

## **Black feminist and digital media studies in Britain**

keisha bruce, Rianna Walcott, Kui Kihoro Mackay, Krys Osei, temi lasade-anderson & Francesca Sobande

**\*Post-print of\*:** keisha bruce, Rianna Walcott, Kui Kihoro Mackay, Krys Osei, temi lasade-anderson & Francesca Sobande (2022) Black feminist and digital media studies in Britain, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.2006737

### **Abstract**

Based on an in-depth discussion between us (six Black PhD and early career researchers), this work explores burgeoning Black feminist and digital media studies in Britain. Our article is rooted in dialogue about Black feminist digital culture, communications, aesthetics, joy, and our different yet interconnected scholarly experiences. We consider who and what shapes the work that we do, the way we approach it, and how it has developed in recent years. Specifically, our thoughts relate to five expansive and interlinked themes: 1. Digital Blackness, Twitter, and Community-Building, 2. Aesthetics, Archives, and Knowledge Production, 3. Pressures, Projections, and Power Dynamics, 4. Research on/as Black Feminist Joy and Pleasure, 5. The Politics of Research. By reflecting on our research and encounters in academia we provide an overview of key aspects of Black feminist and digital media studies in Britain, including how such scholarship is impacted by the specifics of where we are (and have been) located. In doing so, we share insights at the nexus of Black studies, digital studies, cultural studies, and feminist media studies that foreground possibilities, problems, playfulness, and pleasure that can be part of doing Black feminist and digital media studies work in Britain.

**Keywords:** Black feminism; Black joy; Black media; Black pleasure; Black Twitter; Britain

### **Introduction**

What follows is based on an audio-recorded dialogue over Zoom in July 2021 which involved us speaking about our research, ruminations, and experiences as six Black PhD and early career researchers in Britain (England and Wales). Although the discussion was shaped by questions shared beforehand, such as “*What brought you to the work that you do?*”, the conversation unfolded in ways sparked by reflections and relationality that arose in the moment on the day.

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Overall, our discussion explores burgeoning Black feminist and digital media studies in Britain, including facets of our different yet interconnected scholarly experiences. We feel it is important for us to share our discussion in a way that does not detract from its generatively unstructured and informal nature. Therefore, rather than embedding excerpts from our dialogue in a wider theoretical analysis, we chose to make the discussion transcript the core of our article. Five key themes encompass much of what we shared during our conversation, so these feature as the section headings that orient our piece: 1. Digital Blackness, Twitter, and Community-Building, 2. Aesthetics, Archives, and Knowledge Production, 3. Pressures, Projections, and Power Dynamics, 4. Research on/as Black Feminist Joy and Pleasure, 5. The Politics of Research.

## **Digital blackness, twitter, and community-building**

**Rianna Walcott (she/her):** I'm Rianna, I'm at KCL (King's College London). I'm entering my last year of PhD, the write-up, I guess, from September. I'm in the Digital Humanities Department at KCL, that I'm trying to make very Black. I write about social media and language, and how Black people portray identity online. It's like I remembered how to read at about 2am last night, when I was suddenly flicking through this big fucking pile of books I've got here. Yeah I'm quite excited, and I'm probably going to mine you all, indiscriminately, during this conversation for this piece I'm writing, so just be prepared for that, I guess.

**keisha bruce (they/she):** I'm keisha and I'm currently completing a PhD in Black Studies and aim to finish early 2022. My research explores how digital diasporic intimacy is curated online through visual cultures and their affect. It is underpinned by Black feminism, and this will always underpin my work; it couldn't be anything other than that. It focuses on the ways that Black women have created, shared, and engaged with visual mediums online, such as selfies, web series, Instagram archives, and memes, and then how these are used for diasporic (re)connection. I describe my work as a Black studies project that intersects with digital media studies. I say this because I don't think I'm a Blackfeminist digital media scholar. In my next project I might not even look at the digital. I work with materials, and for this project, the materials I'm looking at happen to be online but in the future, it could be a piece of art, music, literature, or the physical materiality of spaces. I'm just interested in materials, what we do with them, and how we use them to create meaning.

**Kui Kihoro Mackay (she/her):** My name is Kui I'm at Royal Holloway University. I've literally just finished my PhD. Francesca was one of my examiners. I studied Kenyans online, particularly Kenyans in the UK, and how they handled their identities, both online and offline. I'm particularly interested in that kind of living in two spaces type identities, and that's how I would sum up my work. I'm excited to be here. I know most of you, from Twitter, and I'm excited about the work that you're doing. It feels really good to be here, as a fan, I guess, and to get to learn from you all.

**temi lasade-anderson (she/her):** I'm temi, and I'm at Cardiff. Francesca is my supervisor for my MA dissertation. Echoing Kui, I've got a massive girl crush on you all, so I feel a bit nervous, just as a FYI. My

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research looks at social media platforms, and platform governance through a Black feminist lens. I work in tech policy, and so that's my frame and my perspective on digital media. My Masters research examines Black British women's confessional vlogs on YouTube, and notions of online vulnerability. I'll be starting at King's College this autumn. As it stands, my PhD research project will look at Black British women's knowledge production on Twitter, digital colonialism and hermeneutical injustice. I'm really excited to learn from you all and to chat.

**Krys Osei (she/her):** I'm Krys, and I'm completing my PhD at Goldsmiths and it has definitely been a journey. I'm also a lecturer at University of the Arts London. I teach cultural studies across fashion, jewellery and textiles programmes at Central Saint Martins, and fashion media, styling and production at London College of Fashion. I do like to refer to myself as a beauty geographer. My research uses autoethnography and my family archival history to map inventive methods of worldmaking for Black women in the Ghanaian diaspora—specifically in Accra, London, and Washington, D.C., through collage self-portraits, moving image, aesthetics, performance, gardening and tailoring, which I guess I will elaborate on further throughout this chat. I'm really, really excited for this.

**Francesca Sobande (she/her):** Hi, I'm Francesca, I'm a lecturer in digital media studies at Cardiff University in Wales. I just really appreciated the fact that, when everybody was speaking, what came across so strongly was that whilst there might be in-person meet-ups and connections that have happened, Twitter has played a big part in some of the ways we've been in touch too. I wondered if anybody had any thoughts on that and reflecting on the role of digital media, or specifically even Twitter, in our experiences of daily life, but also in doing the sort of work we do, and in connecting with other people who are doing similar work.

There were so many different things I was thinking about, including when keisha put the tweet out asking, does anybody want to do a panel for ASA (American Studies Association) and how that tweet was what sparked the coming together, keisha, Rianna and I, and doing that panel on "Navigating Transnational Digital Blackness: Networked Publics and Decolonized Ethnographic Approaches". And what was an incredibly formative experience, I would say, of coming together, doing Black digital studies in the context of Britain, and reflecting on our own individual and collective work, and some of the ways it's shaped by what's happening in the US, in terms of Black digital scholarship, but also clear differences as well.

I guess I was just thinking about that connection—and I remember seeing that tweet [of keisha's], I had just come out of teaching a lecture and being like, this [keisha's panel suggestion call out on Twitter] sounds like it could be so exciting! Also, in October 2018 Rianna, Melz Owusu, layla-roxanne hill and I went to a brilliant conference called "Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black" by the African American Digital Humanities Initiative (AADHum) at the University of Maryland. The three of us put together a panel on "Bridges and Boundaries: Black (British) Digital Discourses" where we spoke about various topics and themes that relate to Black digital diaspora and the specific experiences of Black people in Britain. I'm just thinking about how all of these moments involved, I guess, digitally mediated forms of connection and interaction, and the central role of that, in coming together and doing some of the things we've all done together, over the years.

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**Rianna:** I actually met you before that, Francesca, at that event in Glasgow, it was a POC research event—was it Black or POC, I can't remember?

**Francesca:** I think it was “Women of Colour Researchers: A Mentoring Symposium in Scotland”. Yeah, it really rolls off the tongue [laughs].

**Rianna:** Well done! That was when I met a lot of Black women who were working in similar fields. And because I had been in Edinburgh for so long, been in such a white institution and not really had a Black community of academics, that was the beginning of what has been so formative in my PhD. I wouldn't have been able to do half of the stuff I'm doing if it hadn't been for finding that.

I found my Masters really isolating—I spent a lot of time working on very Black things, looking at the Caribbean, looking at Black Britishness, completely on my own, and in such a white space. I didn't have any sort of community to lean on and so I wonder what that project would have looked like had I had the community of researchers that I do now. So in that event in my first year of PhD, and us going to together, meeting Krys as well, was really important for me to understand that there were, in fact, people doing and interested in the sort of thing I was.

Once we went to ASA—and I had been to a couple of other conferences before that in the States—and started building these networks of Black researchers, in the US as well as the UK, I know those have been the times I learnt the most. Knowing I have these people to lean on when I want to organise a writing retreat, when I want to bounce ideas off people, have conversations like this one. Like I've already said, I'm going to mine you all for content, for this paper I'm writing right now! It's just really important to be in that kind of space, where I know the people I'm talking to will have done similar readings to me and will have cared about similar things.

That's also kind of guided even what I'm doing right now at King's, this very small bit of funding I've received to take a look at decolonising our department. I'm the only Black PGR they've ever had, I'll be the second, and I'm just really looking at why. Even though the department's numbers are growing exponentially every year, Black representation has only gone up to something like 17 in the last decade. And that's in representation of Black students from undergrads right up to PhD.

I remember I used to talk about doing digital humanities, Black digital humanities, in the UK, and going, “Oh there's none of us, there's no-one here . . .” and now I'm not so sure. There are very few of us but we *are* here. That very clear distinction has been super-important to me in the last year—that we are, in fact, here, and that there is a conversation to be had about Black Britishness online, and it's not something where I have to keep just referring to America, but that we can carve out our own space to talk about our own research.

**keisha:** In terms of finding a researcher community, when I started my research project on digital Blackness, I kind of fell into it. I didn't have a clear route mapped out for me from my undergrad. All of the projects I have written so far had different academic focuses and because of that, I hadn't actually done any reading around the topic.

Pretty much, when I started the PhD, I thought, okay I have all of this research on literature, on visual culture, and on Black feminism generally, but I don't know how to even begin to talk about social media, or how to articulate the phenomena that I was experiencing online. I don't even know

who I'm supposed to be reading, or how I'm supposed to be making these connections. And so using social media to find community, to find people in the UK that were doing similar work, was really integral to me to even be able to begin my project.

**temi:** I think, for me, social media—particularly Twitter, is a way of trying to find a commonality of perspective. In my professional work experience, in tech policy, I've always been the only Black person in the room, and that's very isolating, and sometimes my perspectives I'm like, is it just me?

And so I've always used Twitter and YouTube, to try and seek out other people who are doing work in this space [in the UK]. So kind of like the opposite of Keisha, I didn't know anybody. Especially because a lot of the work I do in tech policy—the research comes from the US, from people like Safiya Umoja Noble. I felt like . . . okay who's talking about it here? As Rianna said, it was like, is there anyone, like, tumbleweed, hello?

In particular, I think Twitter is helpful for discovering who else cares about these topics and just being able to jump into someone's DM, or follow them. For me, it makes me feel less alone. It's incredible to be able to mention other people who are doing this work here, instead of constantly looking to the US. It's really nice to know there are other Black women that I can relate to and also bring into my work. I find Twitter super-instrumental for that.

**Kui:** There's something Rianna mentioned about that feeling of isolation, when she was doing her Masters. I experienced the same feelings, during my Masters. I did it in 2014, at Royal Holloway and researched Black Twitter from a British Perspective. I remember just having to spend ages explaining what Black Twitter was, because I was the only Black woman researching Blackness. I was like, "I'll never get to explain anything else, because we're still going to be here on this thing (i.e trying to define Black Twitter to a predominately white audience)". It was a challenging experience because I really felt like saying to people "you're not going to get it, *get it* because you're not Black, but I couldn't really say that."

Then I started doing the PhD, kind of similar topic, Blackness online, specifically Kenyans. I had gone into this knowing that I might be alone, and that's okay. In 2016, I went to the Digital Blackness Conference in the US, and I think I was the only person there from the UK and I was like, wow. I knew there were Black women doing stuff around race and Black women, but to find people actually doing Blackness and the digital was still something I was missing; until I attended the conference.

A little while after Jade Bentil started the thread on Twitter, a discussion, saying, if you're a Black woman doing a PhD reply to this tweet. I went through the tweets and there were so many Black women, and so many Black women doing digital stuff. It was just such a wonderful feeling.

So even though I don't necessarily tweet much about my work it was just nice knowing there was this group of Black women out there doing the same sort of stuff. That I'm not, not wasting my time, it just felt nice to know that there's a whole world of Black women out there, that I can read their tweets and learn from them, and not feel isolated. Twitter reminds me that I'm not alone, which really means a lot, when you're doing this kind of work.

## **Aesthetics, archives, and knowledge production**

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**Rianna:** I just wanted to interject to say that also being able to cite each other is so meaningful because, like you've just said, that work of even having to explain why you're doing this work, explaining what Black Twitter is, is such a waste of time.

Having each other, and having other people who have already done that work, so you can be in conversation rather than reinventing the wheel every time, is saving us time and energy so we can get to the really interesting stuff.

**Krys:** No, that's fine. I did meet Francesca in person, I think it was at Goldsmiths, was it the Black British Cinema event?

**Francesca:** "Black Film British Cinema II Conference", I think that was it. I remember we bonded over so much—our birthdays are a few days apart, we had the same interests. I just remember having this really great conversation with you.

**Krys:** That in itself was quite affirming too because, if I remember, at that conference, I don't think there were many other Black PhD students, so that was really affirming. Even just coming full circle with your book, *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (Francesca Sobande 2020), seeing all those references from people we know and that we've collaborated with, it's just a really beautiful point of reference. But I was also at the early career researcher conference, with Rianna, I think that was the first time I met Rianna, and then there was Amsterdam, with the Black Feminism and Women of Colour in Europe Conference, which was like a mini-girls trip.

I think it was that year of my PhD as well, the first and particularly second year was very isolating. I mean even the process of getting into the PhD, and trying to find an adequate supervisor that could understand as well. Also coming from an American perspective but doing the work to decentralise my American perspective, with my dad from Ghana and mum from Cameroon, just interrogating my own hierarchies of Blackness, in terms of cultural production in relation to fashion. The fashion element was also ostracising as well, because no-one really engages in it and it's still highly trivialised, in that context as well. It's just coming to a stage where you just want to speak to people who understand your perspective. I'm just looking at your comments as well.

**Francesca:** I was just thinking about, as an extension to this question, Krys was involved in a brilliant Instagram live event recently to do with Black archives, archiving and aesthetics, and everything in between. I was just thinking about how sometimes platforms enable the sharing of this work in ways that more "conventional", static, academic outlets or settings don't lend themselves to. I just thought it would be good to hear your thoughts on doing events like that, and if there is anything from that event that you would be happy to share today, because it was really insightful and brilliant.

**Krys:** That was a really nourishing experience. I really enjoyed working together with curator and researcher, Tosin Adeosun, the founder of African Style Archive for that live event and digital exhibition series. I think the role of digital archives, and being able to access them without travel, has been incredibly helpful for my research and sense of belonging. I'm currently rediscovering family

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photographs from Ghana and Cameroon that have now become kind of central to understanding the lineage of artistic practice in my family that truly defies the rigid boundaries of what a conventional archive can even document.

There's this black and white film portrait of my paternal grandfather and my uncle that was taken around 1952/53 in Accra. It's actually breathtaking and the only image that I have ever seen of him. But the image and the life he lived during and after British colonialism takes on new meaning each time I revisit it with the oral history passed down from my father. The beauty of their tailored clothing and the gardens that border the frame of the image . . . while living through volatile circumstances of poverty . . . viewing that image is an experience. I like to think of the portrait as a marker of possibility, and a way of my grandfather and uncle authoring themselves into the world with dignity, faraway from the realities of colonial imposition and degradation.

My mother is Cameroonian and grew up on farmland. For her, gardening is a form of sustenance, a place where she finds peace. It's the cultivation of life and functions as a space for creative ornamentation. The garden, as an expansive metaphor, has been really crucial to understanding how I navigate archives and fashion in general, from a place of an embodied experience, that's also not really highlighted or really understood in the academic context of fashion studies, unless it's a very specific set of circumstances.

**Francesca:** One of the questions I wrote down was, "What brought you to the work or research you do?". I don't think there's an assumption we all have to identify as Black feminists doing digital media studies, so I think we can play around with these words for a bit of time, or think about how Black feminism can be really expansive, but that, in other cases, it can also be restrictive, depending on what Black feminism we're speaking about.

## **Pressures, projections, and power dynamics**

**Krys:** I was just coming in on the idea of how people project ideas of what our research should be. It's an interesting dynamic that also denies the multiplicity of Blackness and Black womanhood within itself. This sits parallel to how conventional tools and traditional methodologies strategically prescribe absence, both within the Academy, but also in terms of public engagement and wider society. But I always think that it's really interesting, starting from Ghana with this web series called *An African City*, which is what I kind of came to the research with; I binge-watched the first season in a single weekend back in 2016 when my sister introduced it to me. It was, for me, the first kind of entry point to seeing a specific cultural representation of Ghanaian fashion, in the context of moving image, that I related to, that also further sparked something within me that remains beautifully transformative.

That was my entry point to exploring a comprehensive representation of Ghana, but there was this emphasis, from academia's perspective, that going to Ghana and interviewing women in Accra about it, this emphasis on the constraint and the issues and the struggle of being a woman in Ghana, kind of reproducing these ideas of a hierarchy, because I also interviewed British Ghanaian women, and then Ghanaian American women.

I guess the gaze of academia was already kind of constructing a narrative, that what-ever was

coming out of Africa was going to be at a lower standard, which I completely rejected from the beginning of the project, especially using that as a place to interrogate my own hierarchies, and just finding an entry point to exploring those different vantage points of Blackness that are rooted in the global south, that I don't really get to expansively engage with through the American lens, or even, sometimes, the British lens as well.

So, yeah, a lot of projection, which also adds a layer of ostracization and isolation as well, so kind of finding these digital communities has been very empowering and very inspiring. To know you're not alone and that we've all had these parallel experiences of just nonsense, basically, but that we're all still here and still making the work and tending to the urgency of getting it done as well, so that's all I wanted to add.

**keisha:** In the first year of my programme, when I was getting feedback for my work-in-progress, I was asked by a fellow student, "Are you going to think about how Black people have been coded and labelled as primitive in relation to digital technologies? Are you going to talk about the digital gap?" Just all of these perceptions of blackness in relation to digital media, that I just wasn't focusing on or interested in at all.

It got to a point where I was firm and decided, no, I'm going to have to make a statement with my research: I'm not concerned with the white gaze, I'm not concerned with any of these projections about how Black people exist online, or Black people only exist to fight racism online. I'm not concerned with it. My research is focusing on joy, it's focusing on pleasure, it's focusing on Black women creating these intimate spaces for one another, and Black queer people creating intimate spaces for one another. I'm not concerned about these other lenses that you *think* are the dominant ones, or the most important, because in my life, in my reality, in my world, they're not.

**Rianna:** I just wanted to add, on the back of that, that really reflects my own PhD journey as well. I think so many Black students do start out thinking, because of the nature of this research and the lack of us, feeling like they need to do something that addresses things other than joy. I know temi has also been thinking about this, about how we can incorporate joy into our work, and not just be focussing on deprivation. My work started out very differently.

My research was supposed to be about closed Black spaces online which still, to some extent, it is. I was thinking about the nature of publics and whether we exist in enclaves or counter-publics, or whether it oscillates between the two, and talking about how we spoke about whiteness in those spaces. I was really interested in the ways Black people talk around whiteness, and create terms online that end up being metonymic for whiteness, and that all eventually guided me towards what I was really interested in: I was interested in how Black people spoke online, simple as that. I was interested in the way we made meaning, the way we make memes, the way we articulate boundaries in the diaspora, or specificity, and just *the way we spoke*.

I realised that that was actually distinct from wanting to talk about how Black people spoke about whiteness, and I really wanted to decentre that part of it. Like it seemed like that actually narrowed and limited my project in a way I didn't want it to. I didn't want everything to be reactive to whiteness because, for me, especially the older I get, the less I bother fighting whiteness, the less that I actually engage with whiteness at all. I wanted my work to be reflective of that change in me.



I just feel that the more I read, the more I learn, the less central to my work whiteness becomes. I start to focus on this very specific in-house stuff, and if white people are mentioned it's fleeting, because they're not really the focus of my work.

It's humbling, every day I'm like, shit I'm not reading enough, because I'll talk to someone and they'll introduce something new for me to think about. My Black interlocutors have all been doing the same reading, the same work, having the same growth, and now I'm asking people, what does Black feminism mean to you, how does it function, how does it change the way you operate online, and a lot of people are a lot more hesitant to call themselves Black feminists anymore, compared to when we were all in closed Facebook "Black feminist" groups.

This is just based on the research I've been doing recently. It just makes me think what would this have been like if I had done these interviews a couple of years ago. What is happening to the way we think about ourselves, and each other, that I'm moving too slowly to capture?

**temi:** I can't help but notice that my experience has been quite different to the rest of yours, in that not only am I starting my PhD much later, so the discourse and the understanding of Black digital feminism, particularly the use of intersectionality in digital spaces has grown. It's a lot more ubiquitous than it was maybe five years ago. Additionally, I have been trained to look at the digital from the perspective of technology's harms. Digital rights advocacy argues that digital rights *are* human rights, and lobbies platforms and governments to uphold the rights marginalised people have online. Through this, I also examine ideologies of the internet and think of the internet as a construction. In doing this work, there's a tension I feel because there's a resistance to the fact that whiteness is seen as the default user experience online.

As I said before, in these rooms, in these policy rooms, I was always the only Black person, and I always felt that there was a missing perspective hidden in this "average internet consumer" that was also presumed to be white. This for me, results in narrow policy and advocacy work that wasn't connecting or engaging with non-white people. This changed when I worked at an organisation called Whose Knowledge? where they have a programmatic stream of work named "Decolonising the Internet". For me, that was like, oh wait, we can do that, that's a thing! It was a really big lightbulb moment, because I was like, that's what is missing in this space, and it shouldn't be a separate theory, or analysis, it should be *the* theory and analysis.

So when keisha was saying that they don't want to focus on the dominant experience that particularly white people think that Black people have online, I find, with my work, it's trying to reshape those questions of digital rights in tech policy and bring intersectionality theory as a framework to do so. To understand how people have multiple axes of identity which do influence how you engage online, and, therefore, policy has to reflect that.

Unfortunately as I said, this does mean most of my work examines tech harms and as I tweeted a few weeks ago—it's really exhausting. Looking at algorithmic oppression, how digital IDs are being used to track migrants, and in the past week, in the UK, racism online, as though it only exists online . . . that's really exhausting because, every day, I'm just reading about these harms.

**keisha:** When I applied for my PhD funding I had originally applied to do something completely different, because that's what I *thought* I had to do. When I was getting help to apply I was kind of

being fed these ideas for what my project should look like, what my project should ask. I was being told, “you can get funding for it if it looks like this”, “you can access all of these archives for this project”, and so I just kind of followed that path. When that funding application was rejected I just completely froze and stopped, and I thought, actually this isn’t what I want to do. Then I switched to enroll on the Black studies programme, and just decided that I’m going to follow whatever it is I enjoy doing.

I knew there was something that was happening in my online world that I wanted to talk about. I didn’t know what it was, I didn’t know how I wanted to talk about it, but there was something that I wanted to talk about, and so I decided that I was going to use these next three to four years to find out how to talk about it. I didn’t know what it was that I was doing, but I was excited to explore something that I loved and that I felt intimately connected to. Fortunately, I had the guidance of a supervisory team who were supportive of this approach.

**Francesca:** I had always been interested in the digital, but I think partly because it didn’t feel as though . . . I guess, it’s to Keisha’s point, people project onto you what they think a PhD should be about, or just what they think a PhD should *be*, how it should look and feel. I remember people saying things like, “But is there anything really you can say on that?”. I was studying in Scotland and they were saying, “How are you going to find Black women to interview?”. But when I started to do interviews with Black women about media experiences (initially to mainly speak about TV representations and film), the digital and social media came up time and again.

I think, realistically, it took me some time in that first year to realise there will always be those people who are dismissive of what you are doing, who are asking bad faith questions, or asking questions and not wanting an answer. But that doesn’t mean you should feel as though you should change what your research is about, or who it’s for, or the direction it’s going in. So I think it was really joyful to reach the point, when I realised, this is about Black women’s media experiences in Britain, but the focus is on digital, and the focus, in particular, is on various social media platforms.

I’m also thinking about Keisha’s brilliant anti-disciplinary work and conversations we’ve had as it doesn’t feel as though there’s a single discipline that captures all of what we’re speaking about, and also the idea of trying to contain our work, or make it translatable or legible to people, by trying to make it fit the conventions of different disciplines can be at odds with all the work we’re speaking about and want to do.

I think those are real challenges, even when we’re talking about Black feminist digital media studies, that perhaps those words don’t really encompass what we’re speaking about, or there are always going to be tensions between what we’re doing and how people understand what digital media studies is, or feminism, Black feminism specifically.

## **Research on/as Black feminist joy and pleasure**

**temi:** Part of what I’m trying to do now is think about how I can research the joys of being online. For me this means conceptualisations of the Black digital diaspora—how I can read a meme tweet about growing up Black, and totally get it, because I have in-group knowledge. These are the ways that I feel

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so connected to so many Black and African people, across the globe, because of Twitter. I don't want the dominant discourse around digital experiences to be about Black people and the harms we face. I also want it to centre the joy, the reimagining technological futures, and some of the great work that is happening online as well.

**Kui:** It's so funny before I heard you all speak, because I had totally forgotten I went through the same process, when I was writing my PhD proposal.

I knew, in my spirit, that I wanted to study Blackness and fun. Not in a trivial sense, but just being Black, like not having any kind of other agenda, just to study us and what we do and that's it. But because I was part of a geography department that was really focused on international development, I felt there was pressure to have some wider goal to it, like, who are you going to save with this work, what Kenyans are going to learn to speak English, or go to school, whatever it was, that kind of thing.

Eventually, I got to write the proposal I wanted to do and got to study what I wanted to study but then the struggle really came, when it came to writing my thesis. I may have won the battle of researching Blackness the way I wanted to but then I didn't feel free to write it as I wanted to write it. I wanted to cite Kenyans, for example, and Kenyans who were not necessarily writing in or for academia but whose thinking still mattered. I wanted to centre Kiswahili, our language and it was such a struggle.

I also wanted to document this struggle; the struggle of being a Black person researching Blackness and when I first raised this with one of my supervisors they said, "That sounds a bit self-indulgent". However when it came to the final writing up stage, it was 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, and I read an article by Dr. Azeezat Johnson (2020) on her experience of research as a Black woman. Reading that, I was like, "I can cite this, I can now have something official, to be like, this is what I'm talking about." Then of course we had the summer of the Black squares, or whatever it was; that performative allyship by non-Black people on social media. I was like, no, if I write this thesis now I cannot just write as if I'm writing in a vacuum; what's happening now is affecting all of this.

And so I wrote a whole section on my experience of researching Blackness while being Black. I talked about how my Blackness fits into my work, the internal struggles I faced, and why it matters for me to articulate this. I submitted it initially to my supervisors and the feedback was very, "it's okay, but it's a risk, it's a gamble it is an unorthodox approach." I had decided I was going to keep it in, no matter what, so I took it out of where it was initially (a subsection of the introduction to my thesis) and made it a stand-alone chapter that followed on from the introduction. I did it as a standalone chapter because I thought, well if the examiners don't like it, I'm just going to take that whole chapter out and no-one will know that chapter existed. Thankfully, it was received well by the examiners.

I am grateful to my supervisors for not only giving me a choice on who I wanted to have on the viva panel but also supporting me in making it happen. One thing I said was that I would really like someone who understands my work, preferably a Black woman.

When I started the PhD, I didn't know who I would pick. Thankfully, Francesca had written her book so I put her name forward as a potential examiner. Having a Black woman in the room made me feel at ease. My work is about centring Blackness and Black people so this mattered to me.

There were a lot of stages and struggles before I got to a place where I felt confident to write my thesis in the manner I wanted to write it. Where I could centre Blackness, Kenyaness, with no other agenda to bring about world peace or whatever. Also I mattered; who I was, a Kenyan living in

the UK, mattered. I'm not just some kind of outsider hovering above. That was my experience and the struggles I had getting to where I got to.

**keisha:** I can relate to so much of what you just said Kui, in terms of the process of preparing for my Viva, but also in terms of the form my project takes. It doesn't look like a dissertation, I'm told time and time again, "This does not look like a thesis, this actually reads like something completely different." So navigating that poses its own challenges and possibilities.

But you mentioned that you're focusing on Black joy, but in a way that's not trivial, however for me, I am focusing on the trivial. I'm focusing on the trivial, on the banal, on the unimportant, on the things that don't matter, because they *do* matter. I want to find ways to speak about these things that are deemed "unimportant" to subvert dominant perceptions of what is considered something worth exploring and something worthy of rigour.

An example of this is my research on the *SpongeBob* and *Ed, Edd "n" Eddy* memes that have been circulating online for a while, but specifically those that have repurposed and edited Black feminist aesthetics onto them. That includes the braids, the acrylic nails, the lashes, and all of that. I'm trying to find ways to speak about the mundanity of this and the joy surrounding it, to then create conversations about the forms and roles of Black femme hypervisibility online, and the erasure of Black queerness within that framework of what it means to be Black and femme. So I'm able to explore how Black women, Black queer, and Black femme cultural production is being erased, but I'm doing that by having this conversation about these memes and their humour. So I can talk about the trivial, the banal and the unimportant, in ways that ask, what can I pull apart from this, what does it illuminate, what can I bring up here?

My Black feminist approach to joy and pleasure takes shape not only in the content and the method of my project, which uses autoethnography, but also in the form of the project. In terms of how I write it and how I engage with this material. My writing is experimental. I don't care about writing in any set ways that I am supposed to write. I have paragraphs that are just solely italics, because I'm trying to give you a rundown of how I woke up one morning and how I decided to roll over and scroll on my phone, what I saw, and we go from there. It has a preface, an epilogue. I'm not trying to adhere to these systems I'm told I have to, I'm just trying to do something that seems natural to me, and I guess that, in and of itself, because I want to exist freely, I guess it's Black feminism.

**temi:** So much of what you said, keisha, resonates with me. Especially how you describe your work, because it's something I think about, particularly when I think about how I present myself, in these spaces, to get work as a self-employed person, who is often working on different contracts, and trying to break down the whiteness that exists in tech policy and digital rights spaces. I always say that I work in critical internet studies, or I'm a critical internet scholar.

But then, because of my other experiences in an academic context, that's where I feel more able to apply Black feminist theory. That is a framework that I look at these issues and to answer some of these questions through: thinking about how Black women resist on the margins of social media, or about the fact that, disproportionately, Black women receive the most online abuse, and then how does that complicate our experience online? And this tension of wanting to engage on social media platforms, for Black digital diasporic experiences, but then also knowing we're likely going to receive online

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abuse, purely for just existing. For me, because my work is at this intersection of tech policy and Black feminist digital media I try to centre how Black women are interacting with digital media and platforms as well despite online abuse.

It's funny because sometimes people are like, "Okay really get the policy aspect of your work" and then they'll be like "But this Black feminism stuff . . ." It kind of becomes minimised, or it's not as legitimised, it's like, "oh that's unique and cute." I always find that so interesting because, on the flip side, you'll have people shouting about intersectionality this and that and not realising that it's very much a part of Black feminist theory.

For me it means I have to resist this idea that my policy work is somehow more worthy than anything else like . . . Black digital joy which looks at memes. Or Black women's Twitter threads as a form of knowledge production. Like the way I learn from Twitter threads from like Kelechi Okafor when I wasn't expecting to, and I'm like, whoa, let me write some of this down! But if you start talking about that, especially in the areas I work in, you get this funny look. I really want to end the delegitimizing of that type of work, because not only is it worthy on its own, but it's also worthy of empirical study.

## The politics of research

**Krys:** I just wanted to add that definitely this trivialisation, just connecting that to what everybody else has contributed, but definitely the study of beauty and fashion, just the downright dismissal of it, within the context of looking at Black women, or having people say, "Black women have real problems" like "Why are you focussed on this element?", of being dressed, and, again, locating it in those small joys we can find in ourselves, that are embodied very well.

But also, going on to what keisha was saying, about just trusting your feeling and writing, I'm not committed to any form of conventional writing either. Like my work incorporates poetry, creative writing, Mariah Carey and Missy Elliott song lyrics. I'm just being me and using this as a tool to explore the fullness of my humanity, the interiority of who I am, but also with women in Ghana and in the diaspora. I'm just trying to make sense of my own experiences of Black girlhood/Black adolescence through fashion magazines and publications. Mariah Carey and Missy Elliott were really central to how I understood beauty, fashion, and style when I was younger so it's all important.

There is this pressure to kind of identify—what temi was saying—this delegitimization of work that kind of, again, quotes on things that are "trivial" in these academic standards and contexts. Even though this is all anchored in post-colonialism and cultural geography, creating this framework of critical beauty and fashion studies isn't really anchored in learning and teaching environments. But there's definitely a need for that. Also just having the freedom to explore the day-to-day, the vernacular of material and visual culture, how Black women make sense of the world through different creative avenues and explore their humanity that's systematically denied on a daily basis is monumental and incredibly important.

I'm just reading keisha's comments, "this is something I've had an internal battle over". Of course it has meaning, yeah, absolutely. The people who tell us that it doesn't have meaning, they just don't understand it so they automatically dismiss it, and that reflects the narrowness of their thinking.

**Rianna:** Thinking about whether PhD research has meaning, if I really stop and think about how many absolutely garbage theses I've seen from white academics, where no-one is challenging them on how bad or pointless this is, but me, because I want to talk about Black people, you're asking "is that really relevant"?

One of the things I have never been concerned about as a researcher, even though imposter syndrome is hard, I've never been worried about being able to make an original contribution, which is one thing I imagine other PhD students are constantly fretting over. For us, how could we not be making an original contribution to knowledge? Obviously, we have to think about valued ontologies, how we're saying things that have been said before, been thought before, how we're maybe just bringing them to a venue they've never been said in.

Often I think about all of the extracurricular work, all of the external outreach work that every Black scholar I know does, and I think about what kind of a different experience the PhD, or even just academia in general, is for us. Particularly I will look at other peoples' work and be like, "what's the value in this?". I've never questioned the value of our work.

**Francesca:** What do you [everyone] hope that your work may do, or what do you hope it may help people to think through and reflect on? Also, I was wondering whether or not anyone wanted to say anything about how they feel feminist studies, including feminist media studies, has changed over the years . . . or if it's less about responding to that question and more about how we sit with some tensions—because I would say Black feminism has always been central to the work I do but I'm still aware that that doesn't mean there aren't times when elements of Black feminist work maybe fails to grapple with some of what we're speaking about.

It depends, again, on *what* Black feminist perspectives . . . are those perspectives accounting for hierarchies in terms of global dynamics, is there a foregrounding of a North American point of view, a British point of view, or is there a foregrounding of a particular classed experience? Just if anyone has thoughts on how feminist media studies, in general, has changed over the years, or some of these tensions you've considered, when doing the work that you do.

**Kui:** One of the things I really struggled with was citing African feminists. I really wanted to cite Kenyan feminists. What I realised was that I didn't know that much. I grew up here (UK) and spent a very short time in Kenya, so that's not something I learnt at school. I came to that realisation when I started questioning my citation practices which was kind of late into the process. So the challenge was trying to find information, while I was writing up. I was like, I don't know where to start with this, like, where do I find Kenyan feminists, and how do I get into the work with the time I have left, to fully engage with it. So I was really aware that I was grounding my work in Black feminist work, but it was very North American, and British in parts, and not rooted, necessarily, in Kenyan or African feminist work.

Twitter has been really helpful for that because Kenyan feminists never appeared on any of my official reading lists. Not during my masters or undergraduate. Black feminists from outside of the UK and USA are just not featured as much. The onus is on us to do the extra work to find these voices and hope that our supervisors deem it worthy enough to cite.

**temi:** I don't know that I feel qualified enough to talk about Black feminist media studies, as I've never

really worked explicitly in that space before, but what I have seen, over the past few years, in feminist media, is . . . I guess there's one side, where I feel there is a burgeoning of Black women owned media in the UK. I think about Black Ballad, for example, and how that is creating content for Black women and not only in London but across the UK.

I like that it's not pigeon-holed in this lifestyle media brand. Black Ballad writes about beauty, fashion, but also peoples' stories, for example I read an article on the experience a Black woman had growing up in a tiny Welsh town. When I was growing up the magazines available were like . . . *17* magazine! It was just like, where, where are the Black people? There was no representation I guess like until Scary Spice came along, and then it was like, ah god, I'll hold on to her, pin all my hopes and dreams on Melanie B.

There have been a few colourism issues I guess with Black women media and feminist topics in the UK too. An example is Candice Braithwaite—who has been constantly speaking on Black women's experiences in birthing in the UK and Black motherhood. There was this documentary about these issues and it wasn't Candice hosting it, Rochelle Humes ended up hosting the show, who is a biracial Black woman. It feels like the erasure of dark-skinned Black women's experiences.

Then it happened again with Leigh-Anne Pinnoch's documentary on the Pop industry and racism—like obviously colourism is an issue itself, but, again, in the British media landscape, the women who are centred and focussed to talk about these issues I always find telling. Again it's like—where is the intersectional analysis? And not only thinking about the inclusion of Black and brown voices, but also how power and proximity to whiteness is entangled within that. For me, the concept of power is always missing when we're thinking about intersectionality and feminism. However, I would say it is changing a bit . . . I am seeing more of these conversations and more of these questions at least being posed, when we look at feminist media in the UK, but, overall, Black feminism, in particular, is still, for me, an addendum.

This is part of the reason why I dislike the term, “people of colour,” or “women and minorities,” because I'm like, well I'm both, so now what? I am both a woman and Black, and I cannot separate these identities. In fact, I would argue you see my Blackness, like my Blackness enters the room before my womanhood does, and that's what's not currently been reflected in the feminist media landscape in the UK.

**keisha:** I also feel these tensions as I attempt to decentre North American Black feminist media scholarship within my work. I did a masters and undergrad that focused primarily on American studies, so a lot of how I came into this scholarship was by way of American Black feminism, and this is still something I'm untangling. It's about knowing where, or how, to find a lot of the texts, how to even go about beginning to decentre the U.S, which is happening, but the same way that it took me years to even begin get to grasp all the different layers and different perspectives of Black feminism in North America, I have to apply that same time and energy and more to learn about other global contexts. So it's not something we can just do in a couple of months, in a year, it's something that's continuous. I have to practice forgiveness with myself for that, because I do hold a lot of guilt that I don't know as much as I would like to know about British Black media studies.

I have to exercise forgiveness and also recognise that this is a product of an education system that was never intended to value the perspectives of Black people here. So, while I hold a lot of guilt

personally, I understand that I am doing the work, it just takes time and that's okay.

Also, again, I'm always celebrating Francesca's book, because although I have always been of this kind of mindset that anything is scholarship, that we draw information and knowledge from all these different places in life, I barely saw that put into practice until I read Francesca's book. For me, that was landmark moment where we're seeing someone who is changing how we talk about Black feminist media studies in Britain in a way that is accessible. It celebrates people at different points in their career, at different avenues and spaces, prioritises spoken conversation and interactions. That's absolutely something that has inspired me going forward. It's given me a confidence boost, an acknowledgement that this can actually happen, and look how beautiful it is when it does, so thank you, Francesca. Throwing you flowers, always.

**Krys:** I think that's really beautiful what you were saying, keisha, as well, this idea of extending yourself a level of self-compassion, because I feel a lot of guilt. I really agree with what you said about how actually doing the work takes years. It took about five years to holistically examine the global dynamics of my own identity. Over the years, in a wider sense, there has also been a shift in my own family, who now see a renewed sense of purpose and value in how beauty and fashion is tethered to their own intergenerational narratives that are rooted in the continent. They are proud of the richness and vibrancy in their African identities, and know that they are enough. So I think that has been a really transformative aspect of my work as well, but I definitely still feel those layers of guilt.

The reality is that we are all on institutional timelines that don't care, or want to afford us any extra space to interrogate these different forms of knowledge, because they aren't interested in producing knowledge that deviates from tradition anyway. I just had a thought and remembered when Francesca and I went to the ICA conference, I don't know if you remember?

**Francesca:** Yeah I do. Me and Krys went to the International Communication Association conference in 2019 and we turned it into a paper afterwards, and I suppose part of the conversation was speaking about, or speaking back, to the dominance of North American scholarship, and also scholarship coming from Europe. I guess it's just interesting the different ways that [perspective] is and is not received, even from people who are maybe critical about some of the stuff we're speaking about.

**Krys:** I don't want to repeat some of the harmful things that were said at that conference, but those power dynamics are definitely ingrained. Turning our presentation into a paper, and doing the work to engage with scholars on the continent that are producing incredible scholarship was really meaningful.

Again, they don't get their flowers, they don't get any sort of credit. Even in terms of the access you have, in terms of institutions that have certain subscriptions to journals that are based on the continent, that is also a rarity. It's frustrating when you know the knowledge is there, but you don't have access because of an institutional boundary that doesn't value journals that are based in Africa. Again, just emphasising what keisha was saying about self-compassion and being gentle with ourselves during this whole process that, again, is institutionalised.

**Rianna:** I just wanted to mention that I thought it was really interesting to see us all speaking, in the chat, about that nature of guilt, because that's not something I have ever articulated before, but my god did

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it get me! Because sometimes I just think, wow what a shitty Caribbean, what a crappy West Indian scholar you are; could you name any? I'll be reading and writing, and getting to people and going, thank god, I'm finally using some Stuart Hall, oh god, do you know what I mean?

Yesterday, for instance, I was thinking about what the archive is, looking at Stuart Hall, the nature of the living archive etc., led there from Francesca's book as well, and thinking about Twitter as an archive and how we use it, the nature of memes as language, signifying and all such stuff. I came across this book, and these Caribbean scholars, who had built these huge interview depositories and stuff, and I was like, I need another lifetime to read all of this.

I'm finding reading really difficult, at the moment, because the way I'm reading is not reading the book cover to cover, and I realise academics don't do that, don't read books cover to cover anymore, that you have to go to the index and the chapters and find the thing that you need and then dip out, because otherwise you would never have the time. It still feels so unnatural. Extractive exactly is the word: it feels like you aren't really taking the time to sit with the people; you're not giving them the honour and respect for all the time they've put into the work to collate this thing, particularly when you're talking about Black scholars here as well. I don't know. Literature searches are oppressive. Writing a literature review, hell on earth.

One of the things I've been thinking about, in terms of the UK academic process, the length of it, etc., is that three or four years is not long enough to settle yourself in your field and do the reading, and so on, that you need to do. So I often feel I'm very far behind people, I often feel like I haven't read the key texts, whatever they are, that I'm not able to be in conversation with people that I would like to be. But I do recognise that, with academics that come from the States that they do their PhD over a longer period of time. They've got more interlocutors to actually meet and be with and talk to.

Myself, I have this network—pretty much us six—and then a few people outside of it, and the speed of the PhD means I don't really have the time to make the real kind of intervention that I want to make. Everything is so rushed and extractive, as you've said perfectly. Yeah the whole thing gives you anxiety, so I'm sort of trying to think about a way that I can slow down, get a chance to go to America, get a chance to maybe take the time to do a postdoc and be in this space, and really be able to sit down and read and get myself to this point where I can feel like an actual expert. It's all about output right now. Lifelong work is how I would like to think of it. I would like to think of it as something that I can eventually take some time and become the intellectual that I would like to be.

**temi:** Can I just add on here—the pressure of often being the only one, and feeling like you have **one** shot to get it right, so not only is it a short period of time but you're also the first person that is maybe speaking about these topics, as you mentioned before. You know—there's the questioning and the ridiculing of your gall to centre Black people and Black women in your work and then, on top of that, you have the fact that you're, perhaps, the first Black person ever in that department.

So not only do you have to figure out a way to try and explain your work, arguing that it *is* deserving of empirical research, but you then also have to deal with all the things that come with being the Only in a workspace, with all of the code switching and the microaggressions that comes with it, and the trying to ensure that your Blackness is not so Black, but also Black enough, because you're the expert. All the extra emotional labour you do, alongside your research. And you don't have the privilege

of generational wealth to not be working, while doing your PhD.

I think about this extra work I do in order to just exist in the spaces that I exist in. I said to my partner that honestly, sometimes, I just don't want to do it. I just want to go to work, or do the work I'm doing, without everything else. Like Krys said, it feels like if you mess up, it's like well we gave that one Black woman a chance and look what happened—not doing that again [laughs]. We can laugh about it but, at the same time, the fear is really there.

Then there's also stuff like what Rianna is doing in trying to get more Black people into PhDs, by breaking down the steps or barriers. She's trying to get someone else to be the second person, or the third person, or the fourth person because these institutions are not doing it. They're truly not doing it. They'll put out their statements, they might have their little scholarships, but it's a tick box exercise and so then you feel you have to reach down as you climb, and it's just exhausting. It's no wonder that we're having to look at the index [of books] to find someone who has an ethnic sounding name, like, okay, cool, let me go with you, from this one book over here [to cite]. It's madness, it truly is.

**Kui:** I wanted to add too to that, and I don't know if anyone else went through this, I was really conscious of airing out our dirty laundry, as it were. One thing I was interested in, was internalised anti-Blackness; the stuff that often appears in diaspora wars for example. This came up in my research and I want to be honest with my work, and really engage with these issues. But I also don't think academia is ready to read this, because I think the academy won't understand it. I felt this pressure of not wanting to put our bad business out there. It was just a weird thing to have to deal with. I guess that goes back to Keisha's point about forgiveness, and not carrying all that guilt. It weighed on my mind, that I have to be true but I don't want non-Black people to look at my work and conclude these Black people over here hate these Black people over there, and just misquote it and take it out of context. I don't know if anyone else has had that kind of drama, but that was something I went back and forth with a lot.

**Keisha:** I want to briefly add something about my hopes for the future of Black feminist digital media studies in Britain. Outside of the growing communities we have such as this, my hope would be that for institutions, or for other people outside of the community that want to support and platform more of this work, commit to creating space. By that I don't just mean physical space and the resources that come with that, but also the space and breathing room for research to be expansive and to look different. So here I'm thinking about space expansively, in terms of methods, how we engage one another, and the room we have to grow as researchers.

I want to push back against the idea that social media researchers are pigeonholed, and so I encourage people to think expansively about how we might talk about digital media as it relates to other facets of culture. That way, people that do this research aren't necessarily bound into only doing one thing and one way. Something I really appreciate from US academia is that I'll be reading texts from someone like Imani Perry, who writes on a wide range of different topics in a variety of different ways, so why can't I do that?

**Rianna:** Absolutely. They have so much more time to find their niche and write in different fields than we do. I mean, again, that idea of condensing the time between PhD and holding a post, means we don't

really actually have that time to explore, to try to do things differently. We're really locked into a very rigid system, I think. Even just thinking about the different ways in which we conduct assessment.

I have really loved what you say, keisha, about your writing process, how there will be a prologue, how you're expressing yourself in a way that really reflects your work, in a way that is multimodal, in a way that does define discipline. It's really lovely to see, over the years we've been speaking, that you genuinely have done that . . . I don't know, you said you were going to do this thing and you just bloody did it. It's so lovely to see that and to see what that actually looks like for you, so I completely agree, that if we had the room, I really think that we would all be better and, most importantly, happier academics.

**Francesca:** This just feels like the loveliest place and I'm not going to say to *end* this conversation, or bring it to a close, because, like everybody has been saying, none of this is linear, there's no start or end, it is always ongoing and defies the expectations of what doing this work looks like. Not even just doing this work, all of who everybody is and how expansive that is, and how it cannot and will never be contained by the expectations of these different institutions. Yes, exactly, a pause, for today [rather than an end].

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**Rianna Walcott (she/her)** is an LAHP-funded PhD candidate at Kings College London researching Black women's identity formation in digital spaces, and a graduate twice over from the University of Edinburgh. She co-founded projectmyopia.com, a website that promotes inclusivity in academia and a decolonised curriculum. She frequently writes about race, feminism, mental health, arts and culture for publications including *The Wellcome Collection*, *The Metro*, *The Guardian*, *The BBC*, *Vice*, and *Dazed*. Rianna is co-editor of an anthology about BAME mental health - *The Colour of Madness*, and in the time left over she moonlights as a professional jazz singer. Rianna tweets at @rianna\_-walcott, and more information can be found at riannawalcott.com

**Dr. Kui Kihoro Mackay**, a doctoral candidate at Royal Holloway University of London, recently successfully defended her thesis. The thesis entitled "*Got on to the plane as white English and landed in London as Black Kenyan*": *Construction and Performance of Kenyanness Across Online and Offline Sites*; centres the lived experiences of Facebook and Twitter users in the UK who identify as Kenyan and uses Black Feminist theory to expand the current language of identification, belonging and performance.

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