneurship does not always mean that digital diasporic intimacies are void.⁸¹

Although it has also been used to help market Black women's entrepreneurship, these intimate practices of Black desire, pleasure, and fascination associated with Black beauty have also been appropriated by white creators and influencers, who have either engaged in digital blackness, or created virtual influencers using computer-generated-imagery (CGI) who can offer Black looks and aesthetics to brands without the need to involve Black people at all.⁸²

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I explored how digital diasporic intimacies are mediated through and negated by influencer culture. I focused on #BlackGirlMagic selfies that were posted onto Instagram to argue that the use of light and lighting evidence a practice of Black diasporic (other)worlding and communicates a desire to be seen. While I am not necessarily concerned with the function of the hashtag itself, the widespread critique of ableism, exceptionalism, and desirability politics that have been prominent within the hashtag usage offered a framework for me to explore how digital exposure, neoliberalism, and desirability politics are entangled within digital diasporic intimacy. I grapple with this as I discuss the ways that a growing culture of influencers, digital marketability, and consumerism has impacted the selection of selfies featured throughout the chapter. While I interrogate these limitations of digital diasporic intimacy, I maintain a primary focus on the purpose of light

⁸¹ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*.

⁸² Francesca Sobande, "Spectacularized and Branded Digital (Re)presentations of Black People and Blackness," *Television & New Media* 22, no. 2 (2021): 131-146, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420983745>.

and lighting in these selfies to argue that digital diasporic intimacy can still be expressed through this visual medium despite the innerworkings of Instagram culture.

Krista Thompson's conceptualisation of the visual economy of light forms the basis of my argument in this chapter. Building on this, I argue that the use of light and lighting in these selfies signals an intimate practice of self-affirmation and community empowerment, and a practice of seeing ourselves. I have argued that light is a cultural resource used in selfies to communicate a desire to be seen, illuminate Black beauty, and connect with a digital diasporic community. I located this use of light in the photographic composition of the selfies, the rhetorical language and emojis used in the captions, and the hashtags that are used to categorise them. I argued that light signals an intimate practice of 'loving blackness' and thus is a visual strategy for self-affirmation and community empowerment against a contextual history of racial bias within lighting technologies.⁸³ I adopted and extended Thompson's conceptualisation of the visual economy of light to consider how the visual and rhetorical use of light in these selfies can be articulated as a Black diasporic practice that intimately frames desire as it speaks to visual agency, beauty politics, practices of seeing, and a longing to be seen. Digital diasporic intimacy, I suggest, can be signalled through the symbolic function of light in Black diasporic visual cultures. However, I complicate this as I focus on influencer culture and consider how this culture can exist within neoliberalism. I also argue that the creation and dissemination of selfies on Instagram cannot always be recognised as a radical act of subversion or self-affirmation.

Within the chapter I argued that the selfies and their use of light communicate fantasies and desires as it relates to how people wish to be seen. However, when these images are uploaded onto Instagram, they inevitably become amalgamated into Instagram's culture of commodification and neoliberalism. As an intervention I ask, what is fantasy and desire in a

⁸³ hooks, *black looks*, 20.

culture driven by commodity? And what can this tell us about the ways that digital diasporic intimacy is engaged? I argue that sometimes this practice contributes to the reconstruction and reification of desirability politics and found this to be evident through the lack of visibility for dark skinned, fat, and/or disabled Black women. This is not only a result of the ways that influencer cultures reify dominant beauty politics, but also because of algorithmic biases and misogynoir that force darker skinned, fat, and/or disabled Black women to the margins. Furthermore, the presence of digitally mediated harm and misogynoir means that not every Black woman will want to showcase their body online.

Overall, Instagram selfies can be an intimate display of desire and fantasy. The use of light and lighting with them signifies upon sociocultural aesthetical meanings that harbour closeness and affect which is bound up in the celebration of Black beauty and the visibility of Black women, femmes, and girls. It is a culturally specific language to communicate Black beauty and joy visually and symbolically. Though it is seldom articulated, we know the language of light as it is an intimate practice of forging togetherness that is enacted both online and offline. The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, similarly evokes intimate displays of self-affirmation and communities of care and love, but as I demonstrated above, when the function of the hashtag changes, so does the contours of digital diasporic intimacy.

Interlude: Sound

Sound cultures have always been integral to the formation of my identity and sense of belonging in communities. I grew up listening to a myriad of music genres all *rooted and routed* in Black diasporic cultures.¹ U.S hip-hop and R&B were my first introduction to music, as my mum told me that I first started dancing to Aaliyah’s “Back and Forth” when she played it on her large stereo. When I was eight years old, the journeys in my dad’s car – the shiny black one, with the colourful LED wheels and the vibrating bass speakers hooked up to the car boot – sewed the foundations for my love of roots reggae, dancehall, and riddim. My own CD collections grew at this time too as I began to compile my own musical identity: Ashanti, Mariah Carey, Destiny’s Child, Rihanna, and Beyoncé’s albums were some of the most played tracks that I listened to on my bedroom CD player. At age 11, I was gifted my first MP3 player and I used our dial up computer to download music files from the peer-sharing software LimeWire. My collection expanded, rapidly. New music was waiting to be found. Then when mobile phones began to overtake MP3s as the primary mode of music listening, I’d exchange West Midlands-born bassline, and London-born garage and grime music with my friends on the school bus using Bluetooth. For me, listening to and sharing music has always been linked to technological innovation and diasporic community.

When thinking about the relationship between the Black diaspora, creative intimacies, and technology, it would be a great remiss to overlook the importance of sound technologies and musical innovations. As Louis Chude-Sokei writes, ‘Music has been the primary zone where blacks have directly functioned as innovators in technology’s usage.’² The creation of a multitude of music genres like funk and house, the innovative use of pre-existing

¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993; reis., London: Verso 1999).

² Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 5.

technologies to produce new sounds, such as sampling, remixing, scratching, and MC'ing, and the formation of new technologies like sound systems and platforms like Jamal Edwards' SB.TV demonstrate how technology and Black cultures are entwined in sound culture.³

But when I speak of sound cultures and creative innovation, I don't only want to talk about the production and dissemination of music and audio. I want to think about the ways that the technological originality that underpins Black sound cultures groove across linguistic, communicative, and visual aesthetics, from fashion, to art, to dance and to wordplay. Black sound cultures signal a Black diasporic technological ingenuity and DIY culture where the local meets the global through creative practice. Within these diasporic networks of innovation, Black aesthetics and styles can be expanded, built upon, remixed, and performed. If Black diasporic sound culture refers to a technological innovation, DIY ingenuity, and original stylisation then how might we apply this to the technological innovation and DIY creativity that takes place on social media?

³ Rayvon Fouché, "Hip-Hop and African American Innovation," *Smithsonian*, February 1, 2009, <https://invention.si.edu/hip-hop-and-african-american-innovation>; Rotimi Odukoya, "How Jamal Edwards Changed the Black British Music Scene Forever," *GQ*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/jamal-edwards-obituary>.

Chapter 5. Meme Queens: The Playful Sonic Vibrancies of Black Femme Aesthetics in Digitally Remixed Cartoon Memes

There is something simply hilarious about seeing a well-known public figure visually presented as a Black femme by way of digital remixing. Though it is difficult to say when this trend began on Twitter, the act of taking a meme of a famous person or TV character and then remixing Black femme aesthetics onto it demarcates a Black digital diasporic community who are connected by the cultural references and humour perpetuated by the meme. Michael Jackson, Marvel's *The Avengers* actors Chris Evans and Chris Hemsworth, and Prince Zuko from Nickelodeon's *Avatar the Last Airbender* are some of the people and characters who have all been remixed with Black femme aesthetics (**See Figure 24**).



Figure 24. A compilation of Black femme remixed memes. (Compilation and screenshot by author).

When I use 'Black femme', I refer to a form of Black queer gendering that does not map onto the Western heteronormative gender binaries of woman and man.¹

Instead, Black femme signals a queer gender practice where codes of femininity are reimagined as a practice of self-

imaging and presentation. As Savannah

Shange put it during a conversation on Black femme genders, femme refers to 'an exclusively and expansively queer tradition of taking conventional signs of femininity and repurposing

¹ For further information on the genealogy of this term, read the following: Treva Carrie Ellison, "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Gender," *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019): 6-16. Kaila Adia Story, "Fear of a Black Femme: The Existential Conundrum of Embodying a Black Femme Identity While Being a Professor of Black, Queer, and Feminist Studies," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 21, no. 4 (2017): 407-419.

them in service of our own Black self-determination.’² To be precise, femme does not mean woman, it does not mean female, and it does not mean feminine. In the above memes, Black femme aesthetics are signalled through the visual addition of satin bonnets, long acrylic nails, large gold hoop earrings and lashes. Throughout this chapter I use the phrases ‘Black femme aesthetics’ and ‘Black femme remix’ to acknowledge how gestures, styles, fashions, visualities, and expressions reflective of Black femme genders are remixed onto cartoon memes via photo editing software and captions.

In Lauren Michele Jackson’s examination of cultural appropriation in pop-culture, *White Negroes* (2019), she argues that internet memes are digital ephemera that are stickily entangled with visual and sonic expressions oriented around Black cultures. According to her, ‘knowing memes means knowing the internet as irrevocably black as fuck.’³ Jackson notes that Black expressive and creative cultures have underpinned the creation, usage, and dissemination of contemporary memes and states that we cannot have a conversation about memes without considering how blackness is enmeshed in their creation. In this chapter I



Figure 25. Arthur’s Fist meme.

want to respond to her theorisations to explore how reaction memes that are remixed with Black femme aesthetics embody Black sound culture which in turn curates digital diasporic intimacy. A reaction meme refers to a visual meme that usually portrays

someone or something reacting to something else. As I explore the use of Black femme aesthetics in reaction memes, I focus specifically on cartoon memes, a genre of memes that repurpose scenes and characters from children’s cartoons that were aired in the late 1990s and

² Savannah Shange, Moya Bailey, Kai M. Green, and Demita Frazier, “Black (Femme) Genders,” Panel Discussion for Black Feminist Futures, Zoom, February 15, 2021, <https://www.moyabailey.com/2021/02/15/black-femme-genders-panel-by-black-feminist-futures/>.

³ Lauren Michele Jackson, *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 86.

early 2000s. The famous “Arthur’s Fist” meme offers an example of a cartoon meme (**Figure 25**). The meme depicts the clenched fist of the titular anthropomorphic Aardvark from the children’s TV show *Arthur* (1996 – present) and was first used by Ghanaian-American Twitter user @AlmostJT, who wrote in their tweet that the meme encapsulates “so many emotions in one fist” (July 27, 2016). Cartoon memes have been frequently used as reaction memes as they are familiar characters and are representative of millennials, who like myself, quite possibly grew up watching these shows. I want to focus on remixed cartoon memes in this chapter, because they represent digital play, joy and creativity through their youthful content and the ways that they are remixed.

Memes are one of my favourite parts of Black Twitter and many of the memes I explore in this chapter emerged in these digital communities and appeared on my timeline through daily scrolls in 2018. Each meme presented here was selected as they not only made me laugh, bookmark and screenshot them at the time, but they also spoke to a wider culture of meme making that I demonstrate throughout. In *Distributed Blackness*, André Brock defines Black Twitter as ‘Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural identity, expressed through digital practices and informed by cultural discourses about Black everyday life.’⁴ In this chapter I explore how digital diasporic intimacies are curated primarily, but not exclusively, on Black Twitter through digital practices that are informed by Black sound cultures and everyday discourses about Black everyday life. With a focus on how these are embodied within Black femme remixed cartoon memes, I am interested in how digital play, joy, and creativity constitutes Black diasporic (other)worlding. As Brock notes, ‘Black Twitter is an online gathering’ and as such, to join the gathering, participants require ‘a deep knowledge of Black culture, commonplaces, and digital practices.’⁵ Though Brock’s discussions on Black Twitter were

⁴ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 80-81.

⁵ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 81.

homogenous to Black American users, his framework on the platform is useful to consider how shared cultural knowledges represented through memes can help curate diasporic intimacies. As I focus on these shared cultural knowledges and their enmeshment within meme production and dissemination, I argue that digital diasporic intimacy can be curated through the *sonic vibrancy* of remixed cartoon memes.

I use ‘sonic vibrancy’ to refer to the ways that the process of meme remixing emanates a sonic register. In Louis Chude-Sokei’s research on Black sound cultures, he notes how the sonic underpins Black relationship with technology. He regards music cultures as a space where Black innovation, originality, and creativity are immersed with technology. However, he argues that these theorisations of Black sound have ‘suffered by largely being described as or thought of as primarily performative, expressive, rhythmic, lyrical, or just musical.’⁶ He encourages us to engage the sonic by looking past its literal and audible function, to consider what Black sonicality can teach us about technological innovation, creativity, and culture. ‘As such’ Chude-Sokei continues, ‘to focus on [Black sound cultures] as a space of sound and sound production is to reorient our listening not only toward the means of aural production but also toward how blacks directly engage information and technology through sound.’⁷ I apply this framework as I am not concerned with the audible sound which can be heard from videos and moving visual culture; instead, I posit that a sonic vibrancy exists in memes where Black diasporic sound cultures can be visually perceived through the technological creation, dissemination of, and engagement with remixed Black femme memes.

In these memes, I locate sonic vibrancy respectively within: (1) their form, which signals Black creative production, such as remixing and sampling, which emerged from Black diasporic sound cultures, (2) their voice, which is captured through the cultural knowledge

⁶ Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 5.

⁷ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*, 5.

surrounding Black femme aesthetics, (3) their dissemination, as they vibrate and ripple across Black Twitter in a collaborative wave of viral digital engagement, and most importantly, (4) their affect, which can be identified through the shared laughter they produce. My argument suggests that within these cartoon memes, Black sound cultures can be perceived where sound is not audible, and sound can be felt through our engagements with them. Interested in the ways that diasporic intimacies are created through the sonic registers of Black digital play, this chapter explores how Black femme cartoon memes are a form of humorous, viral visual creativity that cultivates diasporic bonds. It asks: how is digital diasporic intimacy produced through the creation and virality of remixed Black femme cartoon memes? In what ways do these memes harness, communicate, and emanate a sonic vibrancy through their production and their cultural knowledges? And what function does sonic vibrancy have in my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy?

My exploration of these memes begins with an introduction to meme usage on Black Twitter and their relationship with Black sound cultures. I posit that in Black digital networks, memes reflect the technological innovation and DIY creativity found in Black sound cultures because they are similarly produced, circulated, and signify upon Black cultural experiences. In this section I explain why I use terms such as ‘sample’ and ‘remix’, which derive from Black sound cultures, to describe the dissemination and repurposing of the memes across Black social media networks. I argue that the form of digital play that underpins Black meme culture can be traced to technological innovations within Black diasporic sound cultures. I propose that this form of digital play can help to curate digital diasporic intimacy as it builds upon longstanding technological traditions and methods engaged by Black diasporic communities. Afterwards I locate the salience of Black femme aesthetics at this juncture of internet meme culture and Black sound culture to demonstrate why I focus on this specifically. I offer more context on Black femme-ness, grapple with the

politics and popularity of Black femme aesthetics online, and then discuss the function of Black femme aesthetics in digital spaces.

After this contextual and theoretical framing, I trace the emergence of the Tired SpongeBob meme, which emerged on Black Twitter in 2018, to discuss how the remixed additions of Black femme aesthetics incite playful laughter across Black diasporic networks and centre Black cultural politics as a way to intervene on white surveillance and adoption. In this section I argue that humour, connoted and denoted through the remixed memes, curates digital diasporic intimacy as it creates an illusion of proximity through shared joy and laughter, and delineates community through in-group cultural references. I also recognise how laughter and shared jokes reject online surveillance and create diasporic intimacy through inferred meanings. Then, drawing on a selection of Rolf memes derived from the Cartoon Network show *Ed, Edd n Eddy* (1999-2008), which were popular within my Twitter networks during 2018 and 2019, I expand on the previous section to argue that the remixing and sampling cartoon memes is a playful and collective practice of ‘Black digital ratchetry’ which has been shaped by hip-hop cultures.⁸ Borrowing Brock’s use of ratchetry to refer to a practice and performance of Black anti-respectability which is steeped in the libidinal enjoyment of being Black, I posit that the remixed memes reflect upon everyday intracommunal cultural politics in ways that centre an unserious, playful, and sometimes inappropriate reflection on blackness and Black identity. Finally, I explore how an archive of Black femme remixes is created collaboratively through sampling. I argue that through sampling, the memes signify upon each other and upon Black cultural knowledges to build a repertoire of comedically encoded Black digital culture. In this section I am attentive to how digital diasporic intimacy is curated through the dissemination of these memes and the archives that are created through their dissemination. As I focus on how the remixed Black

⁸ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 129.

femme Rolf memes have been used to encode cultural conversations on Black hair, I argue that these archives can be drawn upon as a practice of playful Black diasporic (other)worlding.

Throughout this chapter, I complicate my understanding of digital diasporic intimacy to discuss how although the use of Black femme aesthetics in these remixed cartoon memes signals a Black queer gendering, cisgendered heteronormativity is oftentimes privileged and platformed in the framing of these memes, and thus queer creative and cultural production is erased. Altogether I discuss the ways that remixed Black internet memes can help curate digital diasporic intimacy through their sonic registers, specifically harnessed through their production, dissemination, and the laughter and humour encoded within their cultural meanings. However, I remain attentive to the limitations of this form intimacy as I recognise that while comedy can reflect dominant voices of a community, it can also marginalise others.

Reading Memes Through Black Sound Cultures

Originating and circulating across social media platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, and 4Chan, internet memes are a form of visual digital language that are commonly used to comedically visualise a user's reactions to something or to provide a commentary on an event. In *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Richard Dawkins first used the term 'meme' to describe units of culture that are transmitted from person to person through processes of imitation and mimicry.⁹ Currently however, the term refers to internet memes, which are best understood as digitally mediated viral jokes which are presented in images, phrases, or GIFs (Gaphis Interchange Format) and are disseminated and repurposed via

⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

social media platforms. In the context of this chapter, when I use the term ‘meme’ I focus specifically on visual memes, including images, stills from pop-culture, moving GIFs (Graphic Interchange Format), and images with captions written across them. While there are vast amounts of memes circulating across social media, they rely on shared knowledges and cultures to convey their meaning and humour, because of this, memes are reflective of the digital communities that they are shared within. They are viral visual media that create, sustain, and perform community through humour because they rely on cultural, and sometimes unarticulated, knowledges references which are distinct to that community.

In Black digital networks, memes are used for a variety of reasons, including for social media activism, for humour, and to playfully mark out a Black diasporic identity. In *Race After Technology*, Ruha Benjamin gives the example of the BBQ Becky meme to illustrate how memes ‘are an effective tool for dragging racism.’¹⁰ Apryl Williams’ expands this to add that this specific genre of memes are used as a tool for the cultural critique of white supremacy.¹¹ While there has been increased focus on the way that Black people use memes for acts of resistance and education, there is less a focus on the ways that memes are shared to celebrate blackness and to playfully recognise diasporic differences.¹² Memes that are produced for the sole purpose of play, humour, and digital exchange can produce digital diasporic intimacy. For example, in a meme created and uploaded onto Twitter by @NinjaLukel on August 11, 2018, he remixes the “Pointing Mannequin” meme to make a joke about diasporic differences.¹³ In the original meme, one mannequin closest to the

¹⁰ Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 25-26.

¹¹ Apryl Williams, “Black Memes Matter: #LivingWhileBlack with Becky and Karen,” *Social Media + Society* (Winter 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120981047>.

¹² Raven Maragh-Lloyd, “From Permit Patty to Karen: Black Online Humour as Play and Resistance,” *American Journal of Play* 13, no. 2-3 (2021): 253-277; Tiera Chanté Tanksley, “Education, Representation, and Resistance: Black Girls in Popular Instagram Memes,” in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

¹³ Throughout this chapter, unless indicated, I will adopt all original and unremixed meme names from <https://knowyourmeme.com>.

forefront cowers away and sobs hysterically, while the other is pointing and laughing at it



Figure 26. @NinjaLukel’s remix of the Pointing Mannequin meme. (Screenshot by author).

with its head turned away from view (see **Figure 26**). The one cowering away has a Jamaican Rasta hat remixed onto its head, while the other has a Nigerian Kufi. The caption written by @NinjaLukel reads, “AYOOOOOOO THIS NIGGA CALLING PLANTAIN ‘PLANTIN’,” and it references the different pronunciations of the cooking banana commonly featured in Black diasporic cuisine. The pronunciation differences are oftentimes up for debate across Black Twitter and has been used to playfully distinguish between Caribbeans and continental Africans. In this playful meme, the Nigerian teases the Jamaican,

who fragily breaks down at being shamed for their pronunciation. It satirically points out the differences between Black people globally and signifies upon the occurrence of diaspora wars that occur across Black Twitter. Like this example, memes offer opportunities for diasporic connection and to explore diasporic difference as they signify upon imagery, knowledges, and a diasporic Black visual lexicon. As Jackson writes, ‘memes in their emergence, development, transformation, and resurgence are imbued with a semantically Black mode of improvisation and revitalization.’¹⁴

Black sound cultures, by way of technology, vernacular, and medium, offers us a language to unpack and identify the salience of memes online. While the relationship between cartoon memes and hip-hop culture has been explored to reveal how these memes are used as conduits for increased music streams, conversations around how memes are created using

¹⁴ Laur M. Jackson, “The Blackness of Meme Movement,” *Model View Culture* 35, March 28, 2016, <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement>.

hip-hop methodologies are limited.¹⁵ Throughout this chapter, I use the words ‘sample’ and ‘remix’ to describe the creation of, dissemination of, and engagement with the Black femme remixed cartoon memes. In Sobande’s research on memes in the British political landscape, she uses ‘digital remix culture’ to describe ‘how people (re)use and (re)create digital content and commentary’ using memes.¹⁶ Remixing is the process producing a new version of an already existing medium. While I draw on Sobande’s definition to think about how remixing is a process of (re)use and (re)creation in meme culture, I build on it to position Black meme remixes as a digital mediation of hip-hop culture. While cartoon memes are memetic samples, taken from children’s TV shows, they undergo a remix where visual additions are added onto the meme to add another layer of meaning. Although, as I illustrated with the example of the Pointing Mannequin meme, remixes in Black social media networks can draw from a variety of cultural references, I am attentive to a specific form of Black femme remixing, where visual signifiers of Black femme aesthetics are photoshopped or drawn onto cartoon memes to create new versions and signify new cultural meanings.

To describe the dissemination and usage of the memes, I use the term “sampling”. Understood to be the foundation of hip-hop music, a sample describes when a snippet of sound or a piece of music is repurposed and reused in a separate piece of music. It is a form of sonic intertextuality which references other Black sound cultures, music cultures, or popular culture to create new materials. The proliferation of cartoon memes across social media evidences a form of sampling. In this medium, snippets from nostalgic children’s TV

¹⁵ Melissa Kasule, “In meMeS wE trUsT: how Kiki is a sign of a changing music industry,” *Gal-dem*, July 29, 2018, <https://gal-dem.com/in-memes-we-trust/>; Eric Skelton, “The ‘Spongebob’ Effect: How Cartoon Rap Memes Are Breaking Artists and Spiking Streams,” *Complex*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.complex.com/music/2019/01/spongebob-effect-cartoon-memes-breaking-artists-spiking-streams>; Natalie Weiner, “Migos & Memes: How Everything From Strippers to Donald Glover Helped ‘Bad and Boujee’ Explode,” *Billboard*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7662485/migos-memes-donald-glover-strippers-hot-100>

¹⁶ Francesca Sobande, “Memes, Digital Remix Culture, and (Re)Mediating British Politics,” *Progressive Review* 26, no. 2 (2019): 153.

shows are visually sampled to create memes that signify upon (or sample) facets of Black culture and internet culture. The memes are a product of a creative visual practice that rely on the knowledge of these TV shows and cultural knowledges to create new materials, but like hip-hop music, knowledge of the sample is not necessary to appreciate and participate in meme culture. In the introduction to *Black Noise* (1994), Tricia Rose hints at the way that rappers have often combined the ‘ever-changing black urban slang’ with ‘cartoon’ and a myriad of other references as a ‘creative and dynamic engagement that powers rap music’.¹⁷ Rose notes that intertextuality fuels hip-hop culture, which in turn fuels pop-culture, and thus, notes that the relationship between children’s cartoons and hip-hop culture is longstanding.

As I centre Black sound cultures within Black meme culture, I propose that we can read the Black femme cartoon memes through their sonic vibrancy. I use this term to indicate how sound culture underscores the production and dissemination of, and engagement with, memes online.¹⁸ This, I argue, produces digital diasporic intimacy as it signals creative technological collaborations and cultural exchanges across the digital diaspora.

Black Femme Aesthetics and Joy Online

My use of ‘femme’ in Black femme aesthetics describes a practice of Black queer gendering. Although cartoon memes have also been remixed to include Black cultural aesthetics more generally, I focus on Black femme aesthetics because its adoption, circulation, and usage speaks to a wider internet-based visual culture centred around the

¹⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), xvi.

¹⁸ Other scholars who have explored Black digital behaviours in relation to Black music cultures include: Regina Duthely, “Black Feminist Hip-Hop Rhetorics and the Digital Public Sphere,” *Changing English* 24, no. 2 (2017): 202-212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2017.1310458>; Della V. Mosley, Roberto L. Abreu, Ashley Ruderman, and Candice Crowell, “Hashtags and Hip-Hop: Exploring the Online Performances of Hip-Hop Identified Youth Using Instagram,” *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 135-152; Carla E. Stokes, “Representin’ in Cyberspace: Sexual Scripts, Self-Definition, and Hip-Hop Culture in Black Adolescent Girls’ Home Pages,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 2 (2007): 169-184.

salience and appropriation of Black femmehood. Ultimately, I argue that the remixed addition of Black femme aesthetics onto cartoon memes is a form of diasporic digital play and I propose that this playfulness is central to the maintenance digital diasporic intimacy.

In the context of social media, images of Black women, girls and femmes are rapidly reproduced and circulated for the purpose of reaction memes and GIFs. Popular examples of memes include drag queen Jazmine Masters' GIF "and I oop", actress Gabrielle Union and basketballer Dwayne Wayne's toddler daughter Kaavia, who is known as #ShadyBaby in the world of internet memes, and reality TV star Tiffany Pollard, whose emotional responses on TV show *Flavor of Love* have been featured in an array of memes. Memes and GIFs of Black women, femmes, and girls are particularly salient and lucrative in reaction memes, when humour, viral content, and cultural appropriation are interlinked.

Using the example of the memetic phrase, #OnFleek, coined by Twitter user Kayla Newman (@peaches_monroe) in June 2014, Malika Imhotep recognises 'Black Twitter as a complicated ground for the politico-cultural salience of Black femme aesthetic indulgence.'¹⁹ She uses 'aesthetic indulgence' to refer to 'intentionally overt performances of delight', and this also shapes the dominant use of Black femme aesthetics in memes and GIFs.²⁰ While Black femme aesthetics and memes are frequently used and circulated in Black digital networks, stock visuals of Black people are continuously circulated on the internet and consumed by nonblack users for comedic or ridiculing purposes.

On the internet, blackness has become packaged into meme-able images for what Lisa Nakamura refers to as 'identity tourism'.²¹ For instance, the use of Black women, femmes and girls in GIFs and memes by non-Black internet users contributes to forms of digital

¹⁹ Malika Imhotep, "#OnFleek: Authorship, Interpellation, and the Black Femme Prowess of Black Twitter," in *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, ed. Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 39.

²⁰ Imhotep, "#OnFleek," 40.

²¹ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2002), xv.

blackface. Like the American tradition of minstrelsy, digital blackface requires the “blackening up” of a white or nonblack person to emulate blackness and participate in forms of ridicule and humour. Imhotep recognises that online, ‘Black femme aesthetics can be said to have a commercial viability separate from that of the Black bodies that initially make them visible.’²² Similarly, Jackson writes that ‘digital blackface uses the relative anonymity of online identity to embody blackness.’²³ While memes of Black men and masculine people are also popular forms of digital blackness, more often than not it is Black femmes whose images are used to visually portray feelings of extreme emotion. As Jackson puts it: ‘white and nonblack users seem to especially prefer GIFs with black people when it comes to emitting their most exaggerated emotions. Extreme joy, annoyance, anger and occasions for drama and gossip are a magnet for images of black people, especially black femmes.’²⁴ These memes often perpetuate misogynoir and reproduce violent caricatures especially when used by nonblack people. They code Black women and femmes as hypersexual, hyperaggressive, sassy, and as having uncontrollable feelings and more often to the detriment of those who are produced and packaged as memes.²⁵

While memes and GIFs that incorporate Black femme aesthetics can be enmeshed with misogynoir and cultural appropriation, they can also be used by Black women and femmes to subvert this. As Bailey writes:

While initial challenges to misogynoirist representations of Black women in the early twentieth century involved some classist and moralizing sentiments about proving oneself in the public sphere, the digital age has made way for strategies that

²² Imhotep, “#OnFleek,”

²³ Lauren Michele Jackson, “We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction Gifs,” *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>.

²⁴ Jackson, “We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface,”

²⁵ Arimeta Diop, “From Megan Thee Stallion to Breonna Taylor, Black Women’s Trauma Deserves Better Than Memes,” *Vanity Fair*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/08/megan-thee-stallion-breonna-taylor-memes>.

reject respectability in favor of more multifaceted representations of Black women in all of our complexities.’²⁶

Although Bailey is not precisely referring to meme creation and usage, her argument that Black women can challenge misogynoir by creating new modes of representations is applicable to these Black femme remixes. Tiera Chanté Tanksley found that Black girls use satirical Instagram memes as a strategy to ‘talk back’ to misrepresentations within popular culture ‘through the use of socioculturally informed gestures and linguistic practices.’²⁷ She elaborates that these women use ‘culturally understood facial expressions, gestures, and body language to voice their discontent with societal (mis)representations.’ Tanksley’s study is useful to consider the ways that memes can be used as an intervention on misogynoir and cultural appropriation as they encode messages, culturally understood expressions, and knowledges that speak to their racialised, gendered and sexualised experiences. She demonstrates how Black femme aesthetics are used within memes as a way to create an in-group, diasporic, cultural conversation away from the surveillance and appropriation of nonblack users.

Against this context, my interest in the ways that Black femme aesthetics are remixed into cartoon memes demonstrates how playfulness and comedy are also methods of cultivating digital diasporic intimacy. Attentive to the ways that Black femme aesthetics are used as a form of identity play online I argue that digital diasporic intimacy can be created through the sonic vibrancy of Black femme memes.

²⁶ Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*, 15.

²⁷ Tanksley, “Education, Representation, and Resistance”, 249.

Remixing Black Femme SpongeBob: Laughing in Community and the Refusal of Outsider Surveillance

The first time I saw a meme of Black femme SpongeBob he was unclothed and wore nothing but a black satin hair bonnet, white socks, and his classic shiny black shoes. Through his posture, he looked visibly winded as he took a moment to regain his breath after whatever laborious task he had just undertaken. His eyebrows were furrowed in distress, and his lips



Figure 27. @BlackCindy's remix of Black femme SpongeBob.

were pursed closely together as he appeared to be panting heavily. He physically supported himself as he leant against the underwater rock beside him, and his other hand was rested against his hip (see **Figure 27**). Without his classic boxed suit, SpongeBob's identity was malleable and free from any specific cultural identity. Thus, his visual presentation as a Black femme was shaped by the remixed addition of the hair bonnet – an accessory commonly worn to bed by some Black femmes and women who want to protect their delicate hairstyles from frizzing and rubbing

against cotton pillowcases – which had been photoshopped to perfectly sit on his square yellow frame.

The remixed meme was uploaded onto Twitter in 2018 by user @BlackCindy, who offered an explanation via the caption for SpongeBob's winded demeanour: "trying to sleep the first night after you get braids" (March 29). Through this caption and the addition of the bonnet, @BlackCindy relies on Black femme cultural knowledges to playfully communicate the frustrating and sometimes painful experience of sleeping with a sore scalp after a newly braided hairstyle. The humour encoded with this culturally specific Black femme remix of

SpongeBob and @BlackCindy's caption marks out a diasporic Black femme community and connects them through a joyful practice of digital play. Through the remixing of the bonnet addition, a Black diasporic community is marked out to engage in a practice of digital diasporic intimacy shaped by humour and comedy.

The weeks before and after @BlackCindy uploaded her remixed Black SpongeBob meme onto Twitter, the original unremixed meme – aptly titled “Tired SpongeBob” – had been rapidly shared across Black Twitter and was the root of much shared laughter (**Figure 28**). In



Figure 28. Tired SpongeBob meme.

this unedited visual iteration, Tired SpongeBob had been used as a visual signifier for a range of mundane experiences within Black life and culture, including being used as a visual response to rap lyrics, and to comedically express the tiresome experience of racial microaggressions in classrooms or managing toxicity in heterosexual

relationships. While the meme's usage spoke directly to Black experiences, this juxtaposed against visualisation of children's cartoon character SpongeBob, heightened the humour.

Nickelodeon's famous show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999 – present), has been central to a plethora of reaction memes that feature the series' main characters in an array of humorous, but oddly relatable still images.²⁸ Popular memes include “Savage Patrick”, “Mocking SpongeBob”, “Confused Mr. Krabs” and “Squidward Looking Out the Window”, and aside from the latter which is used to express FOMO (‘fear of missing out’ on events and social activities), typically the adjectives that come before the character names describes the emotion or state of mind that the meme is used to denote. The *SpongeBob* characters’

²⁸ A reaction meme describes a type of meme that is used to respond to someone else, an event, or a situation by visually conveying emotions.

dominance in the world of internet memes can partly be attributed to a form of millennial nostalgia for 1990s and early 2000s ephemera, but also what Lauren Michele Jackson refers to as the show's 'spectacular realism'.²⁹ Jackson credits *SpongeBob*'s meme-worthiness as a widespread appreciation of the show's endlessly mundane portrayals of adult life and the character's clearly defined personalities which allow us to attach specific, relatable emotions onto them. In Black digital networks the *SpongeBob* memes have been remixed to offer an alternative life for the characters; lives that centre Black culture and quotidian portrayals of Black life. For instance, @TosinShotit used the meme in late March 2018 to parody an assumed white teacher who struggles to pronounce an African name (**Figure 29**). In the tweet, @TosinShotit uses the meme to laugh at microaggressions as part of the subtle realities of being African in Western countries.

While the original Tired SpongeBob meme had been used to visually and comedically represent tiresome responses to a range of Black life experiences, the first use of the meme can be traced back to a Black queer woman who first sampled a still from an episode of the



Figure 29. @TosinShotit's use of the Tired SpongeBob meme. (Screenshot by



Figure 30. @DJVMZ's use of the Tired SpongeBob meme. (Screenshot by

²⁹ Lauren Michele Jackson, "How Did *SpongeBob SquarePants* Become the Most Meme-able TV Show?," *Vulture*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/spongebob-squarepants-is-the-most-meme-able-tv-show.html>.

children's TV show. Exactly one week before @BlackCindy's remix, Twitter user @DJJVMZ used the meme to refer to her sex life: "Me after I take my strap off [Face with Tears of Joy emoji]" (March 22, 2018) (**Figure 30**). In this tweet, Tired SpongeBob became a visual extension of this woman's fatigue after she has engaged in strap-on sex. However, as the low amount of engagement suggests – indicated by the number of retweets and likes it received – @DJJVMZ's tweet did not circulate as much as the following uses of Tired SpongeBob did, despite it being the original iteration. Ultimately, the queer Black cultural production of Tired SpongeBob had been marginalised from Black Twitter's dominant dissemination and consumption. There may be many factors which impacted why @DJJVMZ's original tweet received low engagement in comparison to other tweets, yet the queer sexual origins of Tired SpongeBob and the lack of visibility of these origins reveals the presence of queer marginalisation in Black digital communities. While queer people might be producers and creators of Black expressive cultures, they occupy a liminal space across mainstream Black digital networks.³⁰

Intracommunal queer marginalisation is not the only form of effacement that can be read through the life and culture of the meme. Although Tired SpongeBob had been a source of comedy and community delineation across Black Twitter, like other cultural objects and practices created and circulated by diasporic Black people, it inevitably became amalgamated into white mainstream internet language and behaviour.³¹ Between the 27th and 29th March

³⁰ Black queer activists and public figures have recognised the importance of maintaining safe spaces for queer people on social media. For more, read the following: Paula Akpan, "Virtual LGBTQ+ spaces will be just as important when lockdown's over," *Time Out*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.timeout.com/london/news/virtual-lgbtq-spaces-will-be-just-as-important-when-lockdowns-over-062620>; Okong'o Kinyanjui, "Curating Safe Digital Spaces for Queer Africans," *Echoing Green*, March 23, 2022, <https://echoinggreen.org/news/okongo-kinyanjui-on-curating-safe-digital-spaces-for-queer-africans/>.

³¹ This mass proliferation and then white appropriation of digital Black creativity also extends to the popularity of viral dance videos. On TikTok, a social media platform that publishes short form videos, Black content creators have spoken out about the ways that non-Black creators profit financially from reproducing dances created by Black users, while the same Black users experience algorithmic oppression and are shadow banned. This, they argue, is a form of cultural appropriation. For more on this read: Taiyler Simone Mitchell, "They take our dances.' Black users demand TikTok combat cultural appropriation," *Insider*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/black-creators-call-out-tiktok-for-financial-loss-from-appropriation-2021-8>.

2018, Tired SpongeBob received traction across nonblack Twitter networks who used the meme to comedically express their exhaustion with life's small day-to-day tasks. What had originally begun as a visual expression of Black queer sexual cultures rapidly mutated to become a mainstream satirical conversation about how exhausting everyday tasks are, such as changing the bed sheets, finally replying to a message, or managing to express yourself clearly (**see Figure 31**).³² Like many forms of Black cultural and expressive forms, this playful Black practice had been repurposed by the mainstream and stripped from its origins.



Figure 31. @Mckenzienisee's use of the Tired SpongeBob meme. (Screenshot by author).

Against this context of dominant white mainstream adoption, @BlackCindy's remixed addition of the satin hair bonnet – which received over forty thousand retweets and sixty thousand likes – visually resituates Tired SpongeBob back into the cultural world of Black Twitter. With the addition of the bonnet, Tired SpongeBob is no longer easily circulated by, or as relatable to nonblack users. The meme speaks directly to a Black femme audience, and so for those unfamiliar with Black femme hair practices the joke is easily lost, thus we can assume that the engagement with the tweet is representative of a majority Black audience with

culturally specific knowledge. Her ungendered caption, “trying to sleep the first night after you get braids”, and the remixed addition of the Black femme aesthetic, by way of the satin bonnet, presents a queer Black gendering of Tired SpongeBob and this transformation encodes a layer of humour distinctive to a Black diasporic community. I propose that digital

³² Jacob Shamsian, “There’s a New SpongeBob Meme for Everyone Who’s Tired with The World,” *Insider*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.insider.com/tired-spongebob-meme-explained-2018-3>.

diasporic intimacy is curated within the meme's humour and as the remix reclaims SpongeBob from a dominant white gaze.

Through their humorous intent and the ways that they centre Black life and experiences, the remixed cartoon memes can intervene on the whiteness of Twitter and mark out a culturally specific Black community, irrespective of the dominant gaze and appropriation by white social media users. Discussing the relationship between spectatorship and memes, Jackson writes that 'the spirit of black expression inflects these things called memes that move about the world as if they, too, are constantly surveilled (which they in fact are).'³³ In doing so, she posits that internet memes and blackness are cultural facets that are similarly extracted and appropriated. And in the spirit of 'cultural survival', both Black expression and memes have to undergo change and become remixed in ways that allow their meaning to go undetected or to completely reject white hyper-surveillance. The memes achieve this through their remixed Black femme aesthetics as the cultural jokes are not explained to white audiences, but instead they rely on visual aesthetical cues which are specific to their intended Black communities. Thus, these remixed memes might be interpreted as a Black cultural practice that exploits the gap between literal and figurative meanings to share visual jokes that exist in a digital sphere in a way that is hyper-visible and yet invisible. In addition, the remixed memes are reflective of a practice of 'sousveillance' as they exploit the hypervisibility of Black culture on social media to create an intimate online community oriented around laughter.³⁴ In this way, the memes demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacy can be curated in the digital public while still rejecting white consumption.

Expressions of humour and joy, as well as the libidinal pleasure in being Black are fundamental to my conceptualisation of digital diasporic intimacy. In intimate relationships,

³³ Jackson, *White Negroes*, 94.

³⁴ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 22.

laughter can help to create stronger interpersonal bonds as it allows people to release tension and generate a sense of physical and emotional closeness centred around shared joy.³⁵ When @BlackCindy's remixed Black femme SpongeBob was shared onto Twitter after the white mainstream had appropriated and circulated the original unedited meme, Tired SpongeBob was repositioned back into the cultural world of Black Twitter. This repositioning and recontextualising that was achieved through the remixed addition of the bonnet, is a process of playful Black diasporic (other)worlding as it marks out a community with specific cultural knowledge using humour.

In his essay on affect, diaspora, and visibility online, Reginold A. Royston marks humour as an important area of identity formation within Black digital communities:

Comedy as a source of identity politics is perhaps one of the most engaging and also particularistic forms of discourse within any shared media public. Humor requires a shared set of codes, understood at a vernacular level. This ability to read linguistic and gestural cues quickly, practices that lie at the heart of cultural boundary-marking, delineates insiders and outsiders.³⁶

While @BlackCindy's use of Tired SpongeBob in her tweet would have remained funny without the remixed addition of the satin bonnet, its presence is a Black femme aesthetical cue that marks out a specific community. The bonnet and the caption create boundaries around the humour using insider knowledge and this demonstrates how comedy had been used as a source of identity politics. While the remix delineates insiders, @BlackCindy's reclamation of SpongeBob back into a Black social world is also a root for laughter; in other

³⁵ William P. Hampes, "Relation Between Intimacy and Humour," *Psychological Reports* 71, no. 1 (1992): 127-130, <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr.1992.71.1.127>.

³⁶ Reginold A. Royston, "At Home, Online: Affective Exchange and the Diasporic Body in Ghanaian Internet Video," in *Migrating the Black Body: The African Diaspora and Visual Culture*, ed. Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 275.

words, when Black cultural references are remixed onto already funny viral memes it adds another layer of comedy that is specifically Black. In the context of the original meme's white adoption, Black femme SpongeBob makes joke at the fact that it cannot be easily consumed by those outside of the Black community. The playful boundary marking in and of itself is funny.

When community is marked out through the meme's Black femme remix, the shared laughter it incites produces digital diasporic intimacy. In an article that explores the nuances of Black comedy online, journalist and comedian Taylor Garron, asked Black comedians "What's so funny about being Black?". The two following excerpts, which are snippets taken from their longer responses, provide an insight into the ways that humour might be understood as an intimate practice of Black digital connectivity and creativity:

Kyle Harris: "[...] I haven't seen any family in a while, so seeing Black people collectively laugh online at the same thing sometimes feels like laughing with my cousins or your friends in the back of the school bus."

Ify Nwadiwe: "The fact that we can build SpongeBob memes out of a whole system built to destroy us is really funny and inspiring. My second thought piggybacks off of that idea, and it's that knowing all of this – all the things that are stacked against us Black people – comedy, laughter, and joy is an act of resistance."³⁷

While Harris' response communicates that laughter online produces a *feeling* of physical proximity and evokes a memory of child-like joy, Nwadiwe focuses on how laughter and joy is a practice of refusal and uses the SpongeBob memes more generally to evidence this. These

³⁷ Taylor Garron, "What's So Funny About Being Black?," *Vulture*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/whats-so-funny-about-being-black.html>.

responses offer alternative perspectives of how digital diasporic intimacy is produced and functions through the cartoon memes.

Firstly, Harris' response focuses on how the act of laughing at digital material evokes feelings of geographical proximity that imitates real life interactions and kinship. I argue, as I have done in previous chapters, that the imitation of physical connectivity is an important aspect of digital diasporic intimacy. Although the audible sound of collective laughter is muted by digital mediation, this sentiment is connoted through Twitter user's engagements with the memes. In the replies to @BlackCindy's tweet people share their own experiences of sleeping with braids and express how they relate to the meme. With over 200 replies and 3000 quote tweets, the circulation of the meme creates the feeling of people laughing and participating together. Some users write that the meme reflects their current state, and many people amplify the tweet with laughing emojis. Levine writes that 'humor is primarily an interactive process among those who share a sense of commonality of experience and situation.'³⁸ In these moments of engagement, the Black diaspora come together to experience and express joy in their similarities oriented around the Black femme remix. Humour is created in community, not only through the remix, which samples Black femme aesthetics, and signifies upon the previous usage of the Tired SpongeBob meme, but also through the many interactions with the meme.

Although as Nwadiwe notes, these memes might be used to comedically respond to systems of oppression such as racism and misogynoir, much of the humour that surrounds @BlackCindy's meme stems from the blatantly obvious point that "Tired SpongeBob" had become racialised and gendered. Seeing a famous cartoon character wearing something that is well known within Black cultures but out of place in the cartoon's world, repositions the

³⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 358.

character as Black and this transfiguration holds much of the meme's humour. In his analysis on laughter, Henri Bergson specified inversion as a prime strategy of comedy: 'Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene.'³⁹ This describes the source of humour within these Black femme remixes. Similarly, Levine recognises that inversion and incongruity are a historical feature of Black American humour and understands them as traditional comedic techniques that can be traced back to slavery.⁴⁰ Within these Black femme remixes, inversion occurs through the Black rescripting and reimagining of the cartoon's interior world. Digital diasporic intimacy is thus created through the practice of creating new, funny meanings, and suddenly the cartoons take on new forms when they are Black femmes.

On the other hand, Nwadiwe's argument that cartoon memes are directly related to a form of resistance overlooks that ways that Black comedy might just intended for the purpose of play, fun, and for the maintenance of Black diasporic (other)worlding. Ultimately, the Black femme remixed memes were shared as humorous reflections of life as Black women and femmes. Although Black femme remixes might be understood as an intervention on the dominant misuse of Black women and femmes' images within meme culture, I do not think that it is productive to suggest that the sole purpose of these remixed cartoon memes is to resist the co-optation of Black femme aesthetics, nor do I wish to suggest that they were only created in response to that misrepresentation. Instead, it is possible for the Black femme meme remixes to have been produced solely for play and comedy, but in ways that signify upon experiences of racism and misogynoir. In their essay on visual expressions of Black joy on Twitter, Catherine Knight Steele and Jessica Lu note that celebrations and articulations of Black joy online offers a counternarrative to dominant narratives where Black digital life is

³⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton & Fred Rothwell (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2005), 46.

⁴⁰ Levine, *Black Culture*, 308.

continuously under threat. Attentive to the ways that hashtags are used to share positive, fun images of Black folk, they argue:

The joyful posts shared via these hashtags celebrate Black life in ways that challenge mainstream medias attempts to fix Black people and Black life into a position of death and despair; assert Black people as fully human, capable of experiencing and expressing a full, dynamic range of emotion; and capture, share, and circulate expressions of Black life without concern for the white gaze.⁴¹

Without erasing the ways that Black femmes experience trauma and appropriation online, I suggest that these Black femme remixes are a display of joy. They are mundane creations that are not fuelled with an attempt to convey a political message but are produced for fun. In other words, it is funny to make SpongeBob and other non-Black cartoon characters appear as Black femmes. It is funny to celebrate Black life in this way, and this celebration, felt through laughter, has the capacity to create intimate diasporic connections.

The Niggafication of Rolfeisha: Ratchetry as Black Digital Play

Building on my previous section where I argued that digital remixing helps create diasporic intimacies through humour and laughter, in this section I expand upon this to focus specifically on how these practices of digital remixing are forms of ratchet digital play. I propose that through digital ratchetry, the memes create diasporic intimacies that are centred around the pleasures of being Black.

Though the term has notoriously been used in hip-hop cultures to degrade culturally specific Black behaviours and aesthetics – especially those that are entangled with Black

⁴¹ Catherine Knight Steele and Jessica Lu, “‘Joy Is Resistance’: Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re)Invention of Black Oral Culture Online,” *Information, Communication and Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 829.

womanhood, displays of sexuality, and working-class politics – the word ‘ratchet’ has been reclaimed by Black women and femmes to denote a form of self-identification with, and the pleasure rooted in, hyperbolic Black expressive and stylistic cultures. Nikki Lane locates the Black ratchet as a site of anti-respectability. She notes that ratchet ‘calls attention to, aspects of behaviour most often associated with the Black working-class including non-normative sexual configurations.’⁴² Recognising how the practice of ratchetry is a rejection of respectability politics, Lane continues:

As a sensibility that skirts the need to perform *respectability*, it points out the limits of assimilationist racial politics. Therefore, it functions both as a tool for pointing out and critiquing bad Black behaviour, and as a tool for resisting the notion that there are such things as “good” and “bad” behaviour in the first place. “Good” for whom? *ratchet* asks. “Bad” for whom? *ratchet* asks.⁴³

Thus, ratchetness might be understood as a display of pride in blackness, Black aesthetics, and Black expressive cultures in ways that reject conformity, assimilation, and respectability politics. Black femme remixes of cartoon memes reflect digital ratchetry as they centre visual and discursive Black behaviours associated in ways that critique respectability politics. Through a sense of cultural pride and lack of care for outside perspectives, ratchet behaviour online can create a form of diasporic intimacy that is predicated around the love for blackness and the joy found in celebrating blackness in all its forms. Interrogating the function of digital ratchetry in meme remixing, from here on I will draw on Black femme remixes that derive from an archive of “Rolf memes” that emerged on Twitter in early 2018 and then again towards the latter end of that year. An examination of the evolution of cartoon character Rolf

⁴² Nikki Lane, *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the (Anti)Politics of Respectability* (Cham: Springer, 2019), 8.

⁴³ Lane, *Black Queer Work*, 8.

into “Rolfisha” – the name that I have chosen to give the Black femme remix for reasons I will elaborate on shortly – opens a space for us to discuss the function of Black ratchetry as a sub-genre of Black sound cultures and a playful facet of digital diasporic intimacy.

“Rolf Stares Out a Window” is the name of the meme that features the blue-haired cartoon character Rolf, an immigrant child from Cartoon Network’s *Ed Edd n’ Eddy* (1999-2008), looking outside of his garden shed. In the meme, he is captured with his back facing



Figure 32 @VillageTaker’s use of Rolf Stares Out a Window meme. (Screenshot by author).

the frame as he looks outside in deep thought at whatever scene is happening outside. However, while the name of the meme suggests that Rolf is looking outside of a window, the meme was actually sampled from an episode where the leading trio Ed, Edd’ n Eddy are working on Rolf’s farm. In the space of one second, this scene quickly appears and disappears from the frame as Rolf looks outside of the door of his shed to check on his farm. Yet, in the meme’s rearticulated title, Rolf has been relocated to a setting that is more relatable to a general

audience and he has been stripped of his agricultural heritage in order to aptly represent a mundane happenstance.

Meme database, KnowYourMeme, credits Twitter user @VillageTaker as the first user of the meme. In his original Tweet, he used the meme to frame his shock at the quick passage of time: “Dawg... 2008 was 10 years ago” (April 16, 2018). @VillageTaker’s use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) immediately situates the cartoon character in a Black digital vernacular soundscape, reimagining Rolf as a Black character (**See Figure 32**). During the circulation of the meme in April 2018, Black Twitter users sampled the meme to reflect on the mundanity of their lives, using Rolf to visibly reflect an extension of themselves.

Later that same year, after the use of the Rolf meme had died down, Rolf resurfaced on Black Twitter as user @Playgurluzzi sampled it with the caption “this how your GMa look from the door when you leaving her house [Face with Tears of Joy emoji]” (September 2, 2018). In her tweet she reimagines Rolf as an elderly Black woman due to his wistful and concerning expression. The next day another Twitter user named @Skinny_que quote tweeted @Playgurluzzi’s sample to add another dimension to the humour. He writes, “That girl don’t be feeding them kids” (September 3, 2018). Imitating the



Figure 33. A Twitter exchange between @playgurluzzi and @skinny_que. (Screenshot by Author).

lexicon of an elderly Black woman, @Skinny_que gives a voice to Rolf that is rooted in African American vernacular (**Figure 33**). While @Playgurluzzi’s original tweet received just under three thousand retweets, @Skinny_que’s received over ten times that amount. The sounds of the grandma, captured through his tweet, heightened Rolf’s circulation. From this moment, Rolf’s transformation from an Eastern European immigrant boy to a visibly Black character was a rapid process in the creative visual and sonic landscape of Black Twitter.

Across September 2018, “Rolf Stares Out a Window” was shared by multiple Twitter users who used the character’s likeness to remix him into a Black character. Eventually, Rolf’s skin tone was darkened, his outfit had changed, hair was altered, and accessories were added so that Rolf would become a representation of a range of different Black people. In articles that explore the permeance of the Rolf meme on Twitter, teenager and animator Elijah Rutland was credited as the original creator of a visibly Black Rolf.⁴⁴ In response to

⁴⁴ Ikran Dahir, “This Artist Drew The Black Rolf Looking Out The Window Meme and People Are Making the Best Edits,” *Buzzfeed*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ikrd/this-artist-drew-the-black-rolf-looking-out-the-window-meme>; Kyle Shokeye, “Creator of Viral ‘Black Rolf’ Meme Working on New Netflix

the initial circulation of the unedited meme in April and its resurface in September, Rutland decided to redraw the meme using ProCreate, a digital painting application available on iPads. In his remix, Rutland maintained the same setting, animation style and positioning of Rolf, changing only his hair style, colour, and skin tone. Rolf's iconic floppy blue quiff had been replaced with a low black fade and his skin had been coloured in a few shades darker (**Figure 34**). In Rutland's caption, he collapses the boundary between Rolf and himself, using the character to represent him: "People really out here thinking that I make free art..." (September 5, 2018). In doing so, Rolf had become "niggafied". In honour of an archive of Twitter users who have exclaimed that Rolf had been "niggafied", I use *niggafication* to describe the ratchet process of meme remixing where previously non-Black characters and figures are edited to visually appear Black.⁴⁵ Niggafication is an overtly (in)appropriate term that describes this practice of remixing. As Brock makes clear, 'from rap's



Figure 34. Elijah Rutland's remix of Rolf Staring Out the Window. (Screenshot by Author).

perspective, ratchetry revolves around perceptions of crass materialism, promiscuity, rudeness, ignorance, inappropriateness, dishabille, and occasionally violence.'⁴⁶ My use of niggafication not only signals the inappropriate and anti-respectable practice of remixing, but cements it as a wholly Black intracommunal practice.

Animated Series," *Complex*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.complex.com/life/2019/06/creator-viral-black-rolf-meme-working-netflix-animated-series>.

⁴⁵ Search "Niggafied Rolf" on Twitter for a comprehensive list of all those who helped coin this term. The following Tweet however, is the first recorded Tweet that used the phrase: Artez Jeantario (@OgMigoKash), "I'm sick of y'all [Face with Tears of Joy emoji. Double Exclamation Mark emoji] Who niggafied Rolf?[Skull emoji]," Tweet, September 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/ogmigokash/status/1038548084614197249?s=21&t=ZBNp-Mvg4LGdl0PPuVoVMg>.

⁴⁶ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 129.

While Rutland's niggafication of Rolf was the basis for more Rolf remixes to emerge with darker skin tones as Black Twitter users would sample and remix his meme, he was incorrectly referenced as the first person to transform Rolf into a Black character. The true



Figure 35. @FUCKCHEEY's Rolfeisha meme. (Screenshot by author).

origin of visibly Black Rolf can be traced to @FUCKCHEEY, a Black Twitter user who was responsible for the first Black femme Rolf. Two days after @Playgurluzzi's tweet that positioned Rolf as a Black grandmother (**Figure 33**), Black Twitter was introduced to the first of many iterations of "Rolfeisha". In this Black femme remix, Rolf's signature blue fringe has been drawn over with black ink and a long ponytail has been attached to the back of his head. Two yellow circles had been drawn over his ears to represent large golden hoop earrings

(**Figure 35**). Unlike Rutland's edits, this original Rolfeisha had the same infrastructure of the original Rolf meme intact. Perhaps @FUCKCHEEY's creation had been overlooked in popular discussions of Black Rolf because of Rutland's identity as an animator and because his darker skinned version had been sampled across Black digital networks and remixed to create new Rolf memes who were visibly Black. Or perhaps, and even more convincingly so, her erasure was entangled with the politics of erasure surrounding Black women and queer content creators. Nevertheless, Rutland's animation was not the first version of Black Rolf. The first Black Rolf was indeed a Black femme.

While 'niggafication' sufficiently describes the playful ratchet practice of Black meme remixing, this term does not account for the transmutability of gender that we witness when

Black femme aesthetics are remixed onto them.⁴⁷ Like Tired SpongeBob, the cultural history of the Rolf Stares Out a Window memes showcases the erasure of Black femmes, women, and queer creative production. For the remainder of this section I will focus specifically on the Rolfeisha remixes to centre this production. I choose to refer to the Black femme remix as Rolfeisha to underscore the practice of digital *ratchetry* that is at play within this meme culture. The name discursively locates the remixed character as racialised and gendered, and it also signals the impact that social class has on its production and its humour. I offer ‘Rolfeisha’ to underscore the intersectional analysis required to understand the specifics of Black femme meme culture.

The moniker Rolfeisha joins together the names Rolf and Keisha. A girl’s name that boasts cultural pride and can be found across diasporic Black cultures, predominantly in the U.S and Caribbean, ‘Keisha’ is repeatedly returned to in popular culture to denote a hypersexualised and oftentimes working-class Black woman. Many examples strewn across pop-culture demonstrate how Keisha embodies the Jezebel and Sapphire caricatures who embody the hypersexual and angry Black women stereotypes.⁴⁸ For example, in Russ Millions and Tion Wayne’s 2018 summer anthem “Keisha & Becky”, Keisha represents a very sexy ‘ratchet hoe’ who can’t be introduced to someone’s mother.⁴⁹ Deeply rooted in misogynoiristic stereotypes, Keisha is repeatedly type-casted in media, and those with the name have expressed how they have experienced outright racism and microaggressions due to the blackness of and negative connotations associated with it.⁵⁰ Concerned with the ways that Keisha has been used and degraded specifically within Black popular culture, Lakeisha

⁴⁷ A Twitter search of “niggafied Rolf” reveals a range of Black Twitter users who have collectively used this term to refer specifically to a masculine portrayal of Rolf.

⁴⁸ Jade LB, *Keisha da Sket* (London: Merky Books, 2021); Kendrick Lamar, “Keisha’s Pain (Her Song),” track 11 on *Section.80*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011, digital download; *Why Did I Get Married?* Directed by Tyler Perry, aired October 12 (Santa Monica: Lionsgate Films, 2007).

⁴⁹ Russ Millions and Tion Wayne, “Keisha & Becky,” track 1 on *Russ Splash x Tion Wayne*, Universal Music Operations, 2019, digital download.

⁵⁰ “Keisha: What’s in a name? Bigotry,” *The Kansas City Star*, November 5, 2013, <https://www.kansascity.com/entertainment/article339728.html>

Goedluck writes that ‘cultural influence and entrenched social beliefs go hand in hand to fuel the ideology that certain names carry more merit than others – and this is sadly perpetuated both within the black community and beyond it.’⁵¹ Goedluck’s piece urges people to ‘keep my name out of your mouth’. However, with respect to this request and understanding the culture surrounding the name – especially as someone who has had to grow up with my name being used as a misogynoiristic attack on my Black femininity I use Keisha here as a means of reclaiming the name. My use of Keisha to signal the Black femme remix of these Rolf memes is not done with the intent to fuel these derogative stereotypes, nor is it done to situate Rolfeisha as the visualisation of these caricatures. Instead, I have chosen Rolfeisha to demonstrate how these memes boast Black cultural pride while being stemmed in a practice of online ratchetry.

In African American culture, to be ratchet describes the performance of set of behaviours – audible, stylistic, and physical – that are commonly associated with, but not isolated to, lower-class Black femmes. Ratchet has been wielded as a term, within and outside of the Black community, to degrade and devalue behaviours associated with lower-class Black femmes. However, it has recently been reclaimed as a word to denote authentically Black practices as well as for sexual empowerment. In @FUCKCHEEY’s version of Rolfeisha, the remixed addition of large hoop earrings evokes stylistic Black ratchetry. While large golden hoop earrings are now a staple to many millennials’ wardrobes, they were regarded as a piece of “ratchet” jewellery as they were commonly purchased at low-cost beauty supply stores and stylised by lower class Black femmes. The adoption of the gold hoops in this remix signals a form of ratchet stylisation and encodes Rolfeisha in a long history of Black femme aesthetic culture. The choice to remix this stylisation signals upon and finds joy in Black femme

⁵¹ Lakeisha Goedluck, “My Name is Keisha and Pop Culture Ruined My Name,” *Gal-dem*, March 27, 2020, <https://gal-dem.com/my-name-is-keisha-and-pop-culture-ruined-my-name/>

practices. This, I propose, demonstrates how digital diasporic intimacy can be experienced through affirming displays of Black femme ratchetry.

When André Brock discusses ratchetry in terms of Black expressive cultures, he writes that, ‘for Black culture, the invocation of *ratchet* conjures up someone who has no filter or propriety.’⁵² This is especially prevalent within Black humour. @FUCKCHEEY’s caption which accompanies their Rolfeisha remix demonstrates what ratchet humour might look like in practice:

Him: I’m outside

Me: Look at this dumb ass nigga at the wrong house

In her tweet, @FUCKCHEEY uses Rolfeisha to symbolise herself as she stands at the window and watches an imaginary man arrive at a house that is not hers. @FUCKCHEEY showcases a lack of filter as she mocks his simple mistake. Although the mistake might not usually be a source of humour, the use of Rolfeisha makes it funny. The sample of Rolf and the meanings that have been attributed to the meme over time add another layer of humour. On top of this, referring to the unseen character as a ‘dumb ass nigga’ demonstrates a lack of propriety. In Black vernacular where meaning is coded and subverted, ‘dumb ass nigga’ is doubly offensive, but endearing. The use of ‘nigga’ evidences a practice of Black ratchetry, and it playfully mocks Black men using sass as a rhetorical device. In Monk-Payton’s work on laughter online, she uses the phrase ‘rhythm of ridicule’ to describe a ‘temporal designation for the ebb and flow of content afforded by participant expressions of sass and shade.’⁵³ In this example, @FUCKCHEEY’s use of the meme builds upon a flow of sass and

⁵² Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 128.

⁵³ Brandy Monk-Payton, “#LaughingWhileBlack: Gender and the Comedy of Social Media Blackness,” *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 2 (2017):” 26-27.

shade as to generate humour. Together, the visual remixes and the captions that accompany them create a rhythmic digital flow predicated on Black ratchetry.

In Brock's investigation into Black Twitter, he uses ratchetry as a framework to discuss Black quotidian behaviours on social media to challenge the perspective that digital blackness can only be understood as a product of resistance:

I appropriated the term *ratchet* to ground this frame in the banal, sensual, and outspoken aspects of Black expressive culture [...] before commodification and before resistance, Black folk enact their cultural identity online because they enjoy being Black; my definition of *ratchetry* thus includes a libidinal component of pleasure.⁵⁴

Brock's frame is useful to discuss the Black femme remixes. The creation of these meme, and then their circulation are a form of enjoyment and a form of pleasure. They playfully showcase the joy within blackness and Black life and do so by centring Black voices and aesthetics. Brock's posturing of digital Black ratchetry demonstrates how intention and autonomy are at the crux of its function. The creation of the cartoon memes showcase how Black agency is central to meme culture, and especially the creative production of Black women and queer folk who are often marginalised from Black public discourse. In the Black femme remixes, the unapologetic use of Black femme aesthetics signals a ratchet digital practice.

@ZandiNokuthula's use of the Rolfeisha meme demonstrates how a ratchet digital practice can be used to directly challenge respectability politics. In this sample of the meme, which is watermarked with the name Ming to credit the original creator, two Rolfeisha's are remixed together in one meme. They are wearing outfits which are commonly associated with

⁵⁴ Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 128.

church attendance; while one of them is dressed in purple, the other is dressed in all green.



Figure 36. @ZandiNokuthula uses a Rolfeisha meme to critique respectability politics. (Screenshot by author).

Pearl jewellery has been remixed onto their ears, neck, and wrist. Together, they look outside of the window to observe whatever scene is taking place outside (**Figure 36**). The caption reads, “Older black aunties watching young black women live lives that are free of the constraints of marriage, kids & overall societal convention” (October 28, 2019). With this discursive framing, the meme is used to comedically challenge the prevalence of respectability politics within older generations of Black folk. Although the meme was not necessarily created with the intention of the elderly generation coming across it, it pokes fun at societal

expectations within Black communities and playfully anticipates the disappointment that might be felt from older generations as they look on. Digital Black ratchetry is implied through the way that the meme upends respectability politics and religious assimilation and centres Black youth’s agency. Having this dialogue using a Black femme remixed cartoon meme adds to the practice of ratchetry as it encodes this complex conversation in a playful format. In this example, digital diasporic intimacy is created by making jokes at the tensions that exist within the Black community.

The remixes of Rolf into Rolfeisha and Tired SpongeBob into Black femme SpongeBob demonstrates a type of digital play that is oriented around gender. Specifically, the remixes illuminate the transmutability of gender, insofar that through their remixing, they demonstrate that gender is not fixed. Meme remixing demonstrates that gender is a performative practice that is reliant upon aesthetics and culturally understood behaviours. Visually, Rolfeisha’s

femme identity is marked by the aesthetic technologies that they are adorned with, such as their hairstyles, red lipstick, earrings, and in some versions, the clothing. Black femme

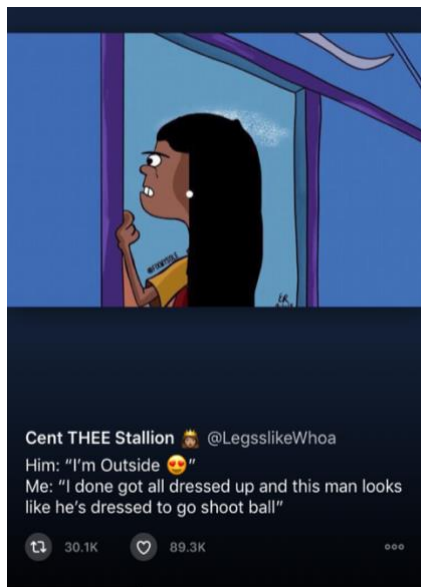


Figure 37. @LegsslikeWhoa's use of a Rolfeisha meme. (Screenshot by author).

aesthetics are remixed upon these Rolfs to shape meaning, encode humour, and signal a ratchet practice of Black stylisation. However, while these memes rely on gender's transmutability for their humour and their creation of digital community, queer contexts and cultures are seldom visible in the virality of these memes. For instance, when the Rolfeisha memes are used to comedically reflect upon relationship dynamics, it is more often heterosexual relationships that are privileged within these.

In @LegssLikeWhoa's use of the Rolfeisha meme,

Rutland's darker skinned redrawing has been sampled and then remixed again to feature long black hair and a small white earring has been added (**Figure 37**). Her tweet reads:

Him: "I'm Outside [Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes emoji]"

Me: "I done got all dressed up and this man looks like he's dressed to go shoot ball"

While Rutland's niggafied Rolf has been visually remixed into a femme through the addition of the Black femme aesthetics, the caption reinforces a heterosexual relationship dynamic.

While the Black femme remix alone signals a queering of Black gender, the tweets that frame them can often reimagine and reify heteronormativity and gender binaries. This aspect of digital play makes it apparent that there is a particular brand of blackness being constructed within these memes, and that is one that privileges heterosexuality and gender conformity.

While femme aesthetics are adopted, they are used in a way that equates femmeness with

womanness, but as Shange puts it, ‘femmes and straightness don’t exist at the same time.’⁵⁵

The Rolfeisha remixes as well as other cartoon memes, provide an opportunity for Black queer sexualities, gender fluidity and nonconformity to be visualised, expressed, and played with, but as these examples and the contexts have demonstrated, queer culture is marginalised within this practice of digital ratchetry. In these examples, while digital diasporic intimacy is created through shared laughter and creative experience, the gender binaries are reinforced through the tweets that frame them. Limor Shifman proposes that ‘revealing the common ideas and forms shared by *many* Internet memes might tell us something about digital culture.’⁵⁶ In this case, these memes illustrate that this practice of digital diasporic intimacy is one that unfortunately marginalises queer cultures, identities, and politics. Though Black femme aesthetics are played with to create joyful digital diasporic intimacies, Rolfeisha herself, cannot fully be articulated as a Black femme in ways that reject gender binaries.

Meme Remixing as Archival Intimacy

Another way that the memes resonate digital diasporic intimacy is through the way that they are circulated and built upon across Black digital communities. In this section, I look at this movement specifically to argue that when the memes are sampled and then remixed they contribute to the creation of a contemporary cultural archive that can be drawn from to then create new meanings that refer back to these community constructed cultural references. In other words, while these memes originally sample scenes from children’s cartoons, the sampled versions, with their new meanings, can be sampled *again* to build upon these new meanings.

⁵⁵ Shange, et al., “Black (Femme) Genders,”.

⁵⁶ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014), 15.

Memes' capacity to rapidly circulate across social media is directly linked to the way that meaning is created and held within them and their wide reception is shaped by the ways that they intersect with a variety of other political or cultural texts to make their point. Limor Shifman's research into the emergence, function, and use of memes in digital culture offers an insight into some of the ways we might understand internet memes' virality through the lens of intertextuality. She describes internet memes as a group of material that share 'common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance', 'are created with awareness of each other', and 'are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.'⁵⁷ Thus, Shifman's definition of memes centres intertextuality, multiple participants, and human creativity as fundamental components of their genetic makeup. However, like most studies of memes, Shifman's definition lacks cultural specificity. While Shifman recognises that intertextuality and collaborative human creativity are essential components of meme dissemination, she does not consider how cultural differences impact meme creation and engagement differently. This is where I intervene, as I propose that sampling and remixing can be used to describe the ways that memes are drawn upon in a way that centres Black creativity.

Attentive to meme usage in Black digital spheres, particularly Black Twitter, Brock argues that memes' creative contexts are specific to the communities' cultural politics who share and engage with them. He proposes that 'Black memetic digital practice invents, transforms, and signifies upon units of Black and mainstream culture to create a shared social and cultural experience.'⁵⁸ While Shifman uses the term "intertextuality" to describe how memes are interconnected, Brock refers to this as a strategy of "signifyin'". In his seminal study, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) Henry Louis Gates Jr, uses signifyin' to describe a diasporic Black

⁵⁷ Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 177.

⁵⁸ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 204.

rhetorical strategy that uses indirection to communicate ideas comedically, provocatively, as an insult and/or as a way to boast.⁵⁹ He articulates signifyin’ as a form of wordplay used and performed in Black vernacular, music cultures, literatures, and street cultures that builds on references and stylisations of what *has been* to create dialogue that requires a shared cultural understanding. In many ways, signifyin’ can be understood as an intertextual practice, but it is specific to the context of Black expressive cultures and knowledges. This practice, I argue, can be seen through the creation and engagement with memes online, however, I use the term ‘sampling’, which is an intertextual practice of signifyin’ found in Black sound cultures.

The sampling of the Rolf memes is demonstrated in the ways that the remixed memes take new forms while building on the archive of the original memes, to create new meanings. In the Rolfeisha memes, although hair was first used to indicate Rolf’s gendered and

Before you
get the job After you
get the job



Figure 38. Before you get the job and after you get the job Rolfeisha meme. Created by @koffeekhaan. (Screenshot by author).

racialised transformation, it quickly became a central focus for the memes. This resulted in many of the already existing remixed memes being sampled to create new meanings but on different platforms and through alternative forms. In a sampled meme created by @koffeekhaan, two Rolfeishas are positioned side by side. One has their hair pressed into a short

bob, and the other has an afro gathered by a headband into a puff (**Figure 38**). The meme has been edited with a passage above that reads “Before you get the job” and “After you get the

⁵⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

job”. In this meme, the two Rolfeishas are used to comment on the ways that Black women and femmes have had to alter their hairstyles in workspaces to be regarded as ‘professional’, but it also draws humour from the way that Black people have exploited and subverted these institutionalised forms of anti-blackness.⁶⁰

Using Rolfeisha to centre Black women and femmes’ agency, the memes make light of racist attitudes and microaggressions in the workplace. As a direct challenge to the presence of anti-blackness and how Black women and femmes navigate corporate life, the meme disrupts feelings of anger, frustration, apathy, and sadness, which can oftentimes cloud the realities of misogynoir. Imhotep argues that this disruption is a marked feature of Black femme aesthetics. She explains, ‘as excessive and indulgent displays of blackness and femininity, Black Femme aesthetics are culturally, politically, and economically disruptive.’⁶¹ Not only would the perceived hair change be disruptive to the working environment as it challenges ideas around beauty and professionalism, but the meme itself is disruptive as it draws from a digital cultural archive of the Rolfeisha memes and engages Black ratchetry to centre Black agency. As Sanjay Sharma writes in his research on Black Twitter, ‘blacktags [hashtags in Black Twitter networks] have the capacity to disrupt whiteness of Twitter network.’⁶² In this case, sampling ‘diasporic resources’ from a ratchet digital archive to create new meanings that challenge whiteness is disruptive.⁶³ Digital diasporic intimacy is created through this disruption, where people draw samples from a resource to then create humorous

⁶⁰ Across the diaspora, Black hairstyles have been articulated as unprofessional and ‘unkempt’ in the workplace and in schools. Recently, Black folk have protested these discriminative, anti-black policies. For more, see: Chanté Griffin, “How Natural Black Hair at Work Became a Civil Rights Issue,” *Jstor Daily*, July 3, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/how-natural-black-hair-at-work-became-a-civil-rights-issue/>; Koketso Moeti, “Stop Racism at Pretoria Girls High,” <https://awethu.amandla.mobi/petitions/stop-racism-at-pretoria-girls-high>; you can also visit <https://halocollective.co.uk> to find out about more anti- hair discrimination organising in the UK.

⁶¹ Imhotep, “#OnFleek,” 50.

⁶² Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion,” *New Formations* 78, no. 2 (2013): 48, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.78.02.2013>.

⁶³ Jacqueline Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1998): 298.

meaning that carries extra meaning if you were part of the original communities that created it.

In February 2020, almost two years after the original upload of meme, @NikitaLawal sampled nine different Rolfeisha memes to create a new meme. In each of individual memes, Rolfeisha wears a different hairstyle, or head accessory. From left to right, they are seen wearing: a pink headwrap with no hair on show; a long black curled weave; glossy pink finger waves; dark brown bantu knots; a sleek black bob; a brown hijab; long black faux locs; an afro puff; and a satin bonnet (**Figure 39**). The meme, tweeted with the words “Priscilla until she collects that 50k #LoveIsland”, signals Black beauty cultures where Black women and femmes’ regularly change hairstyles. In the Tweet, @NikitaLawal is making a reference to ITV’s dating reality TV series, Love Island. Every year during the six-week screening, UK Black Twitter head online to dissect the cultural politics of the show, analyse the treatment of Black women contestants, and live tweet responses to the drama of reality television. Priscilla Anyabu was a contestant known for frequently changing her hairstyle and wowing or surprising the other contestants. @NikitaLawal’s use of the meme brings together an archive of Rolfeishas to signal the diversity of Black femme aesthetics. In Massanari’s research on participatory culture on Reddit, she discusses how retelling and resharing stories that have already been shared helps to create digital community:



Figure 39. @Nikitalawal’s use of a compilation of Rolfeisha memes. (Screenshot by author).

retelling important stories or events, even (or especially) if they are dark or titillating, while refracting/remixing them through a lens of humour. These exchanges both solidify membership in the reddit community by signalling, “I’ve been here for a while, and I remember that” while remixing the original meaning and renewing its relevance to the community.⁶⁴

Massanari’s application of signalling and remixing can be applied to this example as @NikitaLawal pulls from the 2018 archive of Rolfeisha memes to apply it to an alternative context. The use of the meme sample solidifies @NikitaLawal’s membership within the Black Twitter community, which is oftentimes regarded as solely African American, and shapes its meaning within a contemporary context as she applies it to the politics of Black media consumption and critique in Britain.

Although Rolfeisha’s life began on Twitter, the meme has migrated across other social media platforms and has become a visual representation of Black people online. On October 6, 2020, as I scrolled through my Instagram feed, a Black hair account called @NaturalHairLoves shared a meme that looked strangely familiar to me. Within it, a Black cartoon femme is stood in a hair shop and appears to be choosing which type of hair to purchase for their hair appointment. A pink satin hair bonnet has been remixed onto their head, and they wear a long sleeve pink top and black legging. Their body is curvaceous, and they hold a phone in their hand (**Figure 40**). The caption



Figure 40. The Instagram account @naturalhairloves shares a sampled Rolfeisha meme. (Screenshot by author).

⁶⁴ Adrienne L. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015) 81-82.

reads, “When u getting your hair but now your stylist not replying”. It took me a few seconds to realise that this was the same face of Rolf. The cartoon child had been completely removed from his original setting and remixed into a Black hair store. For the first time, Rolf’s entire body shape had been reimagined to portray a body type that is deemed desirable on social media. In the fleeting world of the internet, memes are constantly signified upon, altered, updated, repurposed, and edited. In reference to these varying processes of dissemination and engagement Jackson argues that ‘[m]emes at their liveliest look indebted to very black processes of cultural survival.’⁶⁵ She focuses on the way memes *move* across the internet to illustrate the interconnected relationship they have with signifyin’ and the ways that Black expressive culture is reshaped, updated, and altered as a means of avoiding detection and surveillance online.⁶⁶ The migration of Rolfeisha from Twitter onto Instagram, and then the expansion of Rolfeisha’s setting demonstrates how the Rolf meme has migrated across the internet and taken on new meaning. In the new meme, Rolfeisha has been reshaped, recoded, and relocated into a familiar Black setting. Despite its migration across the internet, Rolfeisha remains in the Black digital lexicon as it builds upon an already existing archive of Black digital diasporic knowledges, jokes, and references.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have explored some of the ways that Black femme cartoon memes sustain creative and joyous ways of curating digital diasporic intimacy due to their sonic vibrancy. I used sonic vibrancy to describe how the production and engagement with these memes is enmeshed with diasporic Black sound cultures. Using ‘remix’ to describe the ways that the memes are edited to create new meanings, and ‘sample’ to refer to their reuse

⁶⁵ Jackson, *White Negroes*, 91.

⁶⁶ Jackson, “The Blackness of Meme Movement,”.

and dissemination on social media, I grounded the creation of Black femme memes within a framework of Black sound cultures to demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacies are shaped by a wider culture of Black technological creativity. While I explored sonic vibrancy through the creation of these memes, I also focused on the *sound* of these memes as it relates to the creation of laughter, comedic and cultural voice, and virality.

My focus on Black femme remixes of cartoon memes allowed me to centre humour, ratchet digital play, and the mundane in my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy. I argued that humour is generative for relieving tension and creating insider community, and by focusing on the ratchet and the banal, I demonstrated how digital diasporic intimacy can be curated through everyday playful digital engagements on social media where outsider surveillance is rejected, and cultural knowledges are privileged. These Black femme remixes also demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacy can be sustained through playful expressions centred around the joy of being Black and femme. While the memes sometimes respond to socio-political issues, most of the time they are shared to generate laughter within digital communities and to celebrate blackness in its multiplicity.

Despite the importance of the transmutability of gender within these memes, queer voices are not heard, laughter and joy that is oriented around Black queer ways of knowing have been marginalised, and this demonstrates that while digital diasporic intimacy might be culminated through humour, this humour requires a shared knowledge and motivation, and so some members of the community might be omitted.

Conclusion: A Case for Digital Diasporic Intimacy and Future Research

This project began with the following question: what are some of the ways that Black women and femmes have used visual mediums to curate digital diasporic intimacies? Over the course of the five chapters and the interludes that separate them, I have mapped out some examples that illustrate how digital diasporic intimacies are produced, enacted, engaged, and experienced across digital visual cultures uploaded onto social media. As I engaged a Black feminist reading of cecile emeke's YouTube-based web series *strolling*, Renata Cherlise's Instagram account @BlackArchives.co, a selection of Instagram influencers' #BlackGirlMagic selfies, and remixed Black femme cartoon memes, I posited that digital diasporic intimacies take shape in the ways that we are affected by digital visual cultures.

Affect has been central to my articulation of digital diasporic intimacy. In each of the case studies I explored how affect is engaged and wielded to create intimate digital communities. In chapter two I explored how emeke's *strolling* series encapsulated and then became a narrative vehicle for articulations of frustration and relief, as well as a resource to search for diasporic belonging. I argued that these moments of affective encounter enacted through the series' visuals, storytellers' narratives, and through viewers' responses in the comments section contributed to a *shared autobiography* of Black belonging which was structured by feelings and conversations of similarities and difference. In chapter three, I made the case that diasporic remembrance is affective. Drawing from an archive of photographs and comments shared onto Cherlise's Instagram page @BlackArchives.co, I argued that affect is created through digital kinship and through the articulation of shared memories, which all gathers in a practice of what I term, *speculative remembering*. For the influencers' #BlackGirlMagic selfies I looked at in chapter four, I demonstrated how affect is captured within processes of

self-imaging. Building on arguments made by Krista Thompson about the visual economy of light, I argued that light and lighting is a diasporic cultural resource used in these selfies to communicate a desire to see and be seen, and to script a Black beauty politic. Finally, in chapter five, I draw from a sample of Tired SpongeBob memes and Rolf Looking Out the Window memes to argue that remixed Black femme cartoon memes can generate diasporic affect through their cultural registers which are a source of shared laughter and community delineation.

Although I looked at each of these case studies separately, there are overlaps in the ways that affect is engaged. For instance, millennial nostalgia and memories of our childhood pastimes contributes to much of the humour encoded within the remixed cartoon memes. This differs from the function of time that appears across Cherlise's @BlackArchives.co to demonstrate how memory can be utilised differently for affective digital diasporic intimacies. In addition, seeing oneself reflected and being wholly involved in the curation of this imagery, is just as important for the structure of affect within all the case studies as it is within the influencers' selfies. Though they are different visual mediums, each of these case studies is connected to the others through the ways that they affect digital diasporic communities.

In my introduction, I engaged with Jacqueline Nassy Brown and Tina Campt to argue that longing, feeling, and desire shape digital diasporic intimacies. Throughout this thesis I have sustained that argument and illustrated the many different forms that desire might take. For emeke's *strolling*, this desire is manifested in the longing for Black community and belonging. Across @BlackArchives.co, desire is communicated through a yearning for the past as well as the rhetorical collapse of past and present in responses to the archive. In the #BlackGirlMagic selfies desire is exhibited through aspirational and self-defined presentations of the self which intervene on misogynoiristic images. Then for the Black femme remixed cartoon memes, desire is exhibited in the practice of digital ratchetry, where

impulse, impropriety, and unapologetic Black play can generate laughter and maintain digital community bonds. Altogether desire structures my case for digital diasporic intimacies.

Diasporic desire, longing, and feeling are not always harmonious or created through shared understandings. Within each chapter, I also recognised that digital diasporic intimacies are present within moments of disharmony and disagreements and where tensions and conflict arise when members of the Black diaspora work through their different desires, perceptions, and experiences. In chapter three I acknowledged how some engagers with Cherlise's @BlackArchives.co used the digital resource to project and validate their ideas for how Black communities, specifically women and the working class, *should* behave and act. Underpinned by respectability politics, these commenters rooted their desires and longing for the past in ways that shunned and denigrated specific aspects of blackness and Black culture. In response to this, I also demonstrated some of the ways that respectability politics were being challenged by others, such as through direct responses to these commenters to hold them accountable for their words, or through the other mediums including when ratchet cartoon memes were used to make fun of cultural expectations grounded in respectability politics, and when Abraham in emeke's *strolling* series shared his frustration with the ways he is impacted by anti-Blackness within the Black community.

In addition, throughout this thesis I grappled with the erasure of queer and trans narratives, people, and cultural production. In chapter three I recognised the lack of visibly queer histories depicted across @BlackArchives.co and noted how this can impact the ways that historical diasporic registers are accessed and who gets to participate in the temporal curation of digital diasporic intimacy. I attended to this erasure more specifically in chapter five where I identified that the Black queer origins of cartoon meme production had been marginalised. I also argued that the transmutability of gender within remixed Black femme memes can further marginalise trans and gender nonconforming people when gender binaries are reinforced, and

heteronormativity is privileged. Although these memes illustrate gender's performativity and showcase how gender fluid digital play can be joyful and fun, without a queer coding of gender, these could risk on one hand legitimising gender fluidity and on the other policing it. Despite these realities, this does not necessarily stop queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people from engaging with these visual mediums. The ways that Black queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people navigate these mediums while part of their identity is marginalised within them is a complex conversation that I strongly suggest needs to be had in the development of future research, and I will return to explain my reasons for this shortly. For now, these disharmonies demonstrate that digital diasporic intimacy is not simply about joy, happiness, and closeness, but also about intracommunity tensions, difficult dialogue, and working through difference.

This thesis was anchored by the concepts of space, time, the body, and sound as they relate to Black diasporic cultures, identity, and knowledges. Although the interludes introduced the themes that were most relevant to the chapter it preceded, these concepts can be mapped and traced throughout all the case studies. This structure allowed me to demonstrate precisely how digital diasporic intimacy is mediated and engaged through different facets of blackness and Black culture. In doing so, I argued that digital visual cultures can create the conditions for Black diasporic (other)worlding, and I used this to refer to the ways that Black people come together to create communities, find belonging, and construct and negotiate diasporic identities. Practices of Black diasporic (other)worlding appears in all the case studies as a creation of spaces for alternative dialogues. This includes the oppositional narratives about blackness and Black identity made visible within emeke's *strolling*, historical photographs of Black communities made accessible and available for community engagement on Cherlise's @BlackArchives.co, self-presentations of beauty created by influencers as #BlackGirlMagic selfies, and the creation of humorous digital content, such as remixed Black femme memes,

that demarcates Black communities from white spectators. Altogether, I demonstrated how Black diasporic (other)worlding was curated through different aspects of digital visual cultures.

Visual mediums were central to my argument on digital diasporic intimacies. Although I did not solely focus on visual media as I also included text from comments sections, everything that I explored was concerned with, or oriented around diasporic digital visual culture. These mediums were particularly pertinent to my research not only because visual communication has become increasingly popular online, but because I was specifically interested in how the visual harnesses affective registers that help the Black diaspora to find belonging and community. This thesis illustrated that for the Black digital diaspora, visual culture and the dialogues and rhetorical framing that surround them can be used to emotively create bonds, delineate community, and celebrate ourselves. I focused specifically on quotidian visual cultures, as I wanted to understand how digital diasporic intimacies resonate through the everyday. I centred the act of seeing, even in those banal moments, to think about how intimacies are mediated daily.

This focus on visual culture and the quotidian inevitably led to discussions around individualism, neoliberalism, and platform affordances. The changes that occurred during the research period resulted in a critical discussion about the impacts of entrepreneurship and capital. For instance, my research on #BlackGirlMagic selfies was not originally intended to focus specifically on influencers. However, as I found that the hashtag was being used more frequently on Instagram to advertise businesses, generate audience, and exploit algorithms, it led me to ask whether digital diasporic intimacies can be located within these cultures of individualism and neoliberalism. For that case study, I argued yes. Although it was inevitably impacted by the wider stripping of meaning surrounding the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag, I located digital diasporic intimacy in the ways that Black women created self-images and

spoke of themselves and their beauty in ways that referred to culturally encoded meanings. Although I also argued that digital diasporic intimacies can sometimes be exploited for digital exposure, I noted that for Black women who have been marginalised within entrepreneurship and beauty media, this requires a more complex discussion that accounts for community uplift and solidarity.

These questions of neoliberalism and capital are also applicable to the other case studies in this thesis. For instance, financial constraints limited emeke's development of *strolling*, and Cherlise eventually used @BlackArchives.co to partner with larger national organisations such as the NBA and Adobe. This demonstrates how digital diasporic intimacies do not exist separately from capitalism and financial pressure, and this also includes the ways the large corporations and white audiences can commodify and appropriate materials that were once used for Black diasporic (other)worlding. Rejecting and defying this can also be a practice of digital diasporic intimacy, as I demonstrated in chapter five, when Black cultural productions are co-opted by white audiences, materials are remixed, reshaped, and given new meanings to avoid surveillance.

Throughout the course of my research, I have grappled with the loss of digital materials and the fast-paced nature of social media. This impacted this thesis specifically as since 2018 emeke's *strolling* was removed from the internet, Cherlise stopped accepting public submissions for @BlackArchives.co, her team expanded and the platform became an organisation, the #BlackGirlMagic tag on Instagram rapidly became oversaturated with digital content oftentimes unrelated to its original aim, and the meme trends were replaced. As I noted in my introduction, this posed methodological and ethical concerns to my research, however, it also revealed truths about the curation of digital diasporic intimacy. Importantly, the digital lives of my sources demonstrate how digital diasporic intimacy in and of itself is ephemeral. The curation of digital diasporic intimacy was never intended to exist in its same

form and be fixed. Instead, this form of intimacy is one that changes based on the context, cultural climate, and its engagers. Like the internet, like blackness itself, and like creativity, the mediums, expressions, and iterations of digital diasporic intimacy are in flux, they change shape, morph, build upon one another, and cannot be located to one example. However, this is not to suggest that digital diasporic intimacy is in any way less legitimate or *real* because it is not longstanding. Alternatively, I argue that digital diasporic intimacy is ever evolving and responding to the needs and desires of the communities engaging it. Each case study offers an archive of digital diasporic intimacy, and as I demonstrated in the final section of chapter five, these archives will continue to be drawn from to create new meanings.

A Final Note on Method

My decision to use autoethnography was important to ground my personal experience of using social media as well as my engagement with these digital visual cultures. It allowed me to delve into the material with an awareness of their contexts, emergence, and how they have changed over the years. It also offered me a space to reflect on the function of these mediums and communities as a Black person. Autoethnography meant that I have been able to take my individual experiences seriously and appreciate lived knowledges as an important mode of intellectual inquiry. On the other hand, the case studies I selected were personal to me as they had been resources that had helped me to forge my own Black diasporic digital identity, and intimately connect with others on social media. This meant that sometimes critically engaging with them proved to be a difficult task, as I did not want to undermine the affects these digital visual cultures had on me and others.

Other limitations of my research relate to my methodological choice of conducting readings. Due to time and pressure constraints towards the mid-late stage of my research that arose because of the impact of Covid-19, as well as my lack of experience as a young

researcher towards the beginning, I did not conduct interviews. Interviews would have been beneficial to this study as I would have been able to gain a deeper insight into the ways that intimacy functions for people individually, opposed to collectively, and it would have given me a better understanding of creators' intentions. Overall, they would have allowed me to grapple with more complex discussions around diasporic intimacies, who can engage them and how. To circumvent this, I focused on how these visual resources conveyed feelings by reading the responses and engagements to them. I also argued that the materials have lives that exist beyond the creator's original intentions.

Despite the areas of improvement within this study, this research contributes to the fields of Black digital studies and Black studies and has been disseminated in peer-reviewed journals, as conference papers, as guest lectures, keynotes, and study sessions. It addresses gaps in the field of Black digital studies as it specifically centres visual mediums in a field that is heavily laden with text-based analysis. Furthermore, by centring the Black digital diaspora it intervenes on a field that has a primary focus on Black American digital publics.

Future Research

As I signalled previously, as studies on digital diasporic intimacies continue to develop, it will be important for researchers to focus on queer and trans communities and the ways that digital media enables intimate identity formation and community building. Throughout my research I gave voice to some of the ways that the Black queer and trans community had been further marginalised within these case studies. Though a queer voice and experience was made apparent through my own, this did not overcome the ways that queer creative productions and communities were marginalised. This marginalisation might not only be reflected by my own specific social media interactions, but also through algorithms that further push queer creators to the margins. By centring these voices, we might have a richer

understanding on the functions of intimacy within a dominant culture of erasure, antiblackness, and heteronormativity.

Alternative ways that one could continue this study would be to explore other social media platforms to comprehend more fully the ways that digital diasporic intimacies are mediated online. The platforms I chose were reflective of my own social media usage, however a focus on TikTok and Facebook might reveal different outcomes including how intimacy is created within digital groups and whether there are platform limitations for where digital diasporic intimacies can be curated. If this study was pursued, then a better insight on creator's intentions by conducting interviews would be useful. Ultimately, taking up 'intimacy' as a focal point would be important, as it would allow researchers to unpack the different ways that intimacies manifest online.

Unlike face-to-face interactions where intimacy is frequently enacted through sensory engagement like touch, scent, and voice, through qualities such as commitment and consistency, and via close geographical and emotional proximities, on social media digital diasporic intimacies are mediated through the desire and longing to creating communities, express similarities, and (re)connect in response to a dominant culture of antiblackness. Digital diasporic intimacy is important to understand the ways that Black communities interact online, build digital communities and respite, and experience joy and pleasure. This thesis is significant insofar that it centres visual culture within these articulations, demonstrating how digitally mediated imagery are conduits for shaping diasporic belonging, rhetoric, and community.

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