

Introduction

For the Black Girls Who Don't Code

Books about race are often about Black men, books about technology are often about white men, and books about feminism are often about white women. This book is about Black women. Studying Black women is often considered too “niche.” In the early years of my career, various senior scholars advised me to study Black folks’ discourse online by comparing it to whiteness. In graduate school, a faculty member suggested that my dissertation research on the Black blogosphere would be much more interesting if I compared this community of writers to recent European immigrants online. When you decide to center Black folks, Black culture, and Black discourse, this provokes questions of validity and objectivity. However, those in the dominant group who study themselves (1) never have to name their work as the study of white folks and (2) are lauded for their work’s breadth and broad applicability. As was the case in graduate school—when I politely declined that faculty member’s placement on my committee—I have little interest in writing a comparative analysis between Black women’s use of technology and Black men’s or white women’s. Instead, in this book, I place Black women at the center of conceptualizing technology and digital culture. I argue that Black women’s historical and persistent relationship with technology provides the most generative means of studying the possibilities and constraints of our ever-changing digital world.

Founded in 2011 by Kimberly Bryant, Black Girls CODE is a non-profit organization that provides technology education to African American girls.¹ The group’s motto is “Imagine. Build. Create.” Their website continues, “Imagine a world where everyone is given the tools to succeed, and then help us build ways for everyone to access information and create a new age of women of color in technology” (www

.blackgirlscode.com/what-we-do.html). Research demonstrates that programs like Black Girls CODE can indeed result in increased “leadership, confidence, and self-efficacy” (Rockman, 2017, p. 18). While organizations like Black Girls CODE provide critical interventions for Black girls in STEM, I argue that Black girls and women have long possessed the digital expertise necessary for the future. Learning to code is neither a panacea nor the missing tool to usurping the racism that has precluded Black women’s technological skills from being recognized by the masses. Reminding us of the profoundly troubling racism and sexism experienced by Black women in Silicon Valley, California, Alondra Nelson asks, “Black girls code, and then what? Do we want to send these young women into Silicon Valley to toxic work environments?” (Nelson, 2020). Further, an overemphasis on coding and programming skills accepts mythology about Blackness, womanhood, and technology that does not serve Black women and girls.

The goals of *Digital Black Feminism* are twofold. The first is that we begin to rightly position Black women online as central to the future of communication technology. By tracing the historical relationship between Black women and technology, I reposition Black women online as purveyors of digital skill and expertise, not deficient or in need of new skills to survive a changing digital landscape. Black women without extensive programming experience have maximized platform affordances, built transmedia platforms, led platform migrations, pushed platform policy changes regarding hate speech and content moderation, and introduced us to new pay structures as precursors to influencer culture. Black feminist writer Luvvie Ajayi started her writing career with a blogging platform, *Awesomely Luvvie*. She has since developed LuvvNation, a stand-alone social media network, and Awesomely Techie, a digital consulting and web strategy firm. Jamilah Lemieux, an early adopter of online media, now consults for political campaigns. Kimberly Nicole Foster has shown bloggers how to shift content from the blogosphere to YouTube seamlessly. Marah Lidey is one of the cofounders of Shine, a mental health app that speaks specifically to the experiences of women of color. As she writes, “Imagine all the ideas we’re missing out on because people from more marginalized experiences—that are uniquely positioned to solve problems because of that experience—struggle to see themselves in existing founders” (Shine, 2020). However, this not a

problem for Black women and other marginalized communities to solve. Black women make structural alterations to digital spheres of communication through developing stand-alone apps and platforms. They are early adopters and transformers of existing platforms, and their online content already serves as models for other creatives. *Digital Black Feminism* provides the historical context needed to consider the digital turn and charts Black women's long-standing relationship to communication technology as a mechanism to better understand the future of our digital world.

The second goal of *Digital Black Feminism* is to document a shift in Black feminist principles and praxes and ensure we consider digital Black feminist thinkers' online writing as central to the ongoing work of liberation. As Feminista Jones writes, "Who could have predicted that people who never set foot on a college campus, much less in a specialized journalism school, would have international audiences reading their cultural and sociopolitical analyses? Or have their work be part of a rigorous academic curriculum at universities they could never afford to attend?" (Jones, 2019a, p. 6). Black feminist thinkers have always existed outside of the academy. However, this generation's use of digital tools and social media platforms has led some to disregard their work as part of a neoliberal superstructure, devaluing what they create online. As Brittney Cooper explains, "There is still a dearth of real knowledge about Black women public intellectuals" (B. C. Cooper, 2017, p. 145). Lifestyle blogging, natural hair tutorials, online snark, and perfectly placed memes do not mark digital Black feminists as superficial or untethered to serious scholarship. None of these practices exclude them from liberation work. They locate their spaces of retreat alongside their activist work, often earning their living by using tools of a digital capitalistic superstructure. As Cooper concludes, "Black women are serious thinkers, and it is our scholarly duty to take them seriously" (B. C. Cooper, 2017, p. 152). Black girls who may not code still possess a knowledge of and ability to navigate digital platforms. Their relationship with digital tools and culture is changing how we view technology today. In the chapters that follow, I analyze the content of digital Black feminist thought online and the mechanisms of production and dissemination, dealing with the messy complexities of a new form of Black feminism imbued with the ethos of digital praxis.

Are #BlackGirlsMagic?

Now, perhaps more than ever, it is imperative that we attune our gaze to digital Black feminism. As the public is becoming more aware of algorithmic bias, influencer culture, the gig economy, fake news online, and social media harassment, researchers continue to point to a disproportionate impact on Black women. Safiya Noble (2018) began her inquiry into algorithmic bias with a simple question: What happens when you google search “Black girls”? In *Algorithms of Oppression*, she details how the creation and utilization of algorithms in nearly every aspect of our digital lives perpetuate anti-Black racism and misogynoir.² Writing for *Forbes*, Janet Burns (2017) penned, “Black Women Are Besieged on Social Media, and White Apathy Damns Us All.” In her article, she describes and documents the extensive and pervasive nature of online harassment of Black women on Twitter and other social media platforms following the very public online harassment of comedienne Leslie Jones. In 2019, the *BBC*, *Washington Post*, *GQ*, and other news outlets reported that Russian internet trolls targeted African Americans to reduce voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election. Even as Black women influencers pushed platforms and challenged norms in the industry, *Adweek* admitted in 2020, “We’re Sorry for Not Listening to Black Influencers before: We Expect to Be Called Out” (Pomponi, 2020). As the headlines bear out, Black women are already at the center of digital studies whether our research has followed suit.

Black women operate online and in digital spaces in ways that far surpass the possibilities imagined for them. Simultaneously, they are met online with many of the most insidious forms of sexism and racism. Black feminism is the means to unseat the oppressive forces in society that harm everyone, not only Black women. As the Combahee River Collective explained, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p. 7). As bell hooks (2000a) states directly, Black feminism is for everyone. In *Digital Black Feminism*, I explore the principles, praxes, and products of digital Black feminism. In the chapters that follow, I provide an analysis of both the content and the form of Black feminist work. The use of online technology by Black feminist thinkers has

changed the outcome and possibilities of Black feminist thought in the digital age, and Black feminist thought has simultaneously changed the technologies themselves. Black women's technological capability and their utility of online platforms crafting intentional discourses of resistance are predicated upon a historically unique position of having to exist in multiple worlds, manipulate various technologies, and maximize their resources. Indeed, I am making the case that we should listen to Black women.

The phrases *listen to Black women* and *ask Black women* became popularized after the election of the forty-fifth president.³ Exposed to the same rhetoric and often living in similar economic conditions, Black women made a different choice for president than their white counterparts. Black women voted for Donald Trump in lower numbers than any other racial/gender population (Pew Research Center, 2018). The phrase *listen to Black women* has been adopted by activists, allies, and journalists who point to Black women's voting record in presidential and local elections. Twitter users created memes to remind the public that *Black women keep trying to save America from itself*. However, popularized phrases and hashtags lauding Black women for their decisions do not do the work of explaining the centuries of wisdom, labor, and ingenuity that have put Black women in a position to do the long-suffering and thankless task of attempting to save America from itself. As Treva Lindsey writes, "Black women and femmes keep developing radical ideas about social transformation, wrestling with the ways anti-Blackness manifests in areas such as the criminal justice system, health care, news media and popular culture, and tirelessly amplifying the experiences of Black women, girls and femmes. But even as our ideas are coopted, our victimization remains on the margins" (Lindsey, 2020, para. 3). As is the case with many hashtaggable lines, phrases like *listen to Black women* often do little more than virtue signal without a requirement of follow-through in terms of Black feminist praxes or principles.

Black women consistently do the *radical* work of calling for the U.S. to make right its promise of democracy. As political strategist Zerlina Maxwell explains in her book *The End of White Politics*, it is time for the left to understand that the future of politics is women of color. Nevertheless, in the months and years that followed the 2016 election, liberal and progressive politicians and writers produced think pieces lamenting the

party's inability to reach white working-class men. Rather than figuring out how to maintain, grow, and energize the core and most reliable part of the democratic base, they ignored Black women. In 2016, Black women were exposed to trolls, bots, and fake news stories on social media. Indeed, they were often the target of such campaigns of disinformation. So what if liberal politicians and progressive writers asked Black women how we made political calculations amid a barrage of fake news and disinformation? What if we inquired about Black women's relationship with social media and technology, a relationship that did not shield us from exposure but provided a skill set to navigate trolling and hate speech online? What if we tried to learn how the history of Black women's use of technology and long-developed skills in intra- and intercultural communication better equipped us to be purveyors of social media, making better decisions for ourselves and society? Are Black women *really* just magic?

The phrase *Black Girl Magic* was popularized by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 when she first tweeted the hashtag #BlackGirlsAreMagic to celebrate the everyday ways that Black women thrive despite the boundaries erected to keep us from doing such. While users tweet the phrase to celebrate Oscar wins and Super Bowl halftime concerts, Black Girl Magic is indicative of the ordinary everyday "magic" of existing as a Black woman. As Thompson explained, "As a kid, I was really introverted, and I loved fairytales. I had a big imagination and all these magical ideas that weren't rooted in reality, and when I saw the women in my family running businesses, raising families, making a way out of no way, to me as a little girl, it just seemed like magic. As a child, I literally thought that Black women were magic" (Flake, 2017). Black women were doing things that white Western culture was deeply committed to teaching us that we were incapable of doing—mothering, being students, cooking healthy meals, working out, organizing for justice, being beautiful. The phrase created visibility for writers, artists, and businesswomen, but it was also reserved for semiprivate moments of celebration online. Students would post pictures of themselves on graduation day and hashtag Black Girl Magic. Sister-friends would snap a moment over brunch, adding to the Instagram pages with the captions #BlackGirlMagic.

So Black Girl Magic is not descriptive of an inexplicable supernatural power possessed by Black women. As Feminista Jones writes, "We do not

have to be supernatural or superhuman to be magic—we just need to *be*” (Jones, 2019c; italics added). Black Girl Magic is the shorthand for the centuries of experience Black women have in doing everything for everyone while maintaining dignity and not sweating out their edges. This book seeks to unpack the magic of Black women who, particularly in their use of online technology, create possibilities for themselves. By examining the discourse of Black feminism as it is understood and discussed online, I demonstrate that the principles, praxes, and products of digital Black feminism are revolutionary. In so doing, I also make connections between this new form of Black feminism and the driving force behind its proliferation, the ability to be profitable. Digital technology has brought Black feminist thought to the masses, creating opportunities for freedom building while simultaneously erecting significant boundaries.

Black Women Are Online

For years in internet studies and new media research, persons of color, and specifically Black American users, were only discussed based on a perceived lack of access to digital resources. Digital divide research predominated scholarly inquiry into the habits and uses of technology by Black persons in the U.S. By the late 2000s, some researchers argued that Black users were operating in largely unknown spaces online, and quantitative analysis of user trends missed their activity (Brock, 2009; Everett, 2009). In the early 2010s, Pew research confirmed that Black and African American use of social media was higher than whites (A. Smith, 2010). Black users often engaged with social media using smartphones, which partly explained why digital divide research focused on broadband and computer access missed their presence. In the years that followed, scholars of Black rhetoric, discourse, and internet studies have pushed for research to explore the construction of Black social movements (Freelon et al., 2018), patterns of oral culture in its migration to online space (Florini, 2013), and Black publics and counterpublics online (Steele, 2018). In the last several years, the work of Safiya Noble (2018), Charlton McIlwain (2019), Ruha Benjamin (2019), Sarah Florini (2019), and André Brock (2020) has effectively created a new genre of books that focus directly on race, Blackness, and technology. However,

even with this nuanced and impactful work, internet research still often assumes a homogeneous Black online population or uses Black men as a proxy for Blackness writ large.

Kishonna Gray (2015), Sarah Jackson et al. (2020), Sherri Williams (2015), and Moya Bailey (2021), among others, have produced significant research regarding Black women's use of digital technology and Black cyberfeminism. Safiya Noble and Brendesha Tynes's (2016) *Intersectional Internet* provides an edited volume of work on the topic. Tracy Curtis's (2015) *New Media in Black Women's Autobiography* considers autobiographical narratives of Black women as means to examine the importance of the Black female body, drawing comparisons between the literary text and the use of selfies and Instagram. Writing for the public, Feminista Jones (2019a) uses her years of experience organizing online to trace critical trajectories in Black digital culture in the book *Reclaiming our Space*. Likewise, Mikki Kendall's (2020) *Hood Feminism* traces the development of Black feminist praxis for a lay audience. Even as these scholars and writers push for more focus on Black women, there is a challenge in capturing the complexity of digital Black feminists' relationship to technology.

Digital Black feminists are a diverse group of women, men, and non-binary folks. There is no monthly meeting or club within which parties agree about tactics, strategies, and goals. They support different candidates in primaries, endorse differing policy recommendations for ending police brutality, and have sharply differing views on whether Issa and Lawrence should get back together.⁴ Instead of pretending this book is a complete rendering of all Black feminist activity online, I position *Digital Black Feminism* as a report of the cultural shift happening in Black feminist discourse and society's relationship with technology. Further, as the following chapters bare out, Black feminist thought work has forever altered digital communication technologies.

From Hip-Hop Feminism to Digital Black Feminism

As I was beginning to write this book, an encounter with a senior Black feminist scholar reminded me of the importance of naming and documenting generational and cultural shifts in Black feminist thought and praxis. During the U.S. Senate confirmation hearings for Justice Brett

Kavanaugh in 2018, I told her that I was not following the hearings online that day. Like many folks in my generation, I am always plugged in, checking updates on multiple apps and watching livestreams as I walk between buildings on campus. I explained that as a politics and news junkie, it was challenging to unplug from my phone and updates on Twitter. Still, for many reasons, some so personal I did not share, I was proud of the decision. I provided myself care instead of shouldering through the unnecessary pain of hearing the public dismissal of credible claims of sexual assault against a man who was almost certain to gain a lifetime appointment to the highest court in the land. As I discuss in chapter 3, digital Black feminist principles prioritize self-care for Black women who frequently encounter violence online. Inundated with harmful images, harassment, and violent rhetoric on social media, many digital Black feminists have determined that breaks from the news are a necessary practice of self-care. While I was steadfast in my newly found strength to protect my mental health, my colleague shamed my “lack of political engagement” and “inability to understand the significance of the moment” because of my age. She deemed this moment of self-care and extension of Black feminist praxis as childish and selfish. This little anecdote reminds me of how profound the gap can be between some Black feminist foremothers and newer iterations of Black feminism. Though we may have the same or similar goals, digital technology and Black feminism’s convergence yields different principles and praxes. Digital Black feminists must contend with pushback to their differing practices from those hostile to Black feminism and those with whom they share goals. I consider this disconnect replicative of what many hip-hop feminists encountered as they argued for a more nuanced and complex Black feminism for the hip-hop generation in the 1990s.

A term coined by Joan Morgan (2000), hip-hop feminism has been theorized primarily outside of the academy.⁵ Scholars like Brittney Cooper, Treva Lindsey, and Aisha Durham are also ensuring this critical development in Black feminist discourse is not overlooked in scholarly research. Durham defines *hip-hop feminism* as “a socio-cultural, intellectual, and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post-civil rights generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation” (Durham, 2007,

p. 306). Lindsey describes hip-hop feminist theory as a “generationally specific and historically contingent iteration of intersectionality and of critical race feminist theory” (Lindsey, 2014, p. 54), pointing to Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and bell hooks as the foremothers who made hip-hop feminism possible. Like hip-hop feminism, digital Black feminism is also a generationally specific and historically contingent iteration of Black feminist thought. The development of this new Black feminist ethos and discursive practice happens in conjunction with the transformation of digital technology. Morgan explains that hip-hop feminism lies in the uncomfortable “shades of gray” that require Black feminists to reconcile their principles and praxes. Explaining the intercession of hip-hop feminism, Morgan says, “We need a feminism that possesses the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip-hop. The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary black female identity lie . . . at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where ‘truth’ is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray” (D. A. Jackson, 2018). Morgan’s “shades of gray” construct is one of the primary interventions of hip-hop feminism. Digital Black feminists also wrestle with shades of gray. Like hip-hop feminists before them, digital Black feminists work to reconcile economic and sexual freedom for themselves with community interests that may conflict with their individual needs. However, instead of *hip-hop* as a driving force, the “gray” for digital Black feminist praxis is deconstructing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy within digital culture.

Writing about “Us”

This text focuses on Black feminism and Black women in a U.S. context. Globally, marginalized communities share many experiences with oppression and colonization and use communication technologies as resistance. However, the social history of Black womanhood is unique in American society. Black American women have a technological capability built on the legacy of enslavement, rebellion, and resilience in the U.S. context. It was from this legacy that Black American women learned the skills to craft intentional discourses of resistance online. Carole Boyce Davies (2002) rightly advises that centering the history of

American Black women's writing falls short of understanding the diasporic nature of Blackness. While I hope that this work has extensions beyond the U.S., I do not aim to capture that broad diasporic tradition of Black women writers and thinkers across the globe in this text. Nor could I explore all the differentiated relationships with technology Black women have based on geographically and culturally specific histories. Instead, I focus on the unique history of Black women living in the U.S. from the antebellum period to the present, arguing that this legacy is worthy of sustained attention over multiple books and across multiple authors. My own ancestry also influences my intentional focus on the legacy of enslavement and resistance in the U.S. context. I can trace my mother's lineage back to Germany and Denmark to the 1600s, while my father's side stops abruptly on a plantation in Virginia in 1860 with Lucinda "Granny Cindy" Jennings. My dad was born less than a hundred years later. His great-grandmother was enslaved in this country, and her great-great-granddaughter is privileged to write about the journey.

I borrow my approach to writing about Black women in part from Patricia Hill Collins and Joan Morgan. Collins, in her pivotal volume *Black Feminist Thought* (2009), makes the case that using the pronouns "we," "us," and "our" rather than "they" and "them" when referencing Black women is a political decision. Collins dismisses false flags of objectivity or rigor. Instead, she argues that separating herself from the Black women she writes about suggests an ambivalence about a subject matter to which she is deeply personally connected. I share this view. I am a Black woman and Black feminist thinker who is writing about digital Black feminism. My work is grounded in rigorous social scientific and humanistic research and my deep and abiding love of Black folks. My decision not to separate myself from those I write about acknowledges the shared knowledge construction at the core of Black feminist epistemology. As Morgan demonstrated in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (2000), the academy benefits from remaining connected to the women who do the work of refashioning Black feminism every day through their lived experiences. The Black feminist thinkers I write about create knowledge alongside me. I remain grateful for the opportunity to be counted as a part of this community.

I resist the impulse to name individual writers or thinkers as digital Black feminists. Many individuals whose writing I track in this book

have never labeled themselves as such. Some do not call themselves Black feminists, instead preferring the label of womanist or no label at all. It is not my intention in this text to therefore ascribe this label to their person. Instead, I am interested in communication patterns, practices, and experiences that shape decisions about online writing, social activism, blogging, signifying, and advocating for Black feminist ideals and freedoms in digital work and play. The women, men, and nonbinary folks who do this work are, I argue, *doing* digital Black feminism. This text provides a moment to understand the patterns in their discourse, their challenges to the status quo, and the obstacles they face as made explicit in the tweets, posts, videos, and memes they leave behind. Many of our grandmothers would never have considered themselves Black feminists, yet this does not deny their labor and words as a foundational part of Black feminist praxis. Likewise, I draw our attention to the digital artifacts to which we have so generously been granted access. Rather than determining who can lay claim to this new moniker, I am interested in what digital Black feminism might *do*.

This book focuses exclusively on the discourse created online and offline and how technology mitigates that discourse. I study what Black feminist thinkers leave behind rather than directly asking them about their relationships with technology. While interviews are an essential tool in a researcher's tool kit, it is difficult to interrogate ourselves about how our use of digital technology influences what we say and do in online spaces. This book traces the digital turn in Black feminist thought and therefore requires a critical analysis of discourse alongside a parallel study of technology's form and function.⁶ I apply the same approach to both digital Black feminists and Black feminist thinkers of the twentieth century, using their artifacts (tweets, diary entries, Instagram posts, and letters) as means to trace the long historical relationship with technology. I spent six years intentionally collecting blog posts, tweets, Instagram stories, and Facebook posts for this book, following hundreds of Black feminist public scholars on multiple platforms, and many more years participating as a member of their discursive communities. While I have built relationships with some, I know many more by collecting their online work. I do not extract tweets or posts without context, "scrape" platforms, or analyze massive data sets because doing so would undermine my ability to conduct deep readings of these texts. Instead, I position myself both as a researcher

in the field and as a group member, yielding access to both the digital artifacts and the context required to interpret them.

Reading work as it is published and engaging with quickly vanishing Instagram stories as I would a conversation observed in the field require a long-term commitment to a group that does not end when this book is published. Writing about communities that experience marginalization and oppression requires long-term commitment. Though I am part of the group I study, I am not immune from considering the ethics of writing about Black women. As an academic researcher, my position can distance me from those I cite in the book. In specific spaces and with a specific audience, my position and credentials imbue my work with the credibility that the digital Black feminist writers I cite in this book must fight to attain. Therefore, it is imperative that I do not cause further harm or violence to Black women from this position of relative privilege and instead situate their public writing and scholarship alongside my own. Using the tools we study and being a part of the communities we investigate are not hindrances or biases to overcome. Recognizing my position and operating transparently in that space, I use my relationship to Black feminism and Black feminist praxis and my participation in Black feminist online discursive communities as support rather than obstacles in defining digital Black feminism.

Why Digital Black Feminism?

In considering both the title of this book and a way to describe the kind of feminist work I am most interested in, I had to wade through a variety of naming conventions. In the past, I have used the terms *womanism* and *Black feminism* interchangeably, seeing them as merely a semantic difference with little consequence. In doing so, I had also adopted the idea that womanism and Black feminism were responsive to notable absences in mainstream white feminism. However, this position conflates the terms and ignores the political value of reclaiming the term *feminism* for Black women. As I will unpack further in the chapter that follows, Black feminism is not a subcategory of mainstream (white) feminism. Instead, Black feminism is a political choice that bolsters the claim that feminism practiced without adherence to racial politics is not feminism at all.

In the 1970s, Alice Walker used the term *womanism* to describe how Black women saw themselves in contrast to white women's activism. The origin of the word comes from a reference to the behavior of young girls as "womanish." Collins explains, "Womanish girls acted in outrageous, courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions long limiting white women" (Collins, 2009, p. 10). Walker (2004) famously wrote, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (p. xii), positioning womanism as a more universalizing element under which feminism might fall. Monica Coleman explains, though, that over time, womanism diverged from Alice Walker's original definition to one that seems more restricted based on cisgenderedness and sexuality. As she explains, "To put it in anecdotal terms, when I tell my Black male friends that I'm a womanist, they think of me as a Black churchwoman, which I sometimes am. When I tell them that I am a Black feminist, they get a little uneasy, because they start to wonder if I'm aligned with lesbians, if I'm going to question their power, and if I'm going to call God 'She'—all of which I also do. I find the word *feminist*, whether modified by *Black* or not, to have the disruptive effect that I want" (Coleman et al., 2006, p. 92). For Coleman, Black feminism is powerful because it disrupts political forces of oppression, including heteronormativity, transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia. The intentional disruption and discomfort the term *feminism* provokes are precisely what makes *digital Black feminism* a useful term. Digital Black feminism is disruptive to mainstream white feminism and the Black feminism of the 1970s and 1980s.

I use the term *digital* instead of *cyber* to likewise disrupt cyber studies that place Black women on the periphery. Cyberfeminism or technofeminism may address women in internet technologies, but they fail to capture race and other identifiers that must also be at the forefront of analysis. Daniels, commenting on the work of cyberfeminist scholars of the 1990s, explains, "Some cyberfeminists contend that the Internet shifts gender and racial regimes of power through the human/machine hybridity of cyborgs (Haraway, 1985), identity tourism (Nakamura, 2002; Turkle, 1997), and the escape from embodiment (Hansen, 2006; Nourai-Simone, 2005 . . .), I argue that the lived experience and actual Internet practices of girls and self-identified women reveals ways that they use the Internet to transform their material, corporeal lives

in a number of complex ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race” (Daniels, 2009, p. 101). Daniels repositions the work of cyberfeminism from an interrogation of a postmodern experience of the feminine body to an examination of structural changes to hierarchies of gender and race. It is a useful shift that focuses on both subordination and agency in digital technology creation and use. Gray argues that Black cyberfeminism “may address the critique that traditional virtual feminist frameworks do not effectively grasp the reality of all women and may help theorize the digital and intersecting lives of women” (Gray, 2015, p. 176). Gray’s “Black cyberfeminism” blends Black feminist thought and cyberfeminist theory, creating a better tool to understand Black women’s use of the internet. Both Daniels and Gray recognize the shortcomings of cyberfeminism and the need to create a more inclusive space to consider the lived experiences of nondominant groups. However, even in this vital intercession, Black cyberfeminism remains bound to the lineage of cyberfeminism that excludes Black women’s voices. Instead, I argue for an analytical tool that *centers* Black women in digital studies rather than advocating for our inclusion.

This brings us to digital Black feminism, which I position neither as a corrective measure to other forms of feminist inquiry nor as an extension of previous waves of feminist activism or research.⁷ Digital Black feminism does not suggest that we should examine Black women’s lives *too*. Instead, digital Black feminism insists we centralize Black women in our definition of and history of digital technology. Digital Black feminism is a mechanism to understand how Black feminist thought is altered by and alters technology. Digital Black feminism suggests we attune our gaze to Black women because they potentially provide the most robust site of inquiry as digital scholars interested in digital communication’s capacities and constraints. “Instead of smoothing out the bugs,” as Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips write about in their own revolutionary academic practice #TransformDH, I am interested in how digital Black feminism may “rattle the poles of the big tent” of internet inquiry “rather than slip seamlessly into it” (Lothian & Phillips, 2013). Digital Black feminism does not operate from the assumption that whiteness is the standard within technology and that Blackness or Black womanness is the deviant other. Instead, I suggest that a conception of the digital that reconsiders history and futures through the lens of Black feminist

thought is vital to the future of digital communication. As Marisa Parham suggests, “What kind of critical structures might be distilled from thinking about technological adoption as itself a kind of Black cultural practice?” (Parham, 2019, para. 1). “Listen to Black women” must be more than a catchphrase. Black women are not responsible for saving anyone, but our relationship with technology, both digital and analog, provides a road map by which those interested and accountable might save themselves.

This book is organized into five chapters. In the first chapter, I begin long before the advent of digital technology to consider how Black women’s specific institutional and social oppression has resulted in continued strength with communication technology. Black womanhood’s social history in American society is unique. In a white supremacist and patriarchal arrangement, Black women are effectively at the bottom of the state and economic power structure while simultaneously serving as the foundation upon which the U.S. builds its empire. Therefore, the labor, creativity, and ingenuity of Black women are foundational to the fabric of the U.S. In this chapter, I rely on historical texts, including narratives, historical reconstructions, and existing literature about Black women’s technology use in the antebellum period through the twentieth century. I argue that Black women’s labor and lives in this period were distinct from white women’s based on their mastery of labor technologies and oral culture and distinct from Black men’s based on their mastery of feminized practices of communication. This historical background provides the impetus for the central argument of this text. Black women’s relationship with communication technology informs a circumstance of its use that inherently is the most generative. Listening to Black women requires engagement with complicated histories and complex arguments.

Following this history, I introduce the virtual beauty shop in chapter two. The virtual beauty shop provides a mechanism for us to interrogate a Black feminist technoculture wherein we no longer treat Black women’s use and manipulation of digital technologies as deviant, deficient, or an aberration. I use the beauty shop metaphor to demonstrate the importance of a separately constructed space intentionally created for and by Black women. The shop is an independently viable institution within the Black community and one of the few spaces where Black women

could own and operate a business enterprise that was not dependent on whites' patronage. I use this chapter to develop the text's theoretical and analytic framework, applying a critical cultural approach based principally on the interrelationship of three theories / significant departures in the literature. They are Patricia Hill Collins's matrix of domination, Joan Morgan's hip-hop feminism, and Anna Everett's Black technophilia. Positioning Black feminism as merely responsive to white womanhood and white feminism assumes whiteness is both the default and the origin of womanhood and feminism. If technoculture reifies whiteness, this provides no space to consider Black women's artful manipulation of communicative technology for their own purposes. Instead, the virtual beauty shop offers us a way to understand how Black feminists have created a relationship with agency, community, and profit in a digital context that mirrors their offline practices.

Following these two chapters, I trace the principles, praxes, and products of digital Black feminism. In chapter three, I propose five *principles* that make up a new era of Black feminist thought and discourse online. Using an analysis of Black feminist bloggers, I argue that digital Black feminist principles shape and are shaped by the interface and affordances of the platform where they emerge, the blogosphere. Unlike the often harassing and toxic culture of Twitter today, Black feminist blogging in the 2000s and 2010s provided a space for Black feminist thinkers to make modifications to Black feminist rhetoric within the safety of enclaved communities of discourse. Within these discursive communities, bloggers developed principles that we now see on multiple digital platforms and in the public speeches and writing of Black feminists today. The principles are the prioritization of agency, the reclamation of the right to self-identify, the centralization of gender nonbinary spaces of discourse, the creation of complicated allegiances, and the insertion of a dialectic of self and community interests. For each, I describe their deployment online and their utility in creating Black feminist discursive practices online that differentiate digital Black feminist discourse from other forms of feminism. The principles are developed through the play and everyday discourse of Black lifestyle, relationship, and hair blogs. Digital Black feminists in the blogosphere intentionally conflate the professional and personal and wrestle publicly with a complicated relationship to capitalism. Any discussion of Black digital culture and social

media would be remiss not to begin by thinking about the importance of the blogosphere in making Black technoculture possible.

Next, I consider praxis. Using the archival materials of Black feminist thinkers from the twentieth century (Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Zora Neale Hurston, and Anna Julia Cooper) and a curated digital collection of publicly accessible documents (tweets, and Instagram stories, and Facebook posts) from three digital Black feminist thinkers of the twenty-first century (Luvvie Ajayi, Jamilah Lemieux, and Feminista Jones), I place historical figures in Black feminist thought in conversation with digital Black feminist writers of today. Tracing their reflections on their public work and knowledge production, I discuss the cultural practices and ingenuity that transform their discourse based on the reformation of technology to meet their needs. The creation and dissemination of Black feminist thought online (specifically in social media and the blogosphere) is a complication and conflation of written work and oral culture. Capturing, publishing, and threading/stitching are three forms of Black feminist praxis that have existed for centuries. However, digital tools mark a shift from previous mechanisms used to conceptualize Black feminist rhetoric. This chapter charts the shift that has changed Black feminist writing in meaningful ways.

Finally, after first analyzing digital Black feminist principles and Black feminist thinkers' relationship to technology in analog and digital spaces, I examine Black feminism online as a *product*, considering branding, content creation, and audience. Returning to the metaphor of the beauty shop, I explore digital Black feminism as a business model and the implications of a consumer-based digital culture on the work of Black feminists online. The original influencers and branding experts, using Twitter, Instagram, and paid platforms like Patreon, digital Black feminists demonstrate their skill in designing brands for themselves online. They navigate the digital artifacts like viral videos and hashtags as incomplete stand-ins for rich critical analysis. They also engage in practices like prototyping to refine Black feminism online. In the transition to a consumerist digital culture, I explore what may be lost when Black feminism is a product manufactured for others' consumption and why a renewed vigilance is required to protect Black feminist thought. Rather than critique any individual's relationship with capitalism, I conclude with a path forward for a digital Black feminist future for researchers and the public.

Before a sustained engagement with the digital, I begin by charting Black women's unique history in the U.S., which created a skill set unlike their white female or Black male peers—equipping them with the ability to survive and maximize resources. If we are to listen to Black women, we must begin long before they began blogging or tweeting. We must engage in the complicated and challenging legacy of white supremacy and patriarchy, which shaped Black women living in the Americas.