

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:03:22

I started writing this book really about seven years ago when I was working on my dissertation, and my dissertation research was on the Black blogosphere. I was looking at how the blogosphere could function as a space of political importance that was often being overlooked in the research, that the discourse in this space was not as simple as simply naming it as a counter public because often times the work that was happening there was intentionally and rather brilliantly hidden from the dominant group through the kinds of high context conversations that were happening and the way that Black bloggers we're maximizing the affordances of that platform.

But the truth is that even though the concept for digital Black feminism emerged during that data collection. I really set it to the side to just complete the requirements of my PhD. And while I regretted at the time that I couldn't give that portion of my research as much attention as I wanted to, in retrospect the additional years provided me a couple of things: one was a different methodological tool chest, a different focus on the importance of the history and the archive, but also I think what those years in between did was put on public display just how consequential Black feminist thought and Black women are to the future of digital technology. I think we probably all remember when phrases like listen to Black women and ask Black women became popularized after the election of the 45th President, though we were exposed to the same rhetoric at that time and living under very similar economic conditions, Black women made a very different choice for president than their white female counterparts in that election so those phrases got adopted by activists and allies and journalists who were trying to point to Black woman's voting records in both presidential and local elections.

Twitter users were creating means to remind the public that Black women are trying to save America from itself, but those popular hashtags, those phrases that laud Black women for their decision making, don't do the work of actually explaining the centuries of wisdom and labor and ingenuity that have put Black women in the position to have to be this long suffering group that has very rarely thanked for the attempt to save America from itself. And I think that's the case with a lot of our hashtag bubble lines, these phrases like listen to Black women often do very little more than virtue signal, without a requirement to actually follow through, in terms of understanding and utilizing Black feminist proxies and principles. So I think it's true that Black women are consistently doing the radical work of calling for the US to make right on a promise of democracy. Because if we look back to 2016 we see the Black women were exposed to the same trolls, the same box, the same fake news stories on social media. In fact, very often they were the target of those kinds of campaigns of disinformation.

And what I wondered in that period of time for my dissertation to want to actually in earnest started writing this book was, what if the liberal politicians and the progressive writers actually asked Black women, how they made political calculations amid this barrage of fake news and disinformation. What if we inquired about Black women's relationship with social media and technology, because that relationship didn't shield us from exposure, but it didn't

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provide a skill set to navigate trolling to navigate hate speech online. What if, as a collective we tried to learn about the long history of Black woman's use of technology and the long develops skills that are in both intercultural communication but also intercultural within community communication that make Black women purveyors of social media, making good decisions, both for ourselves and our communities.

So, the goals of my book ended up being twofold. The first was that we started to rightly position Black women online as central to the future of communication technology, that we trace the long historical relationship between Black women in technology and reposition Black women online as holding a skill set and an expertise, not deficient, not in need of new skills to survive a changing digital landscape. Because what we know to be true what we've seen to be true is that Black women without extensive programming experience have already maximized platform affordances, built transmedia platforms. Lead platform migrations they push policy regarding hate speech and content moderation and introduced even new pay structures that were the precursors to what we call influencer culture now.

I see examples of this with bloggers like Libya JV with writers and editors like Jamila Mew, like Kimberly Nicole Foster moving for Harriet into a YouTube platform. Mara Lindy who was one of the co founders of the app Shine said, Imagine if all the ideas were missing out on her because people from more marginalized experiences that are uniquely positioned to solve problems because of those experiences struggle to see themselves in our existing platforms and founders. But I don't think this is a problem for Black women to solve or other marginalized groups to solve Black women make structural alterations to digital spheres of communication already developing standalone apps and platforms, we're already early adopters were already transformers of existing platforms and our online content has served as a model for other creatives.

So instead whatd Digital Black Feminism text does is provide us the historical context necessary to consider this digital turn and chart Black woman's long standing relationship to better understand the future, potentially of our digital world. Now the second goal of the text is to document the shift in Black Feminist principles and praxies, because of Black woman's relationship and encounter with technology positioning Black thinkers online and they're writing a central to our ongoing work in liberation. writer Feminista Jones said, Who could have predicted that people who never set foot on a college campus, much less in specialized journalism schools would have international audiences reading their cultural and socio political analyses or have their work as a part of a rigorous academic curriculum at universities, they could never afford to attend. She's right, but also Black feminist thinkers have always existed outside the Academy.

There's something strange happening now where this generation's use of digital tools and social media platforms has led many people to disregard their work as simply being a part of some neo-liberal superstructure, devaluing what they create online. So just because we're doing lifestyle blogging and natural hair tutorials, because our online snark and means are perfectly placed, that doesn't mean that our work is superficial, or untethered to serious

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scholarship. None of these practices exclude Black feminists exclude online from liberation work. Instead, what we're doing is locating our spaces of retreat right alongside our activists work, earning our living using the tools of this digital capitalist superstructure while still pushing for a liberation ideology.

So the truth is that Black girls who may not code already have the knowledge and ability to navigate digital platforms. Our relationship with digital tools and culture is changing how we view technology today. So in this book I analyze the content of digital Black feminist thought online, and are mechanisms for production and dissemination, dealing with these very messy complexities that emerged as a form of digital Black feminism is imbued with digital practice.

I was first introduced to computing at around 10 years old when Mavis Beacon taught me how to type, every day after school my lessons began on my family shared computers, when I placed my fingers on the keys and started where I left off the day before, checking to see if my words per minute, and percentage of words properly typed had increased from the day before. On the cover of that CD case was Mavis Beacon in a yellow suit with white pearls and her hair was slicked back in a neat bun. This Black woman was my typing teacher and she was the expert typing teacher for many other little Black girls in the 1980s and 1990s. For Black feminists of a certain age, she was one of the first public images of Black computing in our youth. So a whole generation of Black feminists start their relationship with digital technology from an image that's crafted by a company to sell software, Mavis Beacon wasn't real. Her manufactured image though is instructive of how digital Black feminists form a relationship to technology. Typing, which is a productive skill for a new economy was pitched to the public by an image of a Black woman who lives only in the imagination of software developers, not by the *real* Black woman who's technical skills always served the economic needs of others. So maybe this was training us to type, but in a world of home computers typing wasn't the work of an assistant in an office typing was a required skill for professionals and creative content creators and writers. There exists agency in typing an essay with your own thoughts to be able to share those thoughts online. It was a gift that was provided at least in part by Mavis Beacon.

Before Black feminists started writing in the blogosphere, pending Twitter threads, developing long form essays, Black feminist borders made that transition to writing their thoughts in the form of essays and news articles and folk stories and memoirs. I was really privileged in this text to be able to tell those stories and showcase the continuity over time between Black feminists proxies of the past and the present, and then to document the changing principles of Black feminism as we navigate this world now where Black feminist thought has become a digital product. So I'm really excited to continue this conversation with you today and talk more about digital Black feminism

Serena Oduro:
12:13:24

Thank you so much for that. I'm so excited. I have to say like for me, I mean even just seeing the title digital Black feminism I was so excited because I was like I just know this book's gonna go in, I know it's going to be interesting. And it was like to not let me down at all. Something that meant a lot for me. So like some of my work, you know, people may not know like I'm Policy Research Analyst, I do a lot of work around like algorithmic bias and like helping communities of color and like focusing on that, and things kind of the get go of my introduction to the field I was like, this needs like Black woman's thinking, but I feel like Black women are so often, and I think what that's what's lovely about your book because you really locate like where Black women intellectually produce and also how were systematically left out of those system, out of the areas where people would normally locate where intelligence is or things are created, and you just go to where you know where we are, which is a lot of places like you know we do stuff in the academy and otherwise but I think for me it was a great call to be like yes and kind of almost an affirmation of like those thoughts are true, that we do need Black feminism in these spaces.

I wrote a couple pieces about, you know, meeting and analysis and policy on Black woman needs and desires, etc. But it kind of felt like an empty void, like does anyone really want to listen to this, but I think your book and so many other work by Black women just shows that we are pushing for that which is very beautiful. And so with that, I wanted to ask the first like and you kind of talk about this with your dissertation, but I'd love to hear more, like when you knew it was necessary to reach into the past to show the genius of and within Black woman's technological practice, especially with the myth spread throughout internet studies that Black people such women were late adapters and also the issue of archival amnesty that purposely ignores and keeps our contributions.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:15:22

Yeah, absolutely. It's a great question. And it wasn't the initial goal of the book when I started writing. Most of my work was very present tense. I was thinking about what was going on right now, what was happening in this digital landscape, and in writing the book. It was a shift back very gradually at first it started with of course I have to talk about the blogosphere as one of these really early digital touch points where Black women had the space and the agency and the ability to create these enclave spaces but if I was going to talk about that I have to look back a little bit further to think about hip hop feminism and talk about what Black women were doing in the 1990s and how we were carving out these spaces and he's writing communities, and I thought well if I'm going to go that far back then I have to think back to...

And the problem is there's **no starting point to Black women's genius**. So there's no way to say I'm just going to start this in 1974 and go forward if I actually want to think through how Black women have mastered technology when it was intentionally deprived from us, when it was intentionally removed from us, then I have to just keep going and keep going. And also what you end up seeing is the continuity that happens over time between the praxies between the relationship that Black women end up therefore having with these tools and the tools may

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shift, right so the tools I'm looking at in the 1840s are very different than the tools that I'm looking at in 2020, but the kinds of relationships that we formed with these technologies that kind of tenuous relationships that we have where we recognize their utility where we're, you know, practically, utilizing them day to day whilst understanding the same ways that they replicate power differentials and cause harm in our lives. That's what remains consistent over time.

And so if I wanted to tell the story of people touching computing and touching phones and playing on social media, then I really had to think about the origin points of when we started to encounter these kinds of tools and technologies that were created and developed as tools of oppressive forces that were often times developed intentionally in ways to keep divides in place and ways to keep differentials in place. But we're constantly utilized and reformed and reimagined by Black women to do other kinds of work.

So I was really happy to do that long history, and to make the case, which I think is one that is for all of us that are intentional about our work in studying digital technology and studying the internet is that you cannot start from right now, you are doing a disservice to both the people that you're writing about and four, and to the the tools themselves to imagine that they just emerged out of nowhere. We're not really tracing the history of how these tools and technologies developed and why they developed right and what it comes to me. So we're going to think about technology, I really argue that we have to have a much more expansive view is what counts as a technology, what counts as a tool, because that also allows us to think about who gets left out of technological expertise and why. So why the tools begin to carry these meanings that leave Black women out, **even though we're mastering things that would have previously been considered a technology**. So you know it was, in some ways accidental, and other ways incredibly intentional to say that we can't start here and now we're going to have to look at the long history here.

Serena Oduro:
12:18:55

Yes, and I love how that kind of panned out like okay, I have to go back to go back and that's what I love about what you're saying is you're giving a new, central way to look at technological development that also really challenges current norms so it seems to me like within the book you mentioned not that it's always bad but the problem sometimes with groups like Black Girls Code is it seems like there is this arc of tech development, let's say Black women, they're getting involve, learning how to code and you say, Now there's a completely new different way that you've chosen to look at technology.

Catherine Knight Steele:
12:20:10

Right yeah I think it's about really centralizing different pieces. I'm glad you brought up Black Girls Code, it does great work in terms of providing opportunities. What I tried to do in the text as you're pointing out was starting from a different center point. If our center point isn't whiteness, isn't white maleness when we study technoculture--Andre Brock gives us a starting point with centralizing Black technoculture. But if we don't start from the point of deficiency, if we don't start from the point that whiteness is central and therefore Blackness and Black womanness is deviant, it is deficient. What if a Black woman was the center point? What if we rearticulate our framework for technology to make space for that? Not that we add on Black women too, but we're studying the algorithms and what about Black women too, we're studying tech policy and what about Black women too. But what about Black women were at the center of this, they don't give us a very different lens, because if you study technology from the standpoint of folks who simultaneously have had technology used to cause them harm, but also have therefore been the ones to find the most ingenious and creative mechanisms to utilize that technology, then you're going to see both the expansive possibilities of tech, but also the the constraints, you're going to see where it falls short, you're going to see where it does harm, you're going to see where the design features are not set up to, to include not only to include but are set up and designed in order to keep those structural different points in place.

So I really tried to in the text, not do the comparative thing not do the like white women are this way and so Black women are this way and Black men to this and so Black women did that, like, **what if we just thought about Black women as being important enough to study all on our own.** And from that different lens, from that different framework I think a lot of new questions and possibilities, new methods, new focus on epics all emerged from that different center point

Serena Oduro:

12:21:49

For sure and what's always intrigued me and what I've loved about I mean being a Black woman, studying Black feminism etc is, I think, due to being at the intersection of so many different axes of oppression. It's like my freedom really necessitates other people's freedom. You know, and so it's good you know even within technology for multiple reasons to like look at Black women's experiences and like knowledge standpoint, which I don't want to get ahead of myself on either, but something that I was also thinking of when you're speaking is, you know, you're talking about how Black woman's labor's devalued and you talked about that and antebellum South with even how Black woman's labor's kind of portrayed on slavery like either in the house or not working as hard and you just mix that you're like that's not true, to today even where despite the power of the influencer economy or the importance of the blogosphere etc, people kind of devalue that is like that's not real work, and I think what's cool in your book is you use the beauty shop as kind of this like central point that like shows an important place of economic power, of technological development, of also political choices, right through Black woman's experiences from the antebellum south to now. So I was wondering if you could just speak more to like why you think are like kind of when the beauty shops to you became a clear

important example of like, digital Black feminists practice and also just like an important space for Black women in general.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:23:26

So I'll be honest, I really thought I was doing something when I came up with the barbershop metaphor to talk about the blogosphere back in, in the early 2010s and I was thinking all the barbershop that's really clever, you know, because people are familiar with the barbershop and they understand its importance kind of in the Black community as a space to gather and political decision making and you know, an enclave space. People have written books about it, we get Hush Harbor, we get movies about the barbershop. But I didn't write about the beauty shops then and, and it was an oversight of sorts, because really what the beauty shop does is all the same things of the barber shop right it's this, it's central gathering place it's all these things, but it really does something more and something that's that's interesting to me as well, because barber shops, Black barbershop culture really begins when Black barbers are servicing white men. Post slavery you have Black barber is as the primary folks who are cutting white men's hair, and then you have this concerted campaign that happens on the part of white, white barbers and unions to discredit Black barbershop, they were doing too well, they're making too much money. And so this this concerted campaign happens to suggest that Black barbers are not hygienic, don't have good tools, and it works: right white men largely stop going to Black barber shops

But there was not a similar parallel for Black women's beauty shops, Black women were servicing white women during enslavement but post enslavement Black women were creating beauty products and beauty shops for other Black women. So the central point, the beginning, the origin story of Black beauty shops is fascinating because it begins as a place where Black women are doing things for themselves. They are entrepreneurs who are creating spaces of necessity for other Black women, so they are simultaneously supporting a need of a community, while financially supporting themselves and their families, but they're as you said they're also mastering these technologies like hair straightening, which I talked about in the book briefly, but they're mastering them as a mechanism of survival. Black women, you have to go into these workplaces, you have to do these things and this is what's necessary to be able to do that right and so we can have, and we should and we do have larger conversations about the colorism that's bound up in a lot of hair care practices, but I think when we focus exclusively on that conversation and don't centralize the intelligence and the creativity that's required to engage in these hair cut his hair technologies right then we're also not centralizing Black women again we're centralizing whiteness because we're talking about how Black women are working to become more white to assimilate to look more white, and I don't know about you but the Black woman that I know who are masters at straightening hair at, you know, weave, installations, they're not trying to look like white women. That's not what's happening right there is a mastery of a technique that is celebrated for its possibilities among a large array of different other possibilities for haircare.

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So I'm not suggesting that colorism doesn't exist. Quite to the contrary, it's a huge part of the origin story of a lot of hair care technologies. But the point is if we centralize instead the agency, if we centralize the proximal distance. We decentralize the proximal distance to whiteness and instead focus on how these technologies showcase expertise in a really particular way, then we tell a different story about the beauty shop, we tell a story where Black women are at the center, and we can understand the why and the how of what they create for themselves, of how they master these spaces to do really important work within a community and also to support themselves.

That's one of the beauty shop becomes really important it's a space about entrepreneurship, it's a space about technology, about community but also financial support for the self and it tells a really valuable story about what Black women were doing online, and how that blogosphere has really pushed into different spaces now that we're perhaps more familiar with an Instagram culture and TikTok culture, and we see that transformative thing of like when we're able to do from that space.

Serena Oduro:
12:27:45

It's so much fun that, that just has me thinking of all the so many things, but I'll keep it to my questions. It's actually connects with the next question I have, because, you know, something that you highlighted even earlier actually you wrote how the blogosphere is not just a counter public like lot of times you're engaging in a call and response which is also like, you know, very like Black thing to do, who like to, you know, want to engage personally and also like the privacy. That's kind of needed for Black people to commune together. I mean especially, think of kind of like the hyper visibility and visibility that you know like Blackness kind of engages with you to like state surveillance. And so I wanted to ask how you think the beauty shop provides a model for, like building social media platforms that allows Black women to gather without prying eyes or in a way that also economically benefits them, because with other platforms, it seems like actually you use an example with very smart brothas, I believe where he talks about how they had like a very thriving like call and response system. But then when they chose to go to that counter public to make money, it's like you got the money but now you don't have the privacy and the ability to engage in as deep and away.

So just wondering if there is a way that the beauty shop provides an example that can maybe be used so that we can make money and engage but not, you know, without having to have kind of the harms of social media that currently exist.

Catherine Knight Steele:
12:29:15

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Yeah, I mean, this is why the blogosphere was a really special moment in our digital history that doesn't get enough written about it, we have a tendency I think as digital scholars to move very quickly onto the next thing you know so what's, what's happening right now we have to hurry up and get something written about that because everything's going to change. And so this is why I really kind of insist on looking backward and insist on looking back to these spaces. I think what I liked about writing about the blogosphere, and that period in time, was it gave us a chance to really parse out this public private thing that we still focus on kind of inexplicably even though we all live in this world where we know that those terms no longer serve us in the way that they used to write this idea that there are some spaces that are public and there are some spaces that are private, just doesn't work as well in our digital landscape, but the thing is that Black folks have always experienced this thing we're public and private we're not the same as they were for white folks. Zora Neale Hurston writes about this in the absence of the concept of privacy in her essay the characteristics of an ego expression in 1934, she's writing about how in these United States Black folks have always been under surveillance, have always had a watchful eye on us. And so the ability to exist within that notion that someone is watching but without a care is really beautiful, actually right like the ability to say that I know people are going to see this, **but I'm not conforming for them**. This is still about this communal experience. And the way that we keep folks out without actual physical boundary lines right.

So the Black church functions as beautiful enclave for generations where, not, not, not wholly unproblematic, but yet a beautiful discursive enclave where what keeps folks out is the lack of context necessary to participate. There's not a formal boundary structure right the doors of the church are open yet people coming in are going to relate only in so much as they have this deep contextual relationship with Black spirituality right with Black history with Black political movement. Those elements are necessary to adequately participate and that's what we see carry into the blogosphere.

So when you mentioned the site like very smart brothers which I love right love to talk about that site. That's exactly what they were able to master was the high context necessary for participation, whilst having an open door, while they were hosting their own site right anyone could come and go, but what you notice is that the people who stayed, the commenters the people who are engaging, are people who are there every day. Were folks who knew each other and knew the jokes and got the jokes intuitively, who had the same popular cultural references, had the same experiences when they were at work. And so there was **no gate keeping** in so much as: you can't read this you can't participate here, but what the blog's allowed folks to do was to create the high context necessary that would that **delegate that as an enclave space** there was no goal of reaching some larger wider audience in those in those years. And you mentioned that transition that VSB made over to the root, right, and to a larger platform, which really opened up the doors even further because then you have distribution happening on this blog that now folks outside of that tight knit community are able to see and witness those pieces. There's really great things that come with that, like we have to be very clear that having that broader audience for Black writers is really important. Often, not only for their livelihood, but also for really important content that they're writing, you know, Damon young wrote a really fantastic piece about patriarchy and Black men that got a lot of media attention, Panama

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Jackson the other primary writer on that site wrote a really smart and thoughtful piece about his mother and Donald Trump right and that got a lot of widespread attention and created lots of important conversations about that.

But as you also point out, when you open those doors of possibility, when the context drops, and that's really what's important, right, so it matters less that they're a part of this other platform and more that to be a part of this platform, your context level is lower, so that there's a wider net of participation that's possible. And when we think about that transition from the blogosphere to social media, we see the same thing happening. Where especially in spaces where algorithms are determining who's following us versus people opting in right so when we have TikTok that's almost entirely based on an external algorithm determining what I'm going to be interested in, then my net has to be cast a little wider, right, if I want more people to be drawn into my content. If the goal is to have more people drawn into the content. So that's something that we have to consider is what are the goals of Black creatives online right now are the goal is to have the widest net possible to bring the most people in, in some cases, yes, some content creators are absolutely looking to have these expansive audiences because it's financially beneficial, right there's endorsement deals and there is advertising that's paid and all those other areas. But they're also content creators who are not looking to have their content thrive in these other spaces that they're very intentionally crafting content for Black communities, and still using that high context necessary for participation.

So what I think Katherine Squires gives us which I use throughout the book is this terminology to kind of think through: well there are some times where Black creators, want to engage with the public, they're trying to provoke that kind of debate, but there are other times where we're not. And of course that's the case because we're complex and we're not homogenous. And so **if we keep writing about everything that Black folks do online as being about a resistant counter public, then we're really limiting our understanding of all the potential realities of Blackness of Black thought and a Black discursive power online.**

Serena Oduro:

12:35:10

Thank you for that I really, I really love how you put the amount of context needed and what happens when there's like higher lower, because I think of TikTok, someone talking the other day if they're like, it seems like Black mannerisms like AV like all of these things, especially on TikTok are so easily taken and adapted where a lot of like Black like things traits ways of speaking etc. are being adopted as if it's just general and you know that appropriation has always happened but it's almost on a more rampant scale, specifically due to TikTok even compared to other platforms, it seems to me, and I think what you said about the context levels needed like TikTok. It's so low, you can almost participate and know what's going on just from observing a few things and they can take it. I mean whether you really know what's going on is debatable like people use it. But what happened is very easy.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:36:00

It's happen-ability is very easy. I think the ability to misread and misunderstand, misappropriate is just as easy as you just pointed out. I remember when I was working on a dissertation that the phrase bye Felicia was like very becoming like a thing, and very smart brothers was writing about like the death of this term because white folks had adopted it. I always know that some phrases are completely dead if I see a CNN anchor use it right so as soon as something like that happens you know the phrases over. But what was interesting with bye Felicia and I think what's interesting now with a lot of what's happening with Black content creators on TikTok with the sound usage, I think we can make that parallel, is that people adopt it, and they begin to use it, but they're not using it right, they really are not using it appropriately. They're missing the joke just just enough that the folks who were in on the initial joke, recognize how off it is and then we're done with that sound, we're done with that moment. So bye Felicia for example gets us totally wrong people are just angry at somebody like bye Felicia like, did you see Friday? Do you understand that Felicia was still welcome like Felicia? We didn't hate Felicia, dismissive of Felicia in the moment, but we're gonna be back tomorrow. And so, but this was missed by people.

The same way that like we have sounds now on TikTok that emerged and folks are using it in a small kind of Black tech top corner and then the sound migrates out into kind of a more mainstream space, and it's not being picked up quite in the right way. And so then you have this moment where Black content creators are done with the sound now, because you've ruined. It's no longer funny. And so I say all of that to say it's not new, again, the use of Black culture the misuse of Black culture is persistent, it is relentless, and what is also persistent and relentless is Black creativity, and the ability to transform and to reinvent and to create new context, that's necessary for participation.

I think you rightly point out that TikTok expands and the ability of immediate access to Black space is something that we're all paying closer attention to and how quickly you can tap into these spaces without needing to know someone or being invited somewhere that you can just kind of invite yourself into these spaces is something that folks are paying attention to the creatives are paying attention to as well in terms of how they release content and how they require and are making claims on content and citation and people actually getting credit for their content and their creativity.

Serena Oduro:

12:38:50

For sure, and I love that you bring that up some things I've seen more so it's not kind of citation will practice more and more Black woman online be like this is important and Black feminist principle, and it's almost even more important as we resist the ways that social media and algorithms can be used to not only like you say, take Black trends, but often the people making money off of it, aren't Black people. So it's like it's a financial issue, it's a racial issue.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:39:08

And I think it's a complicated one right like I think that there's absolutely what you point out this citation will practice that's really important of us giving credit to folks who have created content. There's also though the commodification of thought and of what used to be freely shared ideas and conversation that we also have to keep an eye on right so while it does my heart so well to see Black creatives get credit for their content and to get credit and particularly for Black feminist writers and thinkers, to get credit for the invaluable work that they do online that's often not cited more often.

There's also this moment of realization of what happens when we turn things that are supposed to be radical laboratory ideologies into commodities. So, when I begin to sell Black feminist thought, what does that do to Black feminist thought. What does that do to radical proxies of freedom for it to have a numerator of scale to it. And so it's something that I try to do in the book is not in any way glorify digital Black feminism, or be completely critical of it but to just say here's what's going on. And we need to be mindful of the fact that while we've entered this space where everything is become commodified right, that, that includes Black feminists creating themselves as brands and products, and that there is a limit to how far we can go down a path of charging for liberation ideology. **We're charging for radical free thought that if it becomes a good that is for sale and we no longer control that right like the marketplace does**, and that can be a really scary path to go down.

Serena Oduro:

12:40:58

For sure, and I love that you bring that up because, and it's also this tension we kind of mentioned your book of like one of the kind of five principles of Black business practice of or digital Black feminist practice of like care for the community but also yourself. And part of that is like, I need to get paid, like all these all these different tensions, but like, but how much is too far.

You even mentioned there is an example maybe you can speak about an ad for an event that people thought was kind of inappropriate because you're worried about the commodification and you were like, maybe it isn't but people, people are looking at it and are wondering and, you know, like, Are you trying to modify it or not and sometimes they are and sometimes they aren't, and that's a very difficult boundary that like Black feminists thinkers activists, etc have to toe.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:41:47

Yeah, I mean we're seeing countless examples of that day to day and just stories that have come out in the last few days about this tension between activism and getting paid right and and turning one's activism into a job or into a marketable thing that one gets paid for. And I walked through this in several places in the book with with Black feminist thinkers writing like listen, I have I have bills, I have a home, I have a family I have things that I have to pay for. And

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I have thoughts that are valuable, and there is a real, you know, necessity to Black women marking our thoughts and our work and our labor as valuable skilled work right that we are living within a capitalist system presently, whether or not we're fighting to be constructed. Presently, this is our approximate location, and therefore, in this system, we are to be paid for our labor and that's one piece. But then the second piece that you point out is the extent to which I think this is a really good thing, the average person Black person is paying attention to the extent that activism is being turned into a commodity as being very protective over the idea that there are folks who are there to buy and sell on Black trauma and Black pain, and that we should be paying more attention to when and if that is happening.

And so even in instances where we have folks that have the best of intentions are bent toward marketing and branding and strategizing in digital spaces, makes it appear as though our events that may be raising money for someone's family or maybe set out to do some work of, you know, branding a cause, look a whole lot like a concert plug. They're mirroring in a lot of ways the same kind of marketing that's happening in these other arenas, that are focused on commodity that are focused on money making.

What does it mean when our what's supposed to be a radical thought like that doesn't look like Black feminism exist to break systems capitalism, right, **we cannot divorce patriarchy and white supremacy from systems of imperialism and capitalism**. So if this exists to do this work, what does it mean when we have to flirt along those lines with this **capitalist superstructure that is our digital economy**, what does it mean to have to do that and what are the extent of where that works and where that's functional and where it does us a disservice and I think we're, we're in the right place and beginning to chart that in our own work to be mindful of how our work participates in that, but also to be critical of spaces where we see folks crossing those boundary lines,

Serena Oduro:

12:44:15

For sure. I love that point because I think, you know, in the very beginning actually and this was a quote that I really loved as well you talked about women Black woman's decision making, even within politics, like the 2016 election versus 2020 and I think what you really show us just like the importance also have Black feminism to when we look at tech policy or just like anything; I'm analyzing digital culture, etc. is because it's so complicated like I'm thinking about liberating myself from capital structures, but also have to feed myself also Black women are normally caring for other people like there's so many things involved: my own livelihood my communities livelihood and also the worlds that it's like it's complex thinking, which is why it's important for people to engage with, and it's not always perfect but it kind of can't be because, you know, the reason we have to think this way is because of the systems of oppression right position.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:45:30

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I've heard Sarah Florini say this in several talks that she's given where she talks about, if it were simple to break down racism then racism wouldn't even be a great tool. I mean like it's, you know, like it's such, it is such a powerful tool because it is so difficult to disentangle ourselves from this this and if it were simple to do, it wouldn't have had such a long lasting impact on human society, right the reason that patriarchy and racism and colonialism are still here is because they work really well and because we become really deeply invested in them and it becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle ourselves from these interrelated ideas.

But we do have roadmaps for this, and this is why I keep pointing to folks who have shown us the possibilities but the gaps in the matrix right so the matrix of oppression that Pat Hill Collins talks about, there are places where the threat is thinner because people have worked on it, there are places where there are gaps and holes that we can push through. If we were to actually look to them. If we were to actually find those folks who did that work as valuable members of this digital culture that we're trying to understand right, if we didn't start from the place that these are the experts, these are the technological experts and these are the folks that we're trying to help out. What if these folks actually had the expertise, and we actually look to them to understand how to make the system better for everyone because as you put it, when Black women are free, everybody else has to be as a matter of necessity.

So, if we look to the folks who are trying to free themselves but also trying to break down the system in order to do so, because that's I think the unique piece about Black feminist thought. Black feminists are not about raising Black women to the power structure level of white men. That's not the aim. The aim is that the whole system has to come apart in order for us to be free, so we're not looking to a place of trying to replace the folks in power with ourselves, but tear down a system that is less about assessing is putting folks in these differentiated positions of power.

Serean Oduro:

12:47:42

For sure. No, and I just love talking about that and I'm going to put one more question I'm going to give it to q & a, and just due to the work they know that data in society that we do, I just want to be important to talk about your quote that's for those studying online harassment and trolling algorithmic bias and digital activism, Black woman must be included in your work.

Obviously I really believe in that and I think we've kind of touched upon some points. It's obvious through this discussion of Black woman standpoint, which we've talked about our relationship to technology that's important. I was wondering if you could just break it down a bit more because I just think that point can't be talked about enough.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:48:31

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Well, I think that Black women as whole agentic human beings have to be a part of our work and I think that for so many people who are thinking about precious forces in digital technology that the inclusion of **Black women is periphery, it is still from a place of marginalization, it's still from a place and a lot of ways of not seeing the full humaneness of the people that were working alongside.** And so part of what I tried to do in this book was not just through the content, but through the method, through my approach to centralize the people that I was talking about rather than just the content that they leave behind as a data point right that like we are talking about human beings lives, and the artifacts of their lives that they've left here for us to see and for us to witness that **we are more than the data points** that us reporting on and writing about people impacts them in really particular ways and that they do have some say so, and they should have some control over what that looks like. And so we can't operate from a place of a Savior mentality that we're here to fix things for this broken group, or that we know better or that we have the capacities to do things that they can't do for themselves.

That is, I think, a falter point of faulting point for a lot of well meaning organizations right that if we if we do this and it'll make life better for this group of people who couldn't possibly imagine how to do it for themselves. History tells us it's not true. And so if we actually point to the ways that folks have been involved in their own laboratory practices, if we look to the corners and the crevices of digital landscapes that we haven't looked at before that we have been excluded by necessity based on the kind of methods and strategies that we've used to gather data.

So when we're scraping the web, when we're gathering up these huge big data analyses of sites, what's not being picked up what context, are we missing what histories are we missing, what linguistic practices are we missing, to serve the end of having a larger data set, or to serve the end of getting the most expansive sample. So there are ways that we have to really question our own strategies our own methods our own engagement with communities in our practice of doing data analyses, of doing policy work as it relates to digital culture, and I tried to model some of that in this text.

There's a place, obviously for big data, but that place has to be alongside, and it has to be utilized by people who recognize the humanity of the people on the other side of that data.

Serena Oduro:

12:50:59

Absolutely. And that's what I have noticed within and conflict struggles with my own work where you know working on Ai accountability policy. I did advocacy and my former job around algorithmic equity as well as one thing I noticed is that of the list of stakeholders who are consulted, policymakers, data scientists, academics, etc. Like engaging with Black folks was kind of like: maybe we'll talk to some people who've been harmed and like that's it. And I'm like, Well, yes you should like you should engage with communities, especially Black folks in the areas that are heavily surveilled etc like that is an absolute. In addition, **Blackness is like a**

knowledge, as a knowledge point and that's like a stand point should be seen as important as well like not just something to consult on the side so, but it's kind of hard to, you know, for me, engaging with these things it's, it's like how do I bring that there when **people are so used to Blackness being seen at the periphery that seems pretty radical to be like, let's use Black theory Black feminism as a root point, not just, you know, on the outside.**

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:52:05

I feel very privileged to have been able to do that because I take your point i don't think that it's a given that we as academics as researchers, always feel the freedom to be able to centralize Blackness in our work. I think that it's a political move to be able to do it and it's a decision I think for a lot of folks that their work is not going to be taken seriously. And I think that that's what many of us enter into this with is the possibility that this work will be relegated to the Black spaces of these conversations right, which I'm very happy to be in the Black spaces of everything, but also that this works, that works like like distributed Blackness by Andre Brock or beyond hashtags by Sarah Florini or, or Sophia Nobles algorithms of depression right, that these are central works about digital technology period right that they focus on race or they focus on Black culture, but at their core they are telling a story about digital culture about our future that is for everyone to understand, and it is incumbent upon the reader to make themselves, make it possible for you to understand this because we're going to write it from a Black lens, we're going to write it using Black theory and so if you don't have it, **it's your task to catch up** right because we learned all the other theory we've learned all the other places and we are choosing that this is the moment and this is the way to write about this to have the most impact.

And so I think we're challenging and I hope that folks are challenged and feel challenged. If they read texts like these to say: Well, I'm not familiar with, you know this Black feminist theory or I'm not familiar with these particular people that are centralizing as important and technological figures. Well, good. Go, go read about it, go learn about it and then come back to this text with a new lens and a new mechanism to actually understand more expansively what we're doing here.

Serena Oduro:

12:54:01

Sure, know for sure and I actually think they'll kind of we'll go into some of the next questions I have, I'm going to go to the q & a because Shana actually asked a question that was one of my own. And she asked what do you envision for digital Black feminism to look like, and maybe, maybe it'll be different than digital Black feminism to look like, something we weren't even able to talk about the topic like hip hop is hip hop, like politics culture, technological moves

can kind of change the tools that we're focusing around and it impacts our feminism. But in general, what do you think it could look like?

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:54:41

Now that's a great question. I mean, so, so did digital Black feminism exist 150 years ago. No, it didn't. Right, Black feminism has always existed. But the things that are making changes to necessary updates to modifications to challenges to our Black feminism shift over time right and so I do talk in the book quite a bit about and I'm very indebted to the work of hip hop feminist for writing about how something like hip hop forever changes our relationship to Black feminist thought how Joan Morgan's when chicken heads come home to roost is so central to us thinking about the shades of grey, you know this theory and this approach to thinking about Black feminist thought that there are these gray moments and that hip hop feminists become very comfortable in the shades of grey of thinking that I can love hip hop that sometimes has deeply misogynistic tendencies, while being a Black feminist, these are not in conflict for me that I'm very comfortable in that gray space.

And then I try to take that work and and mirror that into thinking about what are those gray spaces or digital Black feminists, what are the things that we have to adopt that we have to contend with while holding these Black feminists principles so what 150 years. I don't know what it is that Black feminists are going to be contending with loving, whilst hating, promoting while it does harm I don't I'm not certain what those things are but what I what I can see, is the expert ways that we have navigated that in the past, and I can have a very strong confidence in Black feminism, as the tool to continue to dismantle these systems because it has always been. So when I look back to what Black women were doing in the late 1800s to an Anna Julia Cooper was doing with respectability politics to what you know i to be Wells was doing with her writing on lynching. When I look at the tools and I look at what has shifted what our access to tools has shifted for us, what has remained consistent in a lot of cases is our praxies, what has remain consistent is our relationship to these tools are complicated relationship to these tools as things that we utilize whilst recognizing the harm that we cause and having the ability to navigate those things, so I can't say what 150 years will look like. If our planet is still is still functional in 150 years, but I can be very confident that **Black women have the tool kit to navigate that and that Black feminism gives us, perhaps our best tool kit toward dismantling these systems of oppression that are interlocking in our lives.**

Serena Oduro:

12:57:29

Yes, and it seems like in your book you talked about, like, maybe Black woman in the 1800s like having to straighten their hair to as a political tool to like prove their femininity do to like the way it was defined, you know, now I don't have to do that it almost seems also like what future Black feminists do is free us from things that we had to do in the past what I don't have to.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:57:39

That's right I mean you see that I think in in spaces like like TikTok and Instagram and what I've really been interested in writing about lately is Black feminist pleasure. You know, more Morgan has a great piece on on Black feminist pleasure that I pull from to talk about this but I'm really fascinated in the way that TikTok content creators are really focused on themselves right like that there's the, we think of TikTok as being as wholly performative place where I'm like doing things for other people to see and to witness into, but the focus on self pleasure is one that I think that emerges from Digital Black feminism, but it's really kind of blossoming in an interesting way online right now that I'm looking forward to tracing over the next, you know, five or 10 years.

Serena Oduro:

12:58:23

For sure. Now I am too, I am on TikTok a lot and I've noticed that trend that's pretty interesting and empowering honestly, and I want to take this one last question real quick about Third World feminism. Often looking at Black feminism to crack the Third World feminism open. What makes you feel there's a space for solidarity, and that we can point to by feminism for third world feminism, especially when there's colorism and internalized anti Blackness.

Catherine Knight Steele:

12:58:40

Yeah, thanks for that question. I mean so I begin the book by being really specific because I think it's important to name the things that we're doing that I wrote about in this book, Black Americans right and because I think that there's a really specific history that points to specific things that are happening but what I also say in the intro that I really hope that folks take kind of the infrastructure of the book so to speak right and find applicable ways to see the overlap in Black diaspora culture across the globe, because there, there's obviously that right I talked to scholars in Brazil I talked to scholars in the UK who have said, some of these principles are really lining up with things I see happening here I'm like that's great.

I want to be clear that that's not what I was doing. I'm not suggesting that there is this kind of you know expansive everybody everywhere is behaving in similar ways, but I think that our mechanism for studying it can be similar, whilst acknowledging the very specific historical context.

So the relationship to colonialism, is different and other places and it is in the United States, right to the chattel slavery is different. It's related but different. So I think that we can point to **tenants of Black feminism as being productive and useful for folks to pick up across the globe, whilst technology that the local indigenous spaces, there are best equipped to figure out how to break down the systems that are specific to those places.**

So obviously things like anti Blackness exist globally that colorism exists globally so there are things that Black women in these United States have been doing that folks can pick up on but likewise, there's things that we here need to pay attention to what's going on in other places to understand the overlaps and what the possibilities are for dismantling those systems here.

Serena Oduro:

13:00:36

Absolutely. And I love that point, especially since I'm Ghanaian American. It's very interesting thinking of, in Ghana, what's going on, about it being applicable to other places. Well thank you so much I know it's one o'clock that people have to go but it's been such a riveting and fun conversation, Catherine and if you have any last closing remarks, please feel free to give them. I appreciate everyone who participated in Q and A's in the chat and also commenting, feel free to tweet at us and I'll let you close.

Catherine Knight Steele:

13:01:03

Thank you so much for this conversation. It's always a pleasure to talk to folks who have read and engaged with the text and I'm always happy to be in further conversation so you know, hit me up on Twitter, I talk a lot about things like this here but also about general ratchet read it has nothing to do with this but it's a fun space all the same. So I look forward to continuing the conversation with folks ahead.

Serena Oduro:

13:01:32

Thank you also honor hosting this on her talk with you, Catherine and I hope that everyone has a great rest of your day and definitely by digital Black feminism, it's amazing.