Book Review: *Digital Black Feminism* by *Dr. Katherine Knight Steele*

Makeda Tadesse

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In *Digital Black Feminism*, Dr. Katherine Knight Steele argues that feminism alone fails to encapsulate race *and* gender, which she asserts are also essential to analysis (i.e. trans-ness and western associations of masculinity and femininity, and their constructed opposition to each other). It's in this way that Black feminism precedes feminism. Calling upon Black feminist thinkers and writers, Steele insists that Black feminism is not an augmented version of feminism, and digital Black feminism is not an addendum to existing theoretical frameworks like cyberfeminism or technofeminism. Through her book, she stresses the importance of semantics and language in acknowledging Black womens engagement and contributions to technology. While offering tribute for the revolutionary political theory of technofeminism as first brought to the mainstream by Donna Haraway, Steele manages to also balance critique for the ways in which these renditions fail to center identities of the margins.[1]

Echoing the ethno-gendered communal havens that are implied from 'the barbershop' for Black men, 'the locker room' for white American men, and 'the salon' for women/white women at large, Steele connects Black women's role in curating online communities as transformative hubs of discourse as "digital beauty shops" – where socio-political issues, cultural phenomena, and personal narratives converge.[2] When looking at polling numbers, online debate about socio-political matters, cultural phenomena, etc., Black feminist writers, bloggers, and niche cohorts in The Online engage with their audiences and within themselves these intricacies, and they call upon those outside their community to share messages to the masses when they aren't heard or taken as the pilots of discourse. At its core, *Digital Black Feminism* compellingly situates Black women's digital contributions within historical, cultural, and theoretical frameworks that highlights their value to technology and discourse. However,

[1] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 14.
[2] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 51

given its attempt at inclusivity, the book's narrative pacing is complex and the narrowed geographic lens at what constitutes *Blackness* challenges its breadth.

Steele's message is not unfamiliar to me. With references to "sweating out edges" and the communal articulation in describing "digital beauty shops," I fit within the narrative for Steele's intended audience.[3] Having been an active participant in these online communities for years, the ideal reader is one that is somewhat familiar with these topics, grew up during the digital age (more specifically in the digital communities she mentions), and already has at least some introductory knowledge about Black or intersectional feminism.[4] This book is recent, and is situated amongst the writings and lectures of Saidiya Hartman[5], Dorothy Roberts[6], Patricia Collins[7], Moya Bailey[8], and many other Black feminist authors; it is the patterns in which Steele references these theorists and outlines her assertions, in fact, that leads to the understanding of her audience. Assertions of Black womanhood, for example describing the nuance between Womanism and Black Feminism or "Hip-hop feminism" vs "Digital black feminism," and references of prolific Black feminist writers are often listed without a breadth of introduction – seemingly with the assumption that the reader is already somewhat familiar with these concepts or themes.[9]

***Black Digital Functionality and Clarity***

For a large majority of the text, there's flowery, surface level language about what this book constitutes as technology, and how it situates Black women's contributions or usage within it. Though the assumed audience is presumed to know the framework to which she's discussing these topics, her assertions are still arguments, even as she attempts to delicately guide readers to them. "Black women

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[3] Ibid, 7.
[4] There is mention about how the term *intersectionality* had been commercialized to mean the intersection of different identities, but the origin of the term – as outlined by its creator Kimberlé Crenshaw, was specific to Black women. For this sentence, I differentiate it by how it's interpreted in the current zeitgeist and understanding of the term.
[5] Saidiya Hartrman,*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).
[6] Dorothy Roberts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-first Century* (The New Press, 2011).
[7] Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Duke University Press, 2019).
[8] Moya Bailey, *HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (MIT Press, 2020)
[9] Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 56.

have always engaged with technology… Black women, as purveyors of the home, had to master many forms of technology."[10] It is unclear in the first half of the book what period or framework Black women's use of tech will be interpreted, for example: industrial age labor, technologists, or coders. There is often little blunt clarity until the middle of chapters themselves. It isn't until mid-way through Chapter two that we find the first distinct example of what the book assumes as technology; in Chapter two Steele describes the practice of hair straightening as *survival technology* and hair braiding as a technology rooted in cultural legacy.[11] Chapter four introduces Black vernacular as technological creativity.[12] Independent of the deeper contexts Steele explores with both, these definitions seem transcendent, almost abstract compared to what is commonly interpreted as *technology* (i.e. tangible), and yet they do not appear until pages 41 and 96 respectively. A writing device that may have been seen as an opportunity for a book structure that parallels storytelling, the result is instead an introduction of what *will be discussed* that seems to span several chapters. Earlier inclusion for what is literal and encompassed by Digital Black Feminism under technology and 'The Digital,' would have opened up more opportunities for engagement by the reader.

Chapters would often begin with a stated goal and enter roundabout ways of getting to the end, introducing several large topics and anecdotes which would require a narrowing of each before connecting themes. If not for attentive reading and familiarity with the subjects, readers may find it hard to recall previous points made in earlier chapters. Chapter four introduced three historical and three contemporary Black feminist writers' work and introduced the following topics: the benefit of typing as emerging tech for young black girls, literacy disparities (tech and print), hashtagging and uniqueness of its use in Black Twitter, ethnography and relationship to your subject, the Selfie and self-documentation, publishing, monetization and engagement of work, open-access to data vs private relationship to research, and writing as a practice. Despite the implied strength of each of these concepts to the greater essence of Steele's arguments, the introduction of such a large variety of themes condensed into a single chapter

[10] Ibid, 28.
[11] Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 41.
[12] Ibid, 96.

creates a challenge in following the path of her ideas. The stated goal for this chapter was to: "...highlight the relationship Black women form with their tools and the relationship Black women have to their work."[13] This purpose, however, became lost when large sections of this same chapter hyperfocus on a conflict between Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes about who owned a particular play, and Hurston's correspondence to Charlotte Osgood Mason for advice.[14] The purpose of including these themes is not lost, but the detail needed for the amount of information provided also required guidance to follow the path she takes the reader on.

Throughout the book, Steele notes the unique relationship Black bloggers and media artists had built with their audience in the early years of the internet – cultivating mutual and lateral connection as opposed to a one-to-many dynamic. In Chapter four, the book introduces the story of prominent writer and feminist Jamilah Lemieux and her experience rising to prominence in the midst of the blogging age.[15] Lemieux, celebrated early in her career for her critiques of the exploitation of Black women's labor and their lack of acknowledgment in public and professional spaces, cultivated an audience that found resonance with her blog. Her ability to candidly articulate shared frustrations and aspirations created a communal space, where readers engaged with both her and each other directly, fueling a personal connection to her and her work. Years later, Lemieux's platform expanded and she began writing for *Ebony Magazine,* launched digital publications, and began monetizing her work; with this, the dynamics of her audience shifted. The readers who had bolstered her for challenging the systemic undervaluation of Black women's contributions started critiquing her self-valuation, perceiving her new financial gains as a departure from their shared intimacy. Lemieux was confronted with the irony and forced to balance a new relationship to her activism and work: an audience that once championed her found themselves at odds with the same realization of principles in her career. Steele uses Lemieux's story to highlight the complexities of navigating digital spaces as a Black woman, particularly the tensions between personal branding, communal expectations, and the inherent changes that come with leveraged visibility and

[13] Ibid, 100.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

professionalization in a capitalist framework. This story itself fits within the broader contextual argument that Steele is urging, and yet despite being strong to her central argument for the chapter, is lost when situated between *the emergence of typing in black households* and *Black Feminist Buzzwords*. Chapter four alone could exist as its own publication, each topic a standalone section. By using unspecific language and failing to use earlier opportunities to establish foundation and clarity, these sections often read as streams of consciousness. In this way, given the complexity of the subject, the book's main strength is also its weakness.

Noting the lack of ethnographic research focusing on Black women as sole subjects as opposed to marginal persons, Steele has undertaken a major function. Dr. Steele is clearly well-researched; her ability to combine the theory and writing from casual users and Black feminist writers cross-generationally is exquisite. Despite the labyrinthe, it's clear this book was the culmination of years of work and study from her ability to eventually call-back to earlier portions of the book and resolve potential questions or open threads. The introduction of the blogosphere in Chapter 3 resolving the conflict of 'loneliness' that came from writing in a pre-digital era mentioned in Chapter 2 bridged the gap between what was a "lack of immediate feedback," and the ability to "...participate in the community discourse" as avatars, profiles, and an online Self.[16] Steele moves between paragraphs very seamlessly while anchoring the narratives well, making for a very pleasant read.

***History and the 'Black' Diaspora***

Steele defines the Black experience and Black women as singularly those who have West African enslaved Black American ancestors. In a period where The Online is beyond our respective geographic locations, the communities that fall within *Blackness* (shared or parallel colonial histories, cultural themes, etc.) are expansive. In her section *Reconstructing Black Women's Narratives about Technology* in Chapter 1, Steele herself acknowledges the harm of Black women's erasure from American history: "The absence of Black women in our understanding of technology is an intentional practice of erasure doing

[16]Ibid, 55, 74.

further violence to an already oft violated group."[17] Though not explicitly described in the book, the likely version of *Blackness* that Steele defines in her text is a political theory introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois, wherein he defined race as a product of power and subsequently resistance as opposed to biology. Through this theory, *Black* is specifically a thread between class and American capitalism.[18] Western technology as a tool for cruelty and tyranny was arguably first with militarization and violent imperialism (i.e. guns). Despite Steele's reference that "Those in power defined technology and wrote its history, prioritizing the written word and excluding so much of the oral history of Black women who lived through an era of state-sanctioned terrorism and enslavement," I contend with what felt like a hypocrisy and an erasure of Black African and Caribbean women from this Black history; in much of the same vein of indigenous exclusion and exploitation as encapsulated by Lisa Nakamurra, an author whose work is highly revered in this book.[19] There's a precursor to this history, and the Black experience in this context then far predates the 1500s. Steele refers to the digital footprint of Black feminist author and technologist Luvvie Ajayi who identifies both as Black American and Nigerian – an acknowledgement of the labor and shared practice of writing within the digital space as a technological advancement of Black women beyond just the United States.[20]Steele acknowledges the labor of Black women's influence on technology and through history, the harm of ignoring such labor, and yet performs an erasure of what constitutes Blackness; by moving through the book with an underlying definition without providing context or clarity, the text assumes only a specific mold of Black women have contributed to digital tech spaces and could reap the benefits of a book and like this.

This is not to say the importance of a unique history that motivates her use of "us" and "our" language is fraught – there is a history that is exclusively tied to the Black American experience that has been intentionally disregarded. I welcome and echo the critiques of diasporic Black people (African and Caribbean) that disparage Black American culture; an othering intended to be a social currency that is

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[17]Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 74.
[18] See Glenn Mac Trujillo, *What Race Terms Do: Du Bois, Biology, and Psychology on the Meanings of "Race"* (Vanderbilt University: ThinkIR, 2018), 235-247.
[19]Ibid, 23.
[20] Ibid, 100.

steeped in Western supremacy – reminiscent of a tribalism many in the diaspora are all too familiar with themselves. Considering these distinct cultural and perceptive differences, it *would* be fair to frame this book in the context of Black American women singularly – but failure to explicitly outline this is an unfortunate limitation of the book.

In spite of some structural shortcomings, *Digital Black Feminism* illuminates the intersections of Black womanhood and technology, inviting both scholars and participants of Black digital communities to engage with these complexities. Steele's work in centering Black women in the digital age comfortably lies amongst the writings of other Black feminist thinkers and writers, and this book is sure to exist as an essential reading along with her contemporaries. The book's value lies in its ability to expand the definitions, boundaries, and historic memory of technology, despite requiring further exploration of what *Black women are* and more solidly in what *technology is*. Digital Black feminism is a necessary lens that captures the intersections of race, gender, and the Online.[21]

[21] Ibid, 15.