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Nappy Queens, Performance, and Vlog-like Things: Combing Through Layers of #BlackJoy

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> *I think of hair as an archive along the lines of performance theorist Diana Taylor's description; but in its connection to rituals of care (and violence), Black hair closely aligns with the 'ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice, as a way to transmit or convey knowledge or memory.'*
>
> *– Jasmine Nichole Cobb, New Growth: The Art and Texture of Black Hair*

Digital spaces embody unique chaos and messiness, contrasting with the ordered forms of dominant US culture. This desire for messiness challenges rigid structures imposed by cultural norms, allowing dynamic and diverse expression of Black culture. Despite mainstream cultural demands for conformity, many digital platforms celebrate freedom from strict constraints and embrace a rich tapestry of voices, experiences, and cultural influences. This messiness also acknowledges the multifaceted nature of Black culture, resisting simplistic categorization that is stifled by the orderliness of white-dominated norms (e.g., algorithmic bias and language styles). We must recognize online spaces that foster inclusivity and creativity to form virtual communities where Black individuals connect, share stories, and offer support for resilience.

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Scholars like André Brock, Jr., Adam Banks, and Catherine Knight Steele explore digital platforms as mediums for Black joyous practices which span positive, negative, and political dimensions. Specifically, Brock argues that Black digital spaces contribute to cultural production through engaging communication styles and diverse texts.[1] Resisting orderliness, these spaces become generative for cultural expression, challenging marginalization, and fostering inclusive representation of Black voices. Furthermore, theorizing about digital spaces for Black women recognizes their unique experiences and help show how identity is shaped in these virtual realms. According to Steele, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube empower Black women to transcend everyday racism through community building, cultural affirmation, education, visibility, representation, and creative expression (Lepere). These spaces serve as canvases for digital art and design and enable storytelling as a tool that can amplify positive narratives about Black beauty through image and video (Martina, Leeker, et. al.).

Banks defines the role of the online Black storyteller as the digital griot. Banks describes the digital griot as someone who weaves the past, present, and future of Black culture online by incorporating a variety of texts that focus on the fluidity of print, oral, and digital media through Black discursive and theoretical practices. This is an intentional rhetoric for the 21st century that offers value for how we understand the future of performance alongside technology and technoculture. Black women operate as griots who introduce a sense of order and flexibility to Black feminist expressions of joy online. This orderliness is not about controlling Black feminine bodies but instead entails a momentary and fleeting structure. A brief coherence surfaces when all aspects of an online experience align, only to disperse again and evolve. Collectively, Black women as digital griots inhabit the kind of togetherness that expand this dynamic. They act as guides, urging us to pay attention to moments of clarity and insight without lingering. Like the griot, Black women are constantly in a state of perpetual creative motion in the digital realm. As Nekeisha A. Alexis argues, "it is good to be in the melanin we're in, to speak with our tongues, to laugh with and at ourselves, to wear our hairs the way we want, it is rejoicing in our cultures, and our histories which comprise of much more than shackles and chains" (1). Here, she highlights the agency that is typically absent in predominately white digital spaces that resist, imitate,

[1] Examples of engaging communication styles in Black digital spaces include poetry and prose performances, video essays, podcasts, social media campaigns, and digital storytelling platforms.

fantasize, and control Blackness. In contrast, Black women griots freely use digital spaces to showcase innovative and artistic hairstyles, contributing to the evolution of beauty standards and challenging conventional norms.

The intricate connections between Blackness, hair, and digital space reflect the rich tapestry of Black culture. Black hair serves as a powerful means of expressing identity through various styles, textures, and grooming practices rooted in African traditions. Digital spaces provide avenues for Black individuals to share diverse hairstyles, discuss hair care, and celebrate natural textures. Visual storytelling through images, videos, and blogs in these spaces broadens the representation of Black beauty (Bailey). Social media empowers Black women to reclaim narratives around their hair by showcasing its versatility and beauty. Digital platforms also connect people with natural hair, fostering a global community that celebrates unique journeys and expressions of Blackness. This inclusivity contributes to the positive and empowering narratives that we demonstrate in the accompanying video essay.

The narratives in this video, both visual and textual, delve into self-care, hair care, and the intimate joy experienced by Black women with natural hair (Hall and Bell). The video's use of brevity allows for a focused exploration of personal experiences, especially in self-care practices that are like the moments of joy found in beauty shops. Gratch and Gratch argue that traditional notions of liveness and co-presence in performance do not align with how we understand most online spaces. Thus, we create alternative realities for ourselves by crafting visual narratives with Black performance methods.[2] The contributors perform various texts, emphasize poetry and prose through performance, and document a collective experience of joy that has been shared on social media by each digital griot. This visual exploration encompasses caring for curls, coils, kinks, and locs, and frames broader ideas of beauty, wellness, (m)otherhood, activism, and digital culture in relation to sociocultural issues. Ultimately, we wield power by constructing images, audiovisual media, and stories that challenge negative histories of looking at the Black body.[3]

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[2] I refer to Black performance methods as culturally specific approaches to performance that emerge from Black experiences, histories, and cultures. These methods encompass various artistic expressions, storytelling, and performative elements rooted in the African American diaspora and Afrofuturism.

[3] See *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*

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