

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/159242/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Sobande, Francesca and Basu, Maitrayee 2023. "Beyond BAME, WOC, and 'political blackness'": diasporic digital communing practices. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 16 (2) , pp. 91-98. 10.1093/cc/cad012

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cc/cad012>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.





“Beyond BAME, WOC, and ‘political blackness’”: diasporic digital communing practices

Francesca Sobande ,^{1,*} Maitrayee Basu²

¹School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Wales, UK

²London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, London, UK

*Corresponding author: Francesca Sobande. Email: SobandeF@Cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

What forms of *opacity* and *excess* propel Black and South Asian digital diasporic feminist cultures of commoning and communing? This article explores digital expressions of retreat, refusal, remixing, and reclamation which are central to diasporic feminist practices. We analyze three illustrative digital practices via two vignettes: (1) Quote tweets and digital anonymity as expressions of subaltern excess; (2) diasporic meme culture as a callout praxis of refusal; and (3) digital opacity as feminist retreat and reclamation of time, interiority, and intimacy. Throughout our analysis we incorporate reflections on the contours of “diasporic feminist excess” and the parameters of public, private, and personal spaces. Overall, by extending the vocabularies of feminist commoning to include certain digital diasporic feminist practices, we conceptualize the fluid and fraught ways that contrapublic discourses move in, between, and beyond, digital publics.

Keywords: digital culture, diaspora, feminism, publics, communing

Digital publics have been the source of vital analyses of digital diasporas and “the complex dynamics around trying to research online/offline intersections” (Gajjala, 2019, p. 10). Key themes in such studies include analysis of digital and platformed feminist communities (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022; Steele, 2021), as well as the relationship between social media and activism (Jackson et al., 2020). There is also a growing literature on how systematic hate and violence is directed at people, especially of African and Asian descent, including people from LGBTIQ communities and feminists (Banaji & Bhat, 2021). As Black and Asian feminists adapt their presence in these digital communities, there is need for more research regarding digital diasporic experiences that involve the intentional avoidance of publicness and embracement of opacity. Our article considers how such digital diasporic experiences might constitute a form of *contrapublic* as opposed to a counter-public.

In this article, we focus on vignettes tied to the geo-cultural contexts of India and the UK to tease out different yet related aspects of Black and South Asian digital diasporic experiences of online (in)visibility in Britain. Specifically, we analyze the role of quote tweeting and threads in feminist communing and diasporic meme culture to critically consider what can constitute a contrapublic. Although the chosen vignettes relate to a range of political issues and power relations, the common thread connecting them involves feminist digital diasporic practices which address the intersections of forms of oppression, such as xenophobia, classism, imperialism, colonialism, and casteism. Rather than focusing on the scale of such digital diasporic work, we consider its scope and nature, and how this relates to forms of opacity that cannot, and should not, be quantified and measured.

In conjunction with the notion of the *contrapublic*, we propose that more attention needs to be paid to digital forms of feminist *communings*, which involve interactions and

experiences of interiority and intimacy that are dependent on departing from participation in publics (e.g., withdrawing from public discussions and digital spaces) (Amponsah, 2021). While such communing includes the forging of solidarity between Black and South Asian feminists, it also relates to gathering in ways that solely involve Black feminists or South Asian feminists respectively. Thus, we refer to Black and South Asian feminists as two distinct and loosely formed diasporic feminist groups that have a history of solidarities *and* fractures, resulting in the need to name differences and similarities between the work and experiences of both feminist groups. So, for instance, we see digitally connected and geographically dislocated younger feminist voices emerging in South Asian diasporas that repudiate the narrow focus on sexual violence of their predecessors in the Indian Women’s Movement (IWM) with a much more nuanced discussion on the relationship of these issues with sexual freedom and sexuality-based rights (for example in Why Loiter and also Pinjra Tod movements) (Roy, 2022).

In the British context, Asian feminists have a history of engaging, as a part of a coalition of “black feminists” with a critique of how sexual violence intersects with race in their work in analyzing the shortcomings of White feminism. More recently diasporic feminists have started connecting these critical insights about the nature of White feminism to a broader critique of representational privilege that certain groups occupy within the public discourses about minority rights as a result of their caste, class, color, immigration status, religious affiliations, and sexuality. The vignettes we draw from illustrate the digital practices of Black and South Asian women engaging in what we deem to be diasporic feminist contrapublics which earmarks the importance of these spaces and technologies to enable both commoning *and* communing. They highlight the work that is being done in connecting struggles across various borders of belonging, as well as ways

Received: 22 September 2022. Revised: 24 March 2023. Accepted: 24 March 2023

© The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of International Communication Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

to push back against them, by diasporic feminist actors who are also critical of what Banaji (2022) calls a “packaged neo-liberal idea of intersectionality” (n.p.).

In what follows, we discuss who and what might loosely constitute diasporic feminist perspectives and how these boundaries are established and redrawn on Twitter. Although numerous other diasporic feminist discursive formations could have been studied that highlight boundaries drawn, around matters of religious practices/secularness, colorism, or caste privilege, in our collaborative analysis we decided to focus on discourses pertaining to sexual violence, racism and political representation. Thus, we attempt to conceptualize the organized labors of diasporic feminists that strategically exist outside, and willfully beyond, the frames of visibility associated with the formation of counter-publics. In taking this step towards carefully regarding the subject of digital labors of such feminists, we hope that more can be done in stretching the scope of the term “digital publics” and its relationship to the political.

The concept of the commons “is often referred to as a struggle against enclosures (...) the privatization of spaces of freedom (...) exclusion, and (...) private property” (Ticktin, 2020). Dockx and Gielen (2018) further assert that “it seems that the era of the “disclosure of the commons” is now dawning” (n.p.) However, based on our analysis of digital diasporic practices, we question the desirability of total digital disclosure for diasporic feminists. We argue that in between the poles of the privatized enclosures of corporate-owned software and platforms, and the ideal of the public internet, individuals marginalized and excluded within the political life of the bounded nation state of their residence (due to their class, caste, religion, ethnicity or sexuality) might be deprived of the closed or semi-closed transnational spaces and practices they have cultivated for their own safety and self-making. Utilizing the dual lenses of *opacity* and *excess*, we advance a defense of retaining communing practices in an ideal future where “we” might all equally partake of the “rights” and resources of the digital commons.

This article is guided by two research questions: firstly, what communing possibilities are present in the space of uncapturable opacity between enclosure and disclosure? By opacity, which can be impacted by experiences of “precarity in public and private spaces” (Alabanza, 2022, p. 40), we signify an affect that exists beyond desires to be seen or represented within the public sphere. We postulate that concepts such as enclosure or disclosure, although central to practices of feminist communing, are inadequate to reach at an understanding of certain diasporic forms of communing, resistance to, or disinterest in sharing or being visible. This understanding of practices of resistance draws also from a postcolonial theorization of “communicative silences” that challenges the dichotomy between silence and voice (Acheson, 2008, p. 536). Secondly, we consider how the excesses of subaltern digital cultures are implicated in expressions of retreat, refusal, remixing, and reclamation. We problematize the fact that these expressions framed as excesses are often treated within a technological governance landscape as risky, suspicious and in need of increased surveillance and discipline. Although we focus on feminist forms of opacity and excess, we also recognize that such practices are central to the experiences of other groups who face the danger of being visible while attempting to commune.

Key concepts: communing, opacity, and excess

The concept of communing connotes connection, intimacy, and a powerful exchange of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Often associated with religion and spirituality, communing is typically perceived as involving profound relations that involve a sense of togetherness and turning inwards. Even when viewed through an agnostic or atheist lens, communing is commonly understood as encompassing intense and soul-stirring interactions. In a sense, communing is something indescribable that is felt and lingers long after those who have communed depart. Thus, although communing can occur in “the here and now,” its ripple effects include the transmission of knowledge and histories which circulate within and across different spaces and generations. Some diasporic feminists may not be as interested in gaining attention to their person or voice as presumed within the workings of representation politics; rather they are keen to accrue the critical foundations necessary for survival and change.

Communing can involve public elements—including by gathering in public spaces or voicing views publicly online. However, communing is not tethered to a focus on publicness to the same extent that the concept of communing is. Although, as with any community-oriented experience, communing is shaped by similarities between people and shared experiences and perspectives, communing should not be assumed to be a practice based on sameness. This clarification is especially important to consider in the context of the Asian and Black British populations we are focusing on in our discussion below, given the differences in their specific histories of racialization and collective action as diasporic feminist groups. We argue that practices of communing, along with others that feminists in Britain are utilizing to forge alliances and solidarities on shared issues like violence, anti-racism, anti-surveillance, and anti-capitalism, provide a way for individuals to engage in digital feminist discourses critically without being fully subsumed within a singular category of identity and an assumption of shared experiences.

Here, it is helpful to reflect on how forms of opacity and excess operate in ways that aid communing and the generative discernment that is part of it. Glissant (1997, p. 190) claims that “[o]pacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.” Our article is intended to offer insight into some of the many textures of digital diasporic feminist experiences, including interconnected forms of opacity and excess within Britain’s South Asian and Black populations. We recognize that the decision to write about opacity is not without its ethical implications, but we approach this article from the feminist viewpoint that forms of digital opacity involve knowledge production and work which can be acknowledged without compromising its boundaries.

Glissant (1997, p. 192) asserts that the basis of “understanding” within Western thought is a requirement of transparency that is demanded of “the Other,” which involves comparisons, judgment as well as reduction of the latter’s experiences. Relatedly, Alabanza (2022, p. 32) has critically considered the oppressive nature of societal expectations of visibility, legibility, and measurability: “Why must empirical proof be a prerequisite for care?” Elements of digital diasporic culture and its utilization in response to the crises analyzed in

our article illustrate efforts to generatively conceal the inner workings, and individual identities, of feminist collectives and organizing spaces, as well as to argue for the retention of individual and communal affective excesses beyond frameworks of collective action. Thus, digital diasporic feminism includes the refusal to reduce the excesses of individual and collective selves to something entirely legible to the capturing lens of Western empiricism. Consequently, although our article includes vignettes that illustrate elements of feminist digital diasporic contrapublics and communing, we do not delve into the intricate details of private dynamics or refer to individual posts. We collaboratively reflect on the theoretical and political consequences of content that is publicly accessible online, mostly already written about by activists and scholars, without rendering the interiority of these digital interactions legible. Although the analytical thrust in this article is informed by our own experiences, we do not claim any ownership of privileged knowledges of the multiple and shifting dynamics in these diasporic spaces.

Our methodology here is inspired by Benjamin (2019, p. 7) and other Black theorists of digital technologies and cultures who insist on refusing to “embrace the status quo” even if sometimes we encounter the consequence of “being illegible” (to some groups and audiences). This approach also follows from Glissant’s (1997, p. 189) work on demanding “the right to opacity.” We thus engage with opacity as a central analytical concept that illuminates aspects of the dynamic between visibility, recognition, and privacy within digital feminist diasporas that women who live in the UK identify with. Our other central concept of “excess” (Kulbaga & Spencer, 2021) has been written about in recent feminist scholarship in relationship to affective excesses of rage and its epistemic use in feminist politics. In our article, however, we understand excess as something that can be made visible, especially when there is a risk that doing so could fuel the repackaging of racialized categories within the neoliberal marketplace (Benjamin, 2019; Táíwò, 2022). Consequently, we develop the conceptualization of “digital diasporic communing” and its relationship to digital feminist contrapublics by exploring how our use of digital culture and artefacts accounts for an openness to the always unsettled nature of who and what constitutes publics, and the willingness to go within and beyond this sphere for diasporic self-making and political solidarity.

Since the vignettes we discuss here are drawn from the specific contexts which have informed both our digital experiences in recent times, in keeping with the nature of diasporic belongings they both challenge the framing of crises as bounded by “nativist” accounts of national borders and belonging (Brah, 1996); the first vignette, for example, explores the diasporic activism around a crisis that has shaped not only Indian politics but also the political constitution of who gets to call themselves “Indian” and which religious, ethnic, diasporic or migrant populations are excluded from such imaginary publics. The vignettes that we focus on can be said to be loosely situated within the following global events. In Indian politics we have seen in recent years attempts to appoint Dalit, Adivasi, or Muslim representatives by the Indian ruling party who capitalize on divisive identity-based political discourse to pit one group against the other to weaken oppositional movements from gathering momentum. The fact that anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in 2019 and the more recent Farmer’s protests (2020) have been able to forge solidarities across professional, class, and caste-based

norms and interests owes a lot to the intimacies forged by grassroots feminist organizing in India as well as transnational digital feminism. In this article we focus on the events and their implications in digital diasporas loosely based in the UK where the inclusion of several right-wing Black and Asian politicians in high political offices in recent years has resulted in related public discourse regarding racism, austerity, anti-immigrant policies of the government, and representation politics. Critiques emerging from diasporic feminists in the UK include those that challenge the dominant values of representative politics in a bounded national public sphere. The key motivation guiding our analysis below is to show how diasporic communing practices are deployed by Black and South Asian feminists in these varied but interconnected contexts to forge intimacies and solidarities whilst retaining the specificities of their lived experiences and positionalities.

Vignettes of (in)visibility in digital diasporas

Vignette 1: on the use of quoted tweets and threads in feminist commoning

On quoted tweets as speech acts to counter trolling

Digital feminists are staging and re-staging attempts to harass them or troll them in a way that gains visibility around such experiences (Gajjala et al., 2022) that women in public spaces often must navigate individually. The strategic construction of such “events” around which feminist collective action might coalesce often relies on the deployment of a mode of crisis when reporting certain incidents, interpellating others affectively to react viscerally and rapidly. One of the related techniques recently seen on Twitter, for example, is the use of quoted tweets, rather than direct messages or replies, by feminists upon receiving abusive messages. The use of quoted tweets not only makes the response more visible, but also visibilizes it particularly for the responder’s followers, allowing feminists to frame the response in a way that mobilizes a critical audience to viscerally react and come together in support and solidarity. In so doing they call into being a discursive space that is framed around specific feminist values. The analysis of this feminist digital practice draws on Sedgwick’s (2003) discussion of performative interpellation through speech acts. What is particularly relevant in Sedgwick’s conceptualization of speech acts in relation to our example is the way in which such performative interpellation works to transform the digital space where one is being minoritized to a safe(r) space by “invok(ing) a consensus in the eyes of others” (p. 71), where one can expect solidarity and support, or at least the resonance of recognition in the form of people bearing witness to what has occurred.

As important to note is also the fact that such interpellation can sometimes visibilize one without their express permission or consent; here we acknowledge that such a commoning strategy might burden certain individuals who are expected to affectively react in a way that supports the formation of a feminist or anti-racist consensus (Kumar, 2021). This could be potentially experienced by some feminist activists as unwanted, burdensome or as a subsumption of their individual voice for the perceived benefit of a collective goal of attaining safety from online harassment or other harms. Therefore, although this digital strategy of quote tweeting could be quite a powerful act of disclosure of the abuse that occurs in the public and private spaces on platforms such as

Twitter, private messages and groups can also emerge on the same platforms where diasporic feminists commune to critique the power relations that impede their ability to foreground their experiences or visibly speak out.

This act of communing with each other is a way for marginalized Black and South Asian feminists to reclaim their voice which exists in excess of the experiences and selves that are privileged within mainstream feminist circles. Moreover, by retaining the right to opacity within these enclosed public conversations these women are also able to retain their criticality and difference in a way which offers them freedom from surveillance and pressures to perform and assimilate. Such online opacity can amount to a form of retreat and reclamation of time, intimacy, and interiority. This enables digital diasporic collective work to occur in ways that are free(er) of the gaze of others, and allows for intra-communal processes of what Clark (2020) refers to as being "called in", i.e., being held accountable by and within the diasporic community.

Organizing around the (feminist) body and sexuality

Indian feminists have organized movements like #WhyLoiter (2015) in an attempt to normalize women's free and safe movement in public spaces, which had a very important digital dimension. But women in India are subject to digital surveillance (Banaji & Bhat, 2021) and those who defiantly express their sexuality sometimes attract hundreds of inappropriate to downright vicious messages on digital platforms. Similarly Black women in the West are subjected to private messages on these platforms that fetishize and objectify them. Of course, these hostile attempts to disenfranchise and humiliate women whose libidinal energies transcend the narrow bounds of the domestic sphere into the political (within reproductive and sexual rights movements) or economic (within sex work) spheres have been prevalent before these spheres moved online. Therefore, within genres of women's culture there has always circulated an awareness of such risks associated with their sexuality as well as shared knowledge about how to be resilient in the management of oneself within these spaces. Hashtags in platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have recently provided an infrastructure that can be utilized for these shared knowledges to circulate digitally in semi-public ways (Jackson et al., 2020). Whereas #metoo brought to Indian urban upper-class feminists a solidarity around visibilizing their experiences of sexual harassment, women outside this privileged subset were unable to participate in such a public way. #LoSha or List of Sexual Harassers in Academia allowed women anonymity while they circulated the names of men who had raped or harassed them, and provided a way for these women to be heard and believed (Sharma, 2021; Subramanian & Sharma, 2022).

Such sharing of knowledge accords women on various digital platforms some ability to apprehend and predict episodic violence and abuse, and thus be somewhat prepared to seek support and face the effects of those harms. Predicting such hostile responses allows some feminists to be able to use technical features like quoted tweets to invoke a consensus around such heinous behavior. Moreover, harassing messages to feminists who post about their bodily and sexual agency if received in thousands end up eventualizing such instances of abuse and visibilizes the conditions that drives thousands of women to be silenced on these platforms. In recent years we have seen digital work to visibilize online abuse and trolling received particularly by Black and South Asian women result

in greater news coverage and inform public discussions. This is thus one of the strategic ways in which "events" that mobilize publics online and offline might be constructed out of an accurate prediction or apprehension of one's own digital presence and others' reaction to it.

These strategies, where feminist digital discourses spill over to away-from-keyboard (AFK) spaces (Russell, 2020), also pose a challenge to the mainstream media industries' control over mediating public opinion and mobilization around certain "events." If there is enough synchronized noise (perhaps mediated by hashtags) around a shared experience of violence, mainstream media conglomerates must respond to it or face a possibility of being rendered irrelevant in public conversations. These examples show how women calling out abuse and harassment in public depends at least partially on the anonymous stories, private conversations and whisper networks that allow women to share experiences and collectivize in ways that do not expose them further to institutional scrutiny and violence.

Playfulness and counter-trolling in mass protests

In addition to practices of refusal, retreat and reclamation that have been discussed in this section so far, communing practices of Muslim, Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, and working-class feminists in India around food, fashion, humor, music, etc., is the excess that spills over at times to influence the way that participants in mass protests and social movements react to the remarks of powerful state actors in the public sphere. This is therefore a counter-political use of these excesses that already exist in intimate and juxtapolitical spaces, as contra-public discourse which may evade visibility. Moreover, even in the vignette we discuss here we only get a glimpse of the excesses which shape and arise out of the subjectivities of marginalized women in India before being subsumed within the narratives of citizenship and national belonging.

During the anti-CAA protests in 2019, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a highly publicized interview with broadcasters that "You can identify protestors and trouble-makers from their clothes" (The Economic Times, 2019) thereby suggesting that signs of visible Muslimness are to be criminalized and subjected to surveillance and control in public spaces. In response Hindu women dressed up in burqas and sported signs with their Hindu last names inviting Rai to tell them apart from Muslim protestors from their clothes. These spillages of digital discursive strategies, collective intuition and intelligence was commonplace in the months that the mass protest against the CAA was ongoing, where feminists used their everyday digital practices to counter abuse and harassment on social media platforms. These tactics playfully countered the pro-Bharatiya Janata Party (Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP being the far-right political party with the majority in Indian parliament since 2014) mainstream media and its prejudiced portrayals of Muslims in India. Protest sites around the country sported signs and slogans responding to right wing internet trolls; for example, when right wing trolls on Twitter and YouTube disparaged the mass protests in Delhi as comprising of paid actors who show up for plates of biriyani, Shaheen Bagh protestors cooked biriyani at the makeshift kitchen at the protest site for visitors. Such playfulness and counter-trolling not only defines the dynamics of the protests, but also directly draws upon the dynamism of digital remix culture and the work and fun involved in forging networks of solidarity online. Of course, within the current

political moment Islamophobia, especially aimed at Muslim women, abounds in progressive spaces, even as these digital practices and instances open up limited space where a critique, however short-lived and precarious can be formulated and shared as a basis of an emergent solidarity. In the next section we discuss how such precarious but vital communing practices mediated mainly through meme cultures have originated some of the solidarities between South Asian and Black British feminists in recent years on a number of political issues and discourses in UK.

Vignette 2: on diasporic feminist meme culture

Meme culture plays a significant role in the everyday lives and political participation of many people globally (Iloh, 2021; Sobande, 2019; Williams, 2020). Although questions of visibility, authorship, and ownership have been examined in relation to meme culture (Shifman, 2013; Wiggins, 2019), seldom has the relationship between opacity, excess, digital diasporic feminism, and memes been conceptualized in detail. Shaped by Iloh's (2021) work, we discuss how memes are sites where digital diasporic feminist communing is made manifest in ways that involve a symbiotic relationship between opacity (of meme authors and social media sharers) and excess (the virality, instability, and resistance to narrative closure within meme culture). Our analysis entails focusing on examples that are particular to the context of Britain, but which include internationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments that are articulated as part of digital discourse about Black and South Asian women politicians.

Not our "feminism"

Among the various narratives apparent in memes that critique former U.K. Home Secretary, and right-wing Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) Priti Patel, are those that allude to her promotion of anti-immigration policies which have, arguably, forced asylum seekers to live under inhumane conditions. Such memes depict Patel fist-pumping in celebration of something, accompanied by acerbic text that suggests that she is celebrating yet more deaths of migrants attempting to reach the UK. These memes which critique Patel are shared across digital platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, as part of discourse that involves diasporic feminists distancing themselves from her views and so-called feminism. (Patel is cited in a 2020 interview with *Glamour* magazine as saying that she considers herself a feminist.) Recently, such meme activity has included the production of content that depicts Patel and features words that are openly critical of her support of the Nationality and Borders Bill, which sought to criminalize asylum seekers who arrive in the UK by "irregular" or "illegal" routes. Indeed, representations of Patel are at the center of digital content that critique the Bill. However, the commentary that such memes contain, and become part of as they move around online, involves wider critique of the capacity for self-proclaimed feminists, including racially minoritized ones, to contribute to the maintenance of xenophobia and white supremacy.

The meme-ification of Patel becomes part of feminist "digital streets" where people remix and share content to establish what their feminist perspective supports and critiques, including by posting such memes in both "closed" and "public" digital spaces which involve denouncing Patel, but without having to render oneself visible as a resistant subject in the process. Some of these Patel memes are indicative of

how "[d]ark humour during pandemics, illnesses, and death has been essential in relieving tension and pain" (Mpofu, 2021, p. 2), by both calling out and laughing at public figures who do harm. Memes that explicitly position Patel as xenophobic delineate some of the boundaries of the digital diasporic feminism of Black and South Asian women that are rooted in international solidarities and anti-imperialism. By denouncing carceral and xenophobic forms of feminism it posits itself in stark contrast to it. These memes that employ the communing practices of diasporic feminists are then utilized to discursively push back against xenophobia, and in turn, contribute to the construction of different digital diasporic terrains (e.g., those that *are* and *are not* committed to internationalism). The ambiguity surrounding authorship of these memes is at times intentional and part of how digital diasporic feminists seek to work in ways that mitigate their potential exposure to harm, also resulting in a somewhat collective critical feminist voice, rather than a brandable individual(istic) one.

Misogynoir and the specificity of diasporic experiences

The meme-ification of Patel includes content which features images of her earnestly addressing an audience out of view, paired with words which critique disparities between societal praise she has received (as a South Asian woman) and the ongoing abuse faced by Diane Abbott (a Black woman) who has been an MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington since 1987. Although many of such memes about distinct differences between their differential treatment in society do not include the word misogynoir (Bailey, 2010; Bailey and Trudy, 2018; Bailey, 2021), the concept is clearly alluded to in these memes with the use of statements such as "if Diane Abbott made that mistake [rather than Priti Patel], it would be front-page news". While these memes do not explicitly refer to Abbott as being Black or Patel as being South Asian, the way that such content zooms in on differences between their public reception can highlight the specific nature of various diasporic women's experiences in the UK. Consequently, such content can also be remixed and reshared in ways that involve critically commenting on the limitations of catch-all racial categories and some notions of racial solidarity, such as the terms "people of color" (POC), "political blackness" (Jameela, 2020), or "Brown" – which often "serves to erase the different lived existences of those grouped under the label" (Gajjala et al., 2022, p. 152).

Memes which critique differences between public responses to Black and upper-caste South Asian women in British politics and public life move beyond reductive "Black or White" representations and rhetoric which imply that all Black and all South Asian people experience identical forms of oppression and societal scrutiny, simply because they are not White. By highlighting differences between the societal treatment of various Black and South Asian women in British politics and public life, such memes and their circulation contribute to the diasporic feminist work of articulating the specificity of intersecting oppressions and the different ways that they do or do not impact certain Black and South Asian women. Furthermore, the creation and amplification of such memes can form one of many ways that South Asian digital diasporic feminists seek to express or gesture to solidarity with Black women, who, as Palmer (2020) has pointed out, continue to be policed in the UK in ways symptomatic of the violences of misogynoir. When the meme-ification of Patel involves clear

critique of the societal treatment of Black women such as, but not limited to Diane Abbott, there is scope for facets of such memes to be perceived as being part of "a longer epistemic tradition of Black anticolonial feminism in Britain" (2020, p. 509).

Beyond more "#GirlBoss" faces in high places

Finally, another key theme we observe across the memeification of Patel in feminist 'digital streets' is the critique of neoliberal notions of representation politics, which involves critique of "#GirlBoss" feminism. Essentially, such narratives are evident across memes and digitally remixed commentary concerning the simplistic perspective that more Black or South Asian individuals in government and commerce equates to dismantling structural oppression such as racism, xenophobia, sexism, and misogyny. These memes include those that depict Patel surrounded by repetition of the words "#GirlBoss" in addition to statements that suggest that her policies exacerbate the socio-economic precarity faced by the most marginalized in British society. The in-group jokes that such memes can be entwined with consists of diasporic feminists conveying and contesting commentaries concerning careerism and social mobility within "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1984).

Content that is critical of neoliberal "#GirlBoss" feminism that has been associated with politicians such as Patel, contend with the class politics of different forms of diasporic feminism. One of many ways that this is done is by skewering the sentiment that the inclusion of more Black or South Asian women in British politics is enough to address forms of oppression and power (Bassel & Emejulu, 2018; Emejulu & Bassel, 2018). The market logics of digital culture are such that many platforms promote pursuit of self-branding and digital entrepreneurialism which aligns with the neoliberal spirit of "#GirlBoss" feminism, and which conflicts with forms of organizing, including the work of digital diasporic feminists who seek to create and sustain a collective voice rather than an individual(istic) one. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that many social media critiques of neoliberal feminisms stem from accounts that draw on online pseudonymity and anonymity to critique such politics without being forced to become visible in ways that could compromise the safety of those voicing such critiques.

Memes have great potential to be part of the patchwork of diasporic feminist commoning and communing which critiques "[p]rocesses of coloniality and imperialistic domination" (Palmer, 2020, p. 508), including by critiquing the intentions and actions of self-proclaimed feminists who are public and political figures. While our interpretation of the meme culture discussed here is informed by a wide range of insightful work, we acknowledge its limits. This acknowledgement is framed however with a need to discard the drive to replace the opacity of meme culture with a reductive transparency that might uphold oppressive power dynamics. Our analysis extends beyond the question of who creates or circulates such content, instead focusing on the messages conveyed and contested by such memes and the work they do in mediating various critical intimacies. We pay close attention to the role of excess in meme culture, which includes the potential for memes to rapidly and excessively move in, between, and beyond, digital publics.

Conclusion: Conceptualizing digital diasporic feminist contrapublics and commons

While the vignettes above connect to experiences of various publics, they also reflect how digital diasporic feminist practices include pushing against demands to be public, and contesting expectations to be part of specific publics. One's visibility or opacity in digital feminist spaces is shaped by structural power dynamics, including those that manifest within the broad landscape of digital feminism and within the diasporic feminist "groups" we have spoken of here. A digital common that is truly inclusive of marginalized agencies exists where we can appear together without necessarily espousing a commonality: this is at the core of our conceptual argument in this article. Feminist protests are creative, affective, and often include bodily acts of producing collective resistance to capitalism and its conditions. Therefore, such protests also involve the capacity to affect and be affected in order to embody the multitude and to transcend the singular. To hold on to this capacity of affectivity and transcendence within the idea of commoning requires us to disrupt the public/private dichotomy discursively, affectively as well as materially and to insist that voices and cadences will not be subsumed or flattened into a homogenous "public" contestation or struggle but instead be engaged in a cacophony of multiple tunes that converge at times, but, are also free to diverge or disappear. These voices do not have a single origin or speaker but are whispers and murmurs of discontent, perhaps simmering anger, gaining volume and specific cadence in the act of collective repetition and re-iteration. In short, our proposition is that to truly embrace the potential of the common we must understand and conceptually delve into the implications of the communing practices that exist at the core of diasporic women's participation within public life.

Expressions of opacity amid digital diasporic feminist settings are not simply a response to an invasive and pervasive structurally white gaze. Rather, the pursuit of opacity may also be spurred on by an intention to simultaneously subvert and stare back at the watchful gaze of other self-proclaimed feminists, whose political positions are at odds with internationalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist endeavors. When accounting for such friction that can underpin dimensions of digital feminism any meaningful conceptualization of digital feminist commons must take seriously distinct differences and divisions that exist between and, even, within, feminisms, without problematizing it. The construction of a counter-public is one that sometimes assumes a certain power, voice, and access to infrastructure. There is also a singularity that is associated with counter-publics which does not fully capture forms of friction and fraught communal relations which are informed by how diasporic feminists often face multiple intersections of power. Thus, embracing the ideal of *contrapublics* instead is to be open to those narratives of everyday resistance, resilience, and survival that exist outside of (as excess) counterpolitical efforts to organize resistance against hegemonizing forces.

Whilst we do not deny the existence of such counter-narrative activity, we grapple with the multiple layers of digital diasporic feminist work, which includes the strategic use of silence (Acheson, 2008), active departures from certain feminist discourses, and a refusal to appease demands for a public digital presence and individualized feminist voice. Our notion of digital diasporic feminist contrapublics acknowledges that, rather than

just participating in publics to convey narratives that counter others, such digital feminist work includes opposing the notion and expectation of publicness itself, which can involve forms of retreating, refusal, and abeyance that are not always visible to others but are nevertheless generative of our self-hood. By nature, the term “digital diasporic feminist contrapublics” must remain fluid and flexible to account for the remixing and shapeshifting that is part of such feminist work, but grappling with the boundaries between commoning and communing in specific contexts can contribute to a nuanced understanding of different dimensions of digital diasporic feminist practices, activism and collective experiences.

By drawing attention away from the most public ways in which feminists engage on social media, this article argues that collective intelligences from semi-public and private conversations play a big part in shaping and informing popular democratic movements. Such digital tactics that are routinely employed within online discourse blur the differentiating line between the spontaneity of protests which at least temporarily widens the gaps in between the enclosures of the political (Basu, 2021) and the organizational and strategic work within semi-public spaces that renders such mobilization possible. Moreover, such tactics also employ a keen awareness of the nuances and politics of visibility and voice within various digital public, semi-public, and private spaces and therefore is an argument against doing away with digital enclosures where marginalized and othered people find relief from constant demands of transparency, legibility, and disclosure. The most important aspect that these tactics highlight is the possibility of carving out a precarious digital common that nevertheless resists the drive to surveil and police minorities using the affordances of digital platforms that are primarily designed to privatize reactions and information. Overall, we argue that the politics of participation within these digital commons cannot be fully understood without adequate conceptual vocabularies describing communing practices undergirded by opacity and excess that diasporic women must deploy to become political whilst maintaining a sense of agency within and beyond these spaces.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in the article and in its online supplementary material.

Funding

The research upon which this article is based has not been funded by any external grants or bodies.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

References

- Acheson, K. (2008). Silence as gesture: Rethinking the nature of communicative silences. *Communication Theory*, 18(4), 535–555. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00333>
- Alabanza, T. (2022). *None of the above: Reflections on life beyond the binary*. Canongate Books.
- Amponsah, E. L. (2021). Black women in and beyond Belgian mainstream media: Between opinion-making, dissidence, and marronage. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(8), 1285–1301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2006262>
- Banaji, S., & Bhat, R. (2021). *Social media and hate* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003083078>
- Banaji, S. interviewed by Nwonka, C. (2022) *Transcript: In Conversation with Shakuntala Banaji*. Sarah Parker Remond Centre, 20 Apr., www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-shakuntala-banaji
- Bailey, M. (2010, March 14). They aren't talking about me... *Crunk Feminist Collective*. <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me>
- Bailey, M. & Trudy (2018). On misogynoir: Citation, erasure, and plagiarism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 762–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395>
- Bailey, M. (2021). *Misogynoir transformed: Black women's digital resistance*. New York University Press.
- Bassel, L., & Emejulu, A. (2018). *Minority women and austerity: Survival and resistance in France and Britain*. Policy Press.
- Basu, M. (2021). Kisi Ke Baap Ka Hindustan Thodi Hai: Citizenship amendment act protests, hashtag publics and the enlargement of the public space. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(1), 169–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1864871>
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim code*. Polity Press.
- Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge: London.
- Clark, M. D. (2020). DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture.” *Communication and the Public*, 5(3–4), 88–92.
- Dockx, N. & Gielen, P. (eds.) (2018). *Commonism: A New Aesthetics of the Real*. Valiz.
- Emejulu, A., & Bassel, L. (2018). Austerity and the politics of becoming. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56(56), 109–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12774>
- Gajjala, R. (2019). *Digital diasporas: Labor, affect and technomediation in South Asia*. Lexington Press.
- Gajjala, R., Ford, S., Kumar, V., & Subramanian, S. (2022). Online (Indian/South Asian) digital protest publics negotiating #POC, #BIPOC, and #antimcaste. In S., Macdonald (eds.) *Networked Feminisms: Activist assemblies and digital practices*. Maryland and London.
- Glissant, E. (1997). *Poetics of relation*. The University of Michigan Press.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
- Iloh, C. (2021). Do It for the culture: The case for memes in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211025896>
- Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Welles, B. F. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. MIT Press.
- Jameela, M. (2020). Violence, above all, is what maintains the breach: Racial categorisation and the flattening of difference. In C. Nwonka and A. Saha (Eds.), *Black film British cinema II*. (pp. 55–68) Goldsmiths Press.
- Kumar, V. (2021). Between rage and silence: being Dalit on Twitter. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(1), 157–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1865605>
- Kulbaga, T. A., & Spencer, L. G. (2021). Outrage epistemology: Affective excess as a way of knowing in feminist scholarship. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 45(2), 273–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2021.1926032>
- Mpofu, S. (2021). *Digital humour in the Covid-19 pandemic: Perspectives from the global south*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Palmer, L. A. (2020). Diane Abbott, misogynoir and the politics of Black British feminism's anticolonial imperatives: “In Britain too, it's as if we don't exist.” *Sociological Review*, 68(3), 508–523. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119892404>
- Peterson-Salahuddin, C. (2022). Posting back: Exploring platformed Black feminist communities on Twitter and Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211069051>
- Roy, S. (2022) *Changing the Subject:: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India*. Duke University Press.

- Russell, G. (2020). *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso.
- Sedgwick, E. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press.
- Sharma, R. (2021). List-making for social justice: responses, complicity & contestations surrounding #LoSHA. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(1), 165–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1864876>
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362–377.
- Sobande, F. (2019). Memes, digital remix culture and (re)mediating British politics and public life. *IPPR Progressive Review*, 26(2), 151–160. <https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.12155>
- Steele, C. K. (2021). *Digital Black Feminism*. New York University Press.
- Subramanian, S., & Sharma, R. (2022). Toward an anti-caste and feminist vision of transformative justice: Analyzing social media activism against sexual violence. *Women's Studies in Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2022.2135948>
- The Economic Times (2019). "Those Indulging in Arson "Can Be Identified by Their Clothes": Narendra Modi on Anti-CAA Protest." Dec 15. online. economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/those-indulging-in-arson-can-be-identified-by-their-clothes-narendra-modi-on-anticaa-protest/articleshow/72687256.cms?from=mdr.
- Táíwò, O. O. (2022). *Elite capture: How the powerful took over identity politics (and everything else)*. Pluto Press.
- Ticktin, M. (2020). Building a feminist commons in the time of COVID-19. *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, <http://signsjournal.org/covid/ticktin/>
- Williams, A. (2020). Black memes matter: #LivingWhileBlack with Becky and Karen. *Social Media + Society*, 2020, 1–14.
- Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality*. Routledge.