

Black women in and beyond Belgian mainstream media: Between opinion-making, dissidence, and marronage.

Introduction

Debates on race and racism in Belgium are often led by women of color, and by Black women in particular. Historically, Black women have held key positions in antiracist movements throughout the West, but their role as core actors in antiracist work has often been minimalized, invisibilized, or forgotten (Darlene Clark Hine, Tricia Danielle Keaton & Stephen Small 2009; Patricia Hill Collins 2000). As stated by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (2019): “[Black women’s] politics are too often erased from or misrecognized in the European imagination.” This is especially true for the context of Belgium, a country that has only in recent years caught up with its neighboring countries to engage in critical public debate about its colonial past and the aftermath thereof (Sophie Withaeckx 2019).

Black women’s media representation and engagement in public debate is, at times, characterized by equivocal interests, both from the institutional side, and from the side of the women in question. This article focuses on Black women’s media engagement, representation politics, and public debate in and beyond Belgian mainstream media. It discusses some of the media practices and interventions by Black women in Belgium and examines the different discourses that Black women use when engaging with the topics of coloniality, racism, and blackness. Partially drawn from existing literature and partially built upon my own hypotheses, which relates to my ongoing research on Black media, public life, and activism in Belgium, in this article I distinguish three key frames of engagement, through which I will observe and analyze the data obtained from the research interviews I conducted for this study. They are *opinion-making*, *dissidence*, and *marronage*. Accordingly, I combine several analytical tools borrowed from communication theory and Black feminist theory. Based on examples of Black women’s media practices in the context of Belgium in recent years, and drawing from semi-structured interviews with Black women in Belgium, this article provides insight into who speaks, what is spoken about, and who is spoken to in Black women’s media discourses. Additionally, I look into the way Black women are positioned and framed in public debate by media institutions to perform a proximity to radical Black activism. Furthermore, I examine the differences between Black women’s anti-racist discourses and strategies, and their (sense of) agency in regard to media institutions who may tokenize and/or misrepresent them. Finally, I scrutinize the role of social media and influencer culture on Black women’s public status and influence in Belgium’s public debate. Overall, my article examines dynamics between media, activism, and the lives of Black women in Belgium which have seldom been at the center of feminist media studies.

The next section of this article offers a detailed account of Black women’s media representation and public debate in Belgium to contextualize my research. The section that follows outlines key literature, theories, and studies that have influenced my work. Such

discussion then leads to an explanation of my methodological approach and the articulation of my research findings and analysis which are at the center of this article. Finally, key themes are synthesized and highlighted in the closing discussion and concluding remarks which emphasize the nuanced ways that Black women in Belgium experience and are represented in media and public debate.

Theoretical Framework

Black women's media representation and public debate

Over the past decade, a striking insurgence of the topics of racism and coloniality have entered mainstream media and public debates throughout Europe. Despite former criticism about lagging behind in such critical debates, Belgium seems to have caught up with the Western European trend. However, due to its federal character and divided cultural-linguistic politics, debates on racism and coloniality remain strongly decentralized in Belgium (Elleke Boehmer & Sarah De Mul 2012), which hinders crucial analyses of anti/Black discursive patterns. The prevailing 'colorblindness' in the French-speaking south typically averts antiracist discourses in mainstream media and public debates by means of a strong assimilationist political ideology (Ceuppens 2006). Yet, the public radio and television broadcaster of the French-speaking community (RTBF) has become host to Belgium's first and only Black women-led journalistic platform *Tarmac*. In the Dutch-speaking north – which is generally considered more inclusive of critical voices of color – such platforms cannot (yet) count on structural support from public broadcasters. Instead, quotas have helped to include a modest number of employees of color across the media landscape (Knut De Swert, Ine Kuypers & Stefaan Walgrave 2019).

Public debates about racialized minorities in Dutch-speaking Belgium have long been dominated by two main parties: right-wing political figures on the one hand, whose explicit racist and Islamophobic discourses about the Turkish and Moroccan 'Muslim' population was mainly reduced to what is known as the 'Muslim debate' rather than a debate on race, let alone racism and coloniality (Kathleen De Ridder 2010). On the other hand were white-led antiracist civil society organizations, initially established in reaction to the former (Karel Arnaut & Bambi Ceuppens 2009) who tend to speak *for*, rather than alongside victims of racism. However, voices of color have increasingly emerged at the institutional surface, especially in Dutch-speaking Belgium, which is the focus area of this article. Particularly striking – in both linguistic regions – is the engagement of Black women in antiracist work, and their in/visibility in the media and public debate on racism and coloniality (Nicole Grégoire & Modi Ntambwe 2019). That "Representation Matters" is, according to journalist and Afro-feminist commentator Djia Mambu (2020), evidenced by the fact that "what we don't see, does not exist." The long absence of Black representation in Belgian media and public debate falsely reflected a non-existence of Black people in Belgium. Yet, when it comes to media representation and the overall public life in contemporary Belgium, Black women hold an ambivalent status, which makes them at once hyper-visible and hyper-invisible (Neske Beks 2021; Rasul Mowatt, Bryana French & Dominique Malebrance 2013). This contradiction is the result of intersecting oppressions that Black women are subjected to such as anti-blackness and misogyny (Moya Bailey 2021). In the US context, anti/racist policy and public discourse has predominantly focused on the dangers (and inclusion) of Black men, which has led to the structural invisibilization of Black women.

Conversely, Black women in Europe are subjected to a prevalent *fascination* by white society (Gloria Wekker 2017). In fact, divergent portrayals of Black women as exotic and sexual objects of (white) desire have already found a place in Belgian cultural archives (Mambu 2018).

The cultural obsession with Black women is not only reflected in everyday manifestations of sexualized racism and racist sexism, but also in the way Black women *have* – however modestly and ambiguously – been visible in Belgian media since the nineties in the entertainment industry¹, as weather presenters², and more recently as writers, journalists, and cultural commentators. In an interview for the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, author and social worker Don Moussa Pandzou even stated that “a generation of empowered young [Black] women” dominates the “anti-racism debate” in Belgium (De Vries 2021). Few authors have touched upon this phenomenon (Emma-Lee Amponsah 2020), but ‘colorblind’ reporting, and the absence of databases and tangible archives on Black life in Belgium complicates academic inquiry into Black media representation and public engagement in Belgium – let alone that of Black women. This article therefore takes an alternative approach to archival work, and draws from what Stuart Hall (2001) refers to as the ‘living’ archive. Such archive is embodied by its subjects who observe, speak, share, and organize. In other words, Black women’s personal documents, stories, (collective) memories, conversations, consciousness form the archive to be inquired (Sobande 2020; Christina Sharpe 2016). The expansiveness and non-tangibility of this living archive is, however, necessarily accompanied with incompleteness, as is discussed in more detail in the methods section of my work.

Black women and Black feminist media studies

Contrary to traditional belief, the public sphere is not unitary and cannot be detached from politics that regulate public participation through mechanisms of (in)visibility and (non)publicity (Ari Adut 2012). One’s visibility and publicity is undeniably attached to power and access (or the power of access), but it is also inseparable from the notion of Voice, which is referred to in this article as the empowering act of speaking up or speaking out – audibly or visibly, individually or collectively (Nick Couldry 2010). One’s (collective) Voice can serve as medium to engage in a “collective ‘mirroring back’ of specific claims to identity in the space of appearance, [and] as a constitutive dimension of radical or subversive forms of citizenship” (Lilie Chouliaraki 2010: 228), in ways similar to what bell hooks (1992) conceptualized as ‘the oppositional gaze’.

One’s visibility and publicity in the media – particularly mainstream media, which refers to corporate media organizations and their content – is indicative of the conditions through which (one’s) citizenship – or power – is imagined, represented, or even (symbolically) granted or dismissed. The oppositional gaze has provided a valuable contribution to considerations of power and visibility as it “involves affirming Black women’s power as cultural readers and producers” (Francesca Sobande, Anne Fearfull & Douglas Brownlie 2019, p418). The practice of oppositional gazing was, however, not theorized in a climate where audiences could rely on the interactive media tools that exist today, such as smartphones, Social Networking Sites (SNS), and hashtags. Black women’s critical spectatorship, or media engagement more generally, could thus, in a way, be imagined as a technology in itself through which media

¹ Some examples are Manuela Kamusi a.k.a. Ya Kid Ki of the 90s band *Technotronic*; Karoline Kamosi a.k.a. Leki (Manuela’s sister), VJ for Belgium’s first Hip Hop program on TMF called *Coolsweat*; Dutch-Surinamese Alida Neslo of children’s TV show *De Boomhut*; Dutch-Surinamese Gerda Havertong of children’s TV show *Sesamestreet*; Kiangana Mupatshi of Flemish youth series *Helden*.

² Marie Niasse for Dutch-Speaking Belgium and Cécile Djunga for French-speaking Belgium. Djunga quit her job after a series of racist attacks.

representations are dismantled in the very moment, simply through the lived knowledge of and in Black (women's) bodies.

Although Black women have been resisting and contesting their life conditions and public depictions in various ways throughout history, the rise of the internet has concretized the immediate negotiation of racialized and gendered media representations. The development of a many-to-many media flow, associated with the Internet and social media, has often been thought of as carrying the potential to disturb the traditional power dynamics associated with broadcast and print media. Various studies have pointed out how online spaces have become sites of resistance where notions of collectivity, as well as experiences of racialization and marginalization are produced, shared, and remembered (André Brock 2020; Tressie McMillan Cottom 2016; Anna Everett 2009; Kishonna Gray-Denson 2015; Sarah Florini 2019; Sobande 2020; Catherine K. Steele 2017). Considering the substantial presence of African American users on SNS, and the significance of critical race and digital studies scholarship that originates from there, it is not unreasonable that much of the work on blackness and media focuses on the U.S. context. However, for an article such as mine it is important to draw on related work that focuses on European contexts.

Scholars of Black Europe, both within and outside the media and communication field, have provided valuable contributions to considerations of Black media engagement and representation. Dienke Hondius (2014), for instance, described global media culture as a potential source for producing equality effects, which has allowed Black presence, performance, and the distribution of self-representations to counter dominant discourses of blackness in western Europe. Stephen Small (2018) described social media as a site where contemporary Black European cultures are created and disseminated through practices of online community-building, organizing, and mobilizing. Also, Madly Simba Boumba (2018) observed the Internet to be a space that grants opportunities for self-expression and self-identification, which provides new social realities from which a new sense of belonging and community for Black diasporic communities in Belgium arise. Francesca Sobande's work on *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (Sobande 2020) remains one of very few studies that specifically addresses the digital media experiences of Black women in Europe. One of her observations points at the meaningful impact of Black American popular and digital culture on the (digital) lives of Black women in Britain. The international cultural impact of Black Americans in the world of SNS, whose digital messages reach far beyond the physical U.S. borders, not only raises important questions about the possible influence of (African) American race discourse and socio-cultural hegemony in shaping global ideas and experiences of blackness, but also requires more thorough inquiry that measures the extent to which contemporary Black identities in Europe may depend on one's online engagement and the media technologies in use. My work is an attempt to further extend the body of research on Black media engagement in Europe by mapping the conversations, connections, and cultural media practices of Black people, and particularly Black women, in Belgium.

Moreover, this article takes into account the extensive work on the capitalist nature of media industries, which impacts upon Black people's media experiences in ambivalent ways. As key sites of consumer culture, SNS serve as an industry where standing out can lead to profit (Crystal Abidin 2018). Fueled by a neoliberal infrastructure, the media landscape is in many ways steered by what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) refers to as an 'economy of visibility' which cultivates brands based on one's persona (Rendan Liu & Ayoung Suh 2017). The politics of representation and visibility is further complicated by the way Black people and their cultural production (e.g. music, fashion, politics) is prone to commodification by popular culture and mainstream media (Lauren Michel Jackson 2019; David Crockett 2008). Choosing to engage in, and benefit from such a market as a Black person (through influencer culture or otherwise), may raise criticism from peers who draw parallels between practices of (self-)branding and the

way Black people have historically and violently been transported and (ab)used as a commodity.

My work is further inspired by the scholarship of, amongst others, Safiya Noble (2018) and Ruha Benjamin (2019a, 2019b) on the discriminatory designs behind media technologies that explicitly and implicitly reproduce and amplify racial hierarchies, divisions, and biases. However, before completely settling into the idea that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, as put forward by Audre Lorde (1984), I also acknowledge such technologies to be tools that enable “temporary or partial gains in countering the establishment” (Gray-Denson 2015, p179.). I draw on the work of scholars of critical race and media who have provided crucial interventions in digital media research by capturing the interplay between race and media technology since the inception of the Internet (Amber Hamilton 2020). In particular, I borrow from Black cyberfeminist perspectives that have interrogated both early positivist views on media technologies (which declared the Internet a space of radical equality, capable of transcending race and gender) as well as pessimist theorizations of the digital divide (which linked technological progress to whiteness and maleness, imagining the Internet as inherently less or inaccessible to people of color). Black cyberfeminist critiques are underpinned by observations of Black women’s substantial presence and creative, intellectual, and emotional labor online, and of the way media technologies algorithmically reproduce racism and sexism against Black women online (Gray-Denson 2020, 2015).

Finally, as this article focuses on Black women’s media engagement and representation in and beyond mainstream media, I am attentive of how mainstream media shifted from exclusive print publication and broadcasting to alternative output (e.g. digital, visual) in response to the changing nature of the way media is consumed (Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield & Crystal Abidin 2020). This has involved ‘professional’ journalists sourcing social media content for stories for mainstream media coverage (Gwen Bouvier 2019; Steve Paulussen & Raymond Harder 2014). The global reporting on the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives matter movement is a recent example of how Black people’s social media engagement, hashtag activism, digital cultural commentary, and active media distribution impacts upon offline political activism and public debates (Sarah Florini 2019; Sarah Jackson 2016; Meredith Clark 2015). The active sociopolitical engagement and agenda setting efforts of Black people on SNS, particularly on Twitter (also known as Black Twitter), captures the power of Black people’s messages of contestation going viral and mainstream, which consequently aids in drawing attention to minoritized issues (Alissa Richardson 2020). In that sense there is no strict division between the digital public sphere and the more traditional public sphere. Instead, both are part of an online-offline continuum, constituted by the normalization of our daily digital routines. To a certain extent, that is, as not all digital messages are automatically incorporated into mainstream media and public debate. Who speaks, what is spoken about, and who is spoken to, is still a determining factor of one’s participation and visibility in public debate.

The tension and interaction between the captivating powers behind media technologies and industries on the one hand, and the simultaneous emancipatory potential they carry on the other, is further explored in this article by taking a closer look at the way Black women navigate media with discourses and practices that may at times seem contradictory.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in decolonial and Black Feminist theory. These theories involve a critical reflection on and detachment from dominant (often Western, white, and male) forms of knowledge (production). Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins observed Black women’s experiences across the diaspora to “have been routinely distorted

within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (Hill Collins 2000, p251). Based on her interpretive framework for Black Feminist thinkers and doers, this article utilizes her conceptualization of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as a “critical methodology” that underscores “the identities, knowledges, and lives of [B]lack women as valuable” (Ashley Patterson, Valerie Kinloch, Tanja Burkhard, Ryann Randall & Arianna Howard 2016, p59). BFT as a method foregrounds Black women’s embodied or lived knowledge as a valid source of knowledge. In doing so, it deconstructs the objectification of research participants (often referred to as ‘objects of research’), and challenges the imagined boundaries between the researcher and the researched.

Central to the method employed in this study are testimonial narratives. Based on the principles of Critical Personal Narrative Analysis (CPNA), which is a key method in anticolonial research by ways of disrupting dominant discourses about the “other”, I invite participants “in a critical reflection of their personal experience within [their] socio-political realities” (Dolores Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga & Judith Carmona 2012, p364). Through their critical personal reflections, Black women’s testimonies about their experiences with media and public debate in Belgium are not just valued as mere data, but as living archives, embodied knowledge, and ultimately a collaborative work through which academic knowledge is co-constructed. As most of my personal thinking is influenced by Black (women and activist) peers – of which some are included as interviewees – they must equally be considered analyzers, researchers and knowledge producers throughout this work.

Moreover, this study is qualitative in nature and includes data from interviews with twenty Black women from both linguistic regions, currently based in the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders, or bilingual Brussels. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of exploratory questions focusing on the participants’ personal experiences of and in Black public life. I invited participants to think along about how such experiences could be analyzed and conceptualized in the context of Belgium. A large part of the interview focused on the role of (Black) media and Black representations – especially the memories participants have of such representations – on thinking about their existence in Belgium as a Black woman. Questions such as “Could you tell me about one of your earliest memories of Black people in Belgian media?”, “Could you bring us back to the first time you used media as a means to raise your voice about something?”, and “What do you feel is missing the media landscape?” guided both me and the participant through the interview.

Frames of engagement: opinion-making, dissidence, and marronage

In order to map some of the different ways Black women go about their media engagement, I distinguish three frames of engagement through which the research interviews are analyzed: The first frame is *opinion-making*, which refers to media practices associated with opinion-leaders and influencers. Opinion-making media engagements are defined by a public discourse of benevolence, and a rather relatable and (relatively) unthreatening presentation (or framing). Opinion-making practices are also closely tied to the marketplace, in such a way that opinion-leaders are oftentimes incorporated in organizations to target and influence audiences in ways that benefit said organizations. This phenomenon has been extended into the world of SNS, and particularly on Instagram, as what is commonly known as influencer-culture (Abidin 2018). Although opinion-leaders are widely accepted as individuals with the charismatic power to influence large audiences, Black women are not exempt from racist and sexist hate when publicly expressing themselves – even if they are widely accepted as opinion-makers. The second frame of engagement is *dissidence*, which is defined by actions of public contestation and criticism about societal affairs. Both dissidence and opinion-making take

shape in the public arena. But whereas opinion-making practices are associated with popularity, dissidence is more so linked to the notion of otherness and marginality to the extent that discourses of dissidence are seen as a form of identity extremism that reinforce, if not awaken, racism in an otherwise supposedly peaceful and welcoming society (Zahra Mian 2021). What distinguishes opinion-making from dissidence is generally more defined by how one is framed, than by what is actually said or done. The fluidity of these frames is illustrated by how one person may fit the opinion-making frame in one medium and the dissidence frame in another.

The third frame is *marronage*, which refers to attitudes and practices of disengagement with or withdrawal from mainstream and popular media and public debate. Originally modelled after the historical phenomenon of Africans fleeing enslavement in search of freedom, marronage is understood in my work as a politics of freedom, which includes decolonial resistance and disobedience (Françoise Vergès 2017). Concretely, marronage is reflected in one's conscious disengagement from public debate, mainstream media outlets, and possibly also from SNS and other social applications. It is, however, not a practice of isolation. Rather, it is accompanied by active and engaging community work which may manifest in the form of alternative (media) connectivity and production that aims to rely as little as possible on the hegemonic-dominant infrastructures of contemporary media and the technologies behind them.

Aware of the threat of appropriation that comes with theorizing the notion of marronage outside the context of transatlantic slavery, my work aims to draw parallels between the historical condition of enslaved Black people, and contemporary conditions that Black people are subjected to due to ever prevailing colonial legacies in and beyond media (Kathryn Golden & Elise Benjamin 2018; Vergès 2017). Hence, I follow Moses März (2020, 92) who argued, based on the work of Édouard Glissant (1981), that “the historical experience of marronage lives on in the cultural realm, by presumably being ingrained in [Black people's] collective sub-conscious.”

The categorization of Black women's media practices into these rather fluid, and thus not fixed and absolute frames, provides insight into the choices some Black women make in regard to their engagement in or contribution to media debates. These frames also shed light on how engaging in public debate relies on having the means, access, skills, and relations to do so. In that respect, Black women's public engagement and media practices inform us about how their identities and discourses are shaped by the intersections of class, ethnicity, age, legal status, language, and other markers that may extort some degree of authority and/or implicate a proximity to whiteness.

What follows is an overview of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews, and of which part is presented in the form of direct citations, alternating with paraphrased findings of recurring thoughts and ideas.

Findings and analysis

Can the subaltern finally speak? > Yes, but in perfect Dutch, please.

Over the past decade, emerging Black women's voices in Belgian media have predominantly revolved around anecdotic narratives about experiences of racism. For the case of the Dutch-speaking north of Belgium, such narratives are defined by a presentation that is indicative of one's belonging to (or so-called integration in) the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium. One marker of such belonging is the level to which one has mastered the Dutch language, which is still considered a major pillar of Flemishness (De Graeve & Sibbo Kanobana 2020; Bommaert & Verschuren 1998). Another marker shared among Black women in mainstream media is their access to public debate by means of their social status. That status is generally granted by one's upbringing in a higher economic environment, higher education, and/or a socialization in a white environment as a result of adoption, mixed ancestry, or other proximities to whiteness.

In laying bare the typical ways Black women enter, navigate, and possibly exit media and public debate through practices of opinion-making, dissidence, and/or marronage, we come across a phenomenon I would identify as a *parcours flamand* (“Flemish route”). This route is characterized by the way Black women’s writing, whether or not initially intended for mainstream media outlets, are picked up on by major Dutch-language news outlets, after which the Black women in question are likely to grow into an expert of race. This phenomenon reflects the common practice of Belgian journalists of inviting or inquiring the same people over and over (Anke Schoukens 2013), which upholds the false belief that valuable Black (women’s) voices are exceptionally scarce. Additionally, such practice contributes to sparking a sense of critical indispensability in the consciousness of some opinion-making Black women. As a result, a (new) gatekeeping force on the topics of racism and coloniality is established, and tropes of “the brave victim”, “the chosen one”, or “*knuffel allochtoon*” (‘huggable immigrant’) prevail, while media institutions uphold the illusion of being radically progressive. The following testimony illustrates how opinion-making and dissidence are fluid categories, and for a large part shaped by the discursive context in which one speaks.

The fact that someone boldly tells their trauma to wake the people up—that's a very easy story for the media to share ... Hey, I was very harmless, I was almost the perfect victim ... I think from the moment I stepped out of that role and likeable trauma stories, the first cracks started to show up ... Suddenly headlines were worded very differently than before. Suddenly the cover said 'angry black woman' ... and then opinion pieces against me and against my person started to appear.

Black women’s motives for engaging in mainstream media and public debate seems to balance between a needed effort for the collective struggle and a desirable achievement for personal status and relative social power. Opinion writing has, especially in Dutch-speaking Belgium, regularly led to career opportunities for Black women in the journalistic and sociocultural sector. Additionally, it has helped some Black women to obtain a niche media-celebrity status, which is further generated by professionalizing and self-branding practices on social media (e.g. creating a fan-page). This phenomenon raises fundamental questions among some Black women about how personal gain and the struggle (should) relate to each other. Yet, opinion-making practices are also associated with temporality: mainstream media platforms have served as a tool for Black women to engage in public debates about racism and coloniality in impactful ways, but the continuity of such engagement is not self-evident. Despite obtaining widespread popularity, Black women’s visibility in mainstream media and public debate has in most - if not all - cases also led to traumatic experiences. Black women face structural violence in the form of online hate. They may, at times, also experience a sense of disposability – however contradictory with earlier mentioned feelings of indispensability – which pressures some Black women into continuously responding to and creating for an institutionally white gaze in ways that are emotionally and mentally exhausting, and jeopardize the Voice of other Black women to the extent that dynamics of competition arise.

You write a piece, you send it to a mainstream media [outlet] because of course you want a certain form of visibility. In this case, the theme I had written about was so specific and the editors would simply say: all well and good, but Ms. X is probably going to write something about that. Without

checking if she had already written anything about it at all ... And I just think that's weird because then they identify all Black people with her voice and they also assume that what I would write is what she would write, but maybe we have different opinions, maybe we have different visions, maybe we have different experiences. So that's just completely ridiculous.

The master's tools will drive us apart

There is a strong awareness among opinion-writing Black women about the production mechanisms within mainstream media institutions. Examples of such mechanisms are negative or stereotypical framing, incorrect citations, and the use of click-baits to generate traffic to certain articles. Such production practices, which often accompany the transition from opinion-making to dissidence, has led to unsafe situations for Black women in their professional and personal lives. Another common strategy employed by media institutions is the framing of Black people as ideological opposites, which tends to happen in double-interviews, resulting in tropes of “the good one” versus “the bad one”. Such tropes are especially harmful when played out in a community that is relatively small and vulnerable, and between people who are, in many cases, acquainted. Moreover, anti-racist Black women are far too often challenged to engage in debate with less progressive Black women. Right-wing political figure Assita Kanko, who is of Burkinabe descent, is a recurring name among participants, whose role in public debate seems to fit the function of those “accorded extra credibility when they express opinions atypical within their group,” in a way that advances “the interests or ideology of non-group members” (Schraub 2020, p964).

There is this idea of scarcity. There can only be one, perhaps two, brown persons on a panel. So then, brown people have to compete with each other to be that one brown person, to stand out, and then you get reduced to being ‘the brown voice’, which is completely wrong in my opinion, because I just wish there were more brown people, so that we have some kind of variation in identities and also a variation in perspectives, because we are not a monolith ... And also, if we're invited with more [than one], it's to put us against each other, it's to say 'Assita Kanko sees things differently and brown people are not united'

Colonial continuities and marronage

The trail of Black women who have (dis)appeared in/from Dutch-language public debate over the past decade, may give the impression that the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium is more progressive when it comes to discussing racism as compared to the French-speaking region. However, Black women's representation – or the lack thereof – in mainstream media and public debate does not necessarily reflect Black people's level of critical engagement in the respective regions. In fact, such (non)representations may be more indicative of the sociopolitical context in which such representation and public debate takes shape. The following excerpt suggests how Belgium's colonial aftermath weighs differently on Black people in French-speaking Belgium and Dutch-speaking Belgium as a result of the continuous execution of a colonial

power over representation, discourses, and cultural memory work in Belgian (media) institutions.

There is much less visibility of Black people in French-speaking media. But on the other hand ... there have been a lot more discussions among [Black] communities and I also have the feeling that the community there is a bit more internationally connected and more often [they] hark back to the [African] continent. And they're just not that invested in white approval, because— and this is a very blunt historical analysis, so be sure to mention that before you publish this—the colonial forces in French-speaking Belgium are much more powerful than in Flemish-speaking Belgium ... [Former colonials] are still on the boards of directors of the RTBF, and companies, and parties, and media, so I think that color was less of an issue for [Black people in French-speaking Belgium] and that it is more about a kind of Africanism and decoloniality, and I personally find that more interesting ... also because the Flemish do not see themselves as having been part of the colonial past.

The relative lack of institutional interest and support for Black activist media and culture in French-speaking Belgium (with the exception of Tarmac, which, however, does not identify as an activist platform but a strictly informative one) has also resulted in a critical independence, which has pushed Black people to organize and produce in a way that does not center whiteness. To a certain extent, such conditions have necessarily led to practices of marronage, where Black people mobilize and create within their own communities, on their own terms, and, most importantly, for themselves.

The revolution will not be digitalized. Or will it?

Digital communication and social media have become essential tools for the development of innovative and self-reliant projects among Black women in Belgium. The Internet, and social media in particular, are sites where Black women in Belgium create, share, archive, mobilize, organize, form communities, and obtain cultural knowledge. It is considered a space where one has control over their own narrative, and where there is relatively more space for a diversity in and of blackness. SNS hosts various community platforms that were created by (and for) Black women in Belgium, such as the Facebook group New African Awoken Generation, which was the first and largest Afrocentric Facebook group in Dutch-speaking Belgium, launched by two women of Congolese descent. Another prominent group is Black Sisterhood BE; a safe space for and by Dutch-speaking Black women in Belgium, inspired by the Dutch group Black Sisterhood NL. Other women-led platforms that were built around amplifying Black voices are Black Speaks Back, La Diaspora Chuchote, Menji, Reclaiming Our Joy, Sans Blanc de Rien, and Tétons Marrons.

I absolutely don't rely on mainstream media which is why I also created my own shit at some point. ... I just think there is room for so much more. So I try to create workshops for young black women here in Belgium

to create podcasts for example. I would love for them to claim their space, to create their thing, express themselves, be creative, go out there ... we have so many things to catch up on anyways, 'cause we were nowhere to be seen for so long. But I definitely rely more on independent media, on more grassroots initiatives and social media ... not being financed by any of the mainstream media or any institution where you can't say everything [you want].

The Internet is also a strategic environment where Black women build brands and make profit over their creative labor. Instagram and YouTube are two of the major platforms used by Black women in Belgium to create and share branded content revolving around topics ranging from beauty and fashion, to art, music, and politics. Such channels are accessible and fill a significant gap of information and representation that mainstream media fail to respond to, but they may also contribute to centralizing unrealistic or Americanized ideas of blackness in ways that disconnect young Black women and girls from the realities of their every lives as Black women in Belgium.

I think in 2021, if you are a young Black girl, you see a lot of different representations on Instagram, whether it's about beauty or about political awareness, that's important. So that plays a huge role in that awareness, but it also gets in the way of course. I think when you get together online, you're doing a lot of work, but is that the case when you're not doing the work offline anymore? If you stop working in the communities, if you stop coming together. In fact, I remain firmly convinced that without meeting [in person] there can be no politicizing work. So if everything is transferred to an online space, then we have a problem.

Finally, the Internet is associated with violence and feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and exhaustion. Hence, online community-building is generally considered an addition to rather than a replacement for physical community-building. However, practices and representations of joy have garnered increased attention among Black communities in recent years, especially on social media. This seems to have grown stronger after the series of global protests following the killing of George Floyd in the spring of 2020. In response to the often very explicit media images of violence against Black people, Black joy addresses the widespread feelings of emotional and political fatigue, and contests the normalization of trauma among Black people. Additionally, and somewhat simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to a widespread screen-fatigue, which has made the practice of physically coming together part of a renewed politics of mental health and self-care, and creates space for refuge, marronage, and ultimately, the development of new strategies of durable Black liberation.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the dynamics between media, activism, and the lives of Black women in Belgium. Based on semi-structured interviews with Black women in Belgium, who co-analyzed the dynamics of Black women's representation in Belgian media and public debate,

I distinguished three frames of engagement (opinion-making, dissidence, and marronage) that Black women navigate when engaging with topics of racism and coloniality in and beyond Belgian mainstream media.

Black women in Belgian media and public debate often share a profile that extorts some level of authority over topics of blackness, while simultaneously suggesting a proximity to whiteness. This has caused some Black women to be represented in a way that allow mainstream media outlets to position themselves in proximity to radical Black activism, without having to compromise on an overall anti-Black and xenophobic structure.

Typical to opinion-making, many of Black women's discourses in mainstream media and public debate center around personal experiences with racism, which has hindered transformational and structural change within media institutions and society at large. When Black women report on the more structural nature of racism and coloniality, which I associate with the dissidence frame, they are generally met with criticism, hate, and violence. What distinguishes opinion-making from dissidence practices depends very much on what is spoken about, who is spoken to, but perhaps mostly so on how Black women are discursively positioned by editorial boards.

Furthermore, this study has identified the role of the Internet and SNS as essential to Black women's daily lives and sense of public engagement. They serve as a site of refuge or marronage, where Black women gather, share, create, and organize themselves outside the hegemonic-dominant structure of mainstream media and the white gaze. At the same time they can be a depoliticizing force and serve as tools that help build brands out of one's public identity as a Black woman in Belgium, which then conflicts with the idea of marronage as it ultimately involves the habit of sharing and creating content for a profitable and predominately white public.

Moreover, Black women's media engagement and public debate about racism and coloniality is also influenced by a colonial legacy that plays out differently in the two linguistic regions and has brought about two separate media landscapes and cultures of public engagement in Belgium. Although in both linguistic regions Black women are at the forefront of antiracist work, and oftentimes positioned and/or feared by institutions as symbols of radical change, Black women's engagement and representation in media and public debate differ. Prevailing cultural memories of Belgium's colonial past has allowed Dutch-speaking Belgium, at least to a certain degree, to distance itself from a colonial "Francophone" elite while positioning itself as a progressive change maker providing media and public debates that are inclusive of Black "radical" voices. Conversely, French-speaking Belgium continues to avert critical Black voices in mainstream media and public debate which, in turn, leads to innovative, radical, grass-roots mobilizations among Black women in and beyond digital media, which could – despite being a somewhat necessary practice – be associated with practices of marronage.

Black women in Belgium have accounted for numerous cultural media productions, which deserve and require more thorough inquiry than the scope of this article can grasp. However, as Black women in Belgium have seldom been at the center of feminist media studies, this work is a first exploration of what such research could entail, and may serve as a starting point from which further research can flow.

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