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# Black media nostalgia in Britain

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Black media, cultural, and digital studies, this work considers the relationship between nostalgia and the media, cultural productions, and experiences of Black people in Britain. Engaging with Hesse's (2000) work on 'Diasporicity: Black Britain's Post-Colonial Formations', I explore how media representations of Black Britain and connected production processes have changed since the 90s, in ways entwined with Black nostalgia and generational (be)longing. Since Hesse (2000, p. 97) observed that 'Black Britishness is a discourse whose increasing currency has yet to be conceptualized seriously', research and writing on Black Britishness and Black life in Britain has significantly expanded. Informed by such work, I delve into some of the details of Black media experiences in Britain to consider how Black nostalgia manifests in and through these contexts. Inspired by Ahad-Legardy's (2021) work on 'Afro-nostalgia' and how visual culture aids archives of Black 'historical joy', I consider the digitally mediated, comforting, conflicting, and historical nature of Black media nostalgia in Britain, and Black nostalgia more generally. Such discussion distinguishes between Black people's nostalgic media experiences and Black media nostalgia which centers Black creative expression and the kaleidoscopic gazes of Black audiences. Nostalgia's enigmatic quality cannot be comprehended via empirical analysis, alone. Thus, sculpted by understandings of 'sociopolitical strategies of presence' (Osei 2019, p. 733), this work conceptualizes Black nostalgia in ways based on key media examples, research interviews, researcher reflections and the possibilities and playfulness presented by influx ponderings. Overall, shaped by Hall's (1993; 1997) work on representation and popular culture, this manuscript yields insights regarding dynamics between nostalgia, media, and Black life in Britain. Such work highlights the need for specificity (e.g., whose gaze(s), geographies, generations) when articulating Black people's experiences in Britain, and the power of nostalgia in Black media and culture, which spans decades and different devices.

**KEYWORDS** Black; diaspora; digital; memory; nostalgia; television

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## Introduction: a note on nostalgia

The warmth of an inside joke and the chill of a memory so vivid that it warps any sense of distinction between the past and the present. Always in the air but never fully in the moment, nostalgia flits and flees like a leaf dancing in the wind. At once, both beautiful and painful. A reminder and a foreshadowing. Always near, but not quite fully here. Nostalgia is never about any one thing, moment, or thought. It is an unimaginable and ever-changing combination of ingredients that are constantly mixed and remixed in ways shaped by trails trodden, traversed, tended to, and traced. Nostalgia can be a source of comfort, contemplation, and a catalyst that momentarily pulls people to the past. Often associated with sentimentality and an intoxicating sense of longing, nostalgia is experienced in a range of ways that can stir the souls of people and unsettle moving memories. Although it can be invoked by material objects and entities, nostalgia is not something tangible that can be quantified, fully grasped, or contained.

Rather, nostalgia is an ever-present possibility that lies dormant until a subtle alchemy occurs which brings projections of the past into the present and brings allusions of elsewhere into here, in the form of a fleeting yet intensely felt sense of familiarity. While nostalgia is not typically linked to the jarring confusion and uncanniness that is often attributed to the feeling of *déjà vu* ('already seen'), nostalgia can still be a source of unease and can even be stifling in the way that it propels people to a previous time that may sharply contrast with their present. Therefore, depending on how it manifests and makes its way to and through people, nostalgia can be noxious.

It feels as though it is in a perpetual state of arrival and departure. Never too late or too early. Forms of *being*, and having *been*, that swell in ways that fill my heart and leave me with the contentment of the here and now. A promise that is always *almost* and *already*. A presence that punctuates life with *beauty* and *pain*, and *pleasure* and *pause*. It does not do planning or scheduling or booking. Instead, nostalgia just *is*, in ways that tease the senses and may soothe.

In essence, nostalgia is a simultaneously embodied, abstract, sensory, and increasingly digitally mediated experience that connects to memories and ideas about 'a time before' now, including, in some situations, an imagined, immortalized, and illusory 'golden age'. That said, ideas about an alleged 'golden age' or the so-called 'good old days' can be weaponized as part of work that promotes harmfully revisionist accounts of history, including in the form of political propaganda and hate speech. As the research of Grainge (1999, p. 621) suggests, 'a rhetoric of nostalgia, linked to particular ideas of authenticity, canonicity and tradition, has been mobilized by the right and the left in attempts to stabilize the configuration and perceived transmission of American cultural identity'.

But nostalgia is not only political. It also presents itself in the form of ahistorical and apolitical accounts that reduce liberationist movements to mere depoliticized visual symbols, devoid of the collective organizing and struggles that underpin them. In a crucial account of 'Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia', Davis (1994, p. 38) reflects on 'the reduction of historical politics':

The unprecedented contemporary circulation of photographic and filmic images of African Americans has multiple and contradictory implications. On the one hand, it holds the promise of visual memory of older and departed generations, of both well-known figures and people who may not have achieved public prominence. However, there is also the danger that this historical memory may become ahistorical and apolitical.

Thus, although my article embraces the potentials of forms of Black media nostalgia, it does so with caution. My work is approached with an awareness of how certain iterations of nostalgia surface as the individualized, ahistorical, and apolitical narratives that Davis (1994) rightly critiques, while other forms of nostalgia are mobilized to facilitate far-right political projects – from the creation and circulation of memes (Merrill 2020) to the slogans and semiotics of posters and pamphlets.

Commonly associated with elements of visual culture (TV, film, printed press, and design esthetics), nostalgia makes many nests in the nexus of media consumption and feelings of (be)longing – be they racially, culturally, geographically, and/or generationally constituted. Arguably, despite the clear consumer culture market for items, styles, services, and brands that are deemed to be nostalgic and retro in nature (Kessous 2015), nostalgia cannot simply be manufactured. Instead, nostalgia is something that manifests in moments in ways that can never be completely controlled, commanded or commodified. Nostalgia can be nurtured, but it is also always somehow unruly. Even when individuals and institutions attempt to awaken a sense of nostalgia or encode it in media, they cannot capture nostalgia in ways that prevent the possibility of their efforts failing to make people feel nostalgic about something, someone, or somewhere. Relatedly, as the work of Hall (1997) illuminates, the many meanings associated with myriad media representations are open to a range of different, and, even, conflicting, interpretations. One person's comforting nostalgia may be another person's chilling nightmare.

When reflecting on the qualities and quandaries of nostalgia from a Black media studies perspective, questions that arise include: what is distinct about Black nostalgia and how does such nostalgia relate to media and cultural productions in recent decades? Spurred on by this question, my work considers elements of how media and cultural representations of Black Britain (Andrews and Palmer 2016) and the production processes behind them have changed

since the 90s, in ways connected to geographically and generationally bound notions of Black nostalgia in Britain.

Specifically, inspired by Ahad-Legardy's (2021) work on 'Afro-nostalgia' which highlights 'spaces of pleasure and happiness in the lives of black folks', my article explores how and why Black nostalgia is conveyed, contested, and creatively interpreted in and through media, in ways that reveal much about ideas and experiences of being Black in Britain. In contemplating such questions, I seek to theorize elements of what may constitute Black mainstream media nostalgia in Britain, while affirming that the concept of such nostalgia is a fluid one. Here, the word 'mainstream' signifies Black media that has been actively and repeatedly shared by high-profile and legacy media organizations/outlets, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Channel 4.

This article builds on prior work that considers matters regarding nostalgia, media, Black diasporas (Hesse 2000, Nassy Brown 2009), and the cultural memory of millennial Black women in Britain (Sobande 2022). Additionally, this manuscript draws on the insights of Hall (1993, p. 109) on Black popular culture:

Black popular culture, like all popular cultures in the modern world, is bound to be contradictory, and this is not because we haven't fought the cultural battle well enough. By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are habitually used to map it out: high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization.

Informed by Hall's (1993) work, and Anderson's (2023) echoing call to move beyond binary framings of Black media and audience experiences, I conceptualize Black media nostalgia beyond the oppositional binary of possibilities and limitations of Black popular culture. The analysis that follows considers key empirical examples of Black media in Britain, such as the 90s groundbreaking sketch show, *The Real McCoy* (1991–1996), and Channel 4's 2021 showcase of Black talent and media via its 24-hour *Black to Front* September schedule which opened with the 80s/90s sitcom, *Desmond's* (1989–1994).

Throughout my consideration of these matters is engagement with conceptualizations of the Black African diaspora. As Campt and Thomas (2008, p. 2) affirm, '[t]he tension between a conception of diaspora as a formation that is solely or primarily the direct result of migration, and a more expansive notion of diaspora as a phenomenon that exceeds any causal link to travel, movement, or displacement is a defining component of contemporary diaspora scholarship'. Guided by such work, and the insights of Bruce (2022, p. 251) which 'situate playfulness and enjoyment as central to digital

diasporic intimacy', I consider aspects of the relationship between Black nostalgia, media, and diaspora. I do so while drawing on a range of methods (research interviews, autoethnography, and analysis of media), as part of how I embrace 'the lens of Black feminist autoethnography and (auto)biographical narrative' (Osei 2019, p. 733), while also seeking to recreate the chorus-style voice that is often nestled within Black nostalgia.

## Writing from and with Black nostalgia

Truth be told, since starting to write this article in Spring 2021, I have found myself both catapulted into, and cradled by, Black nostalgia – or to be precise, Black remembrance – and the love that is its beating heart. Due to my recent (in 2021) experience of grieving a parent, Black remembrance, memory-making, and the nostalgia that can be part of that, is present in my life in ways that my words may not ever be able to fully express, and in ways that I may never fully be able to fathom. In between writing this I have been sifting through black and white photographs of my father, recalling his words of belief in me ('you have nothing to prove to anyone') and the many ways he would express that.

I have sat with well-worn, yet care-fully tended to, images of moments of elation and resolve, such as a photograph of his time running marathons in Scotland in the 80s. And I have found myself quietly in conversation with candid shots of him at ease among loved ones in the 90s – from moments of stillness and exhaling outside, to scenes of comfort framed by familiar patches of wallpaper and the texture of a sofa that I can still feel myself sinking into. While holding these photographs close and marvelling at the collision of moments in time and memories that they bring together, I am reminded of how expressions of Black memory-making, life, remembrance, and nostalgia, greet love and grief.

The simultaneously ephemeral and unending nature of nostalgia is such that it eludes empirical analysis. To be explicit, the beguiling ways that nostalgia and adjacent feelings of remembering manifest, are far from being something measurable. So, aiming to anatomically analyze nostalgia of any form, let alone the specific conjuring of Black nostalgia, seems counterintuitive. What I mean is that while research and writing about Black nostalgia *is* vital, so too is acceptance of qualities of Black nostalgia that may evade understanding and escape the acquisitive gaze of academic enquiry and empiricism. The concept of nostalgia itself is open to much contestation. Is it merely the by-product of feelings, experiences, and emotions such as longing, loss, love, and looking back? Is it something that brings people forms of comfort or is it more likely to be a jarring force that prevents people from experiencing a sense of presence in the here and now? The notions of nostalgia foregrounded in this article are intended to account

for the interdependency of nostalgia's potentially comforting and confronting qualities, including the ways that contradictions can be at the core of how nostalgia is recalled.

My musings concerning the makeup of the nostalgic media and cultural productions of Black Britain are buttressed by unfinished ponderings that I will not present as fixed and complete. That statement is not intended to serve as any sort of caveat, nor is it intended to position this article as radical in nature. Instead, I share that to emphasize that my approach to this work involves embracing the certainty of Black nostalgia's presence in various people's lives, while also acknowledging the fluidity and unpredictability of when, how, and with what effects Black nostalgia shows up and is sensed. Rather than treating Black nostalgia as something that exists independently from feelings, experiences, and emotions such as longing, loss, love, and looking back, I deem nostalgia to be a descriptor applied to a range of reflective moments, during which past times are remembered but also may be (re)presented, (re)constructed, and (re)narrativized.

Right now, I am writing while, and through, grieving. Consequently, my reflections on Black nostalgia are written with an acute awareness of how experiences of such nostalgia are, at times, inextricably entangled with forms of grief, remembering, and memorializing. The relationship between *Black nostalgia* and *grief* is not the central focus of this manuscript, and both terms are far from being interchangeable. However, it is befitting to preface the writing that follows with a moment of remembrance for my loved one, and recognition of how Black grief can be infused with both the love and loss that lies within Black nostalgia. After all, as the crucial work of Stuart Hall elucidates, 'diasporic bodies carry loss, grief, nostalgia and displacement' (Henry 2015, p. 239), but they also carry love that outlasts a person's physical form, and which transcends time and space.

### **'The golden years': black generational belonging and media memories**

As the work of Ahad-Legardy (2021) highlights, there is a '... romantic wistfulness generally associated with nostalgia', but which in predominantly white societies is typically rooted in whiteness. Furthermore, as Ahad-Legardy's (2021) writing emphasizes, the beauty of Black experiences of nostalgia cannot be understood through a lens of nostalgia which denies that "pretty" modes of memory are also the province of the African-descended. Black memory is not limited to traumatic resonances of the past, nor are they constituted only through or in relation to histories of violence' (Ahad-Legardy 2021, p. 3). One of many recent media examples that has sparked questions about Black nostalgia, for me, is a YouTube video by Associated Press, titled,

‘The Wonder Years’ cast say series reboot offers a new perspective’. Turning attention to that video offers an entry point into thinking about the connection between Black nostalgia and media.

For context, before its newer iteration, *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993) was an American coming-of-age TV series which focused on a white middle-class family in the nostalgic context of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The show foregrounded the perspective of its protagonist, Kevin Arnold (played by Fred Savage) – a bewildered young boy (who, eventually, becomes a bewildered young man). Journeying through the trials and tribulations of high school, family life, and love and heartbreak, the TV series secured an iconic status in the years after it premiered following ABC’s coverage of Super Bowl XXII in 1988. In 2021, *The Wonder Years* took on a different form. It became another version of slice of life TV, but with a focus on a Black middle-class family. Developed decades after the original TV show, *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993), this newer version was ripe with nods to nostalgia.

The Associated Press YouTube video on *The Wonder Years* show which was created in the twenty-first century, captures much about media and nostalgia, including in ways that specifically connect to Black people’s experiences of media nostalgia. At around 0:17, the Associated Press YouTube video features commentary from actors Dulé Hill and Elisha Williams – two of the main cast members from the reboot. Hill reflects on the original version of *The Wonder Years* when saying ‘I did watch *The Wonder Years* growing up ... I mean you can’t really be a child of the 80s and not know who Kevin Arnold is or Winnie Cooper [Kevin’s childhood friend and eventual love interest], but I will say as much as I was a fan of the show, I was also very aware of what was missing within the show ... of not seeing myself reflected as much as I would have *liked* ... so I mean the idea to be able now to reexplore that time from a different point of view is very intriguing to me’.

While the Associated Press YouTube video relates to a US TV show (*The Wonder Years*) as opposed to British media, the sentiments that spring forth from it are highly relevant to my consideration of Black media nostalgia in Britain, from the 90s to now. The commentary shared by Dulé Hill in the Associated Press YouTube video illustrates the sense of nostalgia that can surround people’s television viewing experiences. To reiterate Hill’s own words when reminiscing, ‘I did watch *The Wonder Years* growing up ... I mean you can’t really be a child of the 80s and not know who Kevin Arnold is or Winnie Cooper’. Such words signal some of the ways that a sense of nostalgia can be tied to a sense of being part of a particular generation, or, even, an era. While Hill’s experience of watching the original version of *The Wonder Years* and starring in the reboot may be regarded as one filled with nostalgia, it is helpful to distinguish between the nostalgic media experiences of Black



people and the specifics of *Black media nostalgia* which centres both a Black gaze and Black creative expression.

## Black gazing and media nostalgia

The notion of a Black gaze contains within it a multitude of everyday experiences, structural and interpersonal looking relations, constructed identities, and histories that are part of Black audiences. For these reasons, and more, my engagement with the notion of a Black gaze is not intended to imply that there is a singular and unified Black audience, or simply one way that Black people interpret Black media. Rather, in the context of my work, the concept of a Black gaze is intended to encompass some of the many forms of relationality, recognition, reflection, and rumination that can be part of Black people's media audience experiences. Ultimately, my understanding of a Black gaze is informed by Camp's (2021, 22) concept, 'It is a Black gaze that shifts the optics of 'looking at' to a politics of looking with, through, and alongside another. It is a gaze that requires effort and exertion ... '.

At the core of a Black gaze is an intentionality and ways of connecting Black interiority (inner thoughts, feelings, and interpretations) with collective and communal Black cultural experiences (moments of relationality, recognition, reflection, and rumination which relate to Black histories and being Black in the here and now). In the poignant words of Bruce (2022, p. 259) on digital diasporic intimacy and the photographic experiences of Black people, 'Black community is not homogenous' and 'speculative remembering is utilized differently depending on the person, their memories, what they perceive from the photographs, and their understanding of time'. A Black media gaze can be both purposeful and playful, and it can be anchored in both the present and past, in ways that nostalgia may naturally relate to.

What constitutes Black media is, of course, open to interpretation and much debate. However, at the root of my work is a perception of Black media as being the byproduct of the creative, cultural, and media efforts of Black people, including as writers, producers, directors, actors, performers, and in a range of different media-related roles that take seriously the hearts, minds, and souls of Black people – who such media is created for with intention. So, the term Black media nostalgia encompasses the *nostalgic media experiences of Black people* that involve producing and/or viewing media created, fronted, and/or led by Black people and which was developed with an intention to meaningfully tend to such lives, various gazes, and histories. Although that is a very brief explanation of Black media nostalgia, such nostalgia is undoubtedly broad in its manifestations and involves much more than simply seeing Black people on screen or nostalgically remembering media texts.

Put differently, while Hill's own experience of viewing the original version of *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993) may have involved forms of nostalgia, it is not an example of what I refer to as *Black media nostalgia* or the nostalgia of Black media. In contrast, Black people's experience of the reboot of *The Wonder Years* (which unlike the original show, features a Black cast) may involve forms of Black media nostalgia in the future. While The New York Times featured an article which posed the question 'Can 'The Wonder Years' Break Through the White Noise of Nostalgia?' (Poniewozik 2021), a potentially more pressing consideration is how Black nostalgia takes shape in contemporary media and cultural productions. Perhaps, partly when thinking about such nostalgia in Britain, Channel 4 (2021) launched their *Black to Front* project, which, in their words:

... is part of Channel 4's ongoing commitment to improve Black representation on-screen and more widely in the TV industry. The purpose of the project is two-fold: firstly, to challenge us all to see our content differently, and secondly, to leave a lasting legacy in terms of increased Black representation both on- and off-screen.

As part of this project, in September 2021, Channel 4 broadcasted programming featuring Black presenters, actors, writers and experts, contributors and programme-makers. *Black to Front* activity included bringing back Channel 4's show, *The Big Breakfast* (1992–2002), which was a staple part of many people's morning media experiences during the 90s and early 00s. For *Huffington Post*, Welsh (2021) wrote that 'Channel 4 Resurrects The Big Breakfast For Special Day Of Broadcasts Championing Black Talent', which hints at the sense of nostalgia that surrounds the show. Programming that was part of *Black to Front* and which offered a nod to longstanding mainstream media shows, while showcasing iconic Black talent in Britain, also included the gameshow *Countdown* (1982–present) which was fronted by Black newsreader and journalist, Sir Trevor McDonald, during the showcase. Both versions of these shows (*The Big Breakfast* and *Countdown*) which were included in *Black to Front* may be interpreted as being part of the ever-growing tapestry of Black media nostalgia in Britain.

The original versions of both shows differ – with *Countdown* being a British game show and *The Big Breakfast* being a light-hearted entertainment series. However, a thread that tied the original versions of the shows together was their typical focus on white people – both as presenters and guests. The original versions of *Countdown* and *The Big Breakfast* amassed a strong following and have been framed in wider media in ways that position them as examples of quintessentially 'British' television. Hence, revisiting and reworking these TV shows as part of Channel 4's *Black to Front* may be perceived as a commentary on exactly *who* is part of contemporary so-called British TV, and, by extension, exactly *who* is British.

Although the statement of Channel 4 (2021) on *Black to Front* does not explicitly reference nostalgia, parts of it clearly point to an intention to contribute to conversations concerning the depiction of Black people in media in Britain:

It is important to us that viewers can identify with people that they see on-screen and that everyone in the UK feels represented and heard in our programmes. The programming will not only entertain viewers but also create a national conversation about Black portrayal and representation.

The creation of shows such as *The Big Breakfast* and *Countdown* for *Black to Front*, and the nostalgic framing of them, parallels the sentiments invoked by Dulé Hill in the Associated Press YouTube video about *The Wonder Years*. Just as Hill reflected on being a fan of the original show *The Wonder Years*, while being ‘very aware of what was missing within the show ... of not seeing myself reflected as much as I would have liked ...’, *Black to Front*’s approach seems to be rooted in an awareness of the whiteness that underpins much mainstream media that is nostalgically regarded as iconic in Britain. Hence, even though the original versions of *The Big Breakfast* and *Countdown* certainly do not constitute Black media nostalgia in Britain, their revisited versions during *Black to Front*, potentially, do, and may contribute to discourse regarding Black Britishness and its ‘paradoxical enunciation’ (Hesse 2000, 97). In taking a fresh approach to such TV shows, which momentarily centred Black people on-screen, *Black to Front* disrupted the whiteness at the core of much media nostalgia in Britain, but the temporary nature of such an approach still symbolizes the limited mainstream industry investment in media that showcases the work of Black people.

When interviewing Black women in Britain about their media experiences between 2015 and 2020, one of many themes that arose was the nostalgia that surrounded reflections on past Black media from the 90s and 00s. An interview with someone based in England who chose the pseudonym Plantain Baby was demonstrative of the ways that some Black women appeared to mourn a golden age of TV for Black teens in Britain. While thinking about their words, as well as some of my own Black media experiences, ‘... my heart felt heavy. What *had* happened to this sort of content? Why was it barely documented online? Whilst analysing the nostalgia-infused words of someone who I interviewed, my mind was flooded with a kaleidoscope of the few images of Black people which formed much of the television content that I too grew up on.

Our shared cultural references made me feel intertwined with certain memories of Black girlhood in Britain. Reflecting on my own memories and trying to articulate the senses and emotions that were emergent led to poetic expression, I Remember being just one consequence of such reminiscence’ (Sobande 2018):

***I Remember***

I remember  
 feeling part of an inside joke,  
 shared between me  
 and the faces  
 of unfamiliar friends.  
 Their voices travelled  
 from the glow of screens,  
 housing Black and brown people.

They called it 'urban' TV. (*Research diary*, August 27, 2016)

My interviews with Black women in Britain, including someone who chose the pseudonym Annie, involved aside jokes about Black media and nostalgic TV including the television channel *Trouble*. Such relational moments that occurred during interviews were connected to a 'kind of belonging that is not tethered to the present but rather appears in the form of belonging from afar where it is memories from the past that evoke a sense of past belonging that brings pleasure (and pain) in the present' (May 2017, p. 411). In the context of my research, this specific sense of belonging might be regarded as *Black generational belonging*, that is, at least partly, formed by childhood media memories shared among others who 'remember when ...'.

Work such as that of Moore in Halliday's (2019) landmark edited collection, *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*, features poignant discussion of nostalgia, including when reflecting on the term 'Back home', 'a euphemism in many West Indian communities to describe countries they and/or their ancestors migrated from; the term usually represents nostalgia and a melancholy longing for this place' (Moore 2019, p. 125). In the setting of studies of Black media nostalgia, it seems pertinent to account for the various ways that a sense of longing is experienced, including by considering how such longing can relate to specific periods of time and life-stages (e.g. childhood), as well as places (e.g. locally, regionally, nationally) and people (e.g. family and friends).

While the past research interviews that I undertook (approved by the University of Dundee ethics committee) resulted in me learning about the nostalgic Black media experiences of other Black women in Britain, they also catalysed forms of naively unanticipated nostalgia and self-reflection on my part, including a sense of longing for days gone by. Such experiences of mine, as well as those of some of the women who I interviewed reflect

how forms of Black media nostalgia in Britain involve moments of relationality, connection, and interaction with others who too ‘remember when ...’. Much of the Black media that those who I interviewed spoke of nostalgically, stemmed from the US but shows such as *The Real McCoy* (1991–1996) and *Desmond’s* (1989–1994) were fondly discussed in ways that involved a focus on their depiction of the specificities of Black life in Britain, including the politics of those past times and distinctly (Black) British cultural references.

Words such as ‘nostalgia’ and ‘golden era’, which were commonly uttered by those who I interviewed seemed to suggest a sense of missing and longing for bygone days of Black media in Britain, even while acknowledging present-day media examples that people keenly followed. Having turned 30 this year (2021), and now feeling a particularly heightened awareness of the media representations that punctuated my childhood, I find myself thinking about how Black media nostalgia in Britain includes the wistfulness articulated by those who I interviewed regarding memories of 90s depictions and discourses that were far removed from the realms of contemporary social media. For some, such sunny memories of media representations (although they were scarce) and cultural production processes that predate platforms including YouTube are just as much about Black childhood experiences and generational belonging as they are about Black media nostalgia.

Given that nostalgia by nature is entwined with a sense of both the passing and presence of time, to seek to understand and conceptualize Black media nostalgia is also to seek to understand and conceptualize how Black people’s engagement with, and production of, media is interconnected with their experience of time and formative years. To be clear, the childhood of many Black people may be marked by experiences of harm and trauma that should never be dismissed. However, to revisit the words of Ahad-Legardy (2021, p. 3), ‘pretty’ modes of memory are also the province of the African-descended. Black memory is not limited to traumatic resonances of the past, nor are they constituted only through or in relation to histories of violence’. Thus, the words shared by those who I interviewed, and who affectionately recounted the ‘heyday’ of Black media in Britain in the 90s and 00s, are examples of how Black nostalgia is made manifest through memories of media, while also being examples that speak to a broader nostalgia tethered to memories of Black girlhood and childhood.

### **Black Britain’s nostalgic [digital] media formations**

‘Experiences of social media are often associated with an ability to transcend geo-cultural borders to connect and communicate with people in different parts of the world. However, social media encounters are shaped by various complex geographies, including Black geographies’ (Sobande 2022,

p. 137). In an account of 'Belonging from afar: nostalgia, time and memory', May (2017, p. 403) states that 'Nostalgia was originally used to refer to a pathological yearning for one's home country'. Whether it is words such as 'homesickness' or 'homebody', nostalgia is often associated with ideas about The Home (including who, where, and what constitutes it).

To draw on the powerful words of Henry (2015, p. 239) on the inimitable work of Hall, '... Hall emphasized that he did not have the luxury of feeling at home in his country of origin nor in the country where he settled. This neither/nor positionality, this double marginalization, this 'in-betweenness', this 'nostalgia for what cannot be' gave Hall, a brilliant thinker, a particular intellectual acuity, and contributed to his theoretical, creative, and political ideas and activism'. Particularly in the present-day context, experiences and understandings of people, places, spaces, and periods of time that constitute home (or homeliness) are often digitally mediated.

Accordingly, the illuminating work of Bruce (2022, p. 259) has 'illustrated how speculative remembering is used to produce digital diasporic intimacy', including in relation to the sharing and revisiting of Black family photographs, such as those in different domestic settings. The care-full and creative work of Daniju and Johnson (2022) also tends to the different and embodied ways that forms of home are made and are experienced. Overall, the architectures of forms of home are not wholly tangible and can include invisible webs woven and nests made due to digital interactions, online images, and internet-based communities that combine in ways that can connect and contribute to the mystique of Black media nostalgia in Britain. On that note, as I have previously reflected on:



**Figure 1.** Illustration produced by research interviewee.

For some separated by seas, the touch of a smartphone button helps them to experience a sense of being at home, together ... As well as them containing self-archived photo albums that may invoke a comforting nostalgia and be interpreted as examples of self-expression, these phones manufacture memories. Specifically, some functions of smartphones involve the construction of a mirage that is manipulatively marketed as a memory ... There is an eeriness to the iPhone Memories function. Such eeriness is especially pronounced when the function leads to someone being confronted with an unsolicited montage of images. The agency that exists in elements of how people make memories, and recall them, seems to be stripped away by the Memories function. iPhone Memories ultimately eclipses the warmth and randomness that can be a core component of some people's recollections. The phone function essentially serves up something uncomfortably cold that more closely resembles hard sell advertising tactics than the serendipitous or intentional experience of remembering.

Experiences of memory-making, remembering, and nostalgia are impacted by media and digital technology in myriad ways. When doing my prior research, I considered the possibility that the lens of nostalgia is relevant to some of the experiences 'of Black women in Britain, including those who migrated there from Africa and the Caribbean, in addition to individuals who were born in Britain yet feel tied to such other parts of the world' (Sobande 2018). In the seven+ years since my research on Black women's media experiences commenced, Black Britain's media formations have been impacted by the development of digital culture and online content-sharing platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Therefore, when asked 'if you could create a new [TV] show featuring a Black woman in a leading role, what would it be about, and why?', one of the Black women who I interviewed between 2015–2020 spoke of, and depicted, a desire to create a show about a fictional YouTube influencer who vlogs about her life (see Figure 1).

Due to its strong association with memories of the past and previous eras, the notion of media nostalgia is sometimes solely applied to media experiences prior to the establishment of influencer culture and the digital platforms that enable it. However, the rise of social media and online content-sharing platforms should not be regarded as a departure or disconnected from Black media nostalgia in Britain. For example, despite the relative 'newness' that is ascribed to the phenomenon of YouTube vlogging, there is already nostalgia expressed about the 'early days' of YouTube and a time before certain vlogger (or creator) trends and conventions had been concretized. This is evident when reflecting on online article and media headlines such as the following: 'YouTube: Home of Nostalgia and Clickbait' (Schifano 2019), 'The 10 most popular YouTubers at the beginning of the decade – and where are they now' (Leskin 2019), 'Google Report: Generation X Uses YouTube For Nostalgia, Connecting With Kids' (Gutelle 2017), and 'Queue The Nostalgia ... Here's the 7 YouTubers You Forgot You Were Obsessed With ...' (Hit Network: All Stations 2000).

Among those who I interviewed, were individuals who expressed a strong sense of nostalgic sentiments in relation to Black media from their youth, while also commenting on the nostalgic qualities of YouTube vlogger content from previous years which offered a window into the ‘everydayness’ of Black women’s lives in Britain (Sobande 2017). The digitally mediated nature of Black media nostalgia in Britain also includes reminiscing about, and reengaging with, TV shows from previous decades via online archives and platforms, such as *The Real McCoy* (1991–1996) which became available to watch on BBC iPlayer for a limited time. Black Britain’s nostalgic [digital] media formations feature a blend and remixing of different forms of media, including 00s content such as programming on the *Trouble* (1997–2009) TV channel which has been remembered online in ways that range from GIFs and memes to editorial accounts.

In other words, although binary terms such as ‘new media’ and ‘old media’ are still quite commonly used in society, Black Britain’s nostalgic media formations must be understood as neither simply concerned with so-called ‘old media’ or ‘new media’. The preciousness of nostalgia is often in the possibilities and sense of pause presented by the conjuring of a strangely familiar yet time-warping feeling which involves a sense of ‘the before’ evocatively colliding with ‘the now’. Currents of Black Britain’s nostalgic [digital] media formations include nostalgia that relates to TV shows from the twentieth century and online content from the twenty-first century. This indicates the need to conceptualize nostalgia in ways that are neither exclusively preoccupied with the past nor the present and are neither solely focused on analogue media nor digital.

### **Meditations on diasporicity and the future of black media nostalgia**

Over two decades ago, Hesse (2000) shared impactful insights concerning ‘Diasporicity: Black Britain’s Post-Colonial Formations’. Such writing included reflections on the generational components of Black diasporic identity. In the words of Hesse (2000, p. 94), ‘Along with many of my generation, any ideas of national identification were submerged beneath investments in elective diasporic affiliations, the particular Caribbean or African countries our families had migrated from and the distinctive, unquestionable attachments to the British cities we grew up in. Yet this still left undissolved an indelible, cultural birthmark that regularly induced others, if not ourselves, to question the *meaning of* and the *connection between* our Black and British identities’. Black media nostalgia in Britain can be viewed as a sphere within which Black people may consider, create, and contest different notions and experiences of Black diasporic life, including ideas about nation(ality), the past, the present, and the possibilities of the future.



Elsewhere, inspired by Hesse's (2000, p. 97) question, 'what is signified by Black Britishness?', and cognizant of the fact that not all Black people in Britain identify (or are identified) as British, I have collaboratively considered 'what is and is not signified by Black Scottishness, including in ways that both relate to and depart from understandings of Black Britishness. How might the future of digital media and culture shape ideas about and representations of Black Scottishness, and the lives of Black people in Scotland? What risks are involved in the digital visibility of Black people in, from, and connected to Scotland?' (Sobande and hill 2022, p. 193).

With layla-roxanne hill, I have reflected on elements of the media experiences of Black people in Scotland, where 'the somewhat increasing digital visibility of 'a Black Scottish experience' can result in interest expressed by organizations that identify new potential audiences and target markets' (Sobande and hill 2022, p. 193). Black media nostalgia in Britain – be it local, regional, or national in its specific framings – can become a marketing opportunity for businesses whose segmentation strategies distinguish between various Black diasporic experiences (e.g. rural, urban, Scottish, British). Then again, in the words of Hall (1993, p. 107) on the trappings of dismissing the significance of something once marginalized becoming part of popular culture – 'I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility. But it does not help simply to name-call it 'the same'. That name-calling merely reflects the particular model of cultural politics to which we remain attached, precisely, the zero-sum game ... '.

Mindful of Hall's (1993) observation, the gradual rise of Black Scottish diasporic media – namely, Black digital media in Scotland, as well as other iterations of Black diasporic media in Britain, should not be dismissed as simply spectacularizing the lives of Black people (t)here. Rather, expansion of this Black media landscape, including geographically and generationally bound forms of nostalgia within and between various regions and nations, reflects nuanced elements of the history and contemporary lives of Black people in Britain – from differences between daily languages and idioms to similarities between forms of ancestral storytelling and knowledge-sharing. As Hall (1993, p. 107–108) contended:

Popular culture carries that affirmative ring because of the prominence of the word 'popular.' And, in one sense, popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies, and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and the everyday experiences of ordinary folks.

But whose local lives and ordinary experiences tend to be part of Black media in Britain, and how are people and their different everyday practices depicted and discussed? The Black media landscape in Britain is at once part of and

peripheral to the mainstream. It can be a space where dominant narratives and power relations are reinforced (e.g. framings that valorise the middle-class and oppress working-class people), while also being a space where the everydayness of different Black lives is meaningfully embraced, archived, and remembered. That said, the media experiences of Black people are impacted by the intentions of various media institutions, some of which may seek to position Black people in stifling, simplified, and stereotypical ways.

Focusing on the Belgian context, the scholarship of Amponsah (2022) 'shows that Black women are positioned and framed in public debate by media institutions to perform a proximity to radical Black activism'. Such work addresses and raises questions about the various ways that local and national histories in Europe are implicated in Black people's present-day media experiences – on and off screen. On that note, three decades ago Hall (1993, p. 111–112) affirmed that 'it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention. This is not simply to appreciate the historical and experiential differences within and between communities, regions, country and city, across national cultures, between diasporas, but also to recognize the other kinds of difference that place, position, and locate black people'. Future research may benefit from further analysis of how the entanglements of place and position – including, but not limited to, geographically, culturally, temporally, and socio-economically – are conceptualized and experienced as part of contemporary manifestations of Black media nostalgia.

In addition to being inspired by Hall's (1993) conceptualization of Black popular culture, my approach to reflecting on Black nostalgia and media in Britain is shaped by work on diasporic experiences, including the writing of Camp and Thomas (2008, p. 1) who pose questions such as '[w]hat does it entail to raise the question of hegemony in relation to diasporic formations? How does one most productively engage the tensions among individuals and communities situated very differently within a given diasporic formation?'. Among the tensions that seem necessary to constructively engage are those regarding the similarities and differences between the experiences of Black people across different parts of Britain, including their varied (dis)connections to, and from, specific national(ist) identities.

When bringing Black media nostalgia into dialogue with considerations of Black Britishness and different nation-specific identifications in Britain, questions that arise include: How might experiences and expressions of Black media nostalgia in Britain (and the UK) differ in ways influenced by the particularities of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, as well as being impacted by the relationship between notions of Britishness, Englishness, Irishness, Scottishness, and Welshness? What is the dynamic between nostalgia and the media depiction and discussion of Black lives and histories across Britain? Additionally, drawing on 'a desire to explore the vexing tensions of

difference and inequity that characterize the internal relations of diaspora' (Campt and Thomas 2008, p. 1), how can the specifics of Black diasporic experiences in Britain be grasped in ways that do not confuse differences for conflict, and do not construe conflict as being at odds with the formation and sustenance of diasporic solidarities?

The work of Hesse (2000, p. 97) at the turn of the second millennium outlined 'a possible analytics of Black Britishness, defining its theoretical specificity by way of its intra-national and transnational relations with the African diaspora, that is to say, its logics of *diasporicity*'. When accounting for the distinct, and gradually, more salient, nature of *different* Black diasporic experiences across parts of Britain, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the future of Black media nostalgia may be increasingly influenced by regional relations and both the differences between and directions of Britain's constitutive nations, as well as the 'intra-national and transnational relations' that Hesse (2000, p. 97) wrote of.

With that in mind, my article is, perhaps, a provocation or a prelude to further explorations of Black nostalgia in Britain and its [digitally] mediated nature, including future analysis of how the changing experience and positioning of Twitter (since its acquisition by Elon Musk) has catalysed recent reflections on the Black Twitter of yesteryears. While this article includes clear connections to existing Black media and cultural productions in Britain since the 90s, it also attempts to tease out how Black media nostalgia in Britain can be conceptualized in ways that account for both what is known about it *and* what is wonderfully unknowable. Put briefly, I view this article as a process of thinking aloud and feeling through, rather than attempting to neatly theorize Black media nostalgia in Britain. Essentially, mindful of the sprawling spirit of Black nostalgia, while I hope that the words that form my piece 'make sense', the messy, meandering, and meaningful nature of Black nostalgia is such that I have sought to grapple with it without reducing its riveting reality to a mere manuscript.

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