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The Digital Nesting of Black Feminism

Francesca Sobande

The end of Twitter has been declared nigh but digital home-making is about much more than a single site.

Situating

Since its contentious acquisition by Elon Musk in 2022, the social media company Twitter (now known as X) has shifted in ways that sparked an exodus. Despite its numbers fluctuating and its brand image being irreparably altered, the social network site remains a digital space where many people dwell. Put briefly, Twitter continues to be a digital home to some, but like many homes, it is not free of conflict, power relations, and harm. Although the digital experiences of Black feminists are far from being confined to the terrains of Twitter, the site has played a distinct role in elements of Black feminist communications, consciousness-raising, creative expression, and ways of coming together – from facilitating calls-to-action to tackle the intersections of racism, sexism, and misogyny (misogynoir) (Bailey 2021; Baily and Trudy 2018) to aiding the international reach of Black media in Britain (Sobande 2020) and both the creation and accessibility of archives.

Since its founding in 2006, Twitter has been transformed into a cultural force, due to how Black people have cultivated a strong sense of digital community, which embraces both the playful and political potentials of social media, in ways wrought by wit, whimsy, and intergenerational wisdom. Whether it is the broad reach of #BlackLivesMatter (Kennedy-Macfoy and Zarkov 2020) or work which illuminates ‘the possibility of a Black Twitterverse as a way to push forward research surrounding Blackness online and digital Blackness’ (Kihoro Mackay 2021), there are myriad examples of the powerful ways that Black people have engaged and continue to engage on Twitter. Often synonymous with *Black Twitter*, which ‘is resonant of key

themes of community, social movements and private/public conversation' (Clark 2014), the social networking site has been central to various forms of Black community organising and activism in recent decades.

Black American people, culture, and histories are undoubtedly at the helms of 'the multi-level community and network building process commonly referred to as "Black Twitter"' (Clark 2014). However, its expansive reach surpasses the geographic boundaries of the US, meaning that those who participate in diasporic discussions that stem from Black Twitter include Black people in different countries (Brock 2020; Walcott 2022). Hence, the emergence of references to specific iterations of Black Twitter, such as 'Black British Twitter' (Knight 2021), highlighting how digital spaces are shaped by interconnected Black geographies and are one of many 'sites of diasporic entanglement' (Lewis 2011a: 6). As well as being contoured by different yet interconnected diasporic experiences, digital spaces can be sculpted by feminist politics and forms of collective organising.

The rich history of Black feminist collectives includes creative and dynamic uses of digital media and content-sharing sites. Such collective approaches to participating in digital spaces are wide-ranging and include the strategic navigation of online publicness and privateness, to shield Black feminists from being individual targets of online abuse. Indeed, 'digital diasporic feminist practices include pushing against demands to be public and contesting expectations to be part of specific publics' (Sobande and Basu 2023: 96). For example, when Black feminists engage Twitter and other digital spaces in anonymous, pseudonymous, and collective ways that cannot be attributed to a single individual or geographic area. For those reasons and more, it is essential to acknowledge that the landscape of digital Black feminism in Europe, and beyond, consists of much more than what may be deemed publicly visible and clearly identifiable.

While this extended editorial does not focus on geographically distinct iterations of Black Twitter or anonymous/pseudonymous diasporic social media approaches, it is nonetheless influenced by my specific sense of situatedness: living in Wales, having spent most of my life in Scotland, and only fluent in the English language. I share these words about the place from which I write, in alignment with the *European Journal of Women's Studies*' 'loyalty to the by now well-established feminist principle regarding the importance of declaring one's locatedness

(as multiple as this might and must be in a field called ‘European’) so as to refuse the idea and claim that one speaks from no-where’ (Lewis 2011a: 3). Accounting for the sprawling nature of Black geographies and the significance of Twitter/X in the digital lives of Black people, I conceptualise the *digital nesting* of Black feminism. In doing so, this editorial contributes to ongoing ‘dialogue about Black feminist digital culture, communications, aesthetics, joy...’ (Bruce et al. 2022), by evoking the potential role of nesting in this dialogue.

In the US, the research of Peterson-Salahuddin (2022: 11) has ‘looked to platformed Black feminist communities on social media as a contemporary site of Black feminist knowledge production’ and ‘found that these social media communities allow Black women and femmes to form supportive care networks and use hashtag conversations to “talk back” to dominant, hegemonic discourses about Black womanhood’. Relatedly, in the context of Europe, Amponsah’s (2021: 1295) work outlines the following:

Digital communication and social media have become essential tools for the development of innovative and self-reliant projects among Black women in Belgium. The Internet, and social media in particular, are sites where Black women in Belgium create, share, archive, mobilize, organize, form communities, and obtain cultural knowledge. It is considered a space where one has control over their own narrative, and where there is relatively more space for a diversity in and of blackness.

My reflections here, and elsewhere, are informed by such vital works on the digital experiences of Black feminists, as well as drawing on the work of Bailey (2021) *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance*, hooks (1995) ‘Architecture as Cultural Practice’, Glitch, UK (2023) ‘The Digital Misogynoir Report: Ending the dehumanising of Black women on social media’, Johnson (2017) ‘Getting comfortable to feel at home: clothing practices of Black Muslim women in Britain’, Knight-Steele (2021) *Digital Black Feminism*, and Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) ‘Platformed Black Feminist Communities’. Given the brevity of this extended editorial, it is not possible to discuss the history of digital forms and expressions of Black feminism in detail. Still, it is important to acknowledge that it is a rich history that was seeded long before the

development of social media as we know it (Knight-Steele 2021), and is a history buttressed by collective efforts, at local, national, and transnational levels (Emejulu and Sobande 2018), to address structural oppression and systemic power regimes such as imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1994).

The digital experiences of Black feminists certainly do not start and end with Twitter. For decades, Black feminists have incorporated digital tools and technology into ways of communicating and working together – be it through blogging, contributing to online forums and discussion boards, sharing audio and video files, or crafting and circulating email campaigns. While the turbulence introduced by Musk’s 2022 acquisition of Twitter has catalysed public discussions and debates about the problems and possibilities of social media and the internet, the digital home-making practices of Black feminists have never been defined by a particular platform or digital trend of the time. Instead, the digital home-making approaches of Black feminists have always involved both (re)imagining and (re)creating spaces in ways that defy the market logic, which underpins many online platforms, while also refusing the ruse that liberationist work requires digital visibility. Accordingly, my approach is predominantly conceptual and departs from detailing the different functionalities of social media sites. So, I turn my focus to considerations and conceptualisations of the *digital nesting* of Black feminism.

Nesting

Home-making practices are not just material practices. Here, it is crucial to sit with the insights of Johnson (2017: 276) on ‘how comfort and discomfort is negotiated through constructions of home. Comfort/discomfort speaks to affective encounters across different spaces that cannot be neatly slotted into either side of public/private binary’. As the work of Johnson (2017) illuminates, meaningful understandings of constructions of home must move beyond a binary framing that focuses more so on oppositional perceptions of spatial boundaries (e.g., private/public) than the reality of different experiences within and across shifting spaces. Therefore, eschewing a societal preoccupation with what constitutes publicness or (in)visibility, my reflection on the *digital nesting* of Black feminism considers some of the relational and transient ways that forms of collectiveness and communing are cultivated in and across homes.

Home-making practices bring together experiences of imaginativeness, interiority, external environments, and tangible entities. But access to the time, space, safety, security, and material resources that can contribute to healing and heartening home-making practices is undeniably impacted by structural oppression and power regimes. The work of hooks' (1995: 145) 'Black vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice' includes a poignant vignette of the relationship between dreaming, desires, housing, and the space to imagine:

Dreaming the house of my dreams in a high school art class, I did not think that any decisions I made were political. Indeed, every thought I had about the aesthetics of this project was rooted in imaginative fantasy. Beginning with the idea of a world of unlimited freedom where space, and in particular living space, could be designed solely in relation to 'desire,' I greatly wanted most to move away from concrete 'political' realities, such as class, and just dream. When we were given the assignment—to build a dream house—our art teacher encouraged us to forget about dwellings as we knew them and to think imaginatively about space. About the link between what we desire, dream about, and what is practical. We were to design, as I understood it, a dwelling of dreams.

Guided by the work of both hooks (1995) and Johnson (2017) on constructions of home, while focusing on forms of dwelling and dreaming in digital spaces, I am led to reflect on ways of nesting that relate to digital Black feminist experiences and home-making across different platforms and sites. My invocation of notions of nesting is intended to articulate the care-full creation of often ephemeral spaces into which Black feminist individuals, ideas, interactions, and intentions settle for some time, without ever being solely rooted there. Much like the ingenious ways that birds make and remake nests from the assortment of materials available to them in their surrounding environments, Black feminist digital nesting practices can involve repurposing digital tools and embracing the inevitably temporary nature of what become digital homes – or, perhaps more aptly put, digital *nests*, providing forms of shelter, comfort, and intimacy, that are experienced from and across different physical and domestic spaces.

As this reflection is predominantly conceptual in nature, the idea of a *digital nest* (and *digital nesting* practices) may seem quite abstract. Yet, as something that is made up of much more than the sum of any digital or tangible parts, such abstraction reflects the fact that digital nests cannot simply be seen or firmly grasped. While remnants of them may linger – in the form of both active and inactive Black feminist websites, hashtags, social media pages, and group discussion spaces – digital nests are never simply a single digital location, person, or collective, and are continually made and (re)made in layered ways that are 'always already' (Lewis 2017) online and offline. As such, the *digital nesting* of Black

feminism is reflective of ‘non-linear temporalities’ (Lewis 2011b: 212) and affirms asynchronous and multi-modal forms of communicating (audio notes, blogging, digital collaging), which can be kaleidoscopic and inclusive of differences between how people experience time, and ways of interacting. All that, is to say, *digital nests* and *digital nesting* are terms that may go some way towards expressing elements of the digital home-making practices of Black feminists, which involve navigating various geographies, platforms, and devices, across different places, time zones, and ways of processing and parsing information.

Flying

In recent months, the blue bird silhouette logo that was once the hallmark of Twitter was replaced with a comparatively unimaginative black ‘X’ visual. Currently, the bird logo continues to make sporadic reappearances, but the sense of movement and flight that it once symbolised has been replaced by a static ‘X’. Regardless, the site’s association with birds – tweeting and forms of flight – continues to be articulated within speculative discussions about the future of Twitter and the future of social media more broadly. Such discussions have posed and pondered questions including ‘where will people go *now*?’, in ways that tend to flatten differences between how people have experienced the site and how people are experiencing the *now* that is spoken of. Put differently, much discourse on fleeing from Twitter since its acquisition by Musk frames the site as one that was once hospitable and homely, and frames *now* as a time of sudden exposure to harms, harassment, and hostilities. Contrastingly, Black feminist understandings and experiences of Twitter have always involved facing the fact that it is simultaneously a site of problems and possibilities – both a setting where abuse and harassment is rife, and where forms of Black feminist media and activity have flourished.

While the words *flying* and *fleeing* are sometimes used interchangeably in society, unlike the sense of escaping danger and forced retreat that is associated with fleeing, forms of flight can be freeing expressions of agency and modes of movement that do not simply mark a departure. To fly is not just to leave. At the time of writing, much discourse on flight and fleeing from Twitter is continuing to unfold, but in ways that typically portray digital experiences as fixed and either involving someone resolutely staying put and active on the site, or completely withdrawing and disengaging from the platform (e.g., by permanently deactivating their account). The space in-between such binary framings of staying and fleeing is perhaps the space

of forms of nesting. It is a space where the frequency and purpose of engaging a digital platform is always in a state of flux (e.g., posts edited and deleted, accounts temporarily deactivated or decidedly less tended to, profiles changed from ‘private’ to ‘public’ and then back again) and forms of comfort are sought through adapting approaches to participating (less) in different ways.

As Ibrahim (2022) notes in an article titled ‘Can Black Twitter ever really die?’: ‘Trends change, mediums evolve, and platforms may shift, but Black communities worldwide have found ways to create a digital ecosystem that reflects their lived interactions’. Twitter has always been but one part of the wider digital ecosystem that Black feminists participate in, and, in various ways has always been both a source of comfort and discomfort. Just as birds take flight from nests, even if it is to return to them or (re)make them anew elsewhere, the digital nesting practices of Black feminists can be a prelude to, or at least part of, forms of flying. That is, *digital nesting* is as much about moving between, across, and away from digital spaces as it is about creating and cultivating them. It is mobile, not static. It is fluid, not fixed. The longevity of Twitter may be up for debate, but that of Black feminism is not. Whether it is by making use of digital technology to come together across time and space, or through in-person actions that are inflected by digital discourse and dwellings, Black feminism will continue to take flight and soar.

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