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By Us, For Us? Past and Present Black Feminist Publishing Narratives and Routes

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By Us, For Us? Past and Present Black Feminist Publishing Narratives and Routes

From zine-making to creating independent publishing houses, throughout history, Black women have found routes that enable them to autonomously communicate their perspectives and share their Black feminist creative and campaigning work. The ascent of social media and online content-sharing platforms in recent decades has generated publishing avenues that are often deemed to be more democratic than traditional press and print pathways. The rich history of Black feminist publishing has led to present-day digital forms of 'do it yourself (DIY)' and 'do it together (DIT)' publishing, including the proliferation of first-person online essays and video blogs (vlogs). This paper maps parts of the legacy of Black feminist publishing in Britain and the broader Black press history that it is part of. There is exploration of opportunities and challenges involved in Black women's contemporary publishing via digital terrains, such as tensions between how independent Black feminist writing and cultural production can gain recognition online, yet, in ways that can result in the harassment of Black feminists and the fuelling of mainstream media activity which lacks a Black feminist position. Considering past and present examples of Black feminist publishing in Britain, this paper examines how and why such approaches have changed.

Keywords: Black women, digital, feminism, intersectionality, publishing

A brief history of the Black press and Black feminist publishing in Britain

Just as 'The Whiteness of Feminism and the Academy' (Young 2000: 46) has been a source of Black women's struggles in Britain, so too has the institutional whiteness of many mainstream media and publishing organizations (Benjamin 1995)—as has been highlighted by Candice Carty-Williams, writer, and author of *Queenie*, (Chambers 2019), and Sharmaine Lovegrove (2018), the publisher of Dialogue Books. Thus, throughout history, Black women and feminists have sought out, co-produced,

supported, sustained, and steered publishing routes which differ from restrictive racist, sexist, and classist mainstream ones that are often overseen by predominantly, if not, exclusively, middle-class white staff.

It is no secret that even within feminist contexts and feminist publishing spaces, Black women in Britain have experienced structural marginalization and abuse (Boom 2019; Sulter 1986); leading to new and collective tactics that enable them to publish their work in more autonomous yet often scarcely profitable ways (Black Woman Talk Collective 1984). Black feminist politics and various expressions and experiences of it continue to yield different definitions. At the core of this paper is a perspective of Black feminist politics that is based on the notion that Black feminism is 'both a theory and a politics of affirmation and liberation' (Emejulu and Sobande 2019: 4), grounded in the lives of Black women of African descent.

In Britain, at times, the term 'Black' has been used to refer to perceived shared struggles and anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist political positions between Black people of African descent, as well as Asian and other racialized people, particularly in previous decades in the post-war period—such as in the context of the *West Indian Gazette* and the Black Feminist Movement in Britain of the 70s and 80s. This take on the term 'Black' was mobilized by activists in the past (Bryan et al. 2018) and continues to be used amid contemporary trade union organizing as part of efforts to indicate the existence of a coalitional politics. However, '[t]hirty years on from its initial reception, "black" as a political identity under which empire's unaccounted-for-children could unite has become hotly contested' (Okolosie 2018: xi), including due to how it is operationalised in ways that obscure and reinforce anti-Blackness that is inflicted on Black people by non-Black people of colour (Jameela 2021). Moreover, in the words of the Cruel Ironies Collective (2019: 187):

> When Black people and non-Black people are homogenised into a single category based on sameness this can potentially serve to hide and/or deny anti-Blackness. The fantasy in which non-Black people of colour are unable to oppress Black people is upheld by ignoring the lived experience of Black people who have structurally experienced anti-Blackness from non-Black people of colour.

Consequently, this paper on Black feminist publishing narratives includes recognition of the history of coalitional political organizing in Britain in previous decades, including the significant work of the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent. However, this paper is also firmly rooted in issues specifically related to the publishing experiences of Black women of African descent, such as how the contours of antiblackness and sexism shape Black feminist publishing narratives and experiences, past and present.

Despite the common focus on the 20th century onwards, Black writing in Britain can be traced back to centuries before then (Benjamin 1995). Additionally, despite discussion of publishing activity typically primarily focusing on the publishing of written text and static visuals, publishing is a process that involves making information publicly available, including in the form of a wide range of media and content. Therefore, this paper considers the potential to regard online video blogging (vlogging) as a type of Black feminist publishing, while recognizing that identifying it as such is dependent on the content of vlogs, the intentions of vloggers, and a critical understanding of the commercial infrastructures that vlogs are a part of.

Accounts from the archives

Before focusing on contemporary examples of Black feminist publishing in digital settings, it is essential to reflect on the history of the Black press in Britain, and, more specifically, Black feminist publishing and the politics at its centre. The history of Black feminist publishing, which far exceeds what is covered in this article, is bolstered by the political, creative, and collective work of Black women. Related resources can be found at the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in Brixton, and Glasgow Women's Library (GWL), including pamphlets, flyers, posters, zines, and an assortment of ephemera which are a result of Black feminist collective organizing and political campaigning. This section draws upon material accessed at both locations.

Whether it be printed material surrounding the launch of Black Pride/Black Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival in 1992, or written documents associated with the development of Camden Lesbian Centre and Black Lesbian Group in 1984, there are many examples of Black feminist writing and self-publishing in Britain. Some of such examples are in the form of handwritten documents which communicate the multi-layered nature of Black women's experiences of oppression at the intersections of anti-Black racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other entwined power relations (Bryan et al. 1985).

Ionie Benjamin (1995) provides a detailed account of *The Black Press in Britain* pre-21st century and charts the creation and popularity of newspapers and magazines such as the *West Indian World*, *Voice*, *Black Beat International*, *Pride Magazine* and the *Caribbean Times*. In doing so, Benjamin sheds light on the significance of Black newspapers and magazines, as well as the contributions of Black people 'in letter form in periodicals of the day' (Benjamin 1995: 1) which were then 'collated and produced as books' (Benjamin 1995: 1). Examples explored by Benjamin include *The Letters of*

Ignatius Sancho, published in 1782, as well as *The Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole In Many Lands,* published in 1857.

Although contemporary Black press and publishing activity in Britain is often treated by predominantly white mainstream press and publishing industry organizations as though it is relatively recent and emergent in nature, as is outlined in Benjamin's (1995) vital work, forms of Black press and publishing have existed in Britain for centuries. The rich legacy of Black press and publishing in Britain has played a central part in Black creative, cultural, and political work, and has contributed to how Africans in the diaspora communicate with each other and forge cross-continental connections. As Benjamin (1995: 5) puts it:

> The emergence of the Black press in Britain grew out of the demand for a representative voice, a voice that redresses the balance of the discriminatory mainstream media. One that addresses the social, cultural and political issues pertaining to their communities, which in turn helps to correct the imbalance both in the media and across the political and social spectrum and which counters negative stereotype stories propagated by some mainstream news organs.

Among the many Black press contributions of Black women that Benjamin (1995) discusses is the creation of the *West Indian Gazette*, 'launched [in 1958] by political activist Claudia Jones a year after Ghana gained its independence' (Benjamin 1995: 3). Observing the variety of forms of Black publishing, Benjamin (1995) acknowledges the importance of 'pamphlets, newsletters, newspapers and journals appearing between the late fifties and the early seventies' (4). Black publishing has spanned different genres and media, from the unwritten and ephemeral to the tangible and literary. Examples of

the latter publishing efforts of Black women include the trailblazing work of Margaret Busby who co-founded Allison & Busby with Clive Allison in 1967.

In a 1992 interview with Sue Wilson for *The List* magazine, when reflecting on the crucial anthology of work by women of African descent that Busby edited in 1992, *Daughters of Africa*, Busby remarked, '[i]t's a question of trying to redress the balance, to show that there are all these women, who've been doing all these different sorts of work, coming out of all traditions, and their words deserve to be heard'. Busby is also quoted as having said '[t]he very act of portraying oneself is particularly important when the portrait others give of you has been distorted'. Busby's words capture some of what can motivate Black women writers and publishers, namely, the intention to ensure that the lived experiences of Black women are understood, remembered, and shared, as expressed in their own words.

Relatedly, in the March 1986 Issue (27) of the Greater London Council (GLC) Women's Committee Bulletin, Maud Sulter (1986: 28) observes how Black presses active in the mid-80s such as Akira and Karia were publishing the work of Black women which was 'liberationary' in nature. Sulter (1986) offers an insightful overview of elements of Black feminist publishing in Britain at that time, including when alluding to the need for more work that foregrounds Black women's lives and experiences in Britain, outside of London and the South East. Additionally, Sulter (1986) notes that although there is indication that 'the major feminist presses are making a mint out of blackwomen's [sic] writings, the American in particular' (29), Black women continue to be structurally excluded from publishing in many ways.

Lennie Goodings of Virago joined forces with Margaret Busby of Allison & Busby and Ros de Lanerolle of The Women's Press to found Greater Access to Publishing to accelerate inclusion of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic ("BAME")

women in the industry in 1987. The following year, in 1988, Virago appointed Melanie Silgardo and continued to work towards tackling issues concerning structural exclusion along the lines of race, gender, and class. However, even in the years since then, Black women in Britain have often been excluded from the publishing industry, including amid efforts to address “BAME” exclusion and which do not attend to the specifics of antiblackness. Although many presses were struggling to survive financially in the 1980s and were negotiating the reality that American authors across the board were often better sellers in the UK, as is rightly highlighted in Sulter’s (1986) writing, this does not absolve Britain’s publishing industry of its role in marginalizing the work of Black women in Britain.

Sulter’s vivid writing documents the gradually increasing publication of Black women’s longform writing, enabled by publishers such as Sheba Feminist Press, in comparison to how, previously, Black women who were poets ‘tended to be published in pamphlet or short volume form by presses such as Black Ink and Bogle-L’ Ouverture’ (Sulter 1986: 28). Established in the early 1980s, Dalston-based Sheba Feminist Press was one of very few small independent publishers that stemmed from elements of the women’s movement in Britain at the time. The existence of Sheba Feminist Press was significant and involved the support, nurturing, and foregrounding of writing by Black women and feminists in ways that were, and continue to be, rare in Britain. Specifically, the legacy of Sheba Feminist Press challenges any notion that the writing and work of Black women and feminists has been overlooked by *all* publishers in Britain. Still, while Sheba Feminist Press and their commitment to matters concerning gender, race, and class played an integral part in Black feminist publishing in Britain, the fact that publishers such as them were, and are, few and far between in Britain, is also imperative to note.

In previous decades, on some occasions, Black women were also published by non-political, mainstream publishers. The 1960s landscape of publishing in Britain included the Heinemann African Writers series, which published award-winning, pioneering writers such as Buchi Emecheta. Nevertheless, the texts and marketing activities surrounding the series constructed 'African writing' as a genre (Krishnan 2014). This positioned the writing of Emecheta, and others as exclusively being part of this 'African writing' genre, even when the content specifically foregrounded Black women's struggles for independence (while noting that Buchi Emechta herself was ambivalent about the label 'feminist') (Busby 2017). The Heinemann series considerably differs to more grassroots, community publishing. Arguably, the series demonstrates how stereotyping of Black identities in the global literary marketplace shaped, and continues to shape, how such texts are engaged by broader audiences. Overall, the series reflects a wider historical trajectory where nuances of the writing of Black women in Britain, including the different genres that it spans, are seldom meaningfully acknowledged in British publishing.

To return to the words of Sulter (1986) in the GLC Women's Committee Bulletin, '[w]e must continue to write…Who are the commissioning editors? Where are the designers? Who is actively nurturing our creativity? And when a voice is heard, what is it saying? What are the implications of what is being said?' (29). Further still, Sulter (1986) articulates the hegemony of North America and how publishers in the 1980s appeared to pay significantly less attention to the work of Black women in Britain in comparison to Black women in the US. Here, it is also vital to reflect on how the publication of writing by Black women such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou helped to financially sustain feminist publishers such as The Women's Press and Virago in the 1980s and beyond. Therefore, there is scope to both affirm the critique articulated

by Sulter and recognise how, at times, the publishing of writing by eminent Black women and feminists in the US contributed to the relative longevity of publishers that were also sometimes home to the work of Black women in Britain.

Sulter (1986) provides a snapshot of some of the numerous challenges faced by Black women writers, creatives, and political organizers in Britain, such as obstacles connected to the dominant global influence of North American creativity and cultural production, paired with 'the tokenism and the racism of all white publishing houses, commercial or otherwise' (Sulter 1986: 28). Others who have critiqued such issues from the point of view of an author, include Barbara Burford (1988), in *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women'*.

As the work of Benjamin (1995), Sulter (1986) and Burford (1988) indicates, Black press and writing activity is not simply the by-product of a desire for superficial media representation or business ventures, although such desires do exist. Rather, Black press growth has always been connected to systemic social, cultural, and political issues that are important to different Black people. Accordingly, Black feminist publishing in Britain has often been spurred on by intentions to address the specific structural discrimination faced by Black women, not merely at the level of the media industry, but across societal institutions that span education, healthcare, the marketplace, reproductive rights, the criminal justice system, and party politics. Hence, Lauretta G. Ngcobo (1987) wrote:

> In the mainstream of life in Britain today, Blackwomen [sic] are caught between white prejudice, male power and the burden of history. Being at the centre of Black life, we are in daily confrontation with various situations and we respond in our writings to our experiences – social, political and economic. We write

about life as we live it.

In the decades since Ngcobo edited the crucial collection *Let It Be Told: Essays by Black Women in Britain*, published by Pluto Press, Black women have continued to 'write about life as we live it' (Ngcobo 1987), in print and online. Since Ngcobo's (1987) collection was published, to a certain, yet, still notably limited, extent, the publishing industry in Britain appears to have paid more attention to demand for the writing of Black women. In addition, and in response to the impact of digital developments and late capitalist economic structures on Black women's and Black feminist publishing, Black women have used cameras, recording devices (Jones 2019) and digital tools to self-document their lives and Black feminist experiences—such as in the content of videos and vlogs (Sobande 2017, 2020). As such, the following section delves into discussion of Black women's 'do it yourself (DIY)' and 'do it together (DIT)' digital publishing, and some of the dilemmas concerning the politics that can drive such work and the capitalist spaces it can exist within and become consumed by.

Black women's and feminist online publishing: the personal, political and (un)profitable

Black women in Britain have created new ways and avenues through which to write, create, collaborate, and share their work. Over the last decade, several media and press-related groups, organizations, and activities founded and mainly led by Black women in Britain have developed. These include, but are not limited to, the non-profit *Media Diversified*, founded by Samantha Asumadu in 2013, *Black Ballad*—a lifestyle subscription membership platform that focuses on the experiences of Black British

women, launched by Tobi Oredein and co-founder Bola Awoniyi in 2014, as well as *gal-dem*—an online and print magazine produced by women of colour and non-binary people of colour, founded by Liv Little in 2015. The 'do it yourself' (DIY) and 'do it together' (DIT) ethos of much of Black women's publishing in Britain unquestionably precedes the internet and the creation of online content-sharing platforms, blog spaces, and social media, but has undoubtedly emerged in such settings in generative and innovative ways.

Arusa Qureshi's (2016) research highlights the primarily white masculinist nature of the publishing industry in Britain and notes the role of digital spaces in how some Black women have forged their way in the industry. Without adopting a utopian view of how the internet and social media has been used in ways that have helped to spur on Black women's publishing, Qureshi (2016) observes how the developments of certain contemporary publishing examples led by Black women and women of colour have occurred in ways undeniably moulded by the ability to create and share content online. As is discussed in the following paragraphs, Black women's personal essays have been an increasing source of editors' and publishers' interests but often in ways that can expose Black women to harm.

Kesiena Boom's (2019) chapter 'But Some of Us Are Tired: Black Women's "Personal Feminist Essays" in the Digital Sphere' elucidates 'the fixation by white editors on Black, female suffering which characterises some sects of online personal feminist essay publishing' (245). Boom's account reflects on exploitative, traumatic, and commerce-driven dimensions of Black women's experiences of attempting to get their Black feminist personal essays published online; poignantly posing the question 'can the price ever be right?' (Boom 2019: 252). Since the galvanizing visibility of Black social justice activism in Britain due to the global momentum of the Movement

for Black Lives in 2020, fetishizing demand for Black women's personal essay writing appears to have swelled.

In the inimitable words of Toni Morrison when interviewed by Claudia Tate: 'There's a difference between writing for a living and writing for life' (Morrison cited in Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 170). Collectivist and non-profit models have played a key part in Black feminist publishing. Even so, the potential of Black feminists financially profiting from their work need not be perceived as standing in complete opposition to their politics. Anti-capitalist critiques are fundamental to Black feminism (Davis 1981) but so too are efforts to ensure that the work and labour of Black women is appropriately recognized, supported, and financially compensated (Lewis 1993).

Non-profit publishing paths continue to contain radical potentials, yet, as was critiqued by Black feminists in Britain in the 80s, what may be understood as the non-profit industrial complex, is one that can result in communities being at considerable risk of becoming dependent on precarious and very limited state-funding that does little in terms of sustaining them and affording them autonomy (Watt and Jones 2015). More recently, founder of *gal-dem*, Liv Little, discussed related issues concerning funding and its impact on agency and autonomy, when taking part in an *In Good Company* podcast episode about 'Raising Investment. Microaggressions.'

Thinking through the words of individuals such as Boom (2019) who writes about how Black women may be pushed towards 'exploring traumatic racial experiences' (252) by editors who pursue profit, leads to questions concerning to what extent Black feminist writing, even when produced *by* us and *for* us, can become consumed by the capitalist framework that many publishing outlets sit within. Boom's concerns have been expressed by many Black women, including individuals interviewed as part of my work on the media and digital experiences of Black women in

Britain (Sobande 2017; 2020) who discussed their awareness of and frustration at the potential for their online writing, self-publishing, and social media posts to be (re)presented and reused by commercial entities that do not credit them and may expose them to harm. In the words of one woman who I interviewed, "I don't write many Twitter threads anymore because I know how common it is for the words of Black women on social media to be used by non-Black writers and editors who are looking for a new 'hook' for a pitch".

Boom's (2019: 246) recognition of 'the modern, online, monetised setting of personal feminist essay writing and how it affects Black women' involves incisive critique of 'digital publishing in the "clickbait age"' (ibid.). Just as depictions of Black people often circulate in viral ways online (Gray 2015), so too do their words, including as a result of non-Black editors' callous treatment of Black writers whose work may be intentionally reframed to catalyze controversy and clicks.

For Black women, who face extensive amounts of online harassment, abuse, and surveillance due to the entanglements of anti-Black racism, sexism, and misogyny (Akiwowo 2018)—also referred to as misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy 2018; Misogynoir, 2021), there can be significant risks involved in them publishing personal essays online (McMillan Cottom 2019), particularly for dark-skinned Black women who experience vitriolic harassment that is driven by colourism. In other words, despite digital settings presenting potentially more democratic publishing opportunities to Black women in comparison to those associated with other more traditional print publishing industry routes, they can also be a wellspring of Black women's continued oppression.

Conceptualizing Black feminist vlogging: Between leisure, liberation, and labour

In the absence of an interested publisher or support from mainstream media, creative, and cultural industry organizations which often exclude Black people from decision-making processes (Benjamin 1995), Black women have been blogging, and, more recently, vlogging, as part of their documenting of Black feminism. Further still, for some Black women, certain digital spaces and online forms of self-expression provide more expansive forms of artistic and editorial freedom, and ways to reach a broad and potentially global audience, than those that may be (un)available to them via more traditional publishing and print routes. Thus, when considering the history and present-day examples of Black feminist publishing, it seems pertinent to ponder the potential for vlogging to be perceived as part of such activities and activism, while also wrestling with the considerably constrained radical potential of vlogs due to the commercial new media ecology they are part of.

The many ways that digital and social media has shaken up the publishing industry includes an increasing emphasis on video (Thomas 2020). Many online publications that were once known for their focus on writing, including longform pieces, have publicly announced their moves towards a model that has involved a 'pivot to video'. Cue unprecedented waves of redundancies which have particularly impacted individuals whose work is more focused on words than it is on video content (Tani 2017). Within the academic publishing industry, certain journals are even now starting to seek out video submissions and/or ask authors if they would like to create a brief video that captures their written work to market their articles, indicating the digital and visually saturated nature of society.

Since the launch of video-sharing platform YouTube in 2005, which provides people with opportunities to upload and share videos to a global audience, vlogging culture has moved from the margins of mainstream media to the centre, in some cases

(Stokel-Walker 2019). Certainly, the notion that vlogging constitutes a form of publishing may be a source of contention and disagreement. Regardless, considering vlogs as a platform for Black feminist publishing can involve both acknowledging Black feminist credentials of *some* of such activity *and* the inherently capitalist and individualistic ones of vlogger culture, which can be antithetical to tenets of Black feminism and collective organizing. In terms of content creation, creators of original content are protected by copyright. However, such content creators, including Black women, may still experience people attempting to steal and replicate their work in ways that result in copyright infringements.

For some Black women, their use of YouTube and production of vlogs about their thoughts and lives is nothing more than a source of leisure pastime which feels detached from a political motivation or intention to yield financial profit. For others, their engagement with and/or creation of vlogs can be connected to a decidedly Black feminist liberationist position, including an intention to share and learn from Black feminist knowledge that is made relatively freely available (Sobande 2020). As well as YouTube and vlogger culture playing a part in the leisure and liberationist efforts of Black women, they can be central to their experiences of labour and, sometimes, sources of income.

In 2017, I argued YouTube use can be a part of the resistant efforts of Black women in Britain (Sobande 2017), but in the years since then I have become much more aware and critical of how the video-sharing platform is a hotbed of radicalizing, far-right, white supremacist content (Lewis 2018). Hence my intention to avoid simplistically asserting that YouTube and vlogger culture is a part of contemporary Black feminist publishing which enables Black women's editorial control. Instead, I tarry with how, at times, this may be so, but: due to how YouTube and vlogger culture

are ultimately connected to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1992) they must be understood as also being a source of the sustained structural oppression of Black women. The economics and governance of platforms such as YouTube, which are known sites of rife white supremacist content (Lewis 2018), constrain the potential for their use to contribute to Black feminist liberationist efforts, without substantially exposing Black feminists to considerable harm.

Conclusion

This paper maps elements of the legacy of Black feminist publishing in Britain, the Black press history that it is situated within, and precarious tensions between political principles and pursuit of profit in the context of the media and publishing industry. In doing so, it drew on material and archival collections accessible at the Black Cultural Archives and Glasgow Women's Library. Often faced with the prospect of potentially having to compromise their politics and craft to secure the support of mainstream media and publishing industry organizations, Black feminist writers and creatives in Britain, and globally, have a rich history of producing their own publishing pathways. Their independent and collective work, writing, cultural production, and archiving efforts continue to involve much analogue activity but can also be propelled by digital terrains such as social media that may be used to publish and share Black feminist knowledge.

Denying the role of digital tools and the internet in certain components of contemporary Black feminist publishing is misguided, but so too is an uncritical celebratory claim of the so-called democratizing and radical potential of 'DIY' content-sharing platforms that may be perceived as playing a pivotal role in the Black feminist activism of some. It remains important to acknowledge the impact of digital developments and social media on the lives of Black women and their experiences of

publishing, but without overlooking related ‘offline’ activities and structural power dynamics which, ultimately, buttress the history and contemporary trajectory of Black feminist publishing.

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