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Black (Cyber)Feminism: Creating Counterpublics in Social Media

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Background

This case study briefly outlines some of the ways that social media exists as a white-dominant public, to set the stage for a discussion of how Black women and femmes have created spaces of activism and resistance on social media. Some key terms that this case study uses include: *counterpublic*, *cyberfeminism*, and *intersectionality*. Here, we bring together digital studies and Black feminist thought to critique anti-Blackness in mainstream feminism and to consider how Black cyberfeminists disinvest from racialized digital spaces while also existing within them.

Mainstream feminism has traditionally excluded Black women's experiences. Black feminism developed in response to anti-Blackness in feminism, arguing that the field of study and activism must contend with the full complexity of our identities: race, gender, class, and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) legal studies scholarship significantly brought the conversation forward, including the concept of *intersectionality,* and it is a key aspect of Black feminist theory. Many concepts that stem from feminism, such as *counterpublics*, have been developed with primarily white women in mind, which Black feminists have critiqued (Collins, 1990; Cooper, 2015; Trott, 2021). *Counterpublics* are alternative spaces where marginalized groups can create knowledge, culture, and ideologies that challenge dominant knowledge, culture, and ideologies. However, as scholars like Verity Trott (2021) have argued, feminist counterpublics must consider the ways that Black women have been excluded, and make efforts to be mindful of the racial power dynamics at play in feminist alternative spaces.

As feminism adapted to consider how gender works in a digital space, this particular subfield became known as *cyberfeminism*. At the core of cyberfeminism is the idea that technology and the digital sphere have been designed through a masculine framework to be tools of patriarchy. Yet, cyberfeminists argue that we can create a more equitable and inclusive digital space where everyone can thrive through counterpublics as well as by However, Black cyberfeminists, or digital Black feminists, have pushed back on this techo-utopianism (i.e., the idea that technology is creating a better, more ideal place), arguing that in much the same ways that traditional feminism has excluded the experiences of Black women, cyberfeminism has not fully considered how Black women's experiences play out in the digital sphere. As a result, there is a phenomenon of Black women creating counterspaces within feminist counterspaces as they find themselves pushed out of and harmed in those spaces meant to disrupt patriarchal ideology.

Within the digital sphere, Black women's presence is, somewhat paradoxically, hyper-visible and suppressed. In her book, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) establishes this idea by demonstrating how, while some believe that the internet represents an equal playing field for all ideas and identities, evidence suggests that discrimination is built into algorithms and search engines. Noble argues that the existing search algorithms on the internet are deeply biased in a way that promotes whiteness and oppresses people of color, particularly women of color. With a more explicit focus on Black women and femmes, Moya Bailey (2021) coined the term *misogynoir* to discuss the anti-Black and misogynistic ideologies that shape societal ideas about Black women, and has demonstrated how misogynoir is entangled with digital spaces and social media platforms. In these spaces, Black women are depicted as more hypersexual, ugly, unhealthy/fat, and deficient in a variety of ways than their white counterparts.

An example of misogynoir within a digital context is the backlash that Megan Thee Stallion experienced online after coming forward about her experience of being shot in the feet multiple times by Tory Lanez, a Black male rapper, in 2020 (Haile & Phan, 2022). In this situation, Lanez and his team spread misinformation about Megan Thee Stallion, a Black woman in a hypermasculine field, and this led to questions about her credibility. Importantly, in this scenario, many people took to social media to talk about the controversy, and though Megan Thee Stallion was the victim of the shooting, much of the discourse about her was negative. This situation highlights the way that gender and race are intertwined, especially for Black women, and how digital spaces are not and have never been safe for Black women.

Social media is a space where race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in digital experiences. Black cyberfeminism brings together an intersectional understanding of Black women's identities with digital creativity and resistance strategies. Such strategies have included engaging in "hashtag activism" (i.e., building an online movement using a common hashtag like #SayHerName), creating new narratives that disrupt mainstream narratives, and creating new spaces where Black women's voices can thrive.

Indeed, Black women and femmes—whether or not they identify as Black cyberfeminists—have developed unique digital aesthetics, humor, memes, and cultural codes. Catherine Knight Steele's essential text, *Digital Black Feminism* (2021), calls out how Black women have been at the forefront of some of the darkest parts of digital technology, from trolling and online harassment to algorithm bias and influencer culture. Steele argues, though, that Black women's relationship with technology and technoculture extends beyond our current social media platforms. Using the concept of the *virtual beauty shop*, Steele demonstrates that Black women have extensive experience creating spaces for themselves in worlds and spaces not designed for them. A digital Black feminism can reach a wide audience online, but its reach is accompanied by an increase in anti-Black and misogynistic discourse online.

Black women are critical in shaping culture and society off and online. Black cyberfeminism has been at the heart of hashtag activism, as discussed in *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Jackson et al., 2020). By using hashtags on social media platforms, marginalized groups can advance narratives that disrupt dominant and mainstream narratives while building and organizing global networks. #SayHerName, for example, is a hashtag used by Black feminist activists, organizers, and supporters to draw attention to the erasure of Black women and femmes, even when they are the victims of violence, such as Breonna Taylor and Oluwatoyin Salau. Though in the case of Taylor and Salau, the violence against them occurred offline, social media platforms became important spaces for understanding how anti-Blackness and misogynoir frame the experiences of many black women, girls, and femmes online. In turn, Black cyberfeminists have created spaces and techniques for disrupting those harmful narratives (Jones, 2019).

These unique digital spaces are not the utopias predicted in (white) cyberfeminism, and come with their own set of consequences, backlash, and ever-changing forms of anti-Blackness. With this case study, we will look at three examples of Black women and femmes who have created

counterpublics through social media, examining the ways their work aligns with Black cyberfeminism, deepens our understanding of intersectionality, and develops a liberatory space that centers Black womanhood.

Case Study

To deepen our understanding of Black cyberfeminism, we will now look at three different creators who have used Instagram, among other social media platforms, to create counterpublics that center the voices and experiences of Black women. With each example, we will look at how the creator is actively disrupting dominant ideologies, including but not limited to anti-Black misogyny, or misogynoir. By disrupting multiple dominant ideologies, these Black cyberfeminists are engaging in an intersectional understanding of activism and advocacy: they openly and explicitly acknowledge the ways that race and gender are tied up with one another and with sexuality, class, and other social identities. We will briefly address the kinds of backlash and pushback the creators have experienced as Black women and femmes on social media platforms that many believe to be race neutral. However, we will also discuss the importance of counterpublics in formal and informal community organizing.

The first Black cyberfeminist creator is The Nap Bishop, who is found on Instagram under the handle @thenapministry. Established by author, artist, chaplain, and community organizer, Tricia Hersey, this Instagram profile promotes the idea that "rest is resistance." Hersey argues that naps, dreams, and rest are pathways to liberation, and her profile features statements like "Divest from capitalism, lay yo ass down", and "Feel more, you can't think your way to your liberation, get into the body, slow down, rest, listen, stay in the DreamSpace." Hersey identifies as a Black womanist and Afrofuturist, paradigms in alignment with Black cyberfeminism in the ways that they center Black women's knowledge and critical role in technology.

There is something counterintuitive about @thenapministry's message. It relies on social media platforms (alongside published books, workshops, and art exhibits) to organize people around the idea that we as Black women must rest as a way to resist the demands of capitalism while also existing on a social media platform built around capitalism (for more on the connections between platform capitalism and racial capitalism, see McMillan Cottom, 2020). On a platform that demands we post certain things at certain times in certain ways in order to go viral or build/maintain a following, Hersey rejects that message at almost every turn. Instead, she says, "Let people run their mouths on social media. Keep your head down and do your work. The

work that you were called to do. Stay in your passion. Stay in your heart" (March 16, 2025). And with 553,000 followers and a *New York Times* bestselling book, Hersey has let people around her struggle to make the platform's algorithm work for them without appearing to do so in her own work. Alongside pictures of Black women napping in fields, Hersey posts about the idea that, especially for Black women, rest is a path to reparations. This is an idea she embodies as she rejects busy speaking schedules and pushes against social media trends. For example, her work aligns closely with current efforts to push against the rise of white supremacy in the United States, but she does not lean into the political panic around the Trump administration's Executive Orders, reminding her audience that this work is "a lifetime meticulous love practice… Stop marketing and feeding algorithms and go rest" (April 7, 2025).

In her posts and the community she cultivates around her work, Hersey is creating a counterpublic, an alternative digital space that centers Black womanism and a rejection of capitalism's grind culture. These two concepts are inseparable in her work, demonstrating how intersectionality enhances and deepens activism around both Black women's liberation (which is its own kind of intersectionality as it brings together race and gender) and the toll that capitalism takes on the most marginalized people groups in our country (and, truthfully, all of us). Hersey's career did not begin on social media platforms, but the use of social media has undoubtedly furthered it because of the ability to connect with more like-minded people and to build a following. Social media is just another tool for her to embody and enact Black feminism.

The second Black cyberfeminist example is Ericka Hart. Formerly an instructor at Columbia University's School of Social Work, she took to the internet to talk about how the university quietly pushed her out, but continued offering the class she developed and even the syllabus she created (Hart, 2021). As a Black, queer, non-binary femme, Hart (she/they) knew from their own experiences and research that this particular incident was not just a simple case of adjunct job insecurity; she directly calls out how there are no protections in place at the intersection of being an adjunct instructor, being Black, being queer and non-binary, and being open about experiences of racism. Now, Hart has continued this work as a sex educator, writer, podcaster, and racial/social/gender justice educator on social media, including Instagram under the profile name @ihartericka. She uses social media to share her experiences living, working, and being in relationship with Black queerness.

With more than 445,000 followers, Ericka posts often about their life as a Black queer non-binary femme, everything from thoughts about Senator Cory Booker's record-breaking 25-hour-long speech on the Senate floor, to trans-inclusive sex education workshops, to videos of their son trying a cookie challenge. Hart's profile represents the wholeness of their particular experience as a Black non-binary femme, especially as it relates to race, gender, and sexuality. Hart's focus on a Black feminism that includes trans, queer, and non-binary individuals is grounded in scholarship that recognizes that these fields should be—and in many cases, have been—inextricable (Ballard, 2025; Bey, 2022; Green & Bey, 2017) They also discuss issues that are not directly within their particular life experience but are interconnected with Black feminism, such as Palestinian rights, representations of Black masculinity, and class divides. This "wholeness" is intersectionality and Black cyberfeminism more broadly exemplified. Hart has created a counterpublic that centers Black queer, trans, and non-binary people, often building off hot topics and viral moments (e.g., Cory Booker's speech) to re-center their community while creating new knowledge about Black queerness and sexuality.

The third and final Black cyberfeminist example this case study presents is Alexis Nikole Nelson who posts under the Instagram handle @blackforager. Nelson's work focuses on educating about and reclaiming foraging practices, which have deep roots (pun intended) in Indigenous and Black cultural knowledge foraging (Zepelin, 2022). She calls out the ways that white-centric wellness culture has appropriated and capitalized on this knowledge. She does so while educating about which foraged plants are edible and which are not, posting joyful pictures of her outfits, and her love of pop punk/emo bands like Fall Out Boy. Like Hart, Nelson's Instagram posts often capture a more holistic view of being a Black woman in a white-centric world.

@blackforager is the most popular of the three profiles highlighted here with almost 2 million followers. Though many of her posts are about vegan food, foraging, and recipes, Nelson does not shy away from the realities of posting such things as a Black woman. For example, in a post on August 3, 2024, she addresses the ongoing discussion (and misogynoir) around women and femininity in the Olympics, a topic that Black feminist scholars have written about in more formal ways (see Brown, 2025). Yet, Nelson writes about it from her experience as a tall Black girl and woman who has intentionally sought more femme styles (e.g., dresses, makeup, and an air of whimsy) to demonstrate her femininity.

The idea that Black women, and especially Black femme athletes, do not match the societal ideals of womanhood is centuries in the making, and Nelson acknowledges that her experiences and her voice are just a small part of that narrative. But in using her platform to call that out and be vulnerable about her experiences, she is creating a counterpublic where Black cyberfeminism thrives. How does this relate to foraging? Nelson talks about how Blackness has often not been welcome in the vegan and foraging worlds, where white ideas of wellness are dominant. Perhaps this is why her Instagram handle specifically calls out the juxtaposition of her identity: she is both Black and a forager. Of course, though, she is so much more than that, and the content she creates is also creating space for the intersection of her identities as well as the intersection of others' identities. Alexis Nikole Nelson has created a counterpublic where her voice as a Black woman is important in the world of foraging, a reclaiming of knowledge that, as noted earlier, stems from Black and Indigenous knowledge in what is now the United States.

These three cases—The Nap Ministry, Ericka Hart, and BlackForager—are just a few examples of Black women and femmes creating counterpublics on social media platforms. Though each focuses on a different issue—rest is resistance, Black queer and trans issues, and foraging—they bring intersectionality to the forefront as they move beyond talking about race and gender to address other issues that impact Black women and femmes in line with scholarship on Black feminism (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) and specifically Black cyberfeminism or digital Black feminism (Bailey, 2021; Steele, 2021; Trott, 2021).

Discussion and Reflection

Though this case study focuses on the ways that *intersectionality* is a core concept in Black feminism, scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have identified other aspects of Black feminist theory. One such aspect is the necessity of *intellectual activism*, which refers to the ways that Black feminist thought combines scholarship with practical, on-the-ground activism, balancing both as equally important factors in developing knowledge. Collins also introduces the *matrix of domination*, which is closely related to intersectionality as it demonstrates how structural forms of oppression—racism, classism, homophobia and transphobia, misogyny, and other discrimination—are interconnected across our lives. Black feminist thought also challenges the negative stereotypical images of Black women as defeminized, hypersexual yet also desexualized, and ultimately less-than-human, a concept that Collins calls *controlling images*. These core concepts create a broad field seeking to reclaim Black women's humanity.

With this case study, we have explored Black cyberfeminism through the lens of counterpublics on social media platforms. Though the three cases explored in this study do not specifically identify themselves as Black cyberfeminists on their Instagram profiles, they exemplify unique approaches to digital activism centering Black women and femmes' lived experiences, creating alternative spaces within a digital space that is fraught with anti-Black racism and misogyny. Black feminists, whether they are scholars, activists, or a combination of the two, are reimagining and reshaping spaces that have traditionally excluded them.

As we locate these three creators—Tricia Hersey's The Nap Ministry, Ericka Hart, and Alexis Nikole Nelson's BlackForager—within the context of counterpublics, cyberfeminism, and intersectionality, we can consider the role that Black cyberfeminism may play in a future of technology that centers humanity. Though the focus here has been Black women and femmes, understanding how these marginalized groups have created knowledge, community, and activism in a digital space can help all of us think about our role in challenging dominant ideologies and oppressions.

Discussion Questions

1. How do the three featured creators each embody the concept of *intersectionality* in their digital activism? How do their embodiments differ and how do they align?
2. Why are counterpublics important for Black women and femmes in a digital sphere? In other words, what aspects of our digital world created the conditions where Black women would need an alternative space outside the dominant digital space? What are the limitations of such counterpublics?
3. What representations of Black womanhood have you seen on social media? Who is creating that narrative? Who benefits from that narrative?
4. In what ways do the examples from this case study challenge and complicate mainstream (cyber)feminist frameworks?
5. What other aspects of Black feminist thought (controlling images, intellectual activism, and the matrix of domination) are relevant to this discussion of Black cyberfeminism? Choose one of the topics and discuss how it shows up on social media.
6. If social media platforms were built for Black women's liberation, what would they look like? How would they differ from our current platforms?

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