

Book Review | *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists Are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets*, by Feminista Jones (Beacon Press, 2019)

Florence Madenga

Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania
florence.madenga@asc.upenn.edu

In *Reclaiming Our Space*, Feminista Jones traces a much-needed accessible history of Black feminist activism online and off, in the age of Twitter and the eras before, and in the United States and beyond. Jones, a queer Black woman, activist, writer, and community organizer, draws her frameworks from many sources, including Black feminist thinkers who would be considered part of the “canon” in academia (e.g., bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, and the voices that were an integral part of the Combahee River Collective of the 1970s), as well as female hip-hop icons (from Queen Latifah and Salt-N-Pepa to Lil’ Kim and Cardi B). She thinks with fellow Black feminists who are invested in dialogue online and social justice mobilization offline in their communities, and includes snippets and screenshots of exchanges that have led to fruitful collaboration.

Jones’s book contributes to past and ongoing conversations in media and internet studies: the conceptualizations of Black digital communities. On the “validation” of Black Twitter as a digital community in such a space, Jones marks Dr. Meredith Clark’s work as some of the first to “definitively” write about Black Twitter as an online community, with multilevel networking processes and unique cultural dynamics. Jones builds on this conversation by situating Black feminist Twitter’s existence in this broader community space as “a subculture” (p. 15). On this

Madenga, F. (2020). S Review of *Reclaiming our space: How Black feminists are changing the world from the tweets to the streets*, by Feminista Jones (Beacon Press, 2019). *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 6(1), page 1-5.

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

© Florence Madenga, 2020 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

community within a community, Jones tackles questions around misogyny and racism (including harassment and violence by some, mostly male, members of Black Twitter towards Black feminist activists) and the simultaneous hypervisibility and marginalization of Black feminist voices in spaces on social media.

Before the era of Twitter and Facebook, Lisa Nakamura asked what happened to race online and offline in her important book *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (2002). She critiqued earlier frameworks of the internet that saw it as a “utopia” where race could be transcended; instead, she asserted, “the internet is where race happens” (Nakamura, 2002, p. xi). Overly idealized views of racial harmony in “cyberspace” now seem obviously naive, but Nakamura’s work was, and still is, important in addressing how the internet shapes perceptions of race, gender, and ethnicity—identity wholesale. She argued that marginalized identities were being shaped online through “cybertypes.” Race could be performed via avatars and through identity tourism in the chat rooms preceding the social media platforms and the online social movements that Jones focuses on. Nakamura’s (2002) intervention is that “attention must be paid to *discourses with* rather than *appropriations of* the other” online (p. 60).

Looking at Black online communities on social media and how conversations are facilitated between members and with non-members is one avenue through which to pay attention to those discourses. *Cybertypes* raises major concerns regarding the discursive gaps in online discourse at the time, and how those gaps were a major obstacle to a “progressive” internet future. Nakamura calls for more and newer perspectives on critical race theory to interrogate cyberculture, beyond literary analysis in more traditional fields (and within a system that severely lacks enough scholars of color). She also points out the “lack of internet discourse often found along raced, classed, and still to a narrowing extent, gendered lines [that] continue to cut particular bodies out of various histories in the making” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 3). Towards the end of the book, she poses these questions: “Whose ideas have power? Whose discourse is privileged? And why haven’t these questions been asked before?” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 138).

While the internet may look different and more “inclusive” now than it did in the early 2000s, and as social media platforms serve as sites for discourse, the questions Nakamura asks should still be central in internet studies. They should be important to any discipline concerned with intersectionality, and should be used to continuously interrogate what is considered “scholarship” and what is not.

Jones joins other Black feminist writers, scholars, and social commentators, such as Tressie McMillan Cottom (*Thick: And Other Essays*, 2019) and Brittany Cooper (*Eloquent Rage*, 2018), who have recently used stories of their own personal journeys (beyond the academy) to critically engage with what it means to galvanize communities on Twitter and encourage discourse centered on intersectionality.

Jones's work also responds to Nakamura's call by spotlighting bodies of Black women who have been cut out of the history of the internet, social media, and activism. She points to how Black feminist activists have contributed significantly to cyberfeminism, as well as how they have been innovative in the social media space, particularly Twitter, but are often unnamed and/or completely left out of its history. In Chapter 1, she explores the use of hashtags by Black women on Twitter in organizing resistance and carving out a space for their activism. Throughout the book, she provides ample examples of when "hashtags have been important mechanisms in modern movement-building, and Black women, Black feminist women especially, have exemplified best practices when it comes to hashtag utilization" (p. 16). These hashtags include #YouOkSis, #BlackLivesMatter, #GirlsLikeUs, #RhodesMustFall, #RapeCultureIsWhen, #WhyIStayed, #NMOS14 (National Moment of Silence 2014 for Michael Brown, which led to 119 vigils across 42 states and 5 countries), and countless others. Jones also connects the way in which Twitter functions as a platform (how to @ someone, Twitter threads, retweeting and related Twitter etiquette) to ways in which Black women are already familiar with communicating—namely, call-and-response communication structures rooted in widespread African cultural contexts, the concept of "tweeting as antiphony" from Ashton T. Crawley's *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2016), and the legacy and style of hip-hop cypher (coded language) and rap battles.

In magazine pieces and other popular media, the story of how Twitter threads came to be has been attributed to venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who began linking tweets in his timeline before the feature was available on the platform. But Jones reveals that actually, as early as 2013, a Black woman activist, @TheTrudz, linked her tweets together by replying to herself, so that she could connect her tweets to tell a story that her followers could digest with a click on the original tweet. Jones then asks, "Could someone before @TheTrudz have done this also? Perhaps. Could @TheTrudz and Andreessen have started linking tweets near the same time? Possibly. But @TheTrudz is not mentioned in the same breath as Andreessen as an innovator. And remember, origin stories matter" (p. 42).

Jones wants to make it very clear in the book that Black feminist scholars and activists have a strong and quantifiable presence on social media, and they are dedicated to pushing for and maintaining spaces where their voices can be heard. She is also speaking to the next wave of activists after her, “millennial women who grew up with caller ID and Google in their pockets” (p. 5). To all the various, overlapping generations of Black feminists, Jones says,

Who could have imagined that the pound sign, once valuable primarily for its use on touch-tone landline phones, would become one of the most powerful weapons for Black feminism? Who could have predicted that people who never set foot on a college campus, much less in a specialized journalism school, would have international audiences reading their cultural and sociopolitical analyses? Or have their work be part of a rigorous academic curriculum at universities they could never afford to attend? That is what Black feminist activism looks like today. (p. 6)

Indeed, Twitter has become a space that many may have never imagined, especially when *Cybertypes* was published. However, it is still important, as we look towards the future of discourse and intersectionality on social media, to move cautiously. Like overly optimistic notions of a post-racial internet in our past, beliefs about the “democratizing” force of social media have also dissipated as concerns over privacy issues and surveillance, online harassment, and lack of responsibility on the part of platforms to foster a truly welcoming space for marginalized people continue to come to the fore.

The present is located in a world where the algorithmic methods tethered to platforms are not neutral (and often are often discriminatory), or can be so undiscerning that the same platform that can facilitate community building can also, as techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci (2017) describes, “easily cater to the interests of Nazis.” While Jones acknowledges that when it comes to social media platforms, “the onus of responsibility for minimizing online harassment and abuse is put on victims” (p. 99), she does not go much further in interrogating the structural obstacles that future Black feminist activists may face and potential interventions they may employ.

References

Cooper, B. C. (2019). *Eloquent rage: A Black feminist discovers her superpower*. New York, NY: Picador.

Crawley, A. T. (2016). *Black Pentecostal breath: The aesthetics of possibility*. New York, NY: Temple University Press.

MacMillan Cottom, T. (2019). *Thick: And other essays*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Tufekci, Z. (2017, September 23). Facebook's ad scandal isn't a "fail," it's a feature. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/23/opinion/sunday/facebook-ad-scandal.html>

Author Bio

Florence Madenga is a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, and a research fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication. Her work explores the evolution and boundaries of media as it pertains to expanding globalization as well as new and old conceptualizations of identity building.