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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the practices and possibilities of Black women's identity performances on social media. Despite claims that the United States is now "post-racial," in recent years there have been several examples of negative perceptions and hostile receptions to Black women's discourse and literacy practices on- and offline. Simultaneously, we have seen hashtags (#BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName) and user-generated videos created by Black women spark movements and create change. This dissertation extends the theoretical framework of online identity performance (Grabill and Pigg) by looking specifically at ways in which Black women perform their identities online and its outcomes. In chapter one, I provide the context and exigence for this study, the methods I employed, and a conceptual review of the bodies of literature this study contributes to. The following chapters consist of four case studies focused on Black women's discourse and literacy practices in rhetorical analyses of online posts, surveys, and qualitative interviews of Black women who use the sites studied. Each case works to explain how Black women's offline discourse and literacy practices are used on social media, what kinds of identities/subjectivities the practices help the women perform and create, as well as what kinds of affordances and constraints the different social media platforms have on Black women's rhetorical agency. Chapter two focuses on Black women's discourse practices in community building in Homeschooling with Freedom and Natural Tresses, two Black-women-dominant closed-groups on Facebook. The Black girls' literacy practices of five Black, female Nicki Minaj followers on Twitter shed light on the aspirations and costs of freer identity performances online. In chapter four, I explore how YouTubers Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ use identity performances in their vlogs to subvert the spirit of colorblindness in the television show *Scandal*.

Chapter five takes a deeper look at how Black women's discourse practices and literacies fight intersectional erasure on the blogosphere and reshaped the conversation about Beyoncé and feminism. In conclusion, the sixth chapter highlights implications of Black women's discourse and rhetorical agency online and provides suggestions for how the findings of this study can inform the field's current understandings of Black women's discourse and language, rhetorical agency, and digital identity at this moment when so much of our writing, rhetoric, and meaning-making is taking place online.

“DON’T TRY AND PLAY ME OUT!”:
THE PERFORMANCES AND POSSIBILITIES OF DIGITAL BLACK WOMANHOOD

by

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B.A., Hartwick College, 1998
M.A., Syracuse University, 2009

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric.

Syracuse University

August 2017

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For my parents, Sandra Cauley and William Holley

For my grandmothers, Lydia, Mary Addiline, and Mah

For my sisters in heaven and my heart, Necia and Anisa

For my loves, Nyelah, Khalif, Hakeem, Safiyah, and Thomas Lee

Gratitudes

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This section could honestly go on and be the largest one of all, but I have tried to keep it short and sweet. It has taken a village and I appreciate you all. #VillageMovement

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	i
Gratitudes	vi
List of Illustrations.....	xi
1 “How <i>do</i> a Black woman sound?”: Mapping Black Women’s Discourse from Face-to-Face to Digital Space	1
1.1 Context/Purpose of Study.....	1
1.2 Exigence	4
1.3 Methods.....	7
1.4 Relevant Literature	13
1.5 Chapter Outline.....	39
2 “Sugar, Spice, but Not Everything’s Nice”: Identification through Identity Performance in Black Women’s Closed-Facebook Communities	42
2.1 Methods.....	44
2.2 Establishing Solidarity in CMC.....	45
2.3 Data.....	48
2.3.1 Homeschool with Freedom (HWF).....	49
2.3.2 Natural Tresses (NT).....	50
2.4 Person-referencing	56
2.5 AAVE and In-Group Jargon.....	63
2.6 Matching/Testifying	64
2.7 Speech Acts – Talking with Attitude	69
2.8 Findings	85
3 “There’s a Meeting in the Ladies Room”: Black Girls’ Literacies and Counterpublics when 140 Characters are not Enuf	88
3.1 Black Girls’ Literacy and Space on Twitter	88
3.2 Carefree Black Girl Critical Play.....	107
3.3 Black Feminist Twitter.....	111
3.4 Findings	123
4 Chapter Four: Scandal(ous) Literacies and Ratchet Agency: Black Women’s Identity Performance as Resistance in YouTube Fandoms	125
4.1 Data.....	128
4.2 Fandom and Community.....	129

4.3	Identity Performance	132
4.4	Findings	153
5	Bey-ware – Construction Ahead: Beyoncé and Identity Performance in the Formation of the Black Feminist Blogosphere	157
5.1	Feminist Blogospheres:.....	161
5.2	Academic Feminism	166
5.3	Homegrown Feminism.....	174
5.4	Middle-Ground Feminism.....	184
5.5	Findings	200
6	Chapter Six: “My Mic Sound Nice”: The Implications of the Amplification of Black Women’s Voices and Rhetorical Agency on Social Media.....	202
6.1	The Possibility and Power of Black Women’s Identity Performance Online	204
6.2	The Future of Black Women’s Rhetorical Agency Now	211
	Appendix A.....	215
	Appendix B.....	217
	Appendix C.....	219
	Appendix D.....	221
	Appendix E	223
	Appendix F	225
	Appendix G.....	227
	Appendix H.....	229
	Works Cited.....	232

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 Screenshot of parenting article posted to Homeschooling with Freedom. (New York Times; New York Times, 10 Mar. 2017; Web; 25 May 2017).	49
Figure 2 Tamar Braxton meme (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017)	51
Figure 3 Closed-Facebook group word cloud (Sawyer, LaToya; “Closed Facebook Group Survey;” Survey; 1 July 2015).	53
Figure 4 Screenshot of Beyoncé backlash posted to Natural Tresses (Natural Tresses, 9 Feb. 2016; Web; 9 Feb. 2016).	78
Figure 5 A "bear gang" meme (@mobhair; Instagram; https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/89/2a/cd/892acd2d806a76fc9e966029fe40a2b6--men-beard-bearded-men.jpg ; 25 May 2017)	79
Figure 6 Screenshot of a "describe yourself" meme posted to Natural Tresses (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017)	80
Figure 7 A screenshot of a meme promoting self-esteem posted to Natural Tresses (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017).....	80
Figure 8 A fundraising flyer for the Freedom Home Academy (Freedom Home Academy; Homeschooling with Freedom; Web; 25 May 2017)	81
Figure 9 "Positive parenting" illustration based on teachings from the Nation of Islam (Muhammad, L’dia Men-Na’a; Homeschooling with Freedom; 27 Apr. 2017; Web; 25 May 2017)	82
Figure 10 Communal homeschooling program flyer posted to Homeschooling with Freedom (Ma’at Shule; Homeschooling with Freedom; Web; 25 May 2017)	82
Figure 11 “Body count” meme posted to NT (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017).....	83
Figure 12 Screenshot of Nicki Minaj wearing her “17 Perverts” shirt in “Feeling Myself” video, (Prod. Hit-Boy, Knowles, Beyonce; Perf. Minaj, Nicki, and Beyonce Knowles; 2014).	111
Figure 13 Screenshot of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj eating hamburgers in “Feeling Myself” video (Prod. Hit-Boy, Knowles, Beyonce; Perf. Minaj, Nicki, and Beyonce Knowles; 2014).	111
Figure 14 Nicki Minaj’s tweets from 2011 addressing “Black Radio” (Minaj, Nicki (@NICKIMINAJ); 11 January 2011; Tweet).....	111
Figure 15 Screenshot of a Scandal fan comment to Ekhoﬀ’s YouTube video (BarbaraJean2; Scandal at the NAACP Image Awards YouTube Comments; YouTube, 28 Jul. 2013; Web).	149

Figure 16 Academic Feminist word cloud generated from the five blog posts written by Black feminists listed in this section critiquing Beyoncé’s feminism 167

Figure 17 Homegrown Feminism word cloud generated from the 15 blogs posts in support of Beyoncé’s feminism 176

Figure 18 Middle Ground Feminism word cloud generated from the six blogs written by Black feminists positioned in the middle of the continuum between the “academic feminists” and “homegrown feminists” 185

1 “How *do* a Black woman sound?”: Mapping Black Women’s Discourse from Face-to-Face to Digital Space

“What I am saying is that language use is a choice, and the choice for African Americans has been very limited historically because we have been told that our experiences do not matter, or that they are not relevant, because they are different and therefore inferior.”

(Lanehart 1996:329)

“A black woman’s survival depends on her ability to use all the economic, social, and cultural resources available to her from both the larger society and within her community.”

(King 1988:49)

“For African American women, becoming literate has meant gaining the skills to read and write; it has also meant taking the power and authority to know ourselves, others, and our circumstances in multisensible ways and to act with authority based on that knowing.”

(Royster 2000:61)

1.1 Context/Purpose of Study

On July 10, 2015 Sandra Bland, a Black woman from Illinois traveling on a road trip to Texas, was stopped by a white police officer for allegedly failing to use her turn signal while switching lanes and later arrested on the charge of assaulting a public servant. The dashcam video from the officer’s vehicle shows that the arresting officer roughed up Bland. Three days later, Bland was found dead in her jail cell from what authorities said was a suicide as a result of hanging herself with a trash bag in the cell. In light of the numerous deaths of unarmed Black people in the United States when approached by police or in police custody, Bland’s alleged suicide raised suspicion immediately. Without full video of Bland’s days in police custody in the Waller County jail, the Black community sought to learn as much as possible about this young

woman that could help humanize her in the face of her dehumanizing treatment from the police and media as well as help shed light on the circumstances on her death. Shortly thereafter her death, self-made videos of Sandra Bland posted to her Facebook page were shared and went viral online. In these videos, Bland was like many Black women taking to social media to express herself as a Black woman; sharing her perspective about issues of the day, particularly the Black Lives Matter Movement.

In her video series *Sandy Speaks*,¹ Bland spoke in ways that even after death represented who she was as a Black woman, her way of being a Black woman in this country as well as the ways in which she made sense of her world and herself in it. She spoke to her audience, including white viewers, and schooled them about the finer points of racism in America and the disregard for Black lives by the State. For example, she shared her personal accounts of experiences that she believed to be racially motivated. In response to comments questioning her perception of her experience, she exhibited embodied consciousness and argued that while racism may not be *visible* to some of her viewers in her video accounts because they do not share her identity, it was *felt*. With an embodied consciousness, the body and text are interconnected; the body is the text and the author. In her video, Bland used her Black-woman-self as an instrument capable of detecting and discerning racist action toward her because of her lived experience and “training” to do so. This “training” is what Elaine Richardson might call the *special knowledge* that Black women acquire about the world and their position in and use to navigate and survive it. Like the Black women in this study, Bland performs her identity by drawing on her lived experience, invoking race, calling out and fighting against racial oppression, and person-referencing in ways that shows her identity with the Black community. These videos represent her and *represent for her* even after her death because they show the level of social consciousness she had, the community she identified with, her values, as well as what she was willing to fight for and how she waged that fight. Bland continuously worked to engage white

¹ “Sandy Speaks – January 15th 2015;” *Sandy Speaks*, created by Sandra Bland; published by Sandy Speaks; YouTube; 24 July. 2015.

audiences in her videos and work toward ending racial oppression. *Sandy Speaks* refuted arguments that Bland was a trouble-maker and looked to antagonize the police and white people. The videos provided insight into her personality and raised questions about whether she may have taken her own life. The digital archive of this series viewed around the world over seven million times and counting stands as a reminder of the fact that Sandra Bland lived and that her life indeed mattered. It stands as a testament to the fact that although oppressive forces such as the State and structural and institutional racism and sexism may have led to her physical death, her spirit remains. Bland's videos stand as a testimony of life, humanity and freedom that beg to be heard. It stands as evidence of Black women's determination to speak freely and for freedom despite the consequences and risks involved and to respond using any means available to them including digital and social media.

This study examines and privileges the discourse practices of Black women and works to understand them within the contexts they are used instead of in comparison to practices of wider communication. I present case studies that examine Black women's computer-mediated communication (CMC) in four popular online platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the blogosphere. This exploration privileges Black women's online community literacies, practices that take place outside of formal school settings in online spaces, in order to better understand their language and discourse practices in their immediate contexts – not as bridges to a false standard or “academic” literacies but as valuable literacy practices in their own right. I show how they are essential forms of agency for the users that allow them to assert self-selected identities, build communities that sustain them and experience greater freedom (Moss 2010).

In this study, Black women are identified as those who are self-enrolled members of “Black” online groups and/or use Black language as a “shared social resource” in constructing and claiming identity within the African American Speech Community (AASC) (Troutman 2010). In order to better understand these women's literacy practices, I forward Elaine Richardson's (2007) conception of Black female literacies which goes beyond reading and writing words to include the way Black women “manipulate as well as read language, gestures,

images, material possessions, and people, to position themselves against or within discourse in order to advance and protect themselves” (792).

1.2 Exigence

Despite claims that the United States is now “post-racial,” there are several contemporary examples of negative perceptions and hostile receptions to Black women’s discourse and literacy practices in addition to the aforementioned example of Sandra Bland. Another example of the prejudice against Black girls and their literacies came in the summer of 2013 during George Zimmerman’s trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Key witness Rachel Jeantel, a teen-aged, Black girl of Haitian descent and friend of deceased Trayvon Martin, testified during the trial and was summarily dismissed by defense attorneys and much of the public because of her use of Ebonics and other Black girl literacies, such as “representing” (Richardson 2007). Representin’ is a concept and practice that is “a part of the larger black discourse practice that emerged in the slavery experience and is akin to fictive kinship, wherein enslaved Africans devised a way of surviving, achieving prestige and creating a black human identity apart from dehumanized slave” (Richardson 2007:797). Despite Jeantel being a witness in the trial, she was treated as a defendant and characterized as “blunt” and “hostile” based on her physical and verbal presentation during her testimony. Additionally, Jeantel’s Twitter posts, which included vernacular language, were scrutinized and used as “damning” evidence against her character in courts of law and public opinion. In online forums, Jeantel was accused of sabotaging the State’s case against Zimmerman. This is not an isolated occurrence. Even Black women who are deemed more respectable, such as First Lady Michelle Obama are not immune to this type of scrutiny. Michelle Obama’s gestures, speech, and writings, such as her college thesis, have been used to depict her as an “angry Black woman” when viewed through a racist white epistemology.

In school settings, the dismissal of these literacy practices is a dismissal of Black women’s identity, rendering them as “Other” and obscuring and denying their agency. For example, Stephanie Power Carter (2006) highlighted the way two Black high school girls’ manipulation of

gestures—“eye squinting” and eye contact—served as a means of protecting and advancing themselves against the dominant discourse of the classroom; however, the teacher interpreted these literacies as passivity. These misinterpretations are a major factor in the increase in disciplinary action against Black girls, which is a major factor in the school-to-prison pipeline,² and is often overlooked, because the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration are seen as issues that impact Black boys and men, not Black girls and women. Evidence of this was seen with the creation of President Obama’s national My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative. In announcing this program targeting at-risk boys and young men of color, Obama cited the success of other initiatives for young men of color in Miami and New York City.³ Based on a report from the MBK Task Force that recommended enforcing the rights of incarcerated youth, the Obama administration also launched the Second Chance Pell Program that helped provide college education for those released from prison regardless of gender.⁴ One-and-a-half years later, Obama explicitly acknowledged the challenges that girls and young women of color face as well, but failed to offer specific plans as he did with MBK.⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, the feminist scholar and activist who coined the term intersectionality, asserted that the recognition that various social identities such as race and gender are interconnected alone will not make change. She has started

² Grisby Bates, Karen. “Study: Black Girls Are Being Pushed Out of School.” 2015. Web. <<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/13/384005652/study-black-girls-are-being-pushed-out-of-school>>.

³ “Remarks by the President on ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ Initiative.” The White House, President Barack Obama. 2014. Web. <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/27/remarks-president-my-brothers-keeper-initiative>>.

⁴ “U.S. Department of Education Launches Second Chance Pell Pilot Program for Incarcerated Individuals.” U.S. Department of Education. 2015. Web. <<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-launches-second-chance-pell-pilot-program-incarcerated-individuals>>.

⁵ Williams, Vanessa. “Obama’s call to lift up black women gets applause, but some want specific plan.” The Washington Post. 2015. Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/09/20/obamas-call-to-lift-up-black-women-gets-applause-but-some-want-specific-plan/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.ffdb01432431>.

the campaign #WhyWeCantWait to advocate for the visibility and inclusion of Black girls and women in social justice issues like education and State violence.

The representations of Black girls' as defiant and deviant have the potential to impact public opinion, educational outcomes, policy, Black women's freedom, and as asserted earlier, they may even be a matter of life or death. On November 2, 2013, Black teenager Renisha McBride was shot and killed while seeking help from a resident after being involved in a car accident. The shooter, later convicted of second-degree murder, said he feared for his life when he opened the door of his home after McBride, unarmed, knocked on it for help. While there is no way to be certain of the shooter's motive, I contend that the inability and unwillingness to understand Black girls and women's communication and literacy practices reflect and contribute to the inability and/or unwillingness to recognize their full humanity. In her video "#SayHerName: The Fight to Remember the Lives of Black Women," Crenshaw highlighted the connections between the disregard of Black women and girls' voices, the inability to see their humanity and violence against them. Crenshaw recounted Natasha McKenna's death in police custody after repeatedly tasing her while restrained. In the video, Crenshaw stated she was haunted by the fact that officers were still told to keep "an eye on her" even as she was dying and not responding to resuscitation: "That level of humanity means they never really saw her as a human being in the first place. So these are moments where the police are actually showing that our lives don't really matter, and then the fact that we don't really protest suggests that maybe they're right. Unless, we make it matter." Crenshaw continued, "It's gotta be the case that people just don't see this, because they can't see us and actually think that this is okay to disregard it. Life has meaning, particularly for those who are not recognized, who are marginalized, who are excluded, who are forgotten" (2017). As Crenshaw inferred, the violence against McKenna and others is an indication a pre-existing dehumanization. McKenna's last words were, "you promise not to kill me?" Officers had no regard for her words or her life (Crenshaw 2017).

As disconcerting as these realities may be, it is this dis-order, disidentification, and fragmentation that ensures the need for rhetoric and the possibility of agency (Biesecker 2009). Taking a closer look at these issues with a rhetorical framework provides insight about the language use and rhetorical strategies of Black women as well as the women themselves. This research project is significant for Rhetorical Studies because of the recent interests in how identity affects acknowledgment and perceptions of rhetorical agency and the way in which rhetoric is uniquely designed to understand how identities and social relations are in flux and enabled by rhetorical situations (Biesecker 1992).

Operating from the premise that exigence has no fixed location and is not located in a single element of “the rhetorical situation,” but is a series of events and an amalgamation of processes and encounters (Edbauer 2005); I view the examples above within a contemporary context of epistemic and physical violence against Black women. It is within this temporal and historical context that is in a constant state of flux that I theorize the rhetoric (Edbauer 2005) of the women in this study as communal and sometimes public in its creation.

1.3 Methods

In order to better understand the relationship between Black women, discourse, and social media, I asked the following questions when investigating each site studied: How do Black women use discourse practices from FTF African American women’s speech communities on social media? What kinds of identities/subjectivities do these practices help these women perform and create? What affordances and constraints do different social media interfaces have on this form of Black women’s agency? In other words, how do Black women’s language and special ways of knowing and navigating the world translate into digital spaces that allow them to be and do the things they want and need to do when they want to do it how they want to do it?

I conducted rhetorical analysis of digital writing from Black women in online platforms popular among Black women: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs as examples of Black

women's computer-mediated communication. I supplemented this online data with surveys and interviews of Black women who use those forms of social media. I selected, collected, analyzed this data to privilege Black women's discourse practices and show how they work online in order to expand the notion of Black discourses (oral, written, digital), community and CMC as well as Black women's agency. There is a significant body of scholarship on Black discourse and language. This study contributes to this body in two important ways. First, by using intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) as an approach to foreground how gender impacts Black discourse by highlighting unique features and functions of Black women's discourse. Secondly, by expanding what is known about Black discourse by exploring the connection between verbal, written, and digital discourse in order to explicate a theory of digital Black womanhood. This theory focuses on the distinct features, functions, and potential of Black women's discourses online and establishes a framework for further inquiry into and applications of Black discourses.

In order to answer questions about the social media users' perceptions of and intentions behind their social media use and rhetorical choices, I have supplemented my rhetorical analyses of the online archive with online surveys and qualitative interviews of selected survey respondents. I administered four anonymous online surveys; one survey for each online site (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the blogosphere). In total, I analyzed a total of 94 online survey responses. I followed up with survey respondents who indicated that they would like to share more information about their use of their respective social media site, and I conducted 14 computer-mediated qualitative interviews using video call applications Google Hangout and Skype as well as conference calls. I obtained IRB approval for collecting and working with all data, and observed best practices for ethical digital writing research (McKee and DeVoss 2007). I looked specifically at how the participants used discourse to perform their identities in the social media spaces and ultimately, how those performances made it possible for them to identify with one another. My theoretical framework extends Jeff Grabill and Stacy Pigg's theory of online identity performance and Kenneth Burke's (1969) theories of identification and consubstantiality by looking specifically at ways in which Black women perform their identities

online and its usefulness. Identification is crucial for Black women because as Black lesbian feminist poet and author, Lorraine Bethel (1986) asserted:

black woman-identification, the basis of black feminism and black feminist literary criticism, is most simply the idea of black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels – psychic, intellectual, and emotional, as well as physical – with other black women...it is the process of identifying one's self and the selves of other black women as inherently valuable. (84)

This framework helped to uncover where and how Black women's identity performances and identification occurs. I determined coding categories based on the most valid, prominent, and persuasive themes in the data, such as identification, visibility, and disrespectability. Through analyses of data from across these different sites, I highlight core features of Black women's CMC such as culturally-toned diminutives and talking with attitude as well as how different media impact them.

This study privileges the ways in which Black women's language and literacy practices both reflect and inform their lived experiences; therefore, I used the “theory of the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) and other Black feminist (Royster 2000) and Hip-hop feminist theories (Pough 2007)) to inform my rhetorical analysis of the digital artifacts. Moraga and Anzaldúa's “theory of flesh” accounts for the ways the material realities of women of color – skin color, geography, up-bringing, sexuality – necessarily inform theory and lead to knowledge production. This theory applies both to how the Black women in my study produce knowledge as well as how I as a woman of color researcher theorize and produce knowledge based on my material realities and lived experience. I also acknowledge that material realities, cultural contexts, national and state politics and ideologies also shape the technologies that these women used (Bolter and Grusin 2009, Banks 2006, Pandey 2006, Powell 2007, and Selfe 1999).

I also employed Jacqueline Jones Royster's (2000) Afrafeminist methodologies that entail careful analysis, acknowledgement of passionate attachments, attention to ethical action, and commitment to social responsibility (279). These approaches are significant because they both provide frameworks that allow me to acknowledge connections between the participants and me as well as help me to interpret the relationship between the participants and their literacy practices.

Following Collin Brooke's rhetoric of new media, I recognized that the online postings and interactions that appear as text that I have captured are not stable, well-bounded texts or moments in time (Grabill and Pigg 2012), but they are "special, stabilized instances of ongoing process conducted at the level of interface" (Brooke 2009:25), and I analyzed them as such. This approach served as a reminder to consider how the social media used in this study can be understood in terms of their particular uses and contexts as well as the realities they reflect.

In addition to representing a wide variety of rhetorical situations, digital spaces are significant sites of community literacy because they provide spaces for organic vernacular language production (Barton 2010) that to a certain extent can exist below the radar of surveillance and censorship of more public spaces (Banks 2006). While these spaces are not private in the sense of the real-world hush harbors such as the secret meeting places of enslaved people, Black barbershops or beauty parlors, they do share similarities with what Vorris Nunley described as hush harbor spaces; sites where "certain African American counternarratives and narratives are acknowledged, privileged, and spoken and performed differently" (Nunley 2006:229).

In his book *Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam Banks (2006) characterized such refuges on line as "underground spaces." He found that the former

social media site Black Planet served as an “underground” space for African Americans online as it operated outside of the power and surveillance of White society. While online undergrounds do not have physical structures to hide and conceal those seeking cover, Banks asserted that specific, in-group discursive practices serve as the boundary that determine who can enter and who cannot: “The underground is the particular technologies, tools, processes that make those discursive practices possible” (Banks 2006:71). One such technology is African American language. African American language and discourse and the Black oral tradition that informs it thrive online (Banks 2006).

Carmen Kynard (2010) also explored the role of spatiality and built upon Nunley’s hush harbor metaphor in her article “From Candy Girls to Cyber Sista-Cipher: Narrating Black Females’ Color Consciousness and Counterstories In and Out of School.” Kynard (2010), then assistant professor of English at St. John’s University, examined the creation and function of discursive spatiality with the online hush harbor or “hidey space” that she created for Black female college students on her campus. Kynard used what she described as an “unhushing narrative methodology” (48): the use of multiple narratives including her own, to explore how digital technologies offer hush harbors, or protected spaces for Black female college students’ social and literacy practices in what she describes as “sista-ciphers.” Kynard asserted that the space created and the sharing of the stories “(re)value[d] black radical female subjectivity” (Kynard 2010:48). It is with this intent to value Black radical female subjectivity that I continue the exploration of Black women’s social and literacy practices online.

I selected data based on phenomena; I included online discourse from Black women-dominant groups/populations that engaged in self-sponsored literacy activities displaying the phenomenon of online community building and/or conversation. Numerous scholars have

studied Black women's discourse and literacy practices in explicit political and educational contexts; here, however, I am interested in the patterns that emerge outside of those contexts, particularly in online writing spaces. Data for this study was selected primarily from the following four sites of inquiry: two closed, Black female-dominant themed groups on Facebook; two Black women's fan channels on YouTube dedicated to the *ABC* television show *Scandal*; and posts/digital conversations from Black female bloggers about pop-star Beyoncé's self-titled visual album and Black feminism. For the Twitter chapter, I initially planned to analyze rapper Nicki Minaj's posts to her Twitter page. I ultimately changed the focus of that chapter after interviewing five of her Black female followers. Focus on Minaj's tweets would have provided a limited view of Black women's discourse on Twitter. After analyzing the interviews, I found that were more aligned with a community literacy initiatives rather than online communication. Therefore, chapter three does not focus on online posts, but the experiences and reflections of Minaj's followers. Minaj and her page serve as a means to organize the chapter because of the shared appeal she had among those I interviewed due to her Twitter ethos. All of these different sites feature community literacy practices, meaningful practices that take place outside of formal school settings (Moss 2010), with varying levels of online visibility, rhetorical situations and ecologies. In addition to phenomena, I selected these sites because they were also accessible because they were public or in the case of the two closed Facebook groups, I am a member of both groups.

Each of the four social media "sites" selected for this study have unique features and collectively showcase a variety of platform structures, means of communication, registers of discourse and language, and levels of visibility. With the exception of the closed groups on Facebook, the sites studied are public and therefore, include a mixed demographic of public-

figures, celebrities, and private individuals who post and/or read content on the platforms. This was by design and seemed a natural choice because I wanted to study the online correspondence as it naturally occurs. Moreover, throughout the study I discovered that there is little to no difference in the treatment of Black women public-figures and celebrities and every day or “real” Black women online in terms of identification. Based on my analyses of online posts and interviews, most of the women in this study read and viewed celebrities like Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé first and foremost as Black women; albeit they are Black women with more socio-economic class and privilege. Participants did not differentiate between celebrities and everyday people when it came to how they did or did not identify with Black women who were centered in discussions even when the women were fictional ones like Olivia Pope.

Findings on Internet use and social media participation by the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that African Americans and women are among the top users of social media sites. African Americans’ mobile Web use has more than doubled in the past several years (Horrihan 2009). While these digital spaces still reflect the hegemonic elements of larger society (Herring 2010; Selfe and Selfe 1994), Black women go online to make literate connections and can use their literacy practices to create identities and demonstrate agency by drawing on their own *topos* and including “feminine” discourse (LeCourt 1999). Digital communities are also important spaces to publically demonstrate agency (boyd and Marwick 2011). These digital communities are vital spaces for Black women to showcase and develop traditional, digital, and “hidden” literacy skills (Duncan and Leander). It is with this in mind that I selected the four social media “sites” to examine Black women’s rhetoric on the respective sites.

1.4 Relevant Literature

The research questions posed for this study touch upon three primary areas of scholarship: Black Language as resistance, agency, and identity in digital spaces. In the following section, I provide a review of the theoretical and conceptual literature relevant to this study.

Language can be viewed as a place of struggle (hooks 1989:28) as well as a shared social resource that people can self-select in order to construct and claim identity, show solidarity, resist, and identify within a culture (Lanehart 1996, Troutman 2010). African Americans, for example, who choose to speak only African American English (AAE) indicate their membership in the African American Speech Community (AASC) and their rejection of assimilation into white and dominant culture (Lanehart 1996, Troutman 1996). Sonja Lanehart argued that these choices are made consciously or unconsciously in order to fit in with the group we wish to identify with which is not necessarily the same group we are talking to (Lanehart 1996). For example, in her study of African American teachers, Michèle Foster (1995) concluded that African American discourse style, such as codeswitching are intentionally and systematically used features in order to express identity. Those expressions were also influenced by the social relationships between the participants – mainly their level of familiarity.

Lanehart (1996) asserted that we are continually shaped by these exchanges and the subsequent changes they foster. While this language use is a choice, Lanehart suggested that the choices for African Americans has been very limited historically because we have been told that our language and the experiences that inform them do not matter; they are deemed irrelevant and/or inferior (Lanehart 1996:329). In the devaluing of Black language, the Blackness that it reflects and creates is also at stake. Lanehart (1996) argued that because these possible selves are at stake and at risk with each linguistic choice, we must also talk about identity and goals and possible selves in our discussions of language (328). These stakes are higher and the

conversations even more important regarding online communication because people have more options in terms of what identities to present.

Esteemed linguist and Black language scholar Geneva Smitherman (1999) argued that we must have a better understanding of the worldview that undergirds the Black oral tradition in order to understand Black communication. Language ideology is also tied to aesthetics, morality, and epistemology. This can be seen within Black communities. Linguist Denise Troutman asserted that “Within the AASC, a number of shared speech practices persist that index a love relationship with language and language play, among them are rapping, signifying, narrativizing, reading dialect” (Troutman 2010:94).

All Black speech has a purpose, according to Smitherman: “Not talking about speech for the sake of speech, for black talk is never simple cocktail art chit-chat, but a functional dynamic that is simultaneously a mechanism for learning about life and the world and a vehicle for achieving group approval and recognition” (Smitherman 1999:205). The Black verbal tradition acculturates and initiates users into a Black value system; verbal performance establishes one’s reputation, teaches and socializes those with the community through “narration of myths, folk stories, and the semi-serious tradition of ‘lying’ in general; in black sermons; in the telling of jokes; in proverbs and folk sayings; in street corner, barber shop, beauty shop, and other casual rap scenes; in ‘signifying,’ ‘capping,’ ‘testifying,’ ‘toasting,’ and other verbal arts” (Smitherman 1999:204). These functions of the Black verbal tradition and the epistemologies and ontologies it represent are salient to this study of Black women’s discourse online as I examine how the tradition is mediated in digital spaces. One example of this transfer from the verbal to the digital can be found in the AVT connection between the sacred and secular; as in the inclusion of both church and street raps in the same breath (Smitherman 1999).

In addition to initiation into Black culture, a high level of linguistic dexterity when it comes to Black language and signifying, or “talking that talk,” is a form of social capital for its user perhaps (Majors 2004, Mitchell-Kernan 1972, Smitherman 1977, Troutman 2001, 2010). Signifying is “the recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function which is obscured by the surface content or function” (Mitchell-Kernan 1972:317-318). It can also be seen as a culturally constructed form of social face which is pedagogical in that it teaches youth the cultural rules of the Black community as well as the political reality of being Black in America (Morgan 1999:32). Regardless of gender, community members must know and follow the rules of the game in order to signify (Troutman 2001). Morgan (1999) argued that signifying is mainly performed by adolescent boys, but also occurs among adult men and women (Morgan 1999).

Smitherman described such talk as (p.c.): “tapping into the linguistic culture, the linguistic wellspring of our history; hitting the registers that we know are Black lively talk, real talk, colorful talk, full of favor” (Troutman 2001:224). These familiar registers are important indicators of community as outsiders often miss or mistake the meaning of Black speech.

Such meaning making through Black language is not only vital in private, but in the public sphere as well. Gwendolyn Pough (2004) forwarded the Black Public Sphere Collective’s⁶ definition of the Black public sphere as a “critical space where new democratic forms and emerging diasporic movements can enrich and question one another,” (34) but asserted that it is a waste of time if it is not fostering change. Furthermore, she argued that we cannot fully know what the Black Public Sphere is or its potential is until we examine Black women’s roles in it (Pough 2004). The role of Black women in the Black public sphere should readily be

⁶ Collective, Black Public Sphere. *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*. University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.

acknowledged and examined because their legacy of resistance and active presence in the public sphere predates precolonial African society (Pough 2004:46-47). To not do so is indeed another instance of the marginalization of Black women when it comes to issues of race and gender one that this study begins to remedy.

Black women's speech and expressive culture have not been valued in part because the spaces in which their discourse takes place, such as the home, has not been valued by others (Pough 2004). In *Talking Back: Talking feminist, talking black*, Black feminist scholar bell hooks explicates the courageous and sacred nature of Black women's talk in the context of the American society and Black American homes. She rendered an evocative description of the rhetorical situation in the home where many Black women came to voice: "To speak when one was not spoken to was a courageous act – an act of risk and daring. And yet it was hard not to speak in warm rooms where heated discussions began at the crack of dawn, women's voices filling the air, giving orders, making threats, fussing" (hooks 1989:5). These voices of orders, threats and fussings that filled the home, however, were not valued the same as those of Black men who were given the floor to speak in more public spaces, such as the pulpit. Home, therefore, became a Black woman's platform to speak: "There, black women spoke in language so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate" (hooks 1989:5). However magical and compelling the words of the Black women around her were, hooks asserted that their speech, "the right speech of womanhood," fell upon closed and unresponsive ears; true recognition and dialogue only taking place among other Black women (hook 1989:6). hooks (1989) contended that it was in the midst of this intimacy of words between Black women that could range from loud, quick, sharp and/or angry words to sweet and tender words that she and other Black women claimed the "birthright"

of voice and authorship, and I would add agency. I found this phenomenon of Black women centered spaces of intimacy was also present on social media and vital to Black women's agency online.

Black women's violation of the constraining expectations such as speaking only when spoken to flies in the face of attempts to discipline and therefore "normalize" Black women (Foucault 1977:183). One place other than the home where this disciplining of Black women's voices is particularly impactful is in schools. In her study on perceptions of Black girls discourse in the context of European education, Grace Evans (1992) argued that the price of a good education and entry into the middle class was, and still is, the denial of one's Black cultural identity. Subsequently, West Indian patois is replaced with "standard" English and Black girls' bodies are trained to "adopt European body language and gesture, and the voice to adopt European tones of speech and non-verbal expression. Loudness is discouraged, as it reflects field life and rural peasant status" (Evans 1992:185). Whereas the white/dominant group perceived loudness as a deficit, Black, female linguists understand it as a strategy and strength (Mitchell-Kernan 1972 Morgan 2003). This enforced homogeneity from K-12 up through the university level becomes a hostile environment void of opportunities for Black women's legitimate expression of their own voices and becomes an impetus for Black women's rhetorical action (hooks 1989, Koonce 2012). The Black schoolgirls strategically pushed the boundaries sending out a distinct message of being in and for themselves (Evans 1992:183). Many of those loud Black girls later became loud, proud Black women despite attempts to silence them (Evans 1992:190).

With these challenges in mind, Black women's language use even more strategic. For Black women, the formation of liberatory language requires a re-imagining of something other

than the forced cultural context that defines freedom solely in terms of learning the oppressor's language and assimilating however slowly into the dominant hegemony (hooks 1989:29). This invention of a self, a social construction as hooks called it, requires knowledge of history and the voices of the past as illustrated by Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*. At the same time, as hooks has suggested, "the oppressed person who has moved from object to subject speaks to us in a new way" (1989:29). The work of liberation therefore demands a new language for Black women; one made of an oppositional discourse, a collective voice, and a twenty-first-century Womanist language.

For Black women, true speaking is a political act gesture against the politics of domination that would render them nameless and voiceless. "Talking back" in this way comes with risks for Black women and requires strategy and linguistic dexterity. The strategic use of Black language and discourse is nothing new to Black women, and they can do so without feeling stereotypically masculine or aggressive (Troutman 2001) because its use is tailored to their needs and both African American and African American Women's speech communities value these features and speakers who can "talk the talk." As Smitherman showed and proved:

Yes, African American women do indeed signify. We also play the dozens and "talk shit," but save that for another day. The point is that the AVT does not belong to the Brothas alone. African American women must appropriate the African American Verbal Tradition for the advancement of our children, our communities, and our people. We must build on the Womanist tradition of talk in the legacy of Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Frances E.W. Harper, and the many thousands gone. It is the only way to make sure we ain talkin in ways peculiar to our people's minds. (Smitherman 1999:267)

These are ways of being and considering these ways are choices, they are innately performances; constructions, and presentations of one's self. Some of Black women's strategic responses and performances include narratives and "everyday talk" that allow Black women to actualize themselves and assert identities as forms of resistance to "master" or hegemonic

storylines along race, ethnicity and gender (Jacobs-Huey 2006, Majors 2004, Pough 2004).

When shared publicly these stories compel others to acknowledge Black women's suffering and identify with it (Pough 2004). Narratives foster unity by allowing Black women to witness one another "pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification" (Collins 2000:104) and can also organize diversity within a group (Jacobs-Huey 2006:118).

Black women's discursive resistance can be more overt as well. Black women's response to being made to feel invisible was to take their mouths and turn them into guns (Pough 2004:79). Pough (2004) asserted that Black women shape the Black public sphere by "bringing wreck". Bringing wreck is "a rhetorical act that has close ties to various other speech acts that are often linked to Black womanhood: talking back, going off, turning it out, having a niggerbitchfit, or being a diva" (Pough 2004:78). Each of the aforementioned actions has been simultaneously embraced by some Black women as a marker of unique Black womanhood and renounced as a stereotype of Black women by others (Pough 2004). Although similar to other forms of rhetorical acts by Black women, bringing wreck offers new possibilities for the potential of Black women's speech and action (Pough 2004:77). Pough explained that bringing wreck is different from "talking back" in that it builds on the legacy of Hip-hop in which more stylized rhetorical presence is used and draws on grander elements of show and spectacle (Pough 2004:80), and, unlike "going off," bringing wreck is a decided act, not an unavoidable, uncontrollable result of a breaking point (Pough 2004:81). Bringing wreck is enacted by women of the Hip-Hop generation who have made a conscious decision to speak out and bring change" (Pough 2004:81). In this way, these acts are more aligned with "turning it out" because it is a decided act (Pough 2004:81). Bringing wreck harnesses the power of collective niggerbitchfits: the public "embodiment of righteous anger and rage, a response to being fed up" (Pough

2004:81). This rage is warranted in light of the misogyny and disgusting images used to represent Black womanhood in the U.S. are neither rational or reasonable” (Pough 2004).

Collectively this power can be used by the Hip-hop generation to combat sexism and misogyny within Hip-hop and outside of it. It is important to note that numerous examples of this since the publication of *Check It While I Wreck It* have taken place on social media platforms like Twitter. Wreck was brought in the form of hashtag campaigns like #ItsBiggerThanTooShort in 2012 against rapper Too Short’s speech promoting rape culture as well as people on social media speaking out against other rappers like Rick Ross whose lyrics promoted rape culture. Such actions have resulted in changes offline as well. These interventions can be categorized as “diva citizenship.”

Pough forwarded Laura Berlant’s notion of “diva citizenship” to illustrate how a “diva” Black woman can bring wreck within the counter-public sphere of Hip-hop and the larger public sphere to evoke change (Pough 2004): Berlant writes, “Diva citizenship does not change the world. It is a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity. Diva citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere where she does not have privilege” (Pough 2004:83). The end result, according to Pough, should be that those who witness such “wreck” would come to a different understanding of Black womanhood, even if only momentarily (Pough 2004:83). One such example related to this study is rapper Nicki Minaj’s Twitter rant about her video for her song “Anaconda” being nominated for an MTV Video Music Award in 2015. The Twitter war between her and singer Taylor Swift allowed Minaj to speak more in depth about the racialized sexism against Black women in the music industry.

Sometimes the talk that breaks the silence is “talking with attitude” (TWA) (Troutman 2010). In her study of how linguistic politeness functions in African American speech communities, Troutman and the Black women in her study determined that Black women could not *not be* polite; that even what was perceived by others as impolite talk from Black women was served a positive social function for them. Troutman described TWA as:

expressive language, a way of communicating: talking back/sassy, talking disrespectfully, speaking (grammatically) well/articulating ideas well, using witty or flippant comments; talk that exudes confidence. Non-linguistically, co-researchers construct TWA as acts of confidence, edge (verve, distinctness, sharpness; on the forefront; possible sass) displayed in gestures, walk, tone of voice; other kinesic acts include cut-eye, suck-teeth, neck-rolling, finger popping, or having a chip on the shoulder. (Troutman 2010:102)

For Black women, TWA, including finger popping or eye rolling, can be a positive or negative social act depending on the context. It is a positive social act, Troutman argued when it is a display of strength regardless of how socially acceptable the practice may be (Troutman 2010).

For Black girls within institutions hostile to their being, such as schools, TWA seems to be their only opportunity to use voice and can be a defense mechanism in order to maintain their cultural integrity (Koonce 2012). This performance and expression of attitude and its meaning can also be a marker of identity and recognizable to other group members. Outsiders as well as some “insiders” may interpret TWA acts as hostile, inappropriate, arrogant and unnecessary: as in Sandra Bland’s angry response to the police officer who unjustifiably pulled her over and manhandled her on the side of the road was unnecessary.

There are high degrees of uncertainty in terms of interpretation and social face with Black women’s speech acts like TWA and other indirect discourse practices which require rules. For indirect discourse to be successful, the speaker must pay close attention to the local, shared audience who may serve as intended recipients, targets, and over-hearers as well as possible remembered and imagined audiences (Morgan 2003:55). Talking with attitude is innately a FTF

phenomenon that can be seen mediated in CMC in the social media sites in this study.

Marcyliena Morgan argued that women and girls' verbal activities are different and inherently riskier because their fragile social faces are at stake. A dramatic loss of social face requires that the target defend her honor. This is why, for example, talking behind one's back is treated as a capital offense. Before the alleged initiator is confronted, the offended must confirm that the intermediary is not an instigator (Morgan 1999:34). Adult Black women have learned these lessons through signifying and instigating routines and know that audience and hearers are equal partners in interpreting talk (Morgan 1999:36). Women operate with two dialogic styles: behind your back and to your face. The saying "I wouldn't say anything behind your face that I wouldn't say to your face," is often used to challenge someone else's social face and can also halt he-said-she-said or instigating attempts. The "behind you back/ in your face" dichotomy stipulates that intentionality is socially constructed. Speaking about someone behind their back implies a lack of coauthorship and is seen as tactless and divisive. As a result, the interaction may be misunderstood (Morgan 1999). Therefore, discursive rules such as a speaker's right to be present to represent their own experience, and be a part of the collective audience that interprets intentionality are important. These rules are oftentimes unspoken, but communal understandings. Abiding by these understandings maintains harmony and is even more important online in the absence of other social cues.

A primary way that Black women achieve and maintain social face is by reading dialect. Morgan forwarded Goffman's (1967) notion of social face to describe this as the practice of "reading" someone – as in reading them their rights – in a way that clearly denigrates another to his or her face (Morgan 1999). Reading is legitimated only by the presence of other corroborative witnesses. This involves direct attack of one's social face and may be initiated for

several reasons. One can be *read* for acting out class privileges, failing to greet friends, or misrepresenting one's beliefs (Morgan 1996). Reading dialect involves "contrasting or otherwise highlighting obvious features of AAE and AE to make a point. The point is not necessarily negative, but the grammatical contrast indicates a challenge to someone's social face" (Morgan 1999:36). Reading dialect is one way to achieve a cool social face, which Morgan defined as "the ability to enact subtle symbolic cultural practices with eloquence, skill, wit, patience, and precise timing" (Morgan 1999:31). This is another speech act that is more readily discerned in FTF than online, but is nevertheless present.

Another way for Black women and girls to discursively resist oppressive forces against them and their communities is by "representin'" (Richardson 2007). In her critical discourse study of young Black women socialized in Hip-hop culture, Richardson found that the young women were willing to verbally represent for male rap artists and give them the benefit of the doubt despite their misogynistic performances in order to protect them from critique and criticism even when it was not in their best interest. Ideally, women also find ways to represent for one another as well.

Like other forms of Black women's discourse, the signifying laugh can seem out of context to outsiders who lack the knowledge to recognize and respond to what is implicit and being indexed and that which is explicit. Black women's laughter often occurs within narratives and discussions of social oppression such as bigotry, patriarchy, paternalism, social class privilege, sexism; situations that invoke anger and indignation (Morgan 2003:61-62). This laughter is a response cry, an instance of what may seem to be self-talk within a typical conversation but also functions as a reference to outside beliefs (Morgan 2003:52). The response cry aligns speakers with events and is meant to be overheard. It also aligns speakers with a

competing or contradictory assessment of the discourse (Morgan 2003:62). Although the response seems inappropriate on the surface, it is a strong indication of positive social face of the speaker (Morgan 1996, 2003:62).

In Kynard's (2010) study of Black female college students' social and literacy practices, she argued that one issue was university administrator's failure to *recognize* Black student's displacement and talent. She defined the urban, youth term "recognize" as being about "publicly acknowledging what is going on and who the central perpetrators are" (48). Recognition is important among Black people in face-to-face contexts and is connected to issues of authenticity and respect as illustrated by the popular saying, "real recognize real." In the space that Kynard helped to create for her students, she and her students were able to recognize each other and their talents. Because Black women's words and agency are often not recognized, recognition among other Black women plays an even more important role. Black women are best positioned to recognize and validate other Black women's struggles, voices, concerns, and victories (Bethel 1989, Hill-Collins 1999, hooks 1989).

Understandings and/or misunderstandings of Black women's discourse and rhetoric in the public sphere have many implications. One example of this in recent memory is the testimony of Anita Hill during the 1991 Senate Hearings to vet now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. This demonstrated the challenges to Black women being seen as credible speakers. In her sociolinguistic study of the hearing, Smitherman (1995) concluded that Hill's testimony at the end of the 20th century is a teachable moment. Without absolving Thomas or condemning Hill, Smitherman (1995) cautioned Black people to be wary of an "uncritical acceptance of Hill" highlighting the importance of not only content with regard to Black women's speech, but how they say what is said and the politics that are reflected in that delivery. Smitherman argued that a

takeaway from that situation was that “African American women must fashion a language, building on and rooted in the African American Experience, that speaks to the *head* and the *heart* of African America” (1999:265). The questions she raised then presently informs this study at hand: “Is the African American Verbal Tradition the purview of Black men only?” And “What are the discourse options available to Black women? Who is the Black woman, and how *do* a Black woman sound?” (Smitherman 1995:265) At the heart of Smitherman’s inquiry is a beckoning of Black women to consider a new path of rhetorical invention born out of Black women’s previous traditions because the past, present and future available means for Black women are inherently tied to constructions of race, gender, and sexuality and the oppressions connected to them. Smitherman contended that the only way for victory in such an uphill battle is to “jump outside the established logic” and make winning irrelevant (Smitherman 1995:266). The argument here is that Black women cannot continue to try to overcome oppression by appealing to established and acceptable logics of mainstream America that are tethered to the head and Western logocentrism, but need to risk such acceptance and forge a new path by tapping into their own epistemologies and the discourses that communicate them and are recognizable to African America. In these treacherous times amidst the need for declarations that Black Lives Matter in the face of the persistent threat of state violence against Black bodies, perhaps even death must be irrelevant.

Pough (2004) stressed that part of mining the tradition of Black women’s speech and expressive culture is recognizing how Black women come into language and examining the spaces in which that speech and expressive culture occurs (79). When the discourse of Black women’s speech communities is explored for its own sake, it is clear that Black women participate in culture at all levels including the development of language norms, the introduction

of innovations, and the use of all varieties of Black English. Morgan (2002) highlighted that the contributions from these women are most apparent in cultural settings where their identity as Black women is neither questioned nor marginalized (Morgan 2002:87).

Some of the Black female-centered settings that have been studied include classrooms with Black female teachers (Foster 1995), hair salons (Majors 2004) and beauty schools (Jacobs-Huey 2006), adolescent girls in community centers (Koonce 2012, Love 2012), in schools (Power-Carter 2006) and among other organized groups of women (Morgan 2003, Richardson 2007, Troutman 2010). Such studies highlight the ways in which Black women contribute to the development of Black discourses and also use them to construct their own individual identities as well as show solidarity with one another. The aforementioned literature attends to the particularities of Black women's language and literacies and confirms their position as social actors and creators of their own practices based on their lived experiences. These phenomena have primarily been studied in Black women and girls' face-to-face interactions and "real world" spaces and show how they constitute Black girl and womanhood.

Scholars have also begun to address how Black women's discourse unfolds in digital spaces. This scholarship is helpful in showing how "talk" translates into CMC. One prominent feature of AAVE covered in this literature is *signifying*. Signifying is a means of performing or "doing" race and cultural identity online that requires and demonstrates cultural competence (Florini 2014, Jacobs-Huey 2006, Kynard 2010). Because there are not necessarily any visual and aural signifiers of race online, users must be even more intentional about making their identity visible online (Florini 2014, Jacobs-Huey 2006). Florini argued forwarded Nakamura (2008), "In a social media context, where race could be hidden if a user so desired, the act of performing race

constitutes an important mode of resistance to marginalization and erasure” (qtd. in Florini 2014).

Carmen Kynard (2007) also found that in addition to signifying, her Black first-year composition students utilized trickster motifs in their online discussions on Blackboard. She noted that students used AAVE to express their most passionate disagreements regarding racial politics which, she argued, had the possibility as an intervention to challenge the perception of “normal” being white, hegemonic and middle-class (Kynard 2007:337). She argued that, “...for these students, trickstering is more than just joking; it’s a rhetoric that does the work of clarifying their political and cultural visions” (Kynard 2007:337). Florini (2014), Jacobs-Huey (2006), and Kynard (2007) demonstrate that the use of AAVE in CMC is intentional and allows users to index and perform their racial identity in ways that affirm who they are as well as “call out” and push back against the boundaries of racism, sexism and other injustices. The analysis in this dissertation will build on the knowledge of how Black women use Black discourse practices online to “do” race and gender and affirm themselves and each other.

In order to discern the ways that CMC affects Black women’s rhetorical agency, it is important to first consider the nature of agency and the ways that Black women's agency is obscured and denied. With regard to marginalized groups such as Black women, such forces and structures are disciplinary in nature and are designed to produce objectified and docile bodies (Foucault 1977) creating greater need for agency. In Michael Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, he unpacked the subtle nature of discipline and disciplinary power that impedes individuals’ agency. He described “discipline” as a modest and suspicious power that creates individuals and regards them as both objects and as instruments of its exercise (Foucault 1977:170). This discipline is designed into day-to-day life through architecture, which becomes a means for

controlling and altering people's conduct so that they are docile and knowable (Foucault 1977:172). Foucault asserted that, "At the heart of the procedures of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected" (Foucault 1977:184-185).

Combatting the discipline that Foucault described requires work in the form of agency. In Ronald Greene's article "Rhetoric and capitalism: Rhetorical agency as communicative labor," he advocated rethinking and rerouting theories of rhetorical agency from a traditional model of political communication to a materialist-communicative one (Greene 2004). Greene acknowledged that it is commonplace to describe rhetorical agency as political action. The downside for him is that rhetorical agency then describes a communicative process of inquiry and advocacy on issues of public importance. As political action, Greene asserted that rhetorical agency often takes on the characteristics of a normative theory of citizenship: "a good citizen persuades and is persuaded by the gentle force of the better argument" (Greene 2004:188). In Greene's remodeling of rhetorical agency, it would be viewed as communicative labor: "a form of life-affirming constitutive power that embodies creativity and cooperation" (Greene 2004:201). The advantage of this shift, according to Greene, is that we will be able to see how rhetorical agency as a communicative labor can and has been used to perform gendered, nationalized, and raced work (Greene 2004).

Scholars have noted that not all agentive labor or rhetorical agency is recognized equally (Foss, Foss and Trapp 2014, Geisler 2004). Considerations in evaluating a speaker or rhetor go beyond Aristotle's traditional sense of *ethos* and evaluating how well someone speaks or what is talked about but rather who is allowed to speak and write and be seen as good speakers and writers. Foss, Foss and Trapp asserted that there are unspoken rules that dictate that individuals

listen to certain people and reject the discourse of others. These hidden rules which are produced by and reify this form of discipline mandate that only those deemed qualified by satisfying certain conditions, those of the dominant culture, are heard when they engage in discourse (Geisler 2004, Foss, Foss and Trapp 2014: 349). To be heard one's speech must be formulated in particular ways and be created from certain kinds of discourse. For example, those who wish to be heard in the academic world must produce certain types of statements and use certain forms to be allowed to participate in scholarly discourse (Foss, Foss and Trapp 2014). While these restrictions on rhetorical agency have led some to believe that those who are marginalized or members of subaltern groups *do not have* agency (Geisler 2004), agency is not illusory (Geisler 2004, Miller 2007). It is more accurate to say that these members of society, though circumscribed in terms of their agency, are not without agency altogether, instead utilize a number of resources such as space and the body that allow for the exercise of agency in ways that have previously gone unrecognized by rhetoricians (Geisler 2004).

One example of an unacknowledged resource used for agency is African American's use of space. Nunley (2004) argued that spatiality has a significant impact on delivery, meaning making and agency for African Americans as evidenced in "hush harbor" spaces that allow for particular identity performances and recognition of African Americans' agency that would not necessarily be granted under the disciplining gaze in a predominantly white space. Hush harbors are concealed spaces originally created by Black people during the time of slavery that allowed for them to more freely communicate with one another without being discovered by white owners, overseers or others in authority (Nunley 2006). In the contemporary, conceptions of hush harbors include other Black communal spaces (Nunley 2006).

Scholars are also challenging rhetoric's traditional assumptions that privilege rationality and deny the role of the body (Harold 2000, Koerber 2006). In her article "The Rhetorical Function of the Abject Body: Transgressive Corporeality in *Trainspotting*," Christine L. Harold (2000) analyzed the film *Trainspotting* and its representation of heroin users as abject bodies. She argued that humanist rhetorics have either ignored the body completely, or deemed it an unruly entity "that must be forced to the moral bidding of the rational, moral conscience," or, in other words, disciplined (Harold 2000). She asserted that bodies must be examined less as objects and more as rhetorical sites capable of transforming and being transformed through the engagement (Harold 2000). In her article "Rhetorical Agency, Resistance, and the Disciplinary Rhetorics of Breastfeeding," Amy Koerber explored the agency of breastfeeding mothers in light of the disciplining rhetorics sending mixed messages to the women. While the breastfeeding bodies of the women in Koerber's article were not likely to be considered abject bodies like the people in Harold's study, Koerber suggested that public scenes of women simultaneously breastfeeding an infant and a toddler, or even a single toddler, were likely to be seen as perverse and deviant (Koerber 2006). She provided examples of women acting on their own behalf that include the disseminating information, becoming leaders in advocacy organizations, questioning authority, and using their bodies in ways that push against norms to show that the potential for disrupting disciplinary power from within its grip (Koerber 2006). These examples illustrate the potential of bodies' agentive potential as agency can be seen as interventions and transgressions, constant engagement with and against boundaries that have the power to reconfigure boundaries, disrupt disciplinary power and produce new subjectivities (Foucault 1977, Harold 2000, Koerber 2006).

Agency relies on audience, and is performative and interactive (Miller 2007). While Miller and Geisler argued that agency's illusory nature is because it must be attributed to a subject based on the rhetorical action taking place, Lundberg and Gunn (2005) disagreed. In their response to Geisler's (2004) report from the fall 2003 Alliance of Rhetoric Studies, they asserted a posthumanist distinction between "agent" and "agency" that is valuable for understanding Black women's agency. Lundberg and Gunn argued that the presumption that agency possess the agent refocuses our attention on the way that the subject is "an effect of structures, forces, and modes of enjoyment that might precede or produce it" (97).

In Jeff Grabill and Stacy Pigg's article "Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums," they argued that in the context of open online forums identity performances are crucial rhetorical agencies that create space as they function to move discussion. They showed that identity is performed in online discussions and serves as non-rational argumentative moves. Those participants who did not possess traditional forms of expertise were able to participate by performing identity in ways that went beyond *ethos* building. They argue that the small, fleeting acts created argumentative space by shaping how the conversation unfolded and enabled the exchange of information and knowledge (Grabill and Pigg 2012:101). According to the authors, identity performances function as rhetorical agencies to move discussion in three ways: 1- identity performances build exigencies to which fellow participants are called to respond 2- identity performances situated in experience create the need for forum participants to nuance claims made within the conversation 3- identity performances move conversations from the abstract and conceptual world toward the immediate and concrete. (Grabill and Pigg 2012:113-114)

They found that online forum participants used identity performances to position themselves and demonstrate interest in the topic at hand by performing identities that marked their entry into a public conversation, creating a space that enables others to participate and providing perspectives that shapes the nature of the conversation itself (Grabill and Pigg 2012:108-109). Online communicators must use language to perform their identity and establish their position within a crowd of geographically distributed, unknown interlocutors who have limited means for accessing information about those with whom they deliberate (Grabill and Pigg 2012:102). At the same time, this “self” that is performed is determined by “its structural position within a larger field of discursive forces or symbolic practices, the totality of which is indeterminable yet determining” (Biesecker 2009:75). Members perform identities in the group that are also shaped by the group. This mutual identity building within the group can be a significant part of developing agency within an online conversation because the rhetors do not know each other’s’ prior reputations, cultures, motivations, purposes or reasons for communicating (Grabill and Pigg 2012:116).

The challenges of enacting agency offline are multiplied in online spaces. Face-to-face in the public sphere, Pough maintained that an individual must use powerful and imaginative speech to attract attention, create possibilities, and gain recognition in the larger U.S. public sphere in order for two parties to form solidarity between the groups (Pough 2004: 45). The ability to leverage language and identity to move conversations forward despite the challenges of online spaces is therefore a type of persuasiveness that potentially has a considerable amount of power (Grabill and Pigg 2012:116), but it requires performance. For example, asking a question in and of itself is not rhetorically significant in an online forum and can easily be ignored. Questioning only acquires rhetorical force in online contexts through the way they are performed

(Grabill and Pigg 2012:113). Grabill and Pigg suggest that identity performances contextualize questions and determine whether they are important enough to garner future responses (Grabill and Pigg 2012:113).

Identity performance online creates movement, a powerful form of agency in public, online discussions according to Grabill and Pigg. Identity performances challenge others' claims which provide new exigencies that act as catalysts for subsequent writers to reformulate claims and other discursive moves. Each reiteration requires the citing of more or new forms of evidence, and responding directly to the performed identity of those who are part of the interaction (Grabill and Pigg 2012:114).

While discussions of power with regard to marginalized populations and agency typically have negative connotations, Foucault reminded us that power not only has the potential to exclude, repress and mask, but power also produces reality as well as domains of objects and rituals of truth (Foucault 1977:194). Helene Cixous (1976) exhorted that a feminist approach to women's agency may include two aims: to break up and destroy previous oppressive discourses, and to imagine the possibilities, or "project" that which had not existed for women. Black feminist scholar and activist Angela Davis' words gave a similar reminder during her keynote address at the 2014 *Conference on College Composition and Communication* when she asked that we approach writing and theoretical efforts with the notion of expansion: "Make room for surprises, the new" (Davis 2014). This project seeks to do just that.

Understanding the implications of race, gender, sexuality and other issues of identity are critical to understanding technological access and use and its possibilities for agency. In *Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam Banks (2006) argued that the most important element of technological access is use; people using and developing the skills

that make the technology relevant to their lives (68). This argument is particularly important with regard to Black women and their use of digital technologies because such technologies were not created with them in mind and may contribute to their erasure. Social identities and embodiment were initially thought to be irrelevant in online spaces. In “Tales of an Asiatic Geek Girl: Slant from Paper to Pixels,” Mimi Nguyen suggested that the lure of cyberspace is that it is the space where a more perfect democracy is promised, but only when people exchange their real bodies for the prostheses of email addresses and personal homepages, the ideal being bodily abstraction or avatar (Nguyen 2001).

We must be able to see identities that have been marginalized in order to recognize their agency and labor and chart new courses in research, theory, and praxis in the digital humanities (Bailey 2011). Scholarship and activism focusing on technology and identity shows how the relationship between identity and technology is particularly important for marginalized groups. For example, the #transformdh movement works to address the erasure of marginalized groups and their labor. This is important social justice work to combat colonization in digital spaces and ensure democratic and equal citizenship online. In her keynote address at the 2015 #Transformdh Conference, Lisa Nakamura situated present day under-acknowledged feminist labor of women of color in social media spaces among historical labor of Black and women of color feminists in the Combahee River Collective and writers of *This Bridge Called My Back*. Nakamura (2015) argued that this online labor has “real world” impacts as well; pointing to the incidents of premature death of Black female intellectuals (2015). While I discuss identity performance as agency and empowering, it is also a form of labor. Through identity performance, Black women put their virtual bodies on the line and help create safer climates online (Nakamura 2015).

Because both identity and online spaces are socially constructed; therefore, it is important to consider the nuances how digital identities are shaped and how they function.

In the introduction to *Race in Cyberspace* Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert Rodman highlighted that cyberspace and race are both constructed cultural phenomena constantly in the process of being defined, performed, enacted, and identified in new ways (2000:10). Likewise, the selves presented online are also the result of choices and performances that stem from real people who chose to represent themselves in a particular way (Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman 2000:6).

In her chapter “Erasing@ race: Going white in the (inter) face,” Beth Kolko built on Selfe and Selfe’s (1994) argument that interfaces are designed for white male users and added that they work to erase “race” by design by either deeming it irrelevant or homogenously white (Kolko 2000). Interfaces discipline users by prescribing representative norms and patterns in order to replicate an “ideal” user. As a result, oftentimes users must adapt to technology instead of the other way around. Interfaces can also mediate how users interact with one another (Kolko, 2000:220).

The notion that “real” or offline identities such as racial and gender identity and the power dynamics that correspond with them do not matter online is deceptive 1) because those of us are online are already shaped by the way that identity matters offline, 2) we bring our knowledge, experiences and values online with us, and 3) even when the body is not physically present, identity is “narrated” and performed in order to clarify power relations (Banks 2006, Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman 2000, LeCourt 1999, Nguyen 2001).

While some wish to escape the implications of identity online, Jennifer Gonzalez highlighted the desire some have to play with identity online in her chapter “The Appended Subject: Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage”:

...the appended subject describes an object constituted by electronic elements serving as a psychic or bodily appendage, an artificial subjectivity that is attached to a supposed original or unitary being, an online persona understood as somehow appended to a real person who resides elsewhere, in front of a keyboard. (Gonzalez 2000:28)

Gonzalez asserts that the morphing that she analyzes in her study oversimplifies racial mixing while giving little or no consideration to other cultural factors such as language, socio-economic class or politics (Gonzalez 2000). Furthermore, online “invisibility” or “mutability” of online identities do not allow users to escape their “real world” identity (Gonzalez 2000, Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman 2000:4). In reality, users “inevitably enact and perform their new identities through the sign systems they already inhabit, and through which they are already interpellated” (Gonzalez 2000:43). Subjects online are also powerfully shaped by the images and activities that take place for them online (Gonzalez 2000:43, Lewis and Fabos 2005). Part of the goal of this model of cyber-citizenship where cyber identities are universal and transcend all, is the problematic subjectivity of the subject as consumer (Gonzalez 2000). New racialized appendages are consumed and incorporated leading to a new form of colonization.

Real world implications of gender identities and sexuality show up online as well. In her article “Writing (Without) the Body: Gender and Power in Networked Discussion Groups,” Donna LeCourt examined the computer-mediated communication (CMC) of her students to determine if online discussion groups provided female students with alternative subject positions and how online textuality might be suited to provide such opportunities (LeCourt 1999). She defined “feminine” as women’s experiences and women’s epistemologies. LeCourt began with the assumption that the default for online discourse was masculine. LeCourt asserted that the

“feminine” does not exist on its own. The masculine, which she characterized as univocality and monologic, has been the default; therefore, anything that disrupts that may be considered “feminine” resistance (LeCourt 1999). LeCourt suggested that a resistant form of textual feminism would “create a space for speaking multiple and contradictory subject positions within a single voice” (LeCourt 1999:159). LeCourt found that the feminine is discursive and need not have a correlation with biologic sex. The feminine can be “employed by men and women alike to change how power is orchestrated in a given context” (LeCourt 1999:159). She concluded that online discussions successfully provided space for male and female students to subvert power relations, but that the agency did not necessarily transfer back to face-to-face settings because the online reality had little or no impact on the classroom reality.

In her article, “Whose got the Floor in Computer-mediated Conversation? Edelsky’s Gender Patterns Revisited,” Susan Herring revisited C. Edelsky’s theory of how gender impacts who is granted the “floor” and allowed to speak in face-to-face (FTF) conversations or interactions. Susan Herring used discourse analysis to explore how females and males negotiate the “floor” in digital spaces. She concluded that regardless of gender one must feel empowered by the context in CMC in order to introduce a new topic (Herring 2010). Herring also found that men in asynchronous public discussion forums were more likely to initiate disagreement into the discussion, while women on the contrary, were more likely to introduce agreement (Herring 2010).

In their article “Technological Fronts: Lesbian Lives ‘On the Line’,” Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss (1999) examined their own participation on a listserv and used computer-mediated communication (CMC) theory, postmodern gay and lesbian theory, and feminist materialism in order to show how the online group simultaneously created a supportive

environment for heteronormative women while it excluded and disenfranchised lesbian women. They argued that being online does not merely replicate larger cultural norms and power dynamics as Herring (2010) argued, but that online spaces can magnify these norms and dynamics (Addison and Hilligoss 1999). Group members struggle to establish normative relationships among members because identity is already destabilized due to a lack of visual cues; therefore, they found that coming out as lesbian represented yet another destabilization (Addison and Hilligoss 1999). This study shows that categories such as women and girls, as much as they can be used strategically to empower some, can also work to marginalize others that do not fit within cultural norms assigned to those categories (Addison and Hilligoss 1999). It also stresses the importance of foregrounding material realities when working and interacting in virtual worlds (Addison and Hilligoss 1999).

1.5 Chapter Outline

In chapter two, “Sugar and Spice, but it’s Not All Nice: Identification through Identity Performance in Black Women’s Closed-Facebook Groups,” I analyze the computer-mediated communication (CMC), survey and interview data from the members of two closed, Black female-dominant Facebook (FB) groups, Homeschool with Freedom (HWF) and Natural Tresses (NT). I show that marginalized groups such as Black women can and are carving out spaces online and building virtual communities of support to edify one another and combat oppressive systems and attitudes when necessary. My analyses shows that consensus is not necessary for Black women’s solidarity and that by using solidarity building discourse strategies from their FTF speech communities in their computer-mediated communication, Black women can indeed create safe spaces and online networks that they can utilize to ensure their individual and communal survival.

In chapter three, “‘There’s a Meeting in the Ladies Room’: Black Girls’ Literacies and Counterpublics when 140 Characters are not Enough,” I analyze interviews with five of Nicki

Minaj's Black female Twitter followers. In my analysis of their discussion of their experiences navigating Twitter, I show the factors that assist and hinder their identity performances as "carefree" Black girls as well as how Black women's discourse on Twitter helps create Black feminist spaces for safer and freer expression.

In chapter four, "Scandal(ous) Literacies and Ratchet Agency: Black Women's Identity Performances as Resistance in YouTube Fandoms," I focus on the computer-mediated communication of broadcasts by YouTube personalities Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhooff. I analyze the vloggers' 42 broadcasts on their channels about season two of the *ABC* television show *Scandal*, viewer responses from the channels' comment section, as well as survey and interview responses. I show how these vloggers perform their identities and create spaces of possibility that center and create more visibility for a range of Black womanhood including those seen as deviant and deficient.

In chapter five, "Bey-ware – Construction Ahead: Beyoncé and Identity Performance in the Formation of the Black Feminist Blogosphere," I analyze 26 blog posts about Beyoncé's self-titled visual album written by Black feminists between December 2013 and January 2014. I use analysis of posts, a blogger survey, and interview responses to highlight core features and functions of Black women's CMC and demonstrate how it enabled the formation of the Black feminist blogosphere. I discuss the Black feminist blogosphere as a space that makes a wider representation of Black womanhood visible and provides space for communal processing of pain and healing.

In chapter six, "My Mic Sound Nice': Implications of the Amplification of Black Women's Voices and Rhetorical Agency on Social Media," I discuss how the synergy between Black women's discourses and social media result in amplified voices and agency for Black women. I also highlight the implications of this knowledge the advantages and disadvantages of this amplification for Composition and Rhetorical Studies' pedagogy, research, and activism at this time. The chapter calls attention to the need for further research and focus on Black

women's rhetoric and agency online and the development of a theory of digital Black womanhood.

2 “Sugar, Spice, but Not Everything’s Nice”: Identification through Identity Performance in Black Women’s Closed-Facebook Communities

This chapter examines how Black women use closed Facebook groups and Black female discourse practices in order to create digital underground spaces that are consubstantial and offer social support. Adam Banks (2006) describes the “underground” as “the specific discursive practices that determine who gets in and who does not... The underground is the particular technologies, tools, processes that make those discursive practices possible” (71). These underground discursive practices are steeped in the African American oral tradition and attest to the structural and functional vitality of the tradition even in textual and digital forms. Online “underground” spaces give African Americans and other Black people the opportunity to claim the space to “assume the authority they seek, unfettered by the assumptions and processes that would silence their authority” (Banks 82). This is particularly true for Black women. In her study of Black women’s computer-mediated debates in a discussion forum, Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006) found that using computer-mediated communication (CMC), along with African American discourse style and in-group terminology allowed participants to show solidarity and “do’ racial and gendered identities” (90) in ways that push back against the racial erasure that is designed into these technologies (Banks 2006; Kolko 2000, Selfe and Selfe 1994). This is especially true for the Black women whose discourse I examine in this chapter; they use social media and CMC to remediate discourse practices from the African American oral tradition (Smitherman 1999) and African American women’s speech practices (Troutman 2010) to construct their own underground spaces, where they can speak and act in ways that support one another and help ensure their individual and collective success.

In this chapter, I assert that the Black female participants in this study use language in these Facebook (FB) groups to create solidarity among themselves by performing their identities as Black women and using discourse practices from the Black oral tradition and African American women's speech practices that reflect their FTF practices. By creating and joining closed-Facebook groups, these women create spaces of identification and consubstantiation (Burke 1969). As a result of these practices and the subsequent spaces, they are able to more fully access and use cyberspace in ways that make it their own and are more relevant to their lives. By exploring the CMC of the Black women in this chapter, I show how their computer-mediated discourse (CMD) helps to retain a tradition of support specific to women of the African Diaspora that allows them to build community and empower themselves while retaining their own discourse traditions.

I will demonstrate show how the members of Facebook (FB) groups, Homeschooling with Freedom (HWF) and Natural Tresses' (NT)⁷ perform their identities as Black women through person-referencing, language choices including African American Vernacular English and ratchet language, and speech acts such as *talking with attitude* and matching/testifying. These performances create and reinforce shared identities and solidarity among the group members; a union arising from common responsibilities and interests. Examination of this use of social media is significant because it illustrates parallels between online and off-line Black female identities and the ways in which the African American oral tradition and Black women's discourse practices shape online identity performances and group identity formation. It also contributes to our insight into Black women's use of CMC.

⁷ Homeschool with Freedom, Natural Tresses, and individual participant identifiers have all been changed

2.1 Methods

The primary questions guiding this chapter are: How do Black women use language and literacies to exercise agency and build community on FB? To what extent do they use vernacular literacy practices and/or practices from African American Women's Speech Communities (AAWSC) in these FB groups? What kinds of identities, subjectivities, and communities do these practices help women to create on FB? My rhetorical analysis is informed by theories of identity performance online (Grabill and Pigg 2012) and consubstantiation (Burke 1969), but more specifically how they are instantiated online by Black women's practices of "recognizing" (Kynard 2010) and "representin'" (Richardson 2007) in order to better understand the rhetoric of the members of two closed, Black female-dominant FB groups, HWF and NT.

I selected these particular Facebook groups because I was privy to the context of the groups as a member of both groups. I chose to analyze the conversation thread from HWF because it exemplified the phenomenon of online community building; I had intimate knowledge of this as one of the participants in the conversation thread. When selecting a second conversation thread for analysis, I looked for a comparable example of online community building around a group member soliciting advice from the group. I successfully found one in NT. The community building moves illustrated in the threads on each page, person-referencing, language choice, speech acts, "matching," and TWA are typical of the interactions throughout the respective pages. In addition, I conducted a qualitative survey of members from both groups which yielded 51 responses and interviewed two members of the homeschooling group and one member of the natural hair group (three interviews in total) in order to get a better understanding of the group members' intentions and ideas about the groups as well as their participation within them.

In this chapter, I am the researcher and a participant because of my membership in both of the online groups and my participation in FB thread from HWF that I analyzed. Therefore, I felt like both an insider and an outsider at different stages of this research. In August 2010, I began homeschooling my two sons in a small city in the Northeast. The city had numerous underperforming public schools which was a major concern for African American parents in the area. Despite my best efforts, although I was aware of the local homeschool “community,” I felt isolated because that “community” was made up mostly of white, stay-at-home mothers and fraught with many different competing ideologies. In January 2011, a local homeschool friend and member of HWF invited me to join the FB group. At the time of my first post, I had been a member of the group for two months, but I was a “lurker” (Baym 1993); I read posts made by other members at my leisure, but did not contribute my own posts. When I posted my question to the group in March of 2011 it was for purely personal reasons; my goal was to receive at least one answer for my own personal benefit. At that time, it did not occur to me that this group or the exchanges that were to come would be the source of analysis or scholarly inquiry. I am thankful to the women of HWF who responded to my post on that in a supportive way, and I am especially grateful that upon my request they granted me permission to use their comments in this analysis. I am more of a lurker in NT. I read and occasionally reacted to and commented on other people’s posts. I have initiated two conversation threads in the group including the one to solicit participation for this study.

2.2 Establishing Solidarity in CMC

Scholarship over the last several decades has revealed several key insights into how CMC is used to establish solidarity. Nancy Baym (1993) argued that because asynchronous online groups do not share time or location, they rely more, not less, on establishing norms for

communication. For example, the lack of visual and paralinguistic cues (tone, inflection) makes interlocutors compensate in other ways (Hiltz and Turoff 1978), such as language choices and speech acts. These compensatory measures are important in understanding how disparate individuals, particularly African American women, interact in online groups and establish a group identity and solidarity in order to achieve group goals.

These online relationships are established through points of agreement, and indirect forms of discourse, including the use of inclusive pronouns and other linguistic forms, such as “we,” “all of us,” “our,” as well as the expression of group goals. Clarke (2009), in his study of an online community made up of student teachers at the higher Colleges of Technology at the United Arab Emirates, asserted that all language use must be understood within its context of creation, and, therefore, the asynchronous nature of online communication constructs new environments and alters behavior. While this has the potential to improve the co-construction of knowledge, CMC also reflects existing power dynamics. Herring (2010) found that the gender make up of a group, as in a women-only forum, can be a source of empowerment or the reverse and that one must feel empowered by the context in CMC in order to introduce a new topic. Men in asynchronous public discussion forums were also more likely to initiate disagreement into the discussion, while women on the contrary, were more likely to introduce agreement (Herring 2010). Evidence of this tendency toward agreement and the way offline power dynamics appear in online spaces can be seen in the data from the closed FB groups in this chapter.

The aforementioned literature is helpful in understanding how CMC works in comparison to FTF interactions. The data in these studies are derived from a variety of online discourse settings: formal, informal, naturally occurring, and constructed. In line with previous scholarship on electronic communication and community building in computer-mediated spaces (Baym 1987,

Clarke 2009, Rice and Love 1987, Herring 2010), the African American women in this case study also use these discursive practices to establish bonds with people that in most cases they have never met face-to-face. These studies, like the majority of studies on CMC, however, do not focus on African American participants or discourses. Even when scholarship on CMC calls for further study of non-English varieties of online chat, such as e-French or e-Arabic (Al-Sa'di and Hamdan 2005), there is no recognition of e-African American Vernacular English, African American language (AAL), or Black discourse because of the stigmas and ideologies associated with Black culture and language are reflected online. Much like Herring's argument that CMC reflects power dynamics of gender, I argue the same is true when it comes to academic explorations of race, and therefore, more study of Black female discourse is necessary.

Black women use Black discourse to show solidarity in FTF communication through the use of AAVE or AAL. AAL is a "shared social resource" that can be used to construct and claim identity within AASC (Troutman 2010:92). Whether it is done consciously or not, people behave and speak according to the group with which they wish to identify with, and that choosing to speak African American English means choosing community over assimilation (Lanehart 1996). Foster concluded that the use of AAL enabled the women in her study to communicate "cognitive, affective content not available in the standard form of the language, to create and maintain social relationships and express solidarity with listeners" (347). I will show how these expressions of Black style are instrumental in creating group solidarity for the women featured in this chapter. The ways in which Black women use language in FTF interactions to build solidarity, including person-referencing, language choice, and speech acts explicate the ways in which Black women exist and make meaning in the larger world. This study examines how these

practices translate into CMD in hopes to provide a richer, and more nuanced understanding of CMC, as well as how Black women use it to their own ends.

I identify the presence of virtual community in the FB groups in this study by evidence of shared culture, assessed by language choice, such as AAVE and features of the African American oral tradition (Smitherman 1999), in-group jargon; and solidarity, based on speech acts, such as talking with attitude (Troutman 2010) and matching and testifying (Smitherman 1999). Troutman (2010) identified talking with attitude (TWA) as a speech act common in African American women's speech communities that is talking back, talking sassy, talking disrespectfully expressing well-articulated ideas in a confident manner (Troutman 2010).

2.3 Data

Embedded in both HWF and NT is the fundamental belief in one's freedom to express their cultural values. For members of these online groups, HWF and NT are vehicles that allow for the free-flow of information and support. These online spaces are vital because as Black women, most of these members must negotiate multiple oppressions based on race, gender, and class (King 1988). The closed groups give members the ability to exclude those who do not share similar positionalities, beliefs, or value their particular experiences as it relates to homeschooling and natural hair practices. This ability to restrict membership alone helps to create a strong sense of harmony (Peterson 2008). Members of HWF and NT are able to utilize these online spaces and transform them into cultural undergrounds able to avoid much of the "surveillance and censorship that always seem to accompany the presence of African Americans speaking, writing, and designing in more public spaces" (Banks 2006:69). It also creates spaces based on identity and consubstantiality. Group members retain individuality but are still consubstantial with one another.

2.3.1 Homeschool with Freedom (HWF)

HWF is a closed group on FB for homeschool parents from across the African Diaspora. Since the interactions used for data in this study were first posted in 2011, the group has tripled in size to have 851 members. In 2015, an estimated 220,000 African American children were homeschooled.⁸ Black students represent an estimated 10% of the homeschooling population nationwide and comprise 16% of students in public-school.⁹ HWF members represent a wide range of ideological, religious, and political views. Individual member profiles show that members of the group represent different parts of the United States and the Caribbean. The group does not have an official mission statement posted on its page; however, from reading the posts to the group it is clear that for the majority of the homeschool parents in this group, homeschooling is not just about teaching “reading, writing, and ‘Rithmetic.” The Black homeschoolers in HWF have made the choice to homeschool in order to give their children a well-rounded, quality education that is culturally relevant and epistemologically nonviolent.



Figure 1 A screenshot of parenting article posted to Homeschooling with Freedom. Photograph by Anthony Gerace, from “Stop Beating Black Children,” by Stacey Patton (New York Times; New York Times, 10 Mar. 2017; Web; 25 May 2017).

⁸ Institute for National Home Education Research

⁹ National Center for Education Statistics

The primary functions of the group are to share educational resources related to homeschooling and offer one another social supports, such as emotional, informational, humor and inspiration, and political and activism messages (Peterson 2008; Qian and Mao 2010; Xie 2008). Figure 1 is an example of the type of article members share within the group to support using best practices in parenting and schooling. HWF is also a place for homeschool parents to network. As homeschooling depends on forming networks and communities for socialization as well as to avoid isolation, this FB group is a way for homeschool parents who might otherwise be in the minority in their physical neighborhood or city to interact with others in a space where they are in the majority and can be empowered to take the floor (Herring 2010). During their individual interviews, HWF members Amina and Muriel shared that they joined the group to have access to information and resources to help them with homeschooling. For Muriel, one of the most important resources is the people: “I thought it would be a good space to connect with other Black families who were homeschooling or I guess what they call crowd sourcing. Homeschooling can be very isolating and so it is very good to try to create some type of community” (Muriel 2015). Community is necessary for many mothers in the group in order to get assistance with their homeschooling efforts.

2.3.2 Natural Tresses (NT)

NT has the following description of the group posted on its FB page under the “about” heading:

[Natural Tresses], as a group, is a body of support and information for anyone interested in caring for hair in a way that: [1] is devoid of chemical treatments or other styling methods that alter the hair’s natural texture, [and 2] understands the uniqueness and individuality of hair in its natural state. The [Natural Tresses] Admin Team has a zero-tolerance policy against discrimination amongst members on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual preference, culture, nationality or political affiliation.

Even though the group does not discriminate on the basis of gender or race, the group's 42,000 members overwhelmingly consists of Black women. Implicit in the group's claim to support "natural" hair is the understanding that the most of the group's members are of African descent and have naturally curly, "kinky," "coily," or tightly curled hair that is typically not embraced and celebrated as beautiful by Eurocentric/Western beauty standards. Also, while the stated purpose of the group is to offer support and information to members regarding "natural" hair, the group's function extends beyond discussing hair-related topics, such as jokes, current events in the Black community, and posts of attractive Black men who may or may not exhibit natural hairstyles. Figure 2 is an example of a meme posted to the group's page that is a typical way for members to communicate and show their shared cultural knowledge.

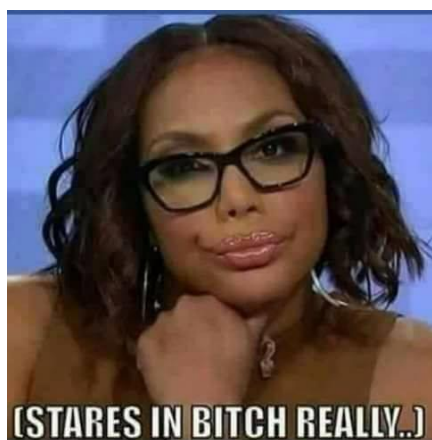


Figure 2 Tamar Braxton meme (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017)

This group is similar to HWF in that it also offers online social support to members that may be marginalized in their offline lives and communities. This point was illustrated in an online discussion initiated by a member who questioned why the group allowed non-hair related topics on the page. One member responded that she only had one other Black friend who lived near her. She explained "these discussions are refreshing to me. Things are from a Black woman's perspective. I feel like I can relate." Another member stated "I like that we talk about

hair and just LIFE in general... after all my life isn't just hair." Another member added, "Even at the beauty shop hair is not the only topic discussed. I mean even before my natural dats (*sic*) thars (*sic*) where i (*sic*) got all my gossip, the latest trends and counseling." This comparison to brick and mortar hair salons reiterates the connection between Black women's use of online groups and the "underground" contemporary hush harbor spaces, such as Black hair salons (Nunley 2004), and their cultural function. My analysis of posts to NT will show that like in hair salons, the group NT serves as an online hush harbor where its members use language and discourse practices informed by their cultural experience to build solidarity and support one another. The function of this space and the support within it goes beyond hair care alone. When interviewed, Sheila a member of NT for two years during the time of our interview shared that having support for her hair journey is a part of improved self-care for her as well: "I embraced myself a lot more...I was able to look at myself and my daughter totally differently. It's weird, but that's really what happened. Like I embraced my hair and I embraced my culture. I embraced my race. I embraced all of that a lot differently" (Sheila 2015). The identity performances and identification among NT members discussed in this chapter demonstrate such affirmation.

Survey responses from members of HWF and NT revealed the sense of community they feel in their respective groups. All 51 survey respondents identified as female and Black, African American, or a person of color, and most had been members of the group for one year or longer. While less than half of the women in the group had interacted with other members of the group in face-to-face settings outside of the group, more than half of the women described the other members of their respective Facebook groups as "community," "family," and "friends." More than two-thirds of the women said that the social support was the best feature of their respective groups. The word cloud in figure 3 represents other common themes the women expressed when

Facebook status updates and comments makes it more difficult to decipher which posts are in response to which. Those who have FB accounts can post a status update in response to the interface's prompt, "What's on your mind?", comment on someone else's status or page's "Wall," or "like" and/or "share" posts by clicking on "like" or "share." As in other CMC, emoticons, such as ":)" [smiley face], "<3" [heart or love] are also utilized to show emotion (Rice and Love 1987) and indicate "illocutionary force" of the textual utterances they accompany (Dresner and Herring 2010). Since the time period that I initially collected this data, 2011-2013, FB has also made additions to help enhance communication and the accuracy of illocutionary force. Such additions incorporate reactions to posts that go beyond the thumbs-up or "Like" and include "Love," "Haha," "Wow," "Sad," and "Angry." Users may now also reply directly to comments posted in a conversation thread instead of posting a comment to the thread and leaving it up to readers' interpretation what statement the comment should be coupled with, if any.

FB Live is another relatively new feature that allows users to post video to their timeline in real-time. This is an interactive feature because the creator of the video can see who is watching and communicate with them, and viewers can communicate with the host and others who are viewing. One feature of these user-generated videos is that it more closely resembles face-to-face communication in that viewers can read facial expressions and other paralinguistic cues. A more impactful feature of FB Live's real-time broadcasts is that it has allowed much larger audiences to bear witness to actions as they unfold offline. For this reason, activists, communities of color, and other underrepresented groups have used FB Live to document tense interactions between private individuals as well as law enforcement and private individuals. One of the most noteworthy, recent examples is Diamond Reynolds' live broadcast of the aftermath of her fiancé Philando Castille's shooting death at the hands of a Minnesota police officer on July

26, 2016. Reynolds' first words to her FB audience during the video were, "Stay with me." One viewer commented to her "Don't stop recording."¹⁰ This live feature allowed Reynolds to seek and receive community backing. The video was also hailed as citizen journalism because it brought critical and humanizing attention to another incident of state violence against a Black man. The livestream video went viral after being circulated by Black Lives Matter activists and others. Despite the Reynold's FB Live video and dashcam video footage from the police officer's vehicle, the officer who shot and killed Castile was found "not guilty" of second-degree manslaughter on June 16, 2017.

My analyses of the two FB conversation threads, one from each group, will be presented in two major sections. The first section focuses on strategies I have identified that both HWF and NT group participants employed in order to signal solidarity and show social support, which include: 1) person-referencing, how the women use inclusive forms, such as "we" and "sister;" 2) matching and testifying, how the women show identification with one another through matching experiences, language, and talk about family; 3) language choice, how the women use elements of the African American Vernacular English and in-group jargon; 4) speech acts, how the women use encouraging and advising; 5) and laughter, the use of "LOL." Secondly, I will highlight a major difference in the two groups' use of CMC to build solidarity—talking with attitude (TWA)—and how NT's use of TWA facilitated community building. I will show how the above discursive strategies are used to build solidarity in AASC and AAWSC are also present in these groups of Black women's CMC.

¹⁰ Stelter, Brian. "Philando Castile and the Power of Facebook Live." CNN.com. 7 July 2016 2016. Web. <<http://money.cnn.com/2016/07/07/media/facebook-live-streaming-police-shooting/>>.

2.4 Person-referencing

In this section, participants in each of the threads perform their identities and show identification with one another by referring to one another with the terms: “sister,” “girl,” “child,” “queen,” and pronouns. Person-referencing allows them to align themselves with one another along the lines of race and gender in ways that are unique to Black women. The members of HWF and NT perform their identities through the use of person-referencing not only to identify their target, but to “do” race, gender and community in particular ways that exhibit solidarity among each other.

The conversation thread from HWF that I analyze begins with a question that I posed to the group on March 9, 2011. The thread consists of an initial question that I posted, and 16 subsequent posts from other members of HWF, including myself. In my initial post, I shared some of the challenges I was experiencing with homeschooling my two sons in hopes that someone with elementary school-aged children who was working or going to graduate school full-time could offer suggestions.

Lines 1-23 in the excerpt below contain several examples of person-referencing:

1 LS: Is anyone else home schooling elementary school age children while working
2 or a f/t student themselves? We’re making it through this academic year, but **I’m**
3 **looking for tips, resources, and other support to help keep me going.** This is
4 tough.

5 TT: i work but not full-time. i teach fitness classes and african dance so my kids
6 travel with me every where i go. this is one of the reasons that i am so fluid in my
7 style of teaching. books on cd while in the car. keeping myself present ...in the
8 moment to look at learning opps. wasting no time on time monsters such as tv,
9 online time, unnecessary talking on the phone. staying on top of house cleaning
10 DAILY but not worrying about it if things get out of hand. taking advantage of
11 breaks by actually resting so that i get rejuvenated. appreciating that it is tougher
12 to work while **hsing**, i would rather do this any day than send my kids to school.
13 (last comment is not an indictment against schools b/c lots of my friends’ kids go

14 to school but i appreciate **hsing** MORE for me and family for reasons i am sure
15 many of you already know). it is more about the mind set **sister**.

16 TT: the other thing i think about is that no matter how hard life seems with
17 working, homeschooling and family life, my life is 1000 times easier than **my**
18 **ancestors...be they slaves**, hunter gathers or whoever....folks back in the old day
19 had to... WORK HARD. **Our** times seem hard but when **we** really study life in
20 the recent and distant past, I am living like a queen! it is all the mindset. it is hard
21 but maybe **we are being built up** like **they** had to be. only **we** don't raise our
22 food and animals and build **our** own homes and make our **own** clothes but instead
23 **we** homeschool and work at the same time.

In lines 1-4, I (LS) am seeking support. As a new poster to the page, I did not use any person-references in lines 5-23, another member of the group, TT, replies to my query, and in so doing uses several communicative strategies that build solidarity, including person-referencing. TT also uses the e-English abbreviation and in-group jargon “hsing” for “homeschooling.” The abbreviation “hsers” is also used for “homeschoolers.”

In line 15 TT calls me (LS) “sister.” This is striking because I have never met TT face-to-face, yet she calls me “sister,” a familial term of identity, endearment, and solidarity. Although TT does not drop the /r/ at the end of “sister,” it can still be taken to mean “sista” (Smitherman 1999), an Ebonic, or African American Vernacular English kinship term for African American woman, or person of African descent. By using this term of address, TT draws upon AAL as a shared resource to express her identity as a Black woman. “Sister” is also one of many culturally-toned diminutives (Troutman 2001) used within AAWSC in order to show solidarity. In lines 6-10, she shares her own strategies for balancing her responsibilities, and offers me social support and practical advice (i.e., time management and self-care).

In lines 19-22, TT continues person-referencing with the inclusive pronouns “we,” and “our.” In lines 17-23, TT compares her struggles to her ancestors, asserting that her hard-times pale in comparison to her “ancestors,” “slaves, hunter gatherers or whoever.” This reinforces the

notion that her choice to homeschool and her determination are rooted in a deeper cultural struggle. Through the use of the word “our,” TT presumes that the cultural struggles of slavery and other difficult conditions are shared by other members of the group and thus uses this statement to build solidarity by focusing on shared cultural experiences.

In lines 19-22, TT makes a significant shift when she inserts the inclusive pronoun “we” to describe the other homeschoolers in the group. Three lines prior to the use of “we,” she used “I” and “my” pronouns to describe herself. “We” is repeated four times from lines 19-22. In these lines, she compares the struggles of Black “hers” to that of the ancestors and frames those struggles as edifying. In line 18, she says, but when “we really study life in the recent and distant past,” to denote a collective history. In line 21, she continues, “maybe we are being built up,” indicating a collective present and *ethos*. In this analogy, homeschooling and working at the same time is equivalent to raising food and animals, building homes, and other survival techniques from “back in the day.” TT frames homeschooling as a form of survival and self-sufficiency.

Four other women in the group responded to my post and offered practical tips and encouragement based on their own experiences. PH shared:

31 PH: **I am both teaching, a student, and have a 2 month old.** I take online
 32 classes and sometimes I wanna scream. I’ve managed to figure out a schedule, it
 33 lacks sleep lol but it gets the job done. **I spend Sundays lesson planning for**
 34 **homeschool. I ...do college homework in the mornings Mon-Sat before**
 35 **homeschool and I take my classes in the evenings.** The baby is here through all
 36 of it. It gets rough some days but there are days when everything goes smoothly.
 37 Rest as much as you can and it’ll be over before you know it. -Sending positive
 38 energy your way-
 39 March 9 at 8:58am • LikeUnlike • 4 people KM and 3 others like this.

I was encouraged by TT’s comment, and unconsciously responded in a similar fashion:

40 LS: Thank you for the response/encouragement, **sister!** As intense as this grind
 41 has been **I wouldn’t change it either.** I don’t think I would be as close and in
 42 tune with my children’s academic and personal development if I was a f/t student

43 and they attended traditional school. I hadn't thought of using books on cd in the
 44 car. Great tip!
 45 LS @ [PH] - thank you for sharing!
 46 This is my first (*sic*) year husing my boys (6 and 10) and they are just now getting
 47 the hang of things. It was harder for my older son b/c he had been so schooled. I
 48 feel more hopeful after reading your posts. It is true that while this lifestyle is
 49 challenging, **it is a lifestyle that our family was free to choose** as opposed to
 50 **our ancestors**. I welcome more feedback.
 51 March 9 at 9:11am 1 person SH DR likes this.

I responded in kind by calling TT “sister” and performing a fictive kinship with her and the other women in the group. I also performed a collective *ethos* of Black women within a strong, shared Black heritage by referring to a shared ancestry; one made of up of people who did not have the same luxury of choice that TT, PH, the other homeschoolers in the group, and I did. Our disclosure of similar struggles through personal testimonies and narratives unified us and build a sense of community (Foster 1995). The support I received from HWF group both directly on that conversation thread and indirectly by reading other's posts helped to sustain me during my two years of homeschooling my sons. Their feedback made a strong impression on me, because when I first posted my question I did not know whether or not I would receive the “floor” (Herring 2010) and be recognized and able to command the attention of the members of the site.

I benefitted directly from this exchange and was thankful that I posted to the group for the first time. I was inspired by TT and QS's practice of carschooling and incorporated that into my practice with my sons by listening to books on CD from the library while driving around town throughout the day. I also took heed to DE's suggestion to make sure the children were working on the same subjects at the same time in order to maintain focus and conserve my energy. Many of the practices the women shared affirmed what I was already doing as well, like letting the boys pick topics that they were interested in and allowing them to research them. I was encouraged by DE's reminder to understand homeschooling as a process that would take at least a year to settle into the routine that worked best for me and my family, and to be open to

changing when needed. My feelings were validated by the women in the group and that along with their tips helped the feelings to pass that much quicker. They urged me to take breaks and rest, and assured me that the stress would pass and it would indeed be worth it in the end. I am indebted to those women and the group for holding me up and not letting me flounder alone.

The women in NT used similar kinds of person-referencing to identify with one another. One example came in response to a group member's post seeking positive feedback. For the NT group, I analyzed a thread initiated by a member I refer to as LT who is seeking positive feedback from the group members after receiving disparaging comments about her hair from someone she was dating. This thread spans over the course of two days, over 300 comments, and 69 pages from group members responding to LT's call. LT began the thread with the following post:

1 LT: The guy I'm dating HATES my natural hair. He said he doesn't like the fact
2 that it's not organized (i.e. micros, twist 2 locs, locs). And not to be rude, he is
3 used to a type of girl that wears the really ethnic "beauty shop Saturday"
4 hair...I'm not that girl... I'm different and VERY unique. I know he doesn't like it
5 and he asked me, "if you know I don't like your hair looking like this, why do you
6 wear it like that around me?".... what to do???? My feelings were hurt....**positive**
7 **feedback?**

In the excerpt below, AC offers LT advice and shows her alignment with her through the use of "sister":

58 AC: Love who you are **sister**, and if he can't deal with it, then he can get the
59 stepping!
60 Sunday at 11:39am • Like • 4

This is a straightforward example of the culturally-toned diminutive to perform race and gender online. The following example, another piece of advice for LT, puts a twist on the term "sister":

390 KG: Okay, this is the last comment I'll make. Why are women always so ready to

391 stick it out with men when they show you who they are – I’m referring to the
 392 negative ones? Unless he takes keen interest, why should you have to educate him
 393 on what is naturally yours in an effort to sway his opinion? This is not even her
 394 husband nor her fiancé. It seems the key is just be confident enough in yourself &
 395 anybody who doubts will ultimately fall to the side. I’ve seen women waste a lot
 396 of time & energy on men who weren’t worth it, so I’m just telling you from
 397 experience - time waits for no one. You want to be happy & **as a stranger**, yet
 398 **sister in God**, I wish that for you, too. Good luck on all of your journeys.
 399 Sunday at 12:25pm • Like • 8

In lines 397-398, KG frames her sisterhood with LT in “God.” By spiritualizing their connection, KG illustrates the primacy of spirituality and the sacred in traditional African culture and the Black oral tradition (Smitherman 1999) and it becomes another point of identification.

Other forms of culturally-toned diminutives found in NT’s CMC were “girl” and “child.” The use of these terms in person-referencing in NT’s thread demonstrates the way in which gender is mediated by race online, because these terms are used differently than white women’s use of diminutives in discourse that would likely be perceived as belittling.

NT group members show that they are on LT’s side and have her back by affirming her beauty and calling her the familiar term “girl” as in “girl, you and your hair are beautiful”.

Member LLC also uses the culturally-toned diminutive “child” to refer to LT in lines 965-967:

965 LLC: **Child** please. What if you came home and showed him a pic of what you
 966 wish his paycheck looked like. He’d probably die. Some stuff you just don’t do
 967 Sunday at 7:26pm via mobile • Unlike • 16

LLC’s in this context of Black women, “child” does not indicate condescension, but respect for LT and her situation. As with “sister” and “girl,” the use of “child” shows LLC identification and solidarity with LT and that she wants her to be respected in the relationship that she is in. This is confirmed by her comparison to LT showing the man she is dating a pic of a bigger paycheck. LLC obviously thinks this would be wrong as she states, “[there’s] some stuff you don’t do.”

The term “queen” is another frequent reference used on both HWF and NT. Members of HWF also use “queen” to refer to one another. TT thanks group member SC for a suggestion and refers to her as “Queen S.” Nicknames off- and online can be used to reveal information that contributes to the performance of one’s age, sex, location, body type, etc. (Van Dorn et al 2008). In the above example, the label “queen” does not necessarily index age, but it does index SC’s seniority and the level of respect that TT has given her based on the wisdom she has shared and will likely influence her online performance. Within these Black, female-dominant spaces, the reference “queen” also indicates a level of royal treatment that Black women should be shown.

In lines 661-664, Natural Tresses member LE posts that LT’s man is at fault if he cannot recognize that she is a “queen”:

661 LE: Ditch, His, Ass... NOW. This dude can go get the **lyed, dyed and laid to the**
 662 **side** chicks he wants. If he can’t **recognize a queen** when she stands before
 663 him.... **honey** you don’t need that mess. Tell him to kick a perm and keep on.
 664 rollin
 665 Sunday at 2:15pm • Like • 3

This line is particularly potent because of the playful punch it deals in that “lyed, dyed and laid to the side” is an old, popular phrase typically used to refer to men who have their hair chemically process, or “conked” to have a smoother texture closer to European standards. LE, in line with the African American oral tradition, incorporates a proverbial statement into her admonition. The use of “queen” and the proverbial statement in this post demonstrate that the discursive and rhetorical features of oral traditions are alive and well online, and important to Black written discourses (Banks 2006).

2.5 AAVE and In-Group Jargon

Besides word choice there are numerous examples of features of AAVE that the women in these FB groups use to show identification and solidarity, such as tonal semantics. One example of this from the NT thread comes from SM in lines 804-806:

804 SM: Girl dump his ass he ain't even worth the head ache or the stress on your
 805 head....**fo real!!**
 806 Sunday at 4:22pm via mobile • Like • 2

In this line, the ellipses indicate a pause in speech before the “fo real!!” which places stress on the latter two words and the realness or seriousness of her statement. This emphasis develops a cadence characteristic of Black style (Foster 1995). Another common way that the members of both groups exhibit tonal semantics in their CMC is through all caps, i.e., TT’s “WORK HARD” in HWF’s line 18. The following is an example from NT:

717 SBB: It's time to make like the Red Sea and **PART. HE'S NOT** the one. Or even
 718 the first runner up
 719 Sunday at 2:48pm via mobile • Like • 3

In line 717, SBB uses all caps to emphasize her point. The caps on the word “PART” helps to deliver the punch-line to her joke comparing LT’s “man” to the Red Sea, which Moses freed the Hebrews in the Judeo-Christian story. Devoid of visual and paralinguistic cues, punctuation, all caps, and spelling become important resources for these women to add additional meaning to their text. Examples of how the group participants manipulated spelling to change the “sound” and provide additional meaning include straight forward changes, such as “sister” becoming “sista” and “brother” becoming “brotha,” but also include more subtle examples.

In addition, both groups use specific in-group jargon to solidify their bond. In HWF, the women frequently use the term “hsing” among themselves to mean “homeschooling.” Within NT, the word “natural” functions as an in-group phrase because it has a particular meaning to the

members of the group. Their introductory statement on their group page clarifies what being “natural” entails. In addition, phrases like “big chop” to refer to a woman cutting their hair low to remove chemically processed hair, are also frequently used. Anyone in the group showing a lack of knowledge of these phrases could be seen as an outsider and limited in their discursive participation.

2.6 Matching/Testifying

One common way for the group members to establish connections to one another is by matching either their experiences and/or language. This typically takes the form of matching troubles, sameness through self-denigration, and the confirmation of feelings and understanding (Tannen 1990; 1994). This is relatively easy for members of both HWF and NT because members typically have similar goals. In her interview, Muriel described the ideology she saw members of HWF sharing in the group: “People that are a part of that group are about education as a practice of freedom...a lot of people in that group were...very Afro-centric” (Muriel 2015). The women in HWF and NT matched each other’s experience in their discourse to a certain extent, in that they began with a common challenge or grievance. However, the women in HWF and NT did not end with mere matching, but testified and shared narratives from their lived-experiences to encourage one another. In the context of these FB groups and specific threads, these narratives engendered unity, but also helped to differentiate members’ experiences and organize diversity within the group (Jacobs-Huey 2006). These narratives also provided counter-discourses that resist hegemonic storylines that do not account for the particularities of Black women’s lived-experiences. Within these online discussions, oftentimes with strangers, these testimonies also help the women to instantiate their credibility related to the topic of discussion. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the telling of these narratives allows these Black women to

establish connections to one another by the humanizing act of acknowledging each other's voices. Within these closed, Black-female dominant groups, the members are no longer speaking before nameless and faceless audiences, but to other Black women who are likely capable of recognizing and identifying with them so that they are not viewed as mere objects, but subjects.

In the HWF thread, most of the respondents to my (LS) initial thread post started their own posts with statements that matched their experiences with mine, especially as it related to trying to balance work and family responsibilities. This matching first and foremost requires recognition of my personhood and particular challenge. An example of this can be seen in TT and PH's opening posts.

In lines 5-6, TT reveals personal information about herself and her children, "i work but not full-time... my kids travel with me everywhere I go." It is important to remember that I do not know TT outside of the HWF Facebook group. Through linguistic cues such as responding with an introductory statement of agreement, TT succeeds in discursively building a sense of interpersonal relationship and community between the two of us. My response to the other homeschool moms about continuing with homeschooling in lines 40-41 demonstrates my agreement with them and the other homeschoolers on the page confirming our collective identity as a group mutually engaged in a common enterprise (Clarke 2009).

In NT, many of the female members that responded to LT's request for positive feedback also included their own personal testimonies and narratives of how they dealt with similar challenges. Initially, female members in the group began matching LT with their own testimonies of how they compromised or changed their hair to please boyfriends and husband that did not like their natural hair.

In lines 358-362, TN shares how she works things out with her fiancé who, like LT's significant other, is not fond of her natural styling:

358 TN: **My fiancée said the same thing..but the key is to find natural hairstyles**
 359 **that he DOES like and do your hair like that when u know u will c him...**for
 360 example my fiancée only likes twist outs so when plan to c him i try to do a twist
 361 out...**compromise**
 362 Sunday at 12:20pm via mobile • Like • 3

In line 358, TN matches LT and illustrates a point of consubstantiation by stating that her fiancé said the “same thing.” In line 359, TN shares her personal strategy for pleasing her man and encourages LT to “compromise.” This post represented a sizable minority within the group and was based on identification that centered on the women’s desire to have a man.

One of the most popular testimonies, indicated by 10 “likes” or agreements, came from AS in lines 557-573. AS began by matching LT’s “hurt” feelings:

557 AS: Sorry for this lengthy wall of text that is coming to you, I had a flash back.
 558 That stuff **rubs me in the worst of ways** because **I had to FIGHT myself and**
 559 **selfesteem (sic) for years on trying to make peace with myself** and be
 560 accepting what others would not accept: ME I can no longer allow people to be in
 561 my head and try to change me into something they think is “normal” to them. I
 562 am AS, I have Albinism a recessive trait where a person of any race is born with
 563 the lack or the complete total absence of pigment in the hair, skin and or eyes,
 564 something that I cannot change and wouldn’t change if I could. My Albinism does
 565 not define who I am BUT has helped mold me into the person I am today, I am
 566 who I am. **So when I hear other people struggling to make peace with people**
 567 **who they find important to them it hurts me because I know the struggle.**
 568 Your Natural hair does not define who you are as a woman, and if people can’t
 569 see that then their minds are so clouded by ignorance. If someone has to change
 570 something about someone just to like them or respect them more then it’s not
 571 worth it, it says a lot about how they will still feel about you in the end. The song
 572 “Unpretty” comes to mind by TLC when I think of stuff like this.
 573 Sunday at 1:19pm • Like • 10

In disclosing her previous struggles with self-esteem and with other people trying to change her into their idea of “normal” she instantiates her credibility to speak on this topic. This

also allows her to be granted the “floor,” and her longer than usual post is indulged and appreciated as shown by the “likes.” This lengthy testimony also shows that she recognized LT’s voice and struggle, and AS lets LT know that she is not alone in that struggle. Here, LT’s man is less of an issue, but the woman-to-woman identification centers the women and their need to be respected and at peace.

Over time, the posts changed to reflect the testimonies of women who asserted their right to do their hair as they pleased. Then, there were female members who gave their testimonies of how their significant other loved them and their natural hair from the beginning. YYH shared that she could not relate to the pressure that LT felt:

577 YYH: **My husband loves my natural hair**...but hates the length. He would
 578 prefer I dread it, but being military I can’t. **Whether I weave it, braid it, or fade**
 579 **it no matter what I do to my hair, he supports it because if I’m happy, he’s**
 580 **happy.** Like MJB says...“Take me as I am or want nothing at all...” Good luck in
 581 whatever decision YOU make.
 582 Sunday at 1:23pm • Like • 3

YYH flips the scenario and shares that her husband loves her natural hair. Based on her testimony, his preference does not seem to be a problem in her relationship, because in lines 578-579 she explains that “no matter what” she does to her hair; her husband supports her, because he wants her to be happy. YYH’s testimony, like some of the others on the thread, is an example of a supportive relationship in which she is fully accepted. Here, YYH identifies with LT as a woman and a person who desires unconditional love and respect, particularly with a man. Her emphasis through all caps in the word “YOU” refocuses attention back on LT’s agency.

The space on the thread for these women to share their stories provides the opportunities for the diversity of experiences and possible options for LT as she negotiates this issue. The testimonies also show that the other members are in solidarity with her; she has support, and is not in it alone in her struggle.

Matching and identification was also seen among the women in HWF regarding the discourse of Black motherhood. TT commented that without the evolving nature of homeschooling, it would be boring. From this statement we can infer that TT believes there to be boring or undesirable elements of homeschooling and that there is a degree of self-sacrifice required to juggle the multiple responsibilities. This notion is supported by Collins' (2000) claim that Black women keep the image of the strong, devoted, self-sacrificing mother in tact to maintain norms of racial solidarity. This representation of Blackness and femaleness in CMC is not surprising because online community members bring their everyday, embodied experiences with them (Van Dorn et al 2008). Other group members like DE, SC, PH, and myself (LS) presented a united front as we matched this performance of Black womanhood through our CMC relying on one another for knowledge about our "gender script" that Crenshaw (1991) argued is inextricable from our race and class backgrounds.

LT performed her identity as a Black woman with natural hair by posting her challenge with her love interest to the thread. Her post is a text book example of "messy rhetoric" in that it established an urgent need for other group members to respond. Her post created the need to nuance claims as evidenced by the many variations of testimonies and "matching: accounts of similar challenges. In inspiring the other responses, LT post moved the conversation from the abstract issue of the acceptance of a natural Black aesthetic and afro-textured hair to concrete responses, solutions, and affirmations.

By matching each other's experiences and language and testifying to their own experiences, the women of HWF and NT successfully establish connections with one another and create a group identity with shared group goals. Through the matching and sharing of these personal stories the group members were able to discern shared values as it relates to children,

child-care, family, homeschooling, hair politics, racial identity, gender, and cultural values. The women of NT were also able to differentiate and organize the diversity of the group. For example, while they were in the minority, women who admitted to changing their hair to please or meet their mates half-way were able to share their perspective and still, for the most part, be respected.

2.7 Speech Acts – Talking with Attitude

While there were many similarities between the CMC of the women in HWF and NT, one major difference between the posts was the occurrence of TWA in the NT group. While the thread respondents in HWF show solidarity through matching and testifying, the respondents to the LT's post do so with attitude. This difference may reflect the varying levels of freedom that members of both groups feel to use AAVE in group posts. For example, my observations of HWF over the course of the six years that I have been a member of the group revealed limited use of AAVE in the posts to the group page and instead reflect more African American Standard English (Spears 2015) use. AASE is a form of African American Language that does not contain distinctively Black grammatical features that are stigmatized. Amina and Muriel, the two members of HWF that I interviewed indicated limited use of AAVE within the group. Muriel, an African American professional educator and self-proclaimed AAVE speaker described her language on the page as formal – at least more formal than how she would write to or respond to close friends on social media. Regarding posting in the past, she said, “I was definitely more careful and cautious about how I responded because of it being a site with a lot of people who I don't know” (Muriel 2015). For Muriel, her language choice was closely tied to familiarity and intimacy with others on the page. Amina, an African American, Muslim, home-maker and

homeschooler shared that she actively chooses not to use AAVE and slang on the page although she has close ties with members of the group. During her interview she said:

I try not to use it [AAVE]. It's an irritant to me. When I look at my children's posts and they put things up and it's like 'what type of English is that?' And I say we have so many strikes against us per se, you know, we're Black, most of them are women, so you get into stereotypes. If we use our English properly and if we practice it we won't get lazy with it, because I think so many people practice it [AAVE] it becomes second nature. Then it becomes everything they do and it's hard to break, so I don't get into the habit of it. It's an irritant. Speaking to people that use it all the time and seeing it written and half the time I can't understand what someone's typing, so I'll have to [ask] one of my children-'what're they trying to say?' or else I'll just get off that post. (Amina 2015)

Amina's remarks reflect her attitudes about Black language that has distinctively Black features that are stigmatized. Her characterization of the Black language use she sees off- and online reveals that she thinks it is "lazy" and immature – she relies on her children to interpret such posts – and she is invested in doing the work to avoid viewed as a stereotype and having an additional strike against her in society. Amina places the onus on those who would use Black language instead of white supremacy, the politics of respectability, and societal pressures; Black language is the "irritant" to her. She admits, however, that even she has a hard time adhering to her own expectations. When asked to describe the language she uses on the site and how her familiarity with other users in the group impacted her language use, she shared:

That site is a second home. It's very relaxed. You don't have to be formal. There are some days when you're so tired and you go check again. At 3 o'clock in the morning my time, sometimes I'm not that alert and my sentences don't make sense. People respond – it's like, oh, 'how did you do that?' There are sometimes I know people are questioning 'how does she teach her child?' (Amina 2015)

Again, Amina associates being relaxed, less alert and perhaps laziness with error and projects her attitudes about "improper" language use onto other users in the group as she imagines they may think of her as less intelligent and judge her ability to homeschool. Amina and other members may be more self-conscious about their language use because the group focuses on education. Interestingly, TT did not appear to be hyper-vigilant about her online grammar and seemed

informal in her post. Her language, however, did not reflect distinctively Black features. Amina admitted that she also infrequently uses slang in her posts to the group, but only jokingly and accompanied by an explanation such as, “that’s all the slang I will be using today”.

There do not appear to be the same restrictions or reservations when it comes to language use in Natural Tresses. Most if not all threads posted to the group contain informal language and AAVE. During her interview, Sheila, a member of NT, shared that feels comfortable being herself and expressing herself informally on the site even though she does not know other members of the group personally. She said, “I use [slang/less formal language] in everyday life. I don’t think that’s gonna change just because I’m in the group” (Sheila 2015). She believes that there is a time and place for formality, but NT is not the place for that. She said, “I don’t see the group as being something that is [different from] just talking to a bunch of friends or just getting some information about one specific thing. I could understand if I was talking to Oprah Winfrey or something” (Sheila 2015). Sheila did not think that others in the group had a problem with understanding her posts and comments to the group because she said that everyone “talks” or posts the same way. This supports Herring’s (2010) claim that regardless of gender, context plays a major role in users’ agency in CMC. This may help explain the difference in the nature of the use of language and speech acts between HWF and NT and why posts to NT contain more AAVE and talking with attitude.

TWA is significant because it is a speech act in which members of the African American speech community draw on African American Language as a shared resource to exhibit Blackness (Troutman 2010). Despite the common perception that TWA necessarily demonstrates impoliteness and inappropriateness, TWA can fulfill a polite or impolite function based on context (Troutman 2010). In the NT thread, many respondents use TWA in order to show

support for LT and her right to autonomy. In doing so, the respondents talk back and *bring wreck* (Pough 2004), or launch an attack on those who threaten LT's right to express her natural identity through her hair. Although these discursive acts, like stating "Fuck him," may seem negative on the surface, within the context of the group they are positive because the work to offer social support to LT and build solidarity among group members by reinforcing the community's cultural norms and values. TWA as with testifying is about expressing voice. In her study of adolescent girls, Koonce (2010) asserted that within restrictive ecologies, TWA can be a defense mechanism for Black girls (44). This use is positive, because in such contexts, TWA allows Black girls and women to maintain their cultural integrity (Koonce 2012). NT does not represent a restrictive ecology for its members; however, the larger cultural landscape that they are confronting in their defense of LT is restrictive.

The group members not only give apostrophic attitude to LT's male love interest and the societal expectations he represents, but they were quick to "check" and address one of the male respondents in the group who began trolling on the conversation thread by signifying on LT and not showing her empathy. In lines 641-644, FBG wrote:

641 FBG: **Fishing** ...just maybe .. **Get the f**k outta here,,, you different and**
 642 **unique for wearing what grows out ya head c'mon son...secondly ya man is a**
 643 **fuck face any man that dare say some shit like that don't like ya ass either**
 644 **way...stop fishing** and have a serious look at who you wit..
 645 Sunday at 1:58pm • Like • 1

In his post, FBG suggests that LT only started the conversation thread to get attention and validation. While FGB's assessment that her "beau" did not value her was not significantly different from many of the respondents, his delivery was very different in that his animus was directed at LT. He intentionally injected disagreement and discord in order to get an emotional response. However, his initial trolling was unsuccessful because he did not get any response. His

comment may have gone under the radar, or the other members did not want to “feed the troll” and encourage him by giving a response. It is also likely that FBG’s post went unanswered because he did not adhere to the guidelines of the indirect discourse he attempted to engage in on the thread. In African American Speech Communities and African American Women’s Speech Communities there are specific rules of indirect discourse, such as: permissibility, knowing the rules (Troutman 2001), and paying close attention to local shared knowledge and audience (Morgan 2003). African American women’s strategic indirectness is typically used for a powerful moral stance toward the target (Jacobs-Huey 2006). FBG did not meet these criteria yet he persisted and doubled-down on his trolling the next day:

1135 FBG: damn ma at this point **you must be on a yachtcuz you fishing is going**
 1136 **sooo well...next time say he beats you because you dont bleach your skin...**
 1137 Monday at 12:50pm • Like

FBG insinuates that she has been very successful in receiving the attention that she sought. He indirectly calls her a liar again, and offers up another lie for her to share the “next time” she decides to seek attention. As a troll, it appears that he is projecting his own attempts at seeking attention by inserting himself in the thread. He shows how improbable he believes LT’s story is by offering another story that is, in his view, as equally hard to believe. His logic, however, does not account for internalized white supremacy and Eurocentric beauty standards that might make men more accepting of a straight-textured weave.

Finally, other members of the group, SIH and JB, respond to his comments in line 1142:

1142 SIH: **What was that about F[BG]?**
 1143 Monday at 1:12pm via mobile • Like • 1

1144 JB: Wow dude was saying she was fishing for complements (*sic*).....**that’s**
 1145 **bullshit, take that somewhere else, Joe.**
 1146 Monday at 1:15pm via mobile • Like

SIH's questioning of FBG shows how out of place his comment is in the thread in comparison to other's comments. Due to the asynchronous nature of the discussion on the FB thread, JB is able to respond to SIH's question before FBG. While I have previously discussed person-referencing in the context of this chapter as a way to show solidarity, here, JB uses it to show that FBG is not welcome in the discussion when she calls him a random "Joe" instead of his actual name. JB lets him know that that type of negative comment is not welcome on the thread by telling him to take it elsewhere. JB's response confirms that there is a disagreement in the thread introduced by a male participant. This is consistent with Herring's (2010) findings that men in asynchronous public discussion forums were more likely to initiate disagreement into the discussion, while women on the contrary, were more likely to introduce agreement. At this point in the "discussion," LT was not actively participating, so the other women in the group represented for her by TWA. However, this did not initially back FBG down. He continued on by posting:

1147 FBG: Is wearing your NATURAL hair this controversial **really really...c'mon**
 1148 **son.. she doesn't even have a man cuz no black man would ever say that** ever
 1149 never and if he did...he trying ya ass. **so tell me again what the ?**
 1150 Monday at 1:45pm • Like • 1

He does not offer her moral support like other members who comment on the thread. Again, FBG insists that LT is lying. FBG concludes that this should be a non-issue when he facetiously asks for the question to be repeated.

Either out of frustration or excitement, FBG responds with the use of all caps for a larger portion of his post in lines 1206-1212. He continues to troll the "ladies" on the thread calling them "STUPID" for believing LT. He also uses hypothetical real-life situations to try and illustrate the improbability of LT's story. In his examples, he attempts to show a male perspective by describing "man code" and mansplaining to the group and demonstrates his identification with other men instead of LT and the women in the group. The only point of

alignment in his post with the others in the conversation is his use of the word “queen;” as described earlier, in the context of this group Black women are assumed to be regarded royally as queens.

Instead of testifying to his struggles with this issue like the female members of the group were able to, FBG performs his identity as a Black man and attempts to change the discourse. Jacobs-Huey (2006) asserts that within conversations among African American women, those with different identities such as white women and Black men introduce whiteness into the discourse in order to join the conversation. In this thread, FBG makes a similar move by introducing his skewed male and masculine perspective into the discourse in order to join and disrupt the conversation. His argument does not get much traction in the group, because many of the women have already identified with LT through similar experiences and know he is being contentious.

Other members clap back with attitude by posting their own sarcastic remarks and insults. Several members of the group not only disagree with FBG’s argument, but take issue with him questioning the legitimacy of LT’s story in the following excerpt. TM confronts FBG and is concerned with supporting or representin for LT as a member of the group.

1234: TM: WOW! Ok I.F.....,she is fishing for complements **SO WHAT?????** She
 1235: **may need an ego boost cause she struggling with her OWN natural journey.**
 1236: But FYI **not every man black, white, or other respect the queen** they are with
 1237: hence **domestic violence, rape, trafficking** etc. etc. so **why you wanna take it**
 1238 **sooooo far to the left?**
 1239 Monday at 3:00pm via mobile • Like • 1

She talks back to FBG in order to affirm LT’s experience and possible struggle with her “natural journey.” Her use of all caps and question marks indicate tonal semantics and her emphasis on wanting to know why there would be a problem with LT using the group in order to receive affirmation about her natural hair when that is part of the purpose of the group. Her emphasis on

“OWN” with the all caps redirects the attention back to LT. TM offers anecdotal evidence that shows identification with LT and other Black women. She brings “receipts” or evidence to back up her claims that misogynoir is in fact real by highlighting examples of disrespect directed toward Black women aka “queens” by Black men. She concludes by once again questioning FBG’s motivations. In asking why he wants to take it so far outside of the boundaries of the norms of discussion of the group and this particular thread.

One particularly significant clap back or critique that members of the group level against FBG is that he is unintelligible. In line 1240 TLF offers comic relief through attitude and shade to FBG:

1240: TLF: **Yall betta than me cuz i couldnt follow what he was tryna say lol**

1241: Monday at 3:02pm via mobile • Like • 3

TLF performs a form of faux self-deprecation by applauding those able to discern and engage FBG’s comments. She makes it clear that she cannot understand FBG’s post; presumably because he does not communicate clearly. This shade is significant because she and the others commenting on the thread are users of AAVE and manage to understand each other just fine. She shades him by implying that he is inarticulate and not making sense. This is obviously a jab at FBG’s intelligence, but also shows that he is not linguistically dexterous or able to talk that talk on FB.

FBG does not go down without a fight. FBG makes an appeal to the members/readers’ *logos* by drawing on faux factual information, “citation,” as well as tonal semantics through the use of all caps and ellipses. FBG says he is not “trying to start” any problems. The lack of insults and accusatory language in this comment is significant because it reflects a shift in response to the previous posts from the other female members. In the battle of the attitudes, the women won and were able to limit FBG’s participation in the conversation through their discourse practices

(Jacobs-Huey 2006). His final argument is that LT needs to have a more important conversation with her man because he is using the hair issue to passive aggressively push her away.

In this exchange on the thread in NT the female members of the group use talking with attitude as a means of social support for LT. By TWA they recognize and represent for LT. Typically, social support online is characterized by “positive” and amiable gestures. In her article, “‘You Have to be Positive.’ Social Support Processes of an Online Support Group for Men Living with HIV,” Jennifer Peterson (2008) concluded that the members of the online support group for homosexual men with HIV/AIDS in her study were able to create a sense of harmony due to their ability to restrict group membership and limit content to reflect positive views. While members of HWF and NT do not explicitly demand the exclusive use of positive talk in their respective groups, they constantly mirrored each other’s positive comments and affirmed one another’s experiences which had the same harmony building effect. The members commenting on the NT thread complicate this theory because on the surface, or from the perspective of an outsider, the attitude exhibited by the group respondents may seem “negative” toward LT’s love interest and FBG. In actuality the women’s use of TWA was another form of positive social support. “Positive” talk or support, just like TWA must therefore be determined by context. By TWA the women of NT showed solidarity with LT, even in her absence from the thread, and with one another. The point of this section is to show the positive effect of the Black women’s use of TWA to push back against restrictive discourses and trolls within their space which allows them to maintain this space of consubstantial and Black female- centered space.

Not all of the interactions and identity performances in the groups are as serious and/or contentious as these on a day-to-day basis. As FB more image- and video centric, many members use the additional media to play and have fun while expressing their views. For example, after

Beyoncé’s 2016 Super Bowl performance of her single “Formation,” many white viewers were upset. Members of NT did not hesitate to discuss this issue among themselves and show allegiance with Beyoncé. The image below in figure 4 is a screenshot of a text conversation that one of the members posted to the group. I have whited-out the member’s name. The identity of the people communicating in the texts was already covered when posted to the page.

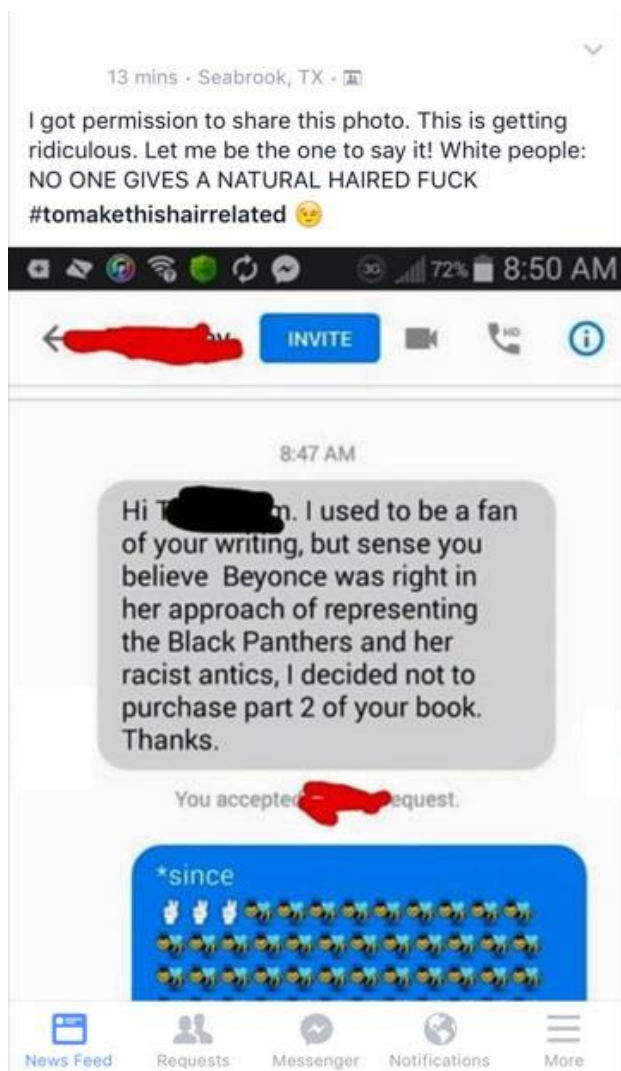


Figure 4 A screenshot of backlash over Beyoncé posted to Natural Tresses by group member DS (Natural Tresses, 9 Feb. 2016; Web; 9 Feb. 2016).

A member shared this clap-back against an angry white person to inform others in the group of the type of sentiments circulating about the performance and to also express her opinion

that she did not care about the white anger. Including the word “hair” in a caption for a picture that is not about hair is a common practice in the group because the group’s guidelines state that all content must be hair-related. The hashtag “#tomakethishairrelated” plus the winking emoji is a part of the inside-joke that a large portion of the content is not hair-related at all.

Members of NT often perform their identities communally through the use of images showcasing their hairstyles as well as memes. Meme posting is such a large part of NT’s daily activity that when I asked Sheila to describe her experience in the group, the first thing she mentioned was the memes. Some meme posts specifically solicit images like the ones below. The first one is asking the men in the group with beards to post selfies; this tends to be eye-candy for members of the group.

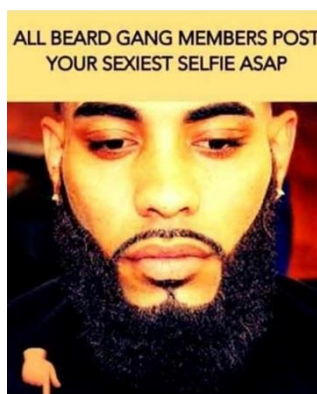


Figure 5 A "bear gang" meme requesting that men post sexy selfies to Natural Tresses (@mobhair; Instagram; <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/89/2a/cd/892acd2d806a76fc9e966029fe40a2b6--men-beard-bearded-men.jpg>; 25 May 2017)

Other posts like in Figure 5 explicitly ask members to perform their identities in the conversation thread.



Figure 6 A screenshot of a "describe yourself" meme posted to Natural Tresses requesting members post pictures to describe themselves (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017)



Figure 7 A screenshot of a meme promoting self-esteem posted to Natural Tresses (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017)

The meme/prompt assumes that members have pictures saved on their computer, or more likely to their phone that they can post. It is also meant to be funny because members are challenged to make do with what they have on hand already. One response shown in figure 7 shows the playful nature and in-group knowledge required to enjoy this type of discourse. For example, Black members would likely know that oxtail is a highly sought after meat among Black cultures is more rarely eaten because of its expense. On the other hand, chicken backs are cheap and much easier to come by, but not worth the trouble of the tedious cleaning because they

do not have much meat on the bones. The user who posted that meme, therefore, is asserting that they are valuable with high standards and will not be treated as if they are cheap and common.

Members of HWF posts pictures primarily of resources – event flyers, homeschooling tips, products, etc. The images in figures 8, 9, and 10 are examples of the kinds of information shared within the group. The dominant colors in the flyers on the far left and right (red, black, and green) demonstrate African pride and Black Nationalism. This theme is reinforced by the images of Black people and references. For example, the middle flyer is illustrating teachings from Elijah Muhammad, former leader of Black Nationalist group The Nation of Islam, and the last flyer is promoting “Afrikan centered education.”

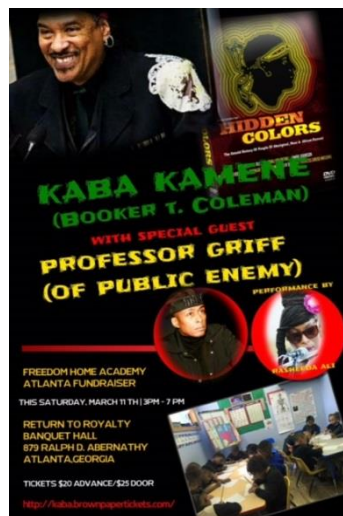


Figure 8 A fundraising flyer for the Freedom Home Academy (Freedom Home Academy; Homeschooling with Freedom; Web; 25 May 2017)



Figure 9 "Positive parenting" illustration based on teachings from the Nation of Islam (Muhammad, L'dia Men-Na'a; Homeschooling with Freedom; 27 Apr. 2017; Web; 25 May 2017)

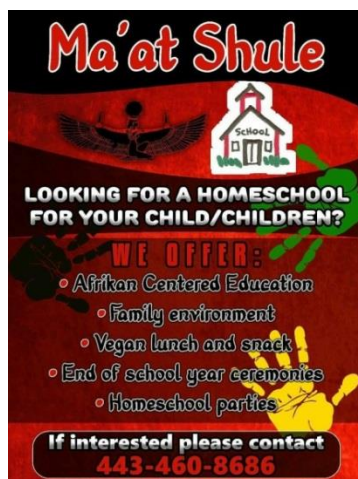


Figure 10 Communal homeschooling program flyer posted to Homeschooling with Freedom (Ma'at Shule; Homeschooling with Freedom; Web; 25 May 2017)

A primary way that group members perform their identities that I do not explore here are usernames and profile pictures and videos. One limit of this study is that because this data is taken from closed groups, it is important to protect the identities of the members I cannot include their usernames and profile pictures in my analysis or in the chapter.

While identity performances have many effects that foster community and well-being within these FB groups, there are limitations and challenges as well. One by-product of group identity and *ethos* formation within the groups is the potential for group-think and the silencing

of other members' voices and identities. The way in which the members of NT called-out and stopped FBG's trolling can also be employed against members that express unpopular beliefs. The communities' practices of sharing and affirming particular beliefs can also have a detrimental effect when reinforcing toxic or oppressive ideas. For example, the meme in figure 11 was posted in NT and is seen as funny by many members, but reinforces common patriarchal and oppressive beliefs about a women's sexuality.



as a lady If ur body count is over 5,
u don't deserve a wedding
ceremony... Just a small gatherin
biscuit and soft drink

Figure 11 A "body count" meme posted to NT (Natural Tresses; Web; 25 May 2017)

The message is that if a woman has had sex with five or more men, she is an unworthy woman and bride. She should therefore be treated cheaply and as unworthy of honor. A meme is oftentimes designed to ridicule human behavior.¹¹ Unfortunately, even in Black women-dominant groups, Black women are still the ones ridiculed and disrespected. These messages circulated and validated by other members help to reinforce ideas that police Black women based on the politics of respectability.

Another way that the large and contained audience may work against its members is that it incubates the upset and anxieties that many members share within the safety of the group. For example, the shooting death of 74-year-old Robert Godwin in Cleveland, OH on April 18, 2017

¹¹ Gil, Paul. "All About Memes with Examples." Lifewire. 5 July 2017 2017. Web. <<https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-a-meme-2483702>>.

was livestreamed on FB Live by his murderer and subsequently went viral. While members of HWF and NT sought the refuge of their closed groups to discuss the terrifying events, members repeatedly posted the video of the shooting on the groups' pages. Group members may feel more comfortable processing the event in these spaces, but they are also likely to be over-exposed to this content in their groups. Social media and Internet users who are constantly exposed to violent videos that circulate online, including in the closed groups, have a desensitizing effect on viewers that fosters apathy. During the hours and days immediately following the Godwin shooting, the video was widespread, but fear and anxiety went viral as well.

Another potential way that these communal spaces can have a deleterious effect on members is when sought after social support is not provided. The conversational threads I analyzed show how important the support and affirmation LT and I sought from the respective groups we posted in were to us. There is an expectation that the members there will identify with and recognize us, and if necessary, possibly even represent for us. If and when that does not happen, members may feel insecure and isolated. During our interview, Sheila said she posted a picture of her bantu-knot out, a challenging natural hairstyle that she was proud of, and was initially disappointed with the response: "I got offended, cuz I'm like dang nobody likes my pic. Nobody likes my twist-out. Other people have like 3,000 likes. I'm sitting there with like two likes. What???" Once the "likes," comments, and questions began to roll in, Sheila said she felt like "the fly girl for the day." In a world where Black girls and women are told they are not pretty, smart, and worthy enough, being seen by your "sisters" and feeling like fly-girl-for-the-day means everything.

2.8 Findings

This Facebook exchange between HWF and NT members show some of the community building practices that take place within their respective groups. These female-dominant groups are made up of people of African descent who share similar histories, ways of being and understanding the world as well as similar oppressions and challenges associated with being Black women as evidenced through their use of Black discourse practices online. Most of them chose to use language rooted in broader AASC as well as the narrower AAWSC in their CMC in order to perform their racial and gendered identities (Troutman 2001) online and establish solidarity with individuals they will likely never meet face-to-face.

I show through the analysis of these threads how Black women are using CMC in online spaces as a resource to form extended networks of support that fulfill similar needs as women-centered networks in FTF contexts in the past. I found that person-referencing in the thread I examined involved the use of AAVE terms like “sister;” through this participants connected to one another as African American women. The use of pronouns also worked to build solidarity predominantly through the use of “we;” this helped forge the women’s online relationships around shared racial, gender, and class backgrounds, epistemologies, challenges and goals. Because of this shared experience, the members of HWF and NT were able to offer encouragement and advice to one another; these practices mirrored African American women’s speech communities and “real world” hush harbor spaces, like beauty salons that have traditionally been resources for Black women. One of the most common ways that members of HWF and NT established solidarity is by matching their experiences and language; by matching each other’s Black discursive style and personal testimonies the women reflected their

socialization as Black women and bonded through their discursive performances of Black womanhood.

My analyses also showed that consensus is not necessary for Black women's solidarity. As Banks (2006) suggests, recreational online spaces allow a more "organic view" of African American rhetorical production: "vernacular site like this provide the opportunity to see what patterns emerge outside the prescriptions used to prepare speakers for public communication" (73). I argue NT's thread illustrates a stronger community bond among its participants than the participants in the HWF thread, because the NT participants were able to show dissent within the safety of the group without dissolving the group cohesion. This is in part because another benefit of online underground spaces, to paraphrase Banks (2006) is that "simplistic judgments" about grammatical features do not lead to their discursive and intellectual complexity and contributions being entirely "dissed" and dismissed from the group. After all, both exclusion and alignment in both AASC and online undergrounds are fluid (Jacobs-Huey 2006). So while FBG was called to task for being out of line in his discursive presentation of his views on LT's situation, he still remains a member of the group, although his last post or comment to the group was made in 2014, one year after this post. On March 30, 2014, a Black woman, JMG, called him out for not belonging in the group and being a "disrespectful ass" after he implied she was a "THOT" for wearing a weave as a protective style. He has not trolled since then.

Social media offers great potential for discursive construction of interpersonal relationships and communities, especially for groups typically marginalized in society because of race, ethnicity, gender, class sexual orientation, ability, etc. Like Herring and Jacobs-Huey argue, my data shows that CMC can be a reflection of problematic social practices and power dynamics harmful to Black women. This chapter shows that despite this, Black women and other

marginalized groups are carving out spaces online and building communities of support to edify one another and combat oppressive systems and attitudes when necessary. By using solidarity building discourse strategies from their FTF speech communities in their computer-mediated communication, Black women can indeed create safe spaces in which they can build the “village” of the 21st century, online networks that they can utilize to ensure their individual and communal survival.

3 “There’s a Meeting in the Ladies Room”: Black Girls’ Literacies and Counterpublics when 140 Characters are not Enough

3.1 Black Girls’ Literacy and Space on Twitter

Twitter is a rich site of community literacy practices for Black women. In this chapter, I show how Black women use discourse and literacy practices that are culturally specific to them on Twitter. To understand how the five women I interviewed for this chapter navigate Twitter as a literacy space I employed the theory of Black girls’ literacies (Muhammad and Haddix 2016, Richardson 2003) as a framework. I explore Black women’s use of Twitter as a space for literacy and sociopolitical activity including feminist community formations and “carefree” identity performances and representations. I entered this inquiry through the Twitter page of rapper and pop-star Nicki Minaj who is an exemplar of Black girls’ literacies on Twitter.

Nicki Minaj shed a light on the connection between Black girls’ literacies on- and offline in popular culture during the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs). During her acceptance speech for Best Hip-hop Video for her song “Anaconda,” Minaj thanked a series of people including her pastor for their support and then turned her attention to the award show host, Miley Cyrus, who had recently made comments about the rapper. Nicki Minaj paused and stated: “And now...back to...this bitch who had a lot to say about me the other day in the press...Miley, what’s good?!” Minaj’s brash calling out of Miley Cyrus was a seemingly unscripted and unstaged response to Cyrus’ previous statements about the rapper to *The New York Times* in which Cyrus said that Nicki Minaj was not “too kind” as a person. Cyrus implied that Minaj had overreacted in her Twitter response to not being nominated for a VMA award for video of the year. It is likely that Cyrus did not expect what started out as social media posts and media comments would lead to a real-life confrontation with Nicki Minaj. A careful examination of Nicki Minaj’s Twitter page, however, would have revealed that Nicki Minaj’s Twitter page and

its usage are rooted in her identity not only as a performer, but as a Black woman socialized in Hip-hop culture. Therefore, it is no surprise that Nicki Minaj responded in the way she did. In fact, it is an illustration of how closely linked Minaj's discourse and literacy practices online and in public appearances are and how they reflect epistemologies and ontologies rooted in the Black female experience and oral tradition. This claim is in no way intended to reify or perpetuate negative stereotypes of "the angry Black woman," but instead highlight the use and function of Black women and girls' literacy practices and how Nicki Minaj and other Black women use them on Twitter.

Nicki Minaj's unabashed performance of her identity online led me to view her Twitter page as a site of sociocultural and political activity among her and her Black female followers. I sought to answer the following questions: How do Black women use discourse practices from face-to-face (FTF) African American women's speech communities on Twitter? What kinds of identities/subjectivities do these practices help these women perform and create? What affordances and constraints does Twitter have on this form of Black women's agency? To this end, I conducted an anonymous online survey of @NICKIMINAJ's Black, female followers as well as qualitative interviews of her Black female followers. I received a total of 20 survey responses. After two of those respondents who indicated that were interested in being interviewed online for the project later declined, I sought out new interviewees on Twitter via my personal Twitter page. I looked for users who both followed me and @NICKIMINAJ, and I requested their participation in my online, confidential interview. Five Twitter users 18-years-old and older who identified as Black and female agreed to be interviewed. All interview respondents have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. See Appendix C and D for the Twitter survey and interview protocols.

Black girls' literacies (Muhammad and Haddix 2016) describes not only the ways Black girls and women read words, but how they read and make meaning of social contexts. The framework builds on existing scholarship that examines the language practices of Black women and girls particularly Elaine Richardson's (2003) African American female literacy. Richardson (2003) described African American female literacies as ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills and expressive arts and crafts that help them advance and protect themselves and society. In their exhaustive literature view of literature on Black women and girls', Muhammad and Haddix concluded that Black girls literacies are multiple, tied to their identities, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical. While Muhammad and Haddix (2016) focus their attention and implications on school-aged girls, the literature reviewed and their findings are not limited to a particular age group. Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) who brought the study of Black girlhood to the fore defined Black girlhood as "the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity" (1). Muhammad and Haddix's (2016) theoretical findings apply to Black girls and women and extend existing understandings of Black women's literacy within Literacy and Rhetorical Studies. For example, they confirmed Jacqueline Jones Royster's assertion that literacy for Black women is not "an autonomous, objective artifact of education and refinement," but also a "fundamentally subjective tool, made meaningful within systems of belief" (Royster 2000:43). Literacy is a sociopolitical action for Black women; literacy is a socio-cognitive ability; the ability to gain access to information and use it to articulate lives and experiences and to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems over time (Muhammad and Haddix 2016, Royster 2000). Black women have consistently resisted hierarchies of power, authority, and

control. One form of resistance is through the use of literacy for social and political change whether through the essays of 19th century elite African American women (Royster 2000) or the Twitter posts of everyday Black women, academics, and activists in the 21st century. This framework is useful in understanding Black women's digital literacies on Twitter because it assumes Black women and girls have voices and knowledge that have historically been silenced as well as unique philosophies and practices, and that they represent two (at least) marginalized groups based on race and gender. Black girl literacies help illustrate how Black women use and adapt literacy practices tied to their identities to communicate on Twitter and how Twitter is a literacy tool and space for 21st-century Black women to achieve social and political goals. The interviews analyzed in this chapter highlight how Black women use Black girls' literacies on Twitter to be multidimensional and fuller versions of themselves; intellectual and critical, political, playful, historical, contemporary, individual and collaborative.

Black women's literacies like other forms of literacy are shaped and impacted by external socio-cultural, political, and economic factors. Like with other forms of Black people's agency, Deborah Brandt found that African American literacy was only fully valued within African American community (Brandt 2001). Brandt argued that African American literacies were shaped within the context of economic and political exclusion and relied upon cultural values including self-determination and freedom (Brandt 2001:107). This is not only true offline, but online as well. Technological advances also impact Black women's literacies, especially concerning digital literacies. One of the interviewees for this chapter, Linda, shared that she felt like an outsider on Twitter because social media was not a part of her literacies during her formative years as it is with younger users. As someone in her 40s, Linda pointed out that she is not a "digital native" in the way that her students and children are:

it's like we're learning these interfaces and technologies, but these are natural, these are – this is how they're lives are versus you know for myself...social media is something that it's an interaction or relationships that develop after we were adults, whereas suddenly there's this new way of interacting with people, but for them this is the only way that they often times know and so it's just this other layer. (Linda 2015)

While Linda's point is well taken, Indigenous rhetoric, feminist and digital scholar Angela Haas cautioned against the use of metaphors like digital “native” and digital “immigrant” because of the colonial paradigms these metaphors employ. Instead, Haas suggests using an ecological approach in which we focus on practices instead of characterizing bodies. In this chapter, I suggest that Black women may be more equipped to use Twitter as a site of literacy when we look at the literacy practices that Black women and girls use on Twitter in the context of historical and cultural trajectories of Black girls' literacies.

While Minaj and other celebrities are galvanizing forces on Twitter, everyday Black women use Twitter for a variety of their own literacy needs that like Black girls' literacies are multiple including personal, political, economic, professional, creative, and entertaining. As one of many social media platforms, Twitter offers Black women a way to join a larger conversation among other people and have a voice. Twitter is an outlet for communicating with others within and across race, gender and age boundaries, but the Black women in this chapter revealed that they joined Twitter in order to join conversations that were centered on their identities. Within these conversations, Black women engage and build with one another about topics that impact them; thus adding meaning to their lives.

Twitter is a social networking site launched in 2006 that allows users to post 140 character messages or “tweets.” It is now worldwide with over 500 million users and in 2012 it was reported that the site averaged 340 million tweets per day.¹² The PEW Research Center's update

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter#References>

on social media usage in 2014 showed that 19 percent of all American social media users used Twitter (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, and Madden 2015).

The following analysis examines the survey and qualitative interview data from Black female @NICKIMAINJ followers on Twitter describing their experiences navigating the social media platform. Through this analysis I will share the ways that the five interviewees, Aaliyah, Kimberly, Rashida, Tanya and Linda, navigate Twitter using Black girls' literacies as well as their goals for expression and the factors that assist and hinder them in achieving them. The following analysis reveals the ways in which @NICKIMINAJ's and other Black women use Black girls' literacies in their socio-cultural, political, and "carefree" performances on Twitter.

Here is a brief description of each of the interviewees. At the time of our interview, Rashida was an 18-year-old college-bound student and a Nicki Minaj fan who was actively engaged with pop culture and social media. Aaliyah was in her early 30s, a master's student in American Studies at a predominantly white university and the social media coordinator for the university's Africana and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies programs. She is a feminist, has a Master's in Theology, is an ordained Pentecostal minister, and a self-identified Nicki Minaj stan. Kimberly was in her mid-30s and an assistant professor of English engaging in feminist scholarship at a predominantly white institution. She was familiar with Nicki Minaj's music and began following her on social media in order to keep current with her students. Linda was in her mid-40s and an associate professor of English and Women and Gender Studies at a predominantly white university. She was familiar with Nicki Minaj's music and casually followed her on social media also in part because of a student's interest in Minaj. Tanya is a feminist, scholar, activist, and producer in her 40s, at the time of her interview, who is active on

Twitter. She became more actively interested in Nicki Minaj as an artist and a personality on Twitter because of her feminist stances in Minaj's 2014 single "Looking Ass."

As a social media platform and space Twitter provides several unique affordances that facilitate Black women's identity performances, Black girls' literacies, and community building. Because Twitter users are more ethnically and culturally diverse than the general U.S. population, marginalized groups like women and people of color and their viewpoints have more visibility (Papacharissa 2012: 1990). Twitter provides a platform for public and private performances of the self (Papacharissa 2012:1989). In her study of performances of the self on Twitter, Zizi Papacharissa asserted that online social platforms collapse or converge public and private performances that create opportunities and challenges for users seeking "publicity, privacy, and sociality;" this is particularly true for Black women who simultaneously suffer invisibility and hypervisibility in traditional and social media. Networked technologies like Twitter enhance the multiplicity of Black girls' literacies because they allow them to reach multiple audiences and express multiple aspects of their own personality (Papacharissa 2012:1992). While seemingly ephemeral, these wide reaching representations of the self have the ability to persist online due to the "persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability" of data on Twitter and other networked publics (Papacharissa 2012:1992). These affordances are a part of Twitter's social architecture which is in constant flux and lively due to the free flow of information (Papacharissa 2012). Contrary to the critique of Twitter as a space for meaningless updates, Twitter's meaning is found in its sociality and the way it offers the means for users to connect and affiliate with a large audience through identity performances (Zappavigna 2011:803). In recent years, however, the low-quality or abusive nature of the interactions has led to a decline in active users on

Twitter and its stock.¹³ Unfortunately, the abusive nature of Twitter use is even reflected in Donald Trump's use of the platform before and even after he was elected president. Umair Haque (2016) suggested that it is not only Twitter's toxic interactions that have caused the platform's decline, but the lack of responsiveness from Twitter's leadership in terms of protecting vulnerable populations.¹⁴ Twitter is apparently trying to remedy this issue, at least optically, with the recent hiring of a Black woman, Candi Castleberry-Singleton, to be vice president of inclusion and diversity.¹⁵

Twitter has its own symbols and conventions particularly because of the 140 character limit per tweet. On Twitter, the "@" symbol is an indicator of a person's username. "RT" indicates the post has been Re-tweeted. The name of the person who originally posted the item immediately follows "RT," followed by a colon and the content of the tweet. It is also possible to reply to tweets. RTs and direct replies can be read as adjacent pairs. The "#" symbol indicates a hashtag or a tag that categorizes a tweet or add additional descriptive information. For example, usernames can also be a significant way to perform identity via markers, stances, in-groups knowledge, etc. As in other social media communication emoticons, such as: :) [smiley face], <3 [heart or love] are also utilized. Users can also share links and posts from their other social media accounts like images from Instagram or videos from YouTube.

As a social media platform, Twitter is uniquely set up for the creation of a multitude of publics and counterpublics. This terminology helps to describe the "spaces" that the interviewees in this chapter expressed experiencing on Twitter. The most popular ones among Black women

¹³ Haque, Umair. "The Reason Twitter's Losing Active Users." *Harvard Business Review*. 12 February 2016 2016. Web. <<https://hbr.org/2016/02/the-reason-twitters-losing-active-users>>.

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Wells, Veronic. "A Black Woman is Heading Inclusion and Diversity at Twitter." *Madame Noire*. 29 June 2017 2017. Web. <<http://madamenoire.com/835083/time-black-woman-heading-inclusion-diversity-twitter/>>.

like Black Twitter and Black Feminist Twitter. While Michael Warner (2002) critiqued the need to distinguish a counterpublic from other publics, his description of the creation of a public is helpful in understanding the various publics that Black women participate in and create on Twitter. He asserted that:

No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public. (Warner 2002:62)

Twitter allows all users to share, respond to, group, circulate, and search messages, texts, images, videos, and links in ways that allow the formation of a public in relation to the circulation of such texts (Warner 2002). Building off of Nancy Fraser (1990) theory of counterpublics, Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles (2015) described counterpublics as “the unique sites and methods that members of these groups use to produce nondominant forms of knowledge” (2). Jackson and Welles (2015) highlighted how Twitter is used as a platform to organize, generate, and promote counterpublic spaces and narratives. Counterpublics legitimize and sustain marginalized communities and challenge “dominant knowledge” (Jackson and Welles 2015:3). One way counterpublics work is to challenge mainstream media narratives and their impact (Jackson and Welles 2015). This can be seen in examples of Black Twitter bringing attention to issues of state violence against Black people. During times when Black Twitter has had blind-spots regarding violence against Black women, Black Feminist Twitter has stepped in to circulate stories and hashtags, such as #SayHerName, to push back against the narrative that only Black men suffer death as the result of encounters with the police. These counterpublic challenges to mainstream narratives first take place online and then have the potential to influence larger offline counterpublics and other publics (Jackson and Welles 2015). There are

real advantages to the social media activism that Twitter and its counterpublics make possible. For example, this nontraditional form of activism does not need a united message or to be legitimized by traditional leadership (Jackson and Welles 2015). A prime example of this is the way in which the Black Lives Matter movement began with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter circulated by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, three queer, Black women. This movement which is inherently social media-based has circumvented much of the white, hetero-patriarchy that has dominated traditional Black activist movements started offline.

The most popular Black counterpublic on Twitter is Black Twitter. Like other publics, Black Twitter is formed around texts and discourses, specifically those related to some aspect of shared Black experience. Not all of the individuals that choose to respond to and engage with these discourses are Black, and not all Black users on Twitter choose to engage in these conversations that make up Black Twitter. In her article on the Black practice of “signifyin” on Twitter, Sarah Florini (2014) described Black Twitter as the substantial and collective Black presence on Twitter evidenced by networking and trending topics. This list typically reflects current issues facing “the Black community” or topics associated with Black culture. The hashtags rely on insider cultural knowledge and may assert a certain level of homogeneity of experience. Florini (2014) asserted that there are shared values of Blackness. Although the Black community is not a monolith, Blackness still carries significant social and political meaning. Florini continued that through Black literacy and discourse practices Black Twitter pushes back against the notion of a generalized user read as being white (2014). Not only does Black Twitter help distinguish Black users from their white counterparts, but it is a way for them to collectively make use of a technology that was not designed with their inclusion in mind (Nakamura and Rodman 2000, Selfe and Selfe 1999). They flip the white Twitter design into “Black” Twitter.

Participation in Black Twitter is a discursive choice that carries great significance. As Lisa Nakamura (2008) and later Florini (2014) contend, performing race in social media contexts is an important mode of resistance to marginalization and erasure because non-white users have the option to blend in online. This is why Nicki Minaj and other Black women's use of Black girls' literacies on Twitter is significant. It is a way of performing identity and making their presence known.

For the interviewees in this section, Black Twitter is a source of information, support, cultural expression, entertainment and the collective clap back against oppressive acts against Black people in society. While the name Black Twitter may imply ownership, Tanya and others were fully aware that they were on "somebody else's network" (Tanya 2015) and that the medium itself is not revolutionary. As Jackson and Welles (2015) argued, Twitter is not a counternormative space; its design still prioritizes advertisers and elites above the average users.

Despite not having ownership of Twitter and knowing that it was not designed for their use, Tanya said that she and others have found a "partnership" with Twitter because the social interactions on Twitter enhance and reflect Black cultural values, such as privileging community as well as the use of the Black oral tradition. She shared that one of the pride and joys of Black Twitter is the "very tight kinship network," even though it is not always harmonious.

Race is a major factor in how the women relate to and use Twitter as an interface. Like Selfe and Selfe's (1999) scholarship has argued Tanya expressed an intuitive understanding that interfaces like Twitter were not created with Black people in mind. She asserted:

It definitely was not created for Black people. It may not have been created in exclusion of Black people, but I'm just saying orality and us coming from an African oral tradition we found a partnership with Twitter because it enhances and it reflects our own cultural values; the type of social interaction – we're very social people. African culture is very social. The fact that we write the way we speak for the most part it means that we're

literally talking to each other. We're expressing that oral tradition in a written format. (Tanya 2015)

Tanya's response illustrates a keen awareness of the connection between race, rhetoric, and technology for Black people. The connection she made between Black people's invocation of the African oral tradition on Twitter is a clear example of how Black users strive to fully access digital technology by using it in a way that is relevant to their lives (Banks 2006).

For Tanya, this has real implications for Black people's use of Twitter. For example, she suggested that since no one's tweets are "thrown away," they could be a source of surveillance of Black people and possibly used against them in racist ways (Tanya 2015). She said, "we didn't create it, all of our tweets are being logged by the Library of Congress and they're being monitored – and our enemies are there and people who don't wish us well and people who, you know, continue to dehumanize us..." (Tanya 2015). The monitoring of Black American's tweets has become more evident recently during the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, it was recently revealed that the Department of Homeland Security had been monitoring the tweets of civil rights activist and notable Black Lives Matter protester DeRay McKesson. According to Vice News, the DHS's reports and emails classified McKesson and others as "threat actors".¹⁶ On a broader level, the collective posts and communications of Black users on Twitter has garnered the attention of news outlets such as the L.A. Times which now has a reporter designated to cover Black Twitter.

One thing that consistently unifies Black Twitter is any type of affront to the freedom of "the" Black community; such offenses may be committed by those outside or within the Black

¹⁶ Edwards, Breanna. "Activists DeRay Mckesson's Social Media Has Been Monitored by Department of Homeland Security." The Root. 2 August 2015 2015. Web. <<http://www.theroot.com/activist-deray-mckesson-s-social-media-has-been-monitor-1790860808>>.

community. A major characteristic of Black Twitter's trending topic posts and the Black oral tradition is "signifyin." Florini (2014) stated, "A deeply collaborative practice, signifyin' has traditionally fostered group solidarity in Black American communities" (226). While tweets under Black Twitter can be quite direct, much of the quality is found in the posts' signifyin' and reliance on indirect discourse, insider knowledge, and humor. Although there are no physical walls, signifyin' is oftentimes performed through the use of hashtags. Black Twitter users utilize hashtags and signifyin' to bring people together as a group. These hashtags contribute to the architecture of Twitter; the brick and mortar of the discursive rooms that these interviewees and others gather in.

Hashtags are used to organize tweets and also create and organize the smaller "rooms" for Black women to gather in to have needed contact. For Rashida, such experiences on Twitter serve to affirm Black women's identity. In our interview, Rashida stated that as an 18-year-old, young Black woman, she knows that she is "not the ideal." While hesitant to elaborate on what she meant, she answered in the affirmative when I asked if she was referring to white, mainstream beauty ideals circulating in our culture through various forms of media. For Rashida, Twitter is a way to counter those images. Rashida shared, "There was a hashtag called #BlackOutDay with people that look like me being recognized for what they look like instead of being put down for what they look like" (Rashida 2015). #BlackOutDay was a hashtag used on various social media platforms including Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook on March 6, 2015 to showcase "everyday" Black people's beauty. The goal was to flood social media pages with images of Black people in all of their diversity and to acknowledge and affirm their humanity and push back against mischaracterizations. Rashida came across #BlackOutDay on

Twitter and she said that it made her appreciate who she was in spite of not fitting mainstream, read white, expectations.

Black Twitter's use of hashtags to signify has the power to foster solidarity online as well. Florini asserted that they are markers of Black racial identity because the index Black popular culture and require certain forms of cultural knowledge (Florini 2014). This serio-ludic discourse, the productive oscillation between seriousness and playfulness within a particular discourse, manages to be highly entertaining while at the same time offering oftentimes scathing critiques. Black Twitter's signifying fits within a creative counterpublic tradition that Jackson and Welles (2015) argued "attempts to infiltrate the mainstream public sphere by making matters of life and death discursively accessible to both in and outgroup members through humor" (10-11). Those found guilty of offenses against the Black community quickly discover that the joke is on them.

Notable offenders have included Paula Dean for her casual racist comments about Black people, Don Lemon for perpetual tone-deafness with regard to the Black community in his "news" broadcasts on *CNN*, and Rachel Dolezal for being dishonest about her racial identity and continuously trying to "pass" as a Black woman.

Linda said that Black Twitter hashtags are one of her favorite aspects of Black Twitter:

I mean the whole development of Black Twitter as a THING – I love it. I just wait for people to mess up. It's like oh my God, who? Please – I just happen to go on Twitter and I like catch something as it's developing, like a new hashtag is like building – like ohhhh – you know and I feel like I struck gold like 'what is happening right now?' (Linda 2015)

Members of counterpublics like Black Twitter and Black Feminist Twitter use the "porousness" of the site's architecture in order to retweet and share posts beyond the particular publics that they belong to so that their topic "trends" and potentially reach mainstream and elite users (Jackson and Welles 2015). The authors argued that counterpublic activism relies on "virality" (Jackson and Welles 2015). Black Twitter trending topics like #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies

can be celebratory too. This hashtag came in the days leading up to Thanksgiving Day 2015 and in the aftermath of video of a police officer shooting Laquan McDonald's, a Black teen, in Chicago. The lighthearted nature of Black Twitter's ability to bring the virtual community together comes in handy during more somber times in what Kimberly called "the cafeteria." Kimberly shared that it is in those times that the cafeteria can become a needed safe space or a town hall meeting site. Kimberly mentioned that while devastating news about Black women, in particular, may be in the news, she rarely has places in her offline network to discuss what is on her mind. She shared a then recent example of a white, male police officer using excessive force on a teenaged Black girl at a pool party in McKinney, Texas. The video of the officer kneeling on top of the girl's much younger and smaller frame went viral online and incensed many, including Kimberly:

That McKinney, Texas video, messed me up, and you know, I go to work, I'm not gonna have anyone necessarily to talk about that rage with, but I can go on Twitter and say something like, I don't even know what to do with how angry this makes me and that puts me into conversation with some people. And so in that way, Twitter allows me to get a sense of Blackness, and get a sense of community, that I'm not gonna have on my workplace. (Kimberly 2015)

Twitter's hashtags and searchability give Kimberly and others the ability to connect with those she feels safety and affinity with.

This feature of Black Twitter has become increasingly important in the wake of the deaths of unarmed young Black men and women like Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland and the numerous others since that have that have led to the refrains and subsequent hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. Rashida and Aaliyah both said that they became more aware of the BLM movement through Twitter. For Aaliyah, Twitter also became a means of activism. Although the legitimacy of Twitter activism has come into question and has been debated on and off Twitter by the likes of rapper Lupe Fiasco, esteemed Black liberation, Black

feminist and prison abolition scholar and activist Angela Davis argued that Twitter does serve a very useful role in real activist work. In an interview with myself and Benjamin Keubrich at the 2014 *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, Davis explained:

So I would suggest that we don't write off Twitter and Facebook, but that we recognize that organizing radical movements require a bit more than simply the process of mobilization. It requires not only a political consciousness, but a sense of connectedness that we often don't get from the media that that allow us to come together... So, that work has to be taken up in the organizing of movements, and then we can use the social media to assist us in that process.

The use of hashtags and formation of counterpublics have Kimberly and others in feeling connected to one another and causes larger than themselves.

Aaliyah used Twitter to foster connection and feel a part of the Black Lives Matter protests after Mike Brown, an unarmed teenager, was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. She said:

When I wanted to participate in Black Lives Matter and I could not make it to Ferguson and I wanted to know the truth, it was Twitter that was there to give us the information and I watched the live coverage on Twitter for all of those events, and I think that that's important, right? Like cause a lot of millennials want to do something, but don't have the capacity or resources to do it... I couldn't travel to Ferguson, but I was saying hey this person is locked up, please free them and I know what I'm doing is only a small minutia of the bigger thing, but it's gonna be the small minutia from a lot of folks that's gonna bring about some real change. (Aaliyah 2015)

In this respect, social media allows those who would not ordinarily be connected to a movement on the ground to participate. Social media activism, although not in the streets, is a form of social justice work that works in tandem with offline activism. For example, Jackson and Welles found that Twitter counterpublics "hijacking" of a mainstream hashtag like #myNYPD was able to bring social and mainstream media attention to issues of police brutality in New York City. For Aaliyah and others, Twitter is a source of news. This is particularly significant in the context

Black women's literacy. They can produce and consume content about issues that are important to them that do not receive mainstream news coverage.

Online counterpublics and underground spaces of and for Black women also they provide spaces for Black women to create and manage their *ethos* and establish expertise and leadership in ways that benefit the larger group. In following Black women and girls' literacy traditions, Black women-centered spaces on Twitter provide opportunities for literacy mentoring and apprenticeships. While apprenticeships have dwindled in American education practices, it is still important in African American communities (Brandt 2001, Muhammad and Haddix 2016). This inter-generational learning is vital for Black women and girls because of the close connection of their literacy, meaning-making, and identity. Having "mentor texts" (Muhammad 2015) by other Black women help women and girls understand and navigate their identities and validate their personal experiences. Interviewees like Aaliyah indicated that they use the posts of other prominent Black women and Black feminists on Twitter in similar ways. Aaliyah boasted that she stays in the know via Black Twitter by following high profile personalities within the community. She is always surprised to find that she is already following the people on the list of 10-15 people to follow on Black Twitter. These "crowdsourced elites" (Jackson and Welles 2015) provide "mentor texts" for Aaliyah and others to navigate their identities and experiences as Black women. Crowdsourced elites or emergent leaders on Twitter, (Jackson and Welles 2015) rise to popularity through retweeting, favoriting, and endorsements from others. Some of the crowdsourced elites the interviewees mentioned were Black feminists Feminista Jones (@FeministaJones) and Joan Morgan (@milfinainteasy). This is an affordance of Twitter that grants Black women visibility and leads to increased recognition of their agency more readily than offline and on other social media. Jackson and Welles asserted:

The race/ethnicity and gender diversity reflected by individual crowdsourced elites demonstrate that Twitter's digital counterpublics are more inclusive of traditionally marginalized voices than mainstream sites of political debate, and, potentially even more inclusive than historical counterpublics, which were often dominated by men and other more privileged members of marginalized groups. (Jackson and Welles 2015:9)

Jackson and Welles found that these crowdsourced elites were women and people of color without elite status anywhere else. Black women's ability to establish *ethos* and have more of a voice in these digital counterpublics may be because "messy" or fluid online spaces do not adhere to the same applications of traditional rhetorical concepts; rhetorical agency of identity performances online are not based on claims to expert status or typical identity attributes of power (Grabill and Pigg 2012).

For all of the interviewees, Twitter is a source of general information and education as well as cultural and identity specific types of knowledge. As a graduate student, Aaliyah has access to an almost limitless source of information in the academy; however, she relies on Twitter to fill in the gaps like getting information from conference presentations virtually in almost real-time from those who are live-tweeting through the use of hashtags. Aaliyah also uses Twitter to fill in knowledge gaps that the academy does not fill: "Twitter has allowed me to gain that extra bit of education that is not afforded in the Ivory Tower, those extra voices that resemble and sound like our own, but a little bit, just a little sharper – that's what it is" (Aaliyah, 2015). Aaliyah said that Twitter can be a means to obtain emerging and most up-to-date information about culturally relevant subjects such as Afrofuturism and Black feminism:

When I want to talk about WGSS (Women and Gender and Sexuality Studies) and womanism and wanna know that history, I go talk to Trudy, I go, you know, look at those kind of things because they're doing that work every day, but they're not doing it in academic journals, or whatever. They're doing it in those spaces that are unique for them, where they could be fully themselves and that's the opportunity that I think is invaluable. (Aaliyah 2015)

Black women use Black girls' literacies and Twitter in order to meet their social, political, professional, and economic needs. For Aaliyah and other Black women their learning on Twitter is not restricted to the technology but transcends it in a way that is meaningful in other aspects of their lives as well. Aaliyah takes advantage of what I call Twitter pedagogy and she said it has inspired further exploration on- and offline and ultimately results in consciousness raising and self-actualization. She explained, "I'm listening to the ideology and it's sparking my growth and helping me go within myself and say, 'hmm, what about me is like this?' or 'what about my history can I uncover and redeem that I fully live in those spaces'" (Aaliyah 2015). I argue that witnessing and participating in these conversations in these "sacred rooms," as Kimberly called them, is akin to the Black women's kitchen and beauty salon conversations about pertinent philosophies and issues of the day.

Aaliyah has also been able to parlay her Twitter knowledge into a research angle in her Master's thesis as well as a paying job while in graduate school: "[Twitter's] the place where I can be fully engaged as an activist. As I said, I get paid to do it now, so like it's a job and it's a real reality in a graduate life like to do a job where I can still be cued in" (Aaliyah 2015).

Aaliyah's experience demonstrates how Twitter is a site of literacy and an economic resource for Black women.

Black Twitter and its "mentors" became a useful resource for Aaliyah to explore other aspects of her cultural identity beyond race. She said that when she discovered her biological father was part Mexican, Black users on Twitter helped her realize that she did not have to choose one identity, but could embrace her Afrolatina identity:

I did not know what that was until I was on Twitter and saw these beautiful Black and Afrolatina women who were saying hey I have multiple identities, they intersect and they're integral to each other, I can't separate one from the other, so I'm gonna do some

real Caribbean or Americana or Haitian or whatever. I'm gonna do some real that, but I'm also fully Black too. (Aaliyah 2015)

This is another example of the diversity within Black Twitter. This diversity helps Black women feel welcome and welcomes them to be fuller versions of themselves. While Aaliyah did not give specific examples, she shared that these other women modeled how to embrace their multiplicity and identities as Black women on Twitter. They show Aaliyah how to *do* some “real” parts of their ethnic identities while also being pro-Black. This offers a counternarrative against anti-Black sentiments among other groups of people of color. These mentors’ discursive performance of their identity is likely through the use of Black girls’ literacies and provides a roadmap for Aaliyah to have a more authentic identity on- and offline.

3.2 Carefree Black Girl Critical Play

Another expression of Black girls’ literacies on Twitter is seen in the performances of the Carefree Black Girl. I define this construct of the Carefree Black Girl (CFBG) as a Black woman or girl who exercises her right to speak with authority about herself and the world as she sees it without regard to viewpoints of those who are unable or unwilling to understand them. The CFBG performance as a construct embodies numerous traits of Black girls’ literacies, because they are multiple, identity-based, and a part of a historic aesthetic. CFBG performances are also collaborative in that they build off of and inspire other CFBG performances. They are also political as well in that they expand the visibility and representations of Black women and girls. There is no consensus on the origin of the term Carefree Black Girl. While Hillary Crosley Coker (2014) cited Jamala Johns (2014) with the first use of the term on her Tumblr page in 2014, Diamond Sharpe (2014) cited the first use of the hashtag #carefreeblackgirls on Twitter was in May of 2013 by writer Zeba Blay. The existence of carefree Black girls and its aesthetic are timeless. Some recent, notable figures that represent this idea in popular culture include

singers India Aire, Corine Bailey Rae, Solange and Willow Smith. While it is unknown whether or not these women identify as CFBGs, Jamala Johns (2014) asserted that their influence is felt and appreciated in CFBG spaces. For Johns (2014), the “‘Carefree Black Girl’ is a way to celebrate all things joyous and eclectic among brown ladies.” Since 2013, this appeal and growing movement has been generated by Black women on social media in image-centric social platforms like Tumblr (Johns and Sharpe). In many ways, the Carefree Black Girl movement is a collective counter-story to mainstream representations of Black women which have been limited to stereotypes and depictions of Black women and girls’ pain (Sharpe 2014). Online, Black women share their own imagery and stories and curate images from a variety of other sources such as style bloggers, fashion editorials, users’ personal photos, and, pictures of their favorite CFBG icons (Johns 2014) to represent themselves. Danielle Hawkins (2014), creator of the Tumblr page “Carefree Black Girls,” asserted that the concept is like a breath of fresh air because it allows for the focus on the positive aspects of Black women and girls’ lives. The Carefree Black Girls movement illustrates the feminist mantra that the personal is political because Hawkins and others who use the hashtag fight against archetypes of Black women “(Jezebel, strong black woman, mammy, welfare queen, video vixen)” by showing that they are multidimensional through other words and images (Sharpe 2014). Black women and girls use of the hashtag on Twitter and on Tumblr illustrates how the hashtag is a convention in digital Black girls’ literacies. It is one that expresses multiplicity, is identity-based, collaborative in the way the hashtag curates posts from an infinite number of Black women and girls and political in offering a counter-narrative for Black female identity. It is important to note that the word “carefree” should not be confused with “careless” though, but should instead be understood in the context of Black women and girls wanting to enjoy their lives as they please like their white

counterparts do (Johns 2014). This distinction between “careless” and “carefree” is evident in Nicki Minaj’s posts on Twitter as her tweet’s appear to be strategic in nature. It is this kind of free *ethos* that the interviewees aspired to.

For example, Aaliyah uses Twitter to express her multidimensionality in ways that she cannot in other spaces like the academy that relies on strict taxonomies. On Twitter, she shared that: “I could be ratchet, I could be academic, I could be all of that and I have people who love each and every one of those moments of myself” (Aaliyah 2015). Aaliyah described this liberated feeling she has and expresses on Twitter as “carefree.” She uses her language in order to express multiple parts of her identity and “unplay” notions of what it means to be a Black woman, an academic, ratchet, etc. This carefreeness is a challenge for onlookers, and therefore, they try to constrain it. Aaliyah said that since others cannot “track” carefreeness or predict where it will go next, they become confused and afraid. She said that Black women like herself and Nicki Minaj exude this carefree nature on Twitter. All the same, she has noticed that she and others offer disclaimers in advance when switching gears from an academic register and conversation to live tweeting the show *Scandal*, for example: “Everybody goes ‘okay, for the next hour I’m about to be tweeting *Scandal*, so if it’s some crazy stuff, be prepared to deal with it,’ and then everybody backs off. Where if they don’t give that little, you know, disclaimer, then people be ‘oh my God. What’re you doing?’” (Aaliyah 2015).

While a CFBG is more of a construct than the reality; in many ways Aaliyah and others map their carefree Black girl aspirations onto Minaj and read their own desires into her performance. According to Aaliyah, Nicki Minaj is not just *a* carefree Black girl but is the epitome of Black girls. She had this to say about Minaj’s collaboration with Beyoncé on the song and video “Feeling Myself”:

Every shot of that film was Instagram-famous from the one piece where Beyoncé changed the world with her onesy...to the eating of the hamburgers and just – that was the – if you wanna look up carefree Black girls and you wanna definition, her and Beyoncé having the best time of their life and the video could be the snapshot of that. I was like yes, yes. ‘cause Black girls will twerk. Yes, we will got to a dance party. We will go shade Tyga with our little “17 Perverts” shirts. We will do all of that because that’s what Black girls do. Yes, she’s definitely coming out of that tradition of a carefree Black girl. She’s saying this is what it is. (Aaliyah 14-15)

Aaliyah mentioned several noteworthy aspects of the “Feeling Myself” video that highlight the use of Black girls’ literacies in Beyoncé and Minaj’s performance. For example, Minaj’s “17 Perverts” crop top seen in Figure 12 was signifying on and shading rapper Tyga who was under scrutiny for dating and presumably having sex with Kylie Jenner who was 17-years-old and underage at the time. Minaj’s “carefree” attitude in her critiques of sexism or improper treatment of women, herself included, is also evident online. The carefree nature of the Minaj and Beyoncé is also seen in figure 13. Figure 14 shows examples of Minaj’s tweets defending herself against sexism in the rap industry.

Aaliyah views Minaj as both a performer who she said *happens to be* a carefree Black girl. For Aaliyah, this means living and walking in that moment which she believes all women should do in addition to telling their truth and “being fully who [they] are in whatever way that means” (Aaliyah 2015). Another aspect of being a carefree Black girl that directly applies to @NICKIMINAJ’s Twitter page is the act of asserting your right to be “carefree.” Aaliyah shared that “being carefree is knowing how to articulate your ability to be carefree. To say ‘this is exactly what I’m doing – deal with it’” (Aaliyah 2015).

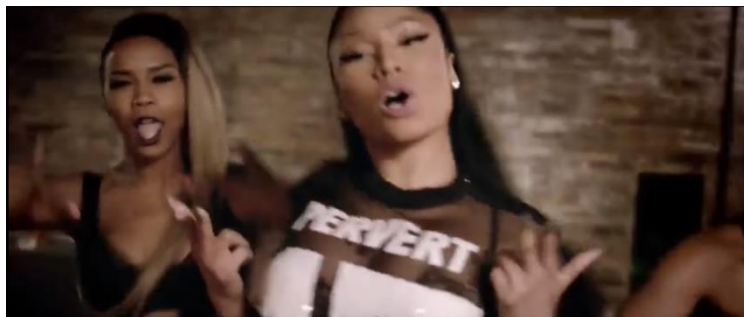


Figure 12 A screenshot of Nicki Minaj wearing her “17 Perverts” shirt in the video for “Feeling Myself,” (Prod. Hit-Boy, Knowles, Beyonce; Perf. Minaj, Nicki, and Beyonce Knowles; 2014).



Figure 13 A screenshot of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj eating hamburgers in the video for “Feeling Myself,” (Prod. Hit-Boy, Knowles, Beyonce; Perf. Minaj, Nicki, and Beyonce Knowles; 2014).



Figure 14 Nicki Minaj’s Tweets from 2011 addressing “Black Radio” (Minaj, Nicki (@NICKIMINAJ); 11 January 2011; Tweet).

3.3 Black Feminist Twitter

Even with the diversity and fluidity of Black Twitter, a smaller, core, niche group of Black feminist figures became apparent through my interviews as well. During conversations with Linda and Aaliyah, several names of key Black feminist tweeters emerged as the

crowdsourced elites of Black feminist Twitter. This distinction among Black women and development of notoriety discussed in this chapter on Twitter is different from the relative sameness among the women in the closed-Facebook groups in chapter two. This is in part because the crowdsourced elites in Black feminist Twitter have public profiles and Twitter's features that contribute to searchability, sharing, and increased followings. Black feminist Twitter is an important counterpublic that is distinct from Black Twitter and Feminist Twitter addresses the intersectional erasures (Crenshaw 2015) that Black women experience may experience in the counterpublics that only address one aspect of their identity. Black feminist Twitter is a particularly valuable literacy space for Black women on Twitter that offers several benefits including apprenticeship via Black feminist texts and knowledge as well as communal safety. Linda shared that her scholarship was inspired not only by reading print texts by Joan Morgan and bell hooks, but from gleaning knowledge from the Twitter pages of Feminista Jones (@feministajones), Mikki Kendall (@karnythia), and Brittney Cooper (@ProfessorCrunk); the latter two are discussed further in chapter five). Both Linda and Aaliyah mentioned scholar Treva Lindsay's (@divafeminist) Twitter presence as well. Linda articulated admiration for these women who she considers "sheroes" and said she wants to "do what they do" and formulate and share her own opinions. Linda's aspiration here brings attention to one of the reasons the aforementioned women are recognized as crowdsourced elites – they are followed and seen as valuable because they are "informers" (Naaman, Boase, & Lai 2010). Informers tend to have more followers and disseminate information across networks and publics via their posts and replies to other users as opposed to those who post personal updates (Naaman, Boase, and Lai 2010, Papacharissa 2012).

Linda also complimented the way Lindsay manages her presence on Twitter as a Black feminist and builds community:

She's there and she's solid and I see her. She responds to people, and she keeps conversations going and she's about her politics, you know that always stays front and clear. She never sort of veers, as long as it comes right back down to this fundamental, sort of Black feminist space. She's clear and so I just think that she's got followers based on that. (Linda 2015)

Linda's description of Lindsay's Twitter presence resembles microcelebrity and personal branding performances (Marwick and boyd 2010, Papacharissa 2012). Part of the challenge for Black women who are scholars or who use their platform to build community around important issues is finding a voice and balancing between the politics and personality. This is where facilitation of Black girls' literacies is important in helping Black women express multidimensionality.

Articulating an authentic voice in a space like Twitter that the interviewees recognize was not created with them in mind is both intentional and powerful. For those witnessing these authentic expressions, it can offer an ongoing feed of "real" representations of Black people and their lives as well as a counternarrative to distorted images, as Rashida attested to. For Black women who decide to express their full selves on Twitter it creates space to *be*. In her discussion of Zandria Robinson, Linda elaborated on this power:

I think that when people are able to find that space of authenticity in something that is kind of an artificial space, it's very empowering and I'd love to see many more of us figure out what those voices are for us, and they may not all look like Zandria's page or Nicki Minaj's page, or Trudy's page, or whatever. But, it'll be spaces that we can occupy. (Linda 2015)

Perhaps this is the beauty of Twitter for Black women and community making: the occupying of space, even if virtual, that allows for more authentic representation and recognition by one another even in all of its diversity.

The first part of that work is deciding how you want to show up in the space. While Linda is cautious about what she posts, she makes other choices in order to show up authentically and perform identity in the Twittersphere, such as using a picture of her instead of an avatar for her profile image. She said it is important to her that her face is always associated with her name because it is her professional name (Linda 2015).

The notion of one's authentic identity being connected to one's profile image also resonated with Aaliyah. She too seemed to think that an avatar represents an alternate identity or the attempt to be "somebody else." She asserted that she is always fully her on Twitter. Aaliyah shared that she is able to communicate the true essence of herself on Twitter: "You can tell when I'm live tweeting and when someone else is live tweeting, because I'm fully [Aaliyah] now because I know that that's the one space where even if it's toxic, it's still not detrimental to my career" (Aaliyah 2015). One way she expresses her full self is by cracking jokes on Twitter in the same way she would do offline. Twitter is an aid to Aaliyah's full expression because, as she stated, her personality would not necessarily come across during a five-minute face-to-face meeting with someone. She suggested that her Twitter archive gives others the opportunity to know her better: "if you read my Twitter, and you're engaging with me on Twitter, then you're like, 'okay,' 'I know you,' 'how you doing?' 'I see you,'" (Aaliyah 2015). On Twitter, searchability becomes an additional Black girls' literacy; Aaliyah leverages this literacy practice to her advantage. This performance of self requires work: We're all doing work, and Twitter is work, right? Like to be in that Twittersphere, that is a job (Aaliyah 2015). This effort of Black women to show up in online spaces as fully and authentically as possible makes room for other Black women to show up as well (Nakamura 2015), yet this labor is invisible and often not recognized.

Tanya expressed feeling that she is both public and private on Twitter. She is aware that she is public, but sometimes gets lulled into a false sense of privacy; especially when participating in Black kinship networks like Black Twitter and Black feminist Twitter: “it can make you think that you are only talking to your supporters until you get trolled.” On Twitter, she said, if you want to engage and share ideas with others, you realize that you cannot “live in your own bubble” on Twitter unless you protect your tweets by making your account private. This kind of restriction prevents others from allows you to create “a very private enclave,” Tanya said, but it will necessarily detract from the “social” nature of social media use on Twitter because access is limited (Tanya 2015); others cannot see your tweets or retweet them and others cannot necessarily see when others reply to you. Users rely on these social affordances in order to increase their influence and become crowdsourced elites. She equated the catch-22 of accessibility and risk to the real world stating that “the greater the stretch, the increase of the threat; the more liberty you lose” (Tanya 2015). This challenge is a result of what Papacharissa (2012) described as the collapse of public and private performances which create both opportunities and challenges for pursuing publicity, privacy, and sociality (1990).

The degrees of this public reach vary by individual social media interfaces. As Linda shared, the public nature of Twitter seems “more open” than Facebook, for example, because users do not necessarily know the people who follow them on Twitter. While she does not try to perform the role of public intellectual on Twitter, Linda is constantly aware that she is a Black female scholar that does public work on Twitter “that can map in together to say certain things to certain viewers” (Linda 2015). The collapse of the public and private, therefore, collapses online and offline identities as well as private and professional identities.

Kimberly also expressed concern about her personal musings on Twitter being read by others in ways that would negatively impact her career. She has, therefore, chosen to keep her Twitter page private. Kimberly said she saw the writing on the wall with regard to the potential for employers to search Twitter profiles even before fully beginning her career as a professor:

I joined Twitter when I was on the job market as a PhD student, and so this was before, you know, they started doing the deep, deep search of people's social media profiles. This was back in 2010, but even then, I could see that when I would apply for a job, they would do some searching and let me know this needs to be private – way back in 2010. (Kimberly 2015)

Fast forward five years and Kimberly has had her concerns validated by public, social media and real world attacks against Black women scholars like Zandria Robinson and Saida Grundy of Boston University. This is an example of searchability potentially being used against Black women and other marginalized groups. Even viral negative representations or mishaps on Twitter do not have the same negative impact on white women and men. The most prominent example of this is the successful presidential campaign of Donald Trump despite his perpetual Twitter trolling.

For Black women, just sharing one's viewpoints on Twitter can result in major backlash. Linda highlighted Black feminist sociologist Dr. Zandria Robinson as an exemplar of this authentic voice. Here, authentic voice denotes an expression of truth and wholeness. Robinson came under fire in June of 2015 for tweets about white supremacy in the U. S. Her tweets condemned the confederate flag as a symbol of white racial superiority and hetero-patriarchal capitalism. In her tweets, Robinson called for a "more nuanced intersectional reading of the flag."¹⁷ Her former place of employment, The University of Memphis, posted that she was no

¹⁷ Chasmar, Jessica. "University of Memphis Professor: 'Whiteness is most certainly and inevitably terror'." The Washington Times. 30 June 2015 2015. Web. <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/30/zandria-robinson-univ-of-memphis-professor-whitene/>>.

longer employed there on their website which many took as an implication that she had been fired over her comments. In reality, Robinson had accepted a position at Rhodes College.¹⁸ This example and the presumption that Robinson had been fired represents the real threat to Black women's safety online. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) argued that "when Black women exhibit a critical consciousness and voice their politics, a dominant positioning of their identities is antagonistic, defiant, and even dangerous. A Black feminist stance requires an active counternarrating of Black girls and women's intellectual activities" (403). Online counternarrating requires the safety and space of counterpublics like Black feminist Twitter. Although these spaces cannot offer total protection from the repercussions of talking back, they are equipped to organize and defend other Black women and girls. After Robinson came under fire for her tweets, a group of over 100 self-described Black cultural and thought workers wrote and cosigned a response in defense of Robinson and Black progressive thought and culture. In the online statement titled "#WeSeeYou: In Response to Attacks on Black Progressive Thought & Culture,"¹⁹ they highlighted the value of Robinson's work and genius and called out white heteropatriarchal supremacy. They stated, "We are wholly aware that the American surveillance and discipline of black bodies and expression extends to cyber space." The group used the power of circulation through the hashtag, Twitter's searchability, and the blogosphere in order to spread the word and organize support for Robinson. Recognizing the strength of the Internet to multiply their numbers and voice, they collectively argued, "we will not accept these aggressions in

¹⁸ Taylor, Eryn. "Dr. Zandria Robinson Takes Position at Rhodes College." wreg.com. 1 July 2015 2015. Web. <<http://wreg.com/2015/07/01/dr-zandria-robinson-takes-position-at-rhodes-college/>>.

¹⁹ Prescod-Weinstein, Chanda. "#WeSeeYou: In Response to Attacks on Black Progressive Thought and Culture." Medium.com. 7 July 2015 2015. Web. <<https://medium.com/@chanda/weseeyou-in-response-to-attacks-on-black-progressive-thought-culture-1b1e903d7ae0>>.

silence; we instead will rally our collective energies of exposure and critique, coalition and mobilization, in order to protect our minds and bodies and work toward the ideals that animate our collective visions for justice.” Their statement and labor about this issue made the connection between offline and online thought and activism visible.

Fortunately for Robinson, Rhodes College decided that her work as a sociologist and scholarship on social inequality, race, class, and gender provided the necessary context to her tweets. Robinson never backed down from the criticism, perhaps in part because of her on- and offline literacy use was evaluated in conjunction with one another. Although Grabill and Pigg discussed the lack of context in online rhetoric, Black women’s truths and posts are not evaluated on their own merits alone; they are seen through racialized and gendered lenses. The same prejudices and barriers to the recognition and attribution of intelligence and agency offline impact perceptions online. At the same time, evaluations of Black women’s communication and rhetoric online can impact Black women in real and material ways offline. There are therefore risks to the type of authentic Black woman stances that Robinson and others take. Linda commented that:

I think you know if we’re thinking about Zandria or if you follow her on Twitter – she has a great Twitter presence that I think is right in that kind of medium space of Black feminist scholar, and regular person talking about shit on Twitter, you know what I mean? It’s right in that middle space and it’s true Zandria. I think her personality and I know her, so I know that’s how she rolls in reality, so it’s really reflective. (Linda 9)

Finding and articulating this voice is recursive in nature. Striking this balance in one’s voice as a Black woman requires authenticity, but the expression of authenticity often times needs space in order to be nurtured. This kind of safety is an advantage of underground and counterpublic spaces like Black feminist Twitter.

Aaliyah expressed feeling a higher degree of safety on Twitter, and therefore takes a less cautious approach to protecting her tweets. She said, “On Twitter, it’s my space. It’s private. It’s

what I do and it's me" (Aaliyah 2015). Her Twitter page, however, it is not set to be a private page. Aaliyah said she just assumes a degree of privacy and that her posts about Nicki Minaj or other topics that do not fully align with her church's doctrine will not negatively impact her as an ordained minister, because as Linda stated, the "old folks" are not really on Twitter – at least not yet. While this practice may seem naïve on Aaliyah's part, it reveals the "performative incoherence" on Twitter and other social media because there are so many opportunities to perform different versions of one's self that do not necessarily harmonize and may even compete (Papacharissa 2012:1992).

Another consideration that Black women account for in their communication on Twitter is their professional identities. With the exception of Rashida, all of the other women had professional identities and expressed concern for how their online posts impacted these identities. This was the underlying concern that prompted Kimberly to make her page private even though she admits her peers with public pages have "stronger voices" or perhaps more impact (Kimberly 2015). While Linda maintains a public page, she said that she recognizes that her Twitter activity "maps" back onto her professional identity, especially in light of the Salaita and Grundy incidents: "I just know that people are out there literally looking, trolling to find you say that one thing" (Linda 2015). This is a lesson that was brought home for Linda and others including Saida Grundy in 2015. Grundy was completing her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Michigan when she became the target of attacks from the conservative blogosphere including FOX News.²⁰ Like Robinson, Grundy is a sociologist whose tweets critiqued white supremacy and were characterized as racist and anti-white. Bloggers and others urged Boston University to

²⁰Jaschik, Scott. "Saida Grundy, Moving Forward." Inside Higher Ed. 24 August 2015 2015. Web. <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/08/24/saida-grundy-discusses-controversy-over-her-comments-twitter-her-career-race-and>>.

revoke the assistant professor job offer that they had offered to Grundy. While the university did not rescind their offer, the university president took a critical tone toward Grundy's posts.²¹ In an interview about the experience with *Inside Higher Ed*, Grundy admitted that she was trying to speak to a "bubble" and not have the larger conversation that resulted. She said that she had not accounted for the "hunters": those who look for Twitter posts to publicize and criticize. Although Grundy has since made her account private, she argued against women of color steering away from social media. Grundy asserted that the larger issue is not about the medium, but racial illiteracy and antagonism toward scholars and people who do critical race work. Her suggestion for them is to be prepared for it.

These were issues that the interviewees grappled with as well. Aaliyah revealed a contradiction in her sense of privacy on Twitter when she said she also felt the pressure as an ordained minister to not post a lot of things even if they are informational in nature, because "the church" will not be pleased with it. She also administers other organizations' Twitter pages and is mindful of how her Twitter activity may affect those organizations and her employers.

Tanya expressed more difference between her personal and professional identity than her online and offline identities; she interacts with friends differently than students. As a professional artist and public scholar, she said she always tried to put her best foot forward. A professional presentation is a part of her identity as an artist. Therefore, for her, her online image is important. Tanya's professional and personal identities were collapsed on Twitter when she found herself in the middle of a toxic exchange. She said the harassment she experienced on Twitter was particularly problematic because she oftentimes works with children, the elderly and other

²¹ Brown, Robert A. "Letter from President Brown." Boston University. 5 May 2015 2015. Web. <http://www.bu.edu/president/letters-writings/letters/2015/5-12/?utm_source=social&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=prbumain>.

groups and does not want to be mischaracterized. In that situation, Tanya suggested that those who were harassing her used her professionalism against her: “I think they were trying to take advantage of the fact that I am an academic and I’m not supposed to say any[thing] – you know I just I don’t agree with that at all” (Tanya 2015). Tanya said that because her professional image is important she “clapped back” and addressed their posts about her directly.

This lack of safety that the Black women in this study expressed can be attributed to how the same power in numbers that Twitter harnesses for support can also be compounded in toxic ways. For those who opt to have a more public Twitter persona, they choose to deal with the good and the bad. Tanya admitted that “as powerful as we can be at building people up, we can also be powerful at beating them down” (Tanya 2015). Linda noted that she has also seen this toxicity on Twitter by “random troll-y” type people who come to pick arguments with some of the Black women tweeting on a larger scale than her. Linda said that Twitter becomes a space where those looking to do so can lash out and “enact their crazy.” Rap artist Drake referred to this as “Twitter fingers;” the phenomenon of people’s emboldened communication when tweeting from behind a computer or cell phone screen. She commented that this type of trolling and nastiness is not unique to Black women on Twitter, but she sees the same thing happening with her friends on Facebook. Linda shared an example about one of her friends whose philosophy is the best offense is defense. Linda said, “every other day I see her like, and when I say this, y’all better not come for me in my comments” (Linda 2015). This is a bit much for Linda who said she tends to stay under the radar: “I’m like, what? Every time you post something it’s got like eight asterisks and like a[n] all caps like warning of – and once I say this, if you say ‘X, Y, or Z,’ I will drop you in a minute...I’m like if I have to practice my stuff, I

can't do that" (Linda 2015). The low tolerance for this type of defense on social media can inspire a low profile Twitter presence, increased privacy settings or self-censoring.

Aaliyah said that the toxic side of Twitter adds to a necessary multiplicity of voices to the space: "We can't fully understand our voice unless we know what the toxicity is, right?" (Aaliyah 2015). To Tanya, this is part and parcel of the human experience. Tanya admitted that she cannot say for sure that she has never said anything cruel on Twitter because she is human. She does know the feeling of being on the receiving end of harsh criticism and what she considered harassment. She said she had to go on the defensive after-the-fact. She shared that she had to "clap back" and fight:

I had to remind people and some of them are very popular on Twitter, but they were participating in, you know, bully culture. They were participating in group think. They were mischaracterizing me and slandering my name and I didn't deserve it. I don't deserve it. And it's wrong...I had to threaten some people and I had to remind them that first of all I'm a public figure and I may not be a huge celebrity but all you have in this world is your name. But you're not going to mischaracterize me as something that I'm not. You either have to prove that or you have to shut up. I'll shut you up. One of the fastest ways to shut people up is to take their money. (Tanya 2015)

Tanya said that although she did not have close relationships with the main people involved, it did bother her that the attack came from other Black women. Aaliyah said that attacks like this from other Black women can feel like betrayal. She contended that "it hurts when it's coming from other sisters that are *supposed to be* on our side" (Aaliyah 2015) emphasis mine. Aaliyah's statement implies that there is an unstated understanding of expected solidarity among some Black women on Twitter. This is quickly ruptured during some Twitter disputes. As Tanya explained, Black Twitter can give a false sense of security that one is talking to their supporters or an echo chamber. In Tanya's case, she did not expect blind allegiance, but was more upset at feeling misrepresented and how she said it broke some of her more personal relationships.

One of the most important human needs is acceptance. The women in this chapter view Twitter in a positive light in part because they are able to show up on Twitter take up space, be their authentic selves to some extent and be accepted. Aaliyah shared the most eloquent articulation of what this acceptance means to her: “On Twitter, my beingness does not matter to anybody but me. I’ve always been told that my beingness was not wanted” (Aaliyah 2015).

Aaliyah continued:

When I want to show up and be present in conversation, as long as you on Twitter and ain’t talking nonsense, you’re fully accepted and wanted. People ask questions, you answer, it sparks great debates, great fame and you attract followers, you get people who actually care about how you doing today. (Aaliyah 2015)

Acceptance and support can extend beyond these online spaces to real offline connections among Black women. Tanya shared her story of meeting up with one of two Black women who she met through Twitter and like her also had a parent with dementia:

I drove up to meet her and we had dinner and hugged and talked and laughed and it really – it was almost – I mean it didn’t feel like I’d never met her. It didn’t feel that way at all because we had even talked on the phone. We – you know we had gotten to the point where we would talk on the phone a lot and, it was just great and with the two of them one day I did a conference call. We were talking and that was the first time I think we talked on the phone. And the other one said ‘you sound just like my sister.’ It was sweet. It still is. (Tanya 2015)

It may be the enduring sisterhood and sweetness that encourage Black women to labor on despite the risks and challenges.

3.4 Findings

With all of the camaraderie and openness that the interviewees shared they experience on Twitter, there are still constraints such as the lack of safety and security on Twitter. The women expressed care and concern over what they shared on Twitter, how openly and fully they shared it and who had access to that content. These feelings of anxiety with regard to their Twitter activity help to explain some of the women’s affinity to @NICKIMINAJ, Zandria Robinson, and

other mentors of Black girls' literacies and informers doing race and gender out loud on their pages.

The women I interviewed in this chapter were drawn to @NICKIMINAJ in part because she performed her identity as a Black woman using Black girls' literacies online. Although very strategic, Minaj's discursive performances of Black girlhood allow her to exude an *ethos* of a carefree Black girl as well as one who engages socio-cultural and political issues in her own way. In 2015 she became more vocal in the expression and representation of Black womanhood using her platform in her particular sphere of influence – women in Hip-hop and the music industry. This *ethos*, one that the interviewees shared is elusive for them, is one that they aspire to have. All of the interviewees expressed a desire to use an authentic voice on Twitter, feel safe and be appreciated for it. Aaliyah asserted that all women, Black women in particular, should be able to be their full selves, including those aspects that do not comply with respectability politics or that “talk back” even when online. While this is true, the interviewees for this chapter expressed reserve in doing so because of the lack of safety in on- and offline spaces for Black women.

For all of Twitter's affordances, the Black women in this chapter still felt constrained. This makes the contributions of Black women crowdsourced elites and mentors on Twitter all the more important. In light of the role of Black girls' literacies in the lives of Black women and girls off- and online and the risk and restrictions that come along with it, more questions arise. How, when, and where can Black women safely enter online? What other Black girls' literacy traditions can be utilized in the formation of digital Black womanhood? How do we account for the labor involved?

4 Chapter Four: Scandal(ous) Literacies and Ratchet Agency: Black Women's Identity Performance as Resistance in YouTube Fandoms

One way that Black women use their voice to make social and political interventions in the 21st century is through video-based social media platforms. One notable, recent example of a Black woman making a social and political intervention using a video platform is Diamond Reynold's and her Facebook Live video in which she broadcasted the aftermath of her fiancé Philando Castile's shooting death at the hands of a police officer in Falco Heights, Minnesota in July 2016. While Reynold's real-time broadcast, hailed as citizen journalism, and the Black Lives Matter protests that it sparked can readily be seen as an act of resistance to state violence, Black women also use social media, like YouTube (YT), to make significant interventions in popular culture. These interventions involve Black women moving from being disciplined objects to subjectivities of their own choosing. Black women engaging in such liberation projects, according to bell hooks, require a new language made of an oppositional discourse, a collective voice, and a twenty-first-century Womanist language. In order to reveal and better understand the ways in which this language is evolving, I privilege Black women's use of organic, online discourse and rhetorical practices on YT to push back against constraints on their freedom. Some of these resources include African American Vernacular English, space, the body, and play. I found that the women in this chapter used these resources in order to perform their identities online and that the interfaces provided the affordances such as connectivity and immediacy necessary to facilitate effective identity performances.

A primary way that the vloggers in this chapter performed their identities is through play and performance. Kyra Gaunt (2006) argued that the games Black girls play are sites of negotiation where they can "play" with the various parts of their identity such as race and gender. Forms of play like playwriting and dramatic performance can also serve as meditational tools

that help girls negotiate their lives and imagine new possibilities (Winn 2011). In her study of incarcerated girls, Maisha Winn (2011) forwarded D. Soyini Madison's (2005) 'performance of possibilities' to describe how participants in the Girl Time program's dramatic play allowed for "creation and change...merging text with the world...and critically traversing the margin and the center" (qtd. in Winn 2011:17). Winn found that play was a vital tool for the girls in her study to go outside of and beyond their realities, including offering the opportunity for girls to write themselves out of the cycle of abuse (Winn 2011). Like critical play's (Flanagan 2009) ability to examine the ways in which individuals and groups play and change the social, political, and cultural function of that play, the girls' play and performance in Winn's example had the ability to rewrite and undo undesirable realities even if only temporarily. Winn argued that girls use playwriting and performance to try and "find a way home" and rehearse new desires (Winn 2011:5, 11). In this way, such play can provide frameworks for the opening up of subject positions (Flanagan 2009).

Play reveals new voices that were likely already present, but not acknowledged. Winn argued that space, opportunity, and an engaged audience are needed for these voices to be shared and recognized (Winn 2011:20). In *Girl Time*, Winn asserted that such a space, and subsequently voice, is "cultivated through activities and nurtured in the circle of girls and women" (Winn 2011:21). In this chapter, I argue that a similar space is created on YT's social media platform within the circles of women in the *Scandal* fandoms on Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ's YT channels.

With the bleak realities and messages the girls in Winn's study faced, she maintained that the playspace of the program Girl Time gave a 'little black girl' a place to shine, stand out, and be acknowledged (Winn 2011:45). The suspension of reality through play was necessary for this

to occur. Performances as forms of play whether dramatic or in user-generated YT videos like the ones studied here help performers and viewers access something outside and beyond reality. I maintain that the space to shine is equally important for adult Black girls as well. As seen with the girls of Girl Time and the vloggers featured in this chapter, once Black girls and women are able to come to and sit at the table as they are, composing and performing original compositions provides ways for them to assert themselves as “literate and capable of creating something original that impact[s] the lives of others” (Winn 2011:91). Authenticity, the ability to come, write, and perform as they are, is also important for Black women and girls to feel welcome, because agency and the freedom to play is often exclusive and reserved for particular kinds of girls and people (Flanagan 2009, Winn 2011).

Space is crucial to the original performance as well as the meaning making that takes place afterward. Opportunities for viewers to respond to and interact with the performers were also important to Girl Time participants. Winn shared that “talk-backs” after the performances were a community-dialogue where those present could “create, question, and imagine something different—a life on their terms as contributors to the world” (Winn 2011:120). Similar community building practices take place among the vloggers Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ and their viewers on YT in the comments sections.

YT is an American video-sharing site that was started in 2005 and later purchased by Google. It has become a widely popular and influential platform in part because it is a do-it-yourself format (Guo and Lee 2013). YT receives over 100 million video views per day. I analyzed video blogs or vlogs posted to YT about the television show *Scandal* by users Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ during season two of the show. Vlogs are user-generated visual texts. I chose to analyze discussions on *Scandal* on YT because of the show’s popularity and social

nature of the viewership. Black women engaged with the show and one another on various social media including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and YT. As a fan of the show I have live-posted on Facebook and hosted online video viewing “parties” on Google Hangout in order to discuss the show in real-time and have post-episode discussions. YT recaps of the show provided another opportunity to see how Black women took up issues of identity in the show.

4.1 Data

I analyzed videos posted about the television show *Scandal* by YouTubers Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ during season two of the show. I look specifically at how viewers use language in the comments section to mirror and affirm the vloggers language. I selected these two vloggers because they are both Black women who bring their identities and cultural knowledge into their broadcasts and have notable popularity on YT. Bondy Blue has close to 32,000 subscribers to her channel, and over 7 million views. Her strong presence on three major social media platforms, YT, Instagram (9,155 followers), and Twitter (5,967 followers), contributes to her mass circulation. Bondy Blue is a Black, bi-sexual, female YT personality from New Orleans and according to her YT profile she joined YT in 2011. Tangela Ekhoﬀ gained popularity and notoriety in a different way; she was recognized by *Scandal* producers and actors for her fan work on YT. She met cast members from the show, and has been featured in news articles based on her YT broadcasts about the show. She describes herself online as a “Writer, speaker, sit-down comic. Southern sass, mother wit. Ready for my close up!” She joined YT in 2009, has over 3,600 subscribers to her channel, and almost 300,000 views. I also chose these two vloggers because they represented different worldviews and life experiences. There were contrasts in their ages, marital status, and how they presented their sexual orientations. For example, Tangela is in an interracial marriage and has two children, and at the time of data collection Bondy Blue was not yet married. Both vloggers also use Twitter and live tweet the show in conjunction with their

vlogging. I chose to analyze the videos as the primary source of discourse as opposed to viewers' discussion of the videos because of their hermeneutic and performative nature. Not all videos are catalysts for textual discourse because not all vloggers encourage responses from their viewers (Milliken, Gibson, and O'Donnell 2008); however, both the vloggers in this chapter explicitly ask viewers to like, comment on, and share their videos. In all, I analyzed the 42 videos that the vloggers published between September 29, 2012 and May 17, 2013 along with the comment section from each broadcast: 16 published by Bondy Blue and 26 published by Tangela Ekhoﬀ and 1,684 comments total. In addition, I conducted an online survey and interviewed one of Bondy Blue's channel subscribers and a fellow YouTuber in order to get a viewer's perspective on the role of Black female vloggers and their broadcasts. See Appendix E and F for the YouTube survey and interview protocols.

Scandal is an American political thriller television series starring Kerry Washington and Tony Goldwyn. The show was created by Shonda Rhimes and debuted on ABC in 2012. Washington's character, Olivia Pope, is partially based on former president George H.W. Bush administration's press aide Judy Smith, who is a co-executive producer of the television show. The show takes place in Washington, D.C. and focuses on Olivia Pope's crisis management firm, Olivia Pope & Associates, and its staff, as well as staff at the White House and surrounding political scene, which includes married President Fitzgerald Grant III played by Goldwyn, with whom Olivia is having an affair.

4.2 Fandom and Community

Information on Black women in fandoms is helpful in contextualizing the study in this chapter. Stereotypes of women in fandoms typically exclude women of color, but women of color are active participants in and producers of content in fandoms (Warner 2015:33).

Producing content is an act of agency for women of color because it enables them to be visible and represented equally within fan communities (Warner 2015:34). A major way that female members of Black fandoms make their femininity visible is by producing content that centers women of color who may otherwise occupy supporting roles (Warner 2015:34). While this particular kind of labor is not necessary with the show *Scandal* because it already has a Black woman as the lead role, there are other factors that inspire and hold Black *Scandal* fandoms together. The majority of these online Black female *Scandal* fandoms emerged on Twitter and Tumblr, but as this chapter illustrates, many have found a home on YT as well. Warner (2015) argued that fan communities are created out of a “shared interest in a love object” and “out of similar approaches to demonstrating that love” (37). For Bondy Blue and Tangelia Ekhooff, similar approaches to exhibiting their love of *Scandal* include debriefing or reviewing show episodes, re-enacting scenes from the show as well as offering their commentary on the show’s storyline, characters, actors’ performances and other subject matter or issues related to the show or episode they are reviewing. All of these acts are specific to the fan performing them; because fans use media texts to reflect their positionality back to themselves (Warner 2015:37). In her chapter on *Scandal* fandoms online, Kristen J. Warner argued that producing and seeing these reflections are particularly important for Black women who rarely see their reflections in the media:

Seeing oneself on screen is a privilege that not all bodies are allowed, thus the ‘make do’ culture that women of color...Black women – participate in to make those identities recognizable is worthy of consideration. The ways Black women reappropriate themselves into the text through characters who look (and potentially act) like them is inherently narcissistic; yet, it serves a greater purpose of identification and visibility. (Warner 2015:37)

This “narcissism” is not mere vanity, according to Warner (2015), but an act of resistance.

Building off of Jacqueline Bobo’s argument regarding Black women’s resistance, Warner

asserted that in finding more ways to see and represent themselves, Black women are doing resistance work in fandoms (38).

In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ do such resistance work by various means of performing their identities as Black women through their language use, play, re-enactments and racebending, and deliberately making race and gender visible in the broadcasts and the show *Scandal*. I identified several discourse features in these various forms of identity performance as well: AAVE, ratchet language, talking with attitude, loud talking, serio-ludic discourse, embodied discourse, and culturally specific topoi and symbols.

The online survey I administered uncovered information about Tangela and Bondy Blue's followers' experiences with YT and the channels studied. I sought to find out more about Black women's engagement with Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ's YT channels, especially with regard to their *Scandal* recaps. The survey started with questions to ascertain demographic information relative to identity and basic participation information. Eleven out of 12 women who responded identified as Black or African American. One woman identified as white. Only one-third of the women actually subscribed to one of the two YT channels; the others were viewers. Approximately two-thirds of the women shared that they had been viewing the videos for one year or less; the others were not sure how long they had been watching the videos for. I also posed questions asking for more detailed information about their participation as well as their perceptions of the videos, the social media platform, and others' engagement. More than half of the women surveyed reported receiving responses to one or more of their comments about a video from other viewers. They were divided almost down the middle in terms of how they viewed other YT viewers; they either described them as "colleagues" or as "strangers." There

was also equal representation among “lurkers” (those who viewed videos and read comments without posting), “semi-active participants” (those who watched videos and occasionally post comments and like other comments), and “very active participants (those who watched videos and frequently commented and responded to others’ comments). Half of the participants said that the YouTubers responded directly to their comment(s) and the other half said they did not receive any response. The majority of women felt “completely free” to express their views in the comments section on Bondy and Tangela’s channels. Nearly three-quarters of the women said they agreed with the views expressed in the videos either “all the time” or “often;” the rest said they “sometimes” agreed. Relatability and humor were the top two reasons the four subscribers shared for following the two YouTubers. One viewer wrote, “it is very humorous and insightful it gives me the opportunity to hear the views of someone that I can relate to age wise.”

4.3 Identity Performance

4.3.1.1 Through “ratchet” language and AAVE

As stated in previous chapters, language choice, and particularly the use of AAVE is a means of performing identity in off- and online spaces. Warner argued that this is a significant aspect of Black women’s *Scandal* fandoms. Warner noted that blogger, social media personality, and author Awesomely Luvvie’s²² popularity stems in part from her codeswitching and use of AAVE and that her followers mirror that language in the comments sections of her posts (Warner 2015:33). In this chapter, I show that a similar phenomenon occurs in Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ’s broadcasts and their comments sections; the particular type of AAVE used in these YT fandoms can be described as “ratchet language.”

²² “About Luvvie.” Awesomely Luvvie. 2017. Web. <<http://www.awesomelyluvvie.com/about-luvvie>>.

I learned more about the use of ratchet language from “Janelle,” the one person I interviewed for this chapter. YT presented a methodological challenge to recruiting survey and interview participants because its network is not compact or inherently designed for community building, and the avenues of communication are limited. Participants’ discourse holds fan communities together on YT more than features of the platform itself. Fan YT channel and television show recap video popularity operates in cycles based on whether or not the show’s season is in progress as well as the frequency of videos being posted. I began collecting survey data during one of *Scandal*’s hiatuses, so there was not as much traffic to the comments sections. Also, email and message accounts for many YT participants tend to be secondary accounts and are not checked as regularly. These characteristics of YT are different than Facebook and Twitter, for example, and present a challenge for communicating and community building. Therefore, it was difficult to attract the attention and participation of many of the channels’ viewers.

I shared my online survey in the comments’ sections of Bondy Blue and Tangelia Ekhoﬀ’s videos and sent messages to individuals who seemed particularly active as commenters on the two channels in order to solicit responses. In the end, one subscriber to Bondy Blue’s channel agreed to be interviewed via Google Hangout. One user contacted me one year after I messaged her and data collection was completed because she had just then realized she had a message waiting for her. I sought interview participants from those who completed the online survey.

Janelle subscribes to Bondy Blue’s channel and is a YouTuber as well. She described the language she vlogs and writes in on YT as “ratchet language.” She is an accountant by trade and said she began watching YT videos to pass the time at work. The word “ratchet” was popularized in 2007 by rapper Hurricane Chris in his album 51/50. Ratchet originally meant getting excited or partying hard, but morphed into a derogatory term to describe unintelligent, loud, and

hypersexual women, but has now been reclaimed and theorized as an intentional strategy to reject the politics of respectability. Being ratchet or ratchetness can therefore be seen as a form of disrespectability politics (Cooper 2012a). In her blog post “Disrespectability Politics: On Jay-Z’s Bitch, Beyonce’s ‘Fly’ Ass, and Black Girl Blue,” Brittney Cooper first theorized this oppositional move when examining rapper Jay-Z’s failure to comply with the societal expectations placed upon him as a new father. While many expected the rapper to stop using the word “bitch” to refer to women in his lyrics after the birth of his daughter, Jay-Z maintained that he would not refrain from doing so. Cooper described his refusal to be “respectful” and “respectable” as a “respectful fuck you to doing the respectable thing and a straight up diss to respectability itself” (Cooper 2012a); an example of what she called Hip-hop aesthetics at its finest.

I therefore define “ratchet language” as the language used to intentionally or subconsciously express such a rejection of respectability as a means of social uplift as well as the desire to be free of such disciplining. Janelle defined ratchet language as an ontological and epistemological state of being, stating that for her:

it’s a place I can go in my mind where I don’t have to worry about if I’m politically correct sometimes, if I’m grammatically correct. I can just be free to express that side of myself that, I don’t know if everyone has it, but that side of myself that doesn’t really have a care in the world, whereas I think Black women we always have to be extra cognizant of how we conduct ourselves in certain arenas. I mean and we’re held to sometimes to a higher standard and I feel like when I’m in these environments I don’t have to hold myself to a higher standard. (Janelle Interview 2015)

At the time of her interview during the summer of 2015, by happenstance, Janelle said she had taken some time off of work and was also in graduate school to obtain a Master’s degree and Ph.D. in Sociology. It is possible that Janelle was responsive to my survey and interview request because she also understood the nature of academic research. She stated that her and her girlfriends joke about taking on different personalities, particularly the subjectivity of the “trap

queen.” According to urbandictionary.com, trap queen is an urban, street-savvy woman who is above all other women and “is down to do what is needed for her friends, family and man”²³ including hustle and deal drugs.

Ratchet language is distinct from formal or professional language that one would use at work as Janelle shared. For her, this language includes a lot of profanity and is very “free.” In online text, one way these differences are reflected is through spelling. For example, she may spell “girl” g-u-r-l to emphasize a different pronunciation and tone. Janelle said that the level of cursing and looseness in her ratchet talk has even surprised her on occasion. In her face-to-face conversations, she uses less ratchet language. The freedom Janelle feels when using ratchet language, she said, is aided in part by YT as an interface: “it does allow me to express a side of myself that I probably wouldn’t if it wasn’t for this platform” (Janelle Interview 2015).

YT provides a space for Janelle to more freely use ratchet language. Several aspects of video media may help Janelle feel empowered in this way. Literature on user-generated videos and YT show that video can aid in communication through the use of non-verbal cues and allowing users to communicate in a more natural way that resembles face-to-face communication (Molyneaux, O’Donnell, Gibson, and Singer 2008:2). Videos encourage identity formation among users and when women depict themselves on video, they are more in control of their representation (Molyneaux, O’Donnell, Gibson, and Singer 2008:3). YT as an online space, like other online spaces, presents safety concerns for Black women and has implications on how Black women are perceived.

Janelle acknowledges this concern and the difference in language use in FTF versus her computer-mediated communication on YT being due to her concern about how she will be

²³ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Trap%20Queen>

perceived by others and the rhetorical choices involved with constructing that image. As with the Black women navigating Twitter in chapter three, there is a real concern regarding safety, and Janelle is concerned about how her communication both online and off can impact her employability. She stated:

I'm creating a life for myself that I can be free to talk how I want to, you know in the academic world sometimes you can't, you know? So what I wonder is it gonna impact a job or is it gonna impact the way that certain people may feel about me who don't know that I can cuss like a sailor, you know? (Janelle Interview 2015)

Part of ratchet language for her is cussing like a sailor when she wants to. Even though she enjoys these options, she fears that others will not see her in her totality and respect her. She explained:

I work really hard to present myself in a certain way and I wanna say 'hey, you know, I'm educated, I'm cultured, I'm all of these things, but if you see me on here talking about *Love and Hip Hop*,²⁴ you may not get that perception. And, again, like I said, I think Black people or Black women in general don't always get a pass, you know? Once you see that ugly side, it becomes the stereotype. So I do worry about that sometimes. (Janelle Interview 2015)

In her interview, Janelle explicitly and implicitly stated that “outsiders” perceive “ratchetness” to be in conflict or diametrically opposed to intelligence and education as was seen in chapter 2 with respect to homeschooler Amina’s concerns about AAVE and representation. Janelle’s comments above also reveal the belief that ratchetness is somehow “ugly” or an undesired trait that will not be forgiven by those who are not also Black, female, and ratchet. The pressure Janelle describes to continuously labor in order to put the best, most universally acceptable version of herself forward at all times reflects the politics of respectability. In a blog post for *For Harriet*, Osamagbe Osagie described the politics of respectability as an oft overlooked murderer: “Cultivated in a hetero-normative, Eurocentric, cis-male, middle/upper class, Christian based, hegemonic context, the politics of respectability thrives off of debilitating its prey in order to

²⁴ <http://www.vh1.com/shows/love-and-hip-hop>

concentrate and maintain its power.”²⁵The death of its prey, in this case Black women, is a more probable outcome than social mobility or uplift. This reality presents a damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t link of conundrum for Black women, according to Cooper: “When disrespect becomes where we enter, we confront a reality that is pretty dismal for Black womanhood. But when we enter at respectability, there we confront limitations, too” (Cooper 2012a).

Citing the disrespect of first lady Michelle Obama, Cooper concluded the project of respectability has been a failure. This failure has been comprehensive considering it has persuaded neither white people or Black men to treat Black women better (Cooper 2012). As an alternative, Cooper contemplated the:

potential in the space between the diss and the respect—the potential (and the danger) of what it means to dis(card) respectability altogether. This space between the disses we get and the respect we seek is the space in which Black women live our lives. It is the crunk place, the percussive place, the place that makes noise (and music), the place that moves us, the place that offers possibility in the midst of two impossible extremes.” (Cooper 2012a)

This is also the space of possibility of ratchetness. YT is a space where Black women explore and push for more possibilities.

In Shondaland’s *Scandal*, Olivia Pope does not fit neatly into all of the criteria for respectability, because she is the mistress of the president of the United States on the show, Fitzgerald Grant. With that being said, Olivia Pope is far from ratchet. She represents the class, education, and power/status that Janelle wants to be recognized for. While Olivia is in a Black woman’s body, she does not have any of the markers of ratchedness or overt markers of

²⁵ Osagie, Osamagbe. "To Hell with the Politics of Respectability." For Harriet. 2014. Web. <<http://www.forharriet.com/2014/09/to-hell-with-politics-of-respectability.html#ixzz4HaJ9XyhF>>.

stereotypical Black womanhood such as aggression or loud talking or even those of professional Black girlhood.²⁶ Warner (2015) contended that Olivia’s depiction on the show is one based on what she calls the “spirit of colorblindness” because the series “avoids race talk and stereotypical assumptions about Black femininity in favor of a more neutrally raced, woman first, Blackness-as-flavor discourse” (35). While this colorblind spirit may expand the reach of *Scandal* to mainstream and white audiences, colorblindness and the move to embrace this as a societal ideal is harmful to people *with color*. It is harmful because although race is a social construct, so-called colorblindness gives white people the option to not see the real implications of race for Black people. Warner wrote:

Ultimately, Rhimes leaves it to the audience to fill in those cognitive-gaps, to have that ‘discussion about race’ in their own minds if nowhere else. This becomes the primary strategy of the series, allowing it to appeal to mainstream (White) audiences who do not want to ‘see’ race and to those audiences who want to read Olivia and Fitz as distinctly raced characters. To do this, Rhimes not only forgoes much explicit discussion of race, but also keeps Olivia from demonstrating any visible signs of Blackness. (Warner 2015:42-43)

On the show, Olivia’s skin color is visible, but her Blackness is not. While this spirit may seem to be unifying and expansive to some, it is inherently limiting to people of color. African American poet Nayyirah Waheed’s poem “my color is” reads:

never
trust anyone
who says
they do not see color.
this means
to them
you are invisible.

Waheed, a published poet whose poetry is widely circulated through social media accounts, highlights the way in which people of color are rendered invisible when “color” is not

²⁶ <http://yabablay.com/professional-black-girl/>

recognized because whiteness is the default. The increase in aspirations of colorblindness was a byproduct of post-racial claims after Barack Obama was elected as the first Black president of the United States. This impulse, as Waheed and the vloggers in this chapter intimate, should not be trusted or relied upon for protection.

Part of the labor of the *Scandal* fandoms like Bondy Blue's and Tangela Ekhoﬀ's reviews of the show includes countering the spirit of colorblindness by filling in Black socio-cultural and sociolinguistic gaps for themselves and the Black, female *Scandal* fandom. For example, Bondy Blue gives Olivia the words that Shonda Rhimes will not. The majority of Bondy Blue's reviews are spoken and recorded in ratchet language, particularly in her scene re-enactments from the show. Also, Tangela Ekhoﬀ has argued that Olivia needs to tap into her Blackness. This is seen when she explicitly and repeatedly insists that Olivia should trade in her famous lip quiver for finger waving and neck rolling, which she implies are more characteristic of embodied Black female discourse and will garner her the respect she needs. The supplemental ratchetness that Bondy and Tangela's reviews bring to Olivia's character do not change or denigrate her character, however, because as Janelle stated, there is no distinction between ratchetness and intelligence. The Black female *Scandal* fandom has the ability to fill in Black femaleness in the gaps that *Scandal* writers leave.

Bondy and Tangela show that there is not only one manifestation of this Black femaleness; however, some form is desired and even necessary for the Black female fandom. In essence, the Black, female fandoms work to "race" Olivia. The "racing" of Olivia is a critical form of labor to push back constraints of Black womanhood imposed by the spirit of colorblindness.

This “racing” through the insertion of ratchet language is seen during Bondy Blue’s review of season 2, episode 11 of *Scandal*; she re-enacts and translates a scene between Olivia and Fitz in which Olivia is critiquing Fitz’s behavior toward his campaign staff. In her re-enactment, Bondy “raced” Olivia by including AAVE and ratchet language in her speech directed at Fitz. In her broadcast, she stated:

Olivia comes in and tells everybody ‘y’all been doing good work, but I think that’s enough for tonight. I’ll see y’all in the morning. Fitz starts to walk off, ‘Not you, goddamit! Bring yo ass back in here. These people is working they ass off for you. They deserve better than that.’ (Blue Episode 11)

In her re-enactment, Bondy performed her own Black female identity and “raced” Olivia through her embodied performance of the scene. In it she looked off into the distance and waved her hands to the imaginary staff, gave an imagined Fitz “the look,” a look that means business and neck rolls communicate the need for immediate compliance. The inflection in Bondy Blue’s voice when she exclaims “bring-yo-ass” almost as one word is an example of the tonal semantics that is commonplace for *talking with attitude* (Troutman 2010). YT is able to capture these discourse features more readily than text-based platforms and allows these paralinguistic features to be conveyed.

This “scene” from Bondy Blue’s broadcast illustrates Bolter and Grusin’s (2000) theories of remediation and immediacy because the YT interface is designed to create a unified space in which traces of the programmers and the technology are not prominent. Bondy’s engagement with viewers through her performance in her videos encourages them to both forget about the interface between them and Bondy and have a sense of immediate connection with her through her video on YT. The elimination of this barrier allows for the interconnectivity of Bondy, her Black female viewers, and Olivia. This is significant to her project of increased agency and visibility of Black women.

Bondy continued to narrate more of the scene in which Olivia is questioning Fitz, and then offered a translation of the rest of Olivia's speech to Fitz concluding that if Olivia were not sleeping with Fitz she would have been able to assess the situation sooner and more clearly.

Bondy exclaimed:

'I know what it is! If I wasn't fucking you, I would have picked this up a long time ago. You have not shown the American people who you are. I know who you are. They don't. You have to show them who you are, babe. Now let's go fuck. Let's go.' (Blue Episode 11)

Ending Olivia's savvy political revelation with an invitation to have sex is ratchet. The request to "fuck," instead of the more romantic or socially acceptable term "making love," increases this ratchet factor. Critical play is significant here as Bondy *plays* discursively with the colorblind script and rules of the show, and through her ratchet language and embodies rhetoric – neck rolls, eye rolls, hands in the air – breaks the rules drawing critical attention to a different, more defiant Black female subjectivity than the original Olivia Pope of *Shondaland*. She subverted the colorblind project to have Black women represented by Olivia Pope blend in or not be fully seen.

Bondy Blue and Tangela's writing ratchetness onto Olivia's character call for Olivia to use Black girls' literacies (Muhammad and Haddix 2016) such as loud talking and talking with attitude in order to assert and sometimes defend herself as a Black woman, most often within the context of her relationship with love interests, whether they be white or Black men, and other opponents who are either white, male, or both. African American female literacies are practices that refer to "ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society" (Richardson 2006:798). Black girls' literacies are the multiple ways of reading, writing, speaking, and performing texts that are identity-based, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical (Muhammad and Haddix 2016). This desire and request on the part of Tangela,

Bondy Blue and other Black women within the fandom reflect the mirroring that Black female fans do with regard to Olivia's character on the show because she is a Black female in a lead role. As Warner asserted, Olivia's defense of her Black womanhood is a defense of all Black womanhood, just as the denigration of Black womanhood is felt as the denigration of all. It is important for Olivia to actively represent and represent for Black women as she is in a prominent role on television. Bondy Blue and Tangela leverage Olivia's position and add their own language and literacies to her character in order to exert and feel a certain level of power by proxy.

One example of this exertion of power can be seen in the following excerpt when Bondy gives her version of what Olivia's response should be when her boundaries are violated. She said:

So we get back to present time. Eddisson is in Olivia's apartment yet again waiting for her. She says, 'I'ma have to change my muffukin locks, cuz every time I come home you sittin in this bitch waitin for me! (Blue Episode 11)

Here, Bondy gives Olivia more aggressive and brash words so that she can protect her space. Bondy allows Olivia to more fully show her upset without the burden of having to be dignified or measured in her response. Bondy's choice of ratchet language also helps us to understand her audience and her perception of that audience. She uses language that is real and comfortable to her and assumes that her audience will also understand and appreciate. In doing so, she constructs a consubstantial space with her audience based on shared identity, language, and perspectives; those who do not understand or appreciate such language and perspectives are not likely to continue to view her videos.

Language is not the only marker of Black womanhood that Bondy Blue and Tangela wish Olivia had. The same way that markers are signals, the absence of certain markers are symbolic as well. This, again, is prevalent in discussions about real and fictional Black women's hair. In

Lanita Jacobs-Huey's study of gender and race in computer-mediated hair debates, she argued that hair is invoked by Black women as a symbol of racial authenticity; participants in her study referenced their own hairstyles and texture in order claim higher racial consciousness (2006:90). For Black women, hair care practices have much larger implications. Tangela illustrated this when she offered commentary on Olivia's hair: "We knew it was gonna be dangerous with Olivia when she went to bed without a scarf on her head and without a silk pillowcase. Black women know that those cotton pillowcases will cut your hair out. I knew it was serious then" (Ekhoﬀ Episode 12). Tangela knew that Olivia was experiencing a love jones for Fitz and not over her relationship with him. For Tangela, Olivia's lack of Black women's personal hair and self-care indicated the level of distress that Olivia was under.

Tangela urged Olivia, and by proxy "Shonda and nem damn writers" to tap into Olivia's Blackness through symbolic markers such as hair care and language in order to protect and defend herself on numerous occasions during her reviews of season two of *Scandal*. Tangela's promptings are in essence calling for Olivia to use Black girls' literacies such as loud talking and talking with attitude in order to defend herself as a Black woman, most often within the context of her relationship with her love interests, whether they be white or Black men, and other opponents who are either white, male or both. This desire and request on the part of Tangela, Bondy Blue and other Black women within the fandom reflect the mirroring that Black female fans do with regard to Olivia's character on the show because she is a Black female in a lead role.

In light of this reality, in her review of episode 16 from season two, Tangela called Cyrus out for disrespecting Olivia by "talking all up under Olivia's clothes" or taking about her sex life. She also used schooling rhetoric by providing her own recommendations for how Olivia should utilize her Blackness in order to handle the situation:

And Olivia Carolyn Pope, I'm gonna need you to tap into your inner Tanisha and tell his ass off one of these days. I need you to shade his ass so much that he feels like he is camping in Tuskegee National Forest in the middle of December. You need to shade him. You need to open up the Library of Congress and read his ass. (Ekhoﬀ Episode 16)

It is clear that Tangela means business in this address to Olivia, because she called her by her full government name. Calling her by her middle name which is not commonly known also shows Tangela's fan knowledge and devotion. She explicitly asked Olivia to get "ethnic on his ass" because she believes that Olivia's transcendent approach, read: white woman approach, (Ekhoﬀ Episode 16) was ineffectual and allowing Cyrus to repeatedly violate her. This is a problem for Tangela, because she clearly does not think that Cyrus, who is a white, homosexual man on the show, has the right to speak on or critique Olivia's Black female sexuality. Like the hair scarf, names hold a symbolic power; Tangela asked for Olivia to tap into her inner "Tanisha," a more markedly Black name and one more aligned with ratchetness than Olivia, in order to assert herself. Again, since Olivia's respectable approach, in Tangela's view is not effective, she makes the case for disrespectability. Although Cooper made a valid claim about the repercussions of Black women entering through disrespect, in this case, Tangela deems it necessary as a defense and has the ability to play with the possibility in the space created on her YT channel. Ratchet language and disrespect, like talking with attitude, is connected to an expression and performance of performance of power.

Despite Shonda Rhimes' writing in the spirit of color-blindness, both Tangela and Bondy Blue's commentary in their videos, as Black women, are aware of the ways in which Black female sexuality is fraught with judgment and is considered deviant. Tangela, in particular in this review, contended that such disrespect of Olivia's sexuality needed to be dealt with directly and with force. Tangela continued: "You have to bow up and tap into that inner-angry Black woman that I know is there. And, see, every time your lip quivers, I know what you really want to be

doing is this. Don't lip quiver when you can neck roll" (Ekhoﬀ Episode 16). As Tangela admonished Olivia, she imitated her lip quiver and then substituted vigorous, circular neck movements for what she said she believes Olivia's inner-angry Black woman would really like to do and could be more effective in checking and wrecking Cyrus and anyone else trying to disrespect her. This time Tangela used gestures in addition to schooling rhetoric in an attempt to change Olivia's course. Tangela's faux intuitive knowledge that Olivia does not really want to do the lip quiver, but would prefer to show more attitude implies that Olivia is being constrained and trying to be "respectable" instead of authentic in a way that may be perceived as ratchet. On Shondaland, ratchet is a detriment. On YT, however, ratchet is leveraged as a superpower by vloggers.

Tangela called on Olivia to invoke her Blackness when Fitz disrespects her; especially when it is concerning her sexuality. The following example highlights the way Tangela "races" Olivia and reinforces the importance of respecting Black women in her *Scandal* review episodes. In *Scandal* season two episode 14, Tangela claimed that Fitz was acting out his anger with Olivia by treating her like a "Skank-osoarus Rex" and contemptuously using her for sex as if she was not someone he had professed to love and respect.

Despite understanding that Fitz is mistreating Olivia because he is deeply hurt, the historical context of American white presidents having sexual relationships with Black women is not lost on Tangela or Bondy Blue. The history of white men raping enslaved Black women in the U.S. complicates perceptions of Black women's sexuality, respect, and agency. Tangela advised Olivia to tap into her Blackness for strength:

Olivia. Olivia. Olivia. You are descended from strong ancestors. I'm feeling like Iyanla right now. Let me life coach you, Olivia. Strong ancestors. And not only the ancestors, Olivia. There are ghetto girls all around this country that you share their blood, you know what I'm sayin? You better blow up on his ass and take your earrings off and beat the shit

outta him. Don't let him talk to you like that. You should have gone upside his head with that damn pocketbook. Made good use of that damn purse. Broke in that leather a little bit by hitting him upside the mouth. How dare you? How dare you, Fitz? (Ekhoﬀ Episode 14)

Tangela asks Olivia to tap into both her strong ancestral and ghetto bloodlines without making any distinction or privileging one identity over the other. This is significant because the historic and collaborative elements of her Black girls' literacies are evident in her admonishment of Olivia. Tangela also highlights a bilateral flow of power and strength through the bloodline running between Olivia and the ghetto girls across the country; they are looking to Olivia to represent, and they and their literacies are also a resource for her to use when she needs to assert herself.

4.3.1.2 *Making race and gender visible*

Generating visibility for Black women is an important task for Black female fandoms even when the media text has a Black leading role. In addition, their labor impacts and engages material realities beyond the text. Regarding actress Kerry Washington, "Not only have these fans been partly responsible for the series' initial survival and the way it became known as 'water cooler television' but they can also be credited with the rise of Washington to A-list talent" (Warner 2015:41).

Fandom labor includes filling in gaps to add dimension and specificity, according to Warner (2015). For example, Bondy Blue and Tangela work to bring attention to issues of race, gender, sex, class, and other socio-political categories. They facilitate important discussions on race and pick up where Rhimes leaves off. *Scandal* and YT are catalysts for larger discussions about the implications of race, gender, and sexuality in society.

On YT, Bondy Blue and Tangela employ their own strategy of distinctively racing the characters on and off of the show. They do the work of bringing in outside racial contexts to interpret and discuss the show and use the characters outside of the show in order to make

meaning of racial politics in the larger society. Evidence of this particular phenomenon can be seen in Tangela's YT video recap of the 2013 NAACP Image Awards in which actor Tony Goldwyn who plays Fitz on *Scandal* presented his co-star Kerry Washington the award for best actress at the ceremony. Tangela proclaimed:

And Tony Goldwyn is now the avatar for the white boy in every Black woman's mind. Now, you thinking it. You may not be out there brave enough to get your Fitz, but you know when you think it, you have that minute where you go, 'I'ma get me a Tony Goldwyn. Every Black woman in America is feeling that way. And Tony, I'm gon tell you something. We are loyal as hell. Ask Victor Newman how he still got a job. Black women are loyal to you, Tony. You got us now. You got us. We like the damn National Guard. If an'budy fuck with you, an'budy – you just put out a sister alert on damn Twitter and we will round up, grease our faces, take our damn earrings out, get our box cutters, and commence to whoop ass against an'budy messin witchu. Cuz that's how we are, baby. Sisters are loyal. We are down for you. If you down for us, we down for you. And we know, we saw that love and respect you got for Kerry...you have a genuine respect for her, and because you respect her, we respect you. (Ekhoﬀ Episode Scandal at the NAACP Awards 2013).

This declaration of loyalty to Goldwyn the actor and his fictional character Fitz from Tangela on behalf of "all Black women," or at least those in the fandom, illustrates the blurred line between the characters on the show and the real identities of the audience, as well as the personal connection and commitment that Tangela and other Black female fans have not only to Goldwyn/Fitz, but to Kerri Washington and Olivia Pope, the real and fictional Black women who are seen as representing and standing in for other Black women. With that said, Tangela and others are "not here for" or in support of watching Olivia be disrespected by her lover and POTUS Fitzgerald Grant, her sometimes friend and right-hand-man to the president Cyrus, her lover's wife, or anyone else. This is because, as Tangela concluded in her declaration of devotion to Goldwyn, she and we as a larger society, in the U.S. and abroad, seldom see "a sister" or Black women getting "her due" outside of the respect that President Obama publicly shows to his wife and First Lady Michelle Obama. Tangela's public invocation of racial politics in her broadcast on YouTube is also significant, because the literature of YT characterizes the platform

as “overly playful.” Because of the push for YouTube videos to entertain, it is possible and probably for political discussions to get buried. Tangela’s skillful use of serio-ludic discourse – the productive oscillation between seriousness and playfulness (Rouzie 2001) – is vital to staying relevant on YT and foregrounding her identity and concerns as a Black woman. In a study of his students’ synchronous chats, Albert Rouzie (2001) found that serio-ludic discourse was used to negotiate power relations and allowed the students to both “provoke and relieve” tensions (284). His data also showed that such discourse online allowed students to attribute more agency to one another (Rouzie 2001). In her recap of Goldwyn’s award presentation to Washington, Tangela is able to simultaneously confront the contentious topic of race that *Scandal* oftentimes avoids and relieve that tension through her humor. Tangela and Bondy Blue subvert the “colorblind” nature of the show by approaching the intersections of race and gender head on.

Again, there is a critical play and manipulation of what is real-life and what is fiction. Tangela removes the boundary between the characters of the show and the people who play them. Ultimately, she removes the boundary from between herself and her viewers and the Black womanhood that is represented by Olivia/Washington. This identification between Tangela and her audience can be seen in the comments in her comment section. For example, in the comments section of Tangela’s Image Award recap, her subscribers and viewers show their agreement with her views on the topic and her identity performance and representation through their comments. They show agreement both through their stances and in the ways that they react to and reflect the language and rhetoric that Tangela uses. Figure 15 is a screenshot from the comments section from this episode and shows that user BarbaraJean2 changes the spelling of the word “anybody” to “Nbody” in order to reflect Tangela’s pronunciation and tone.

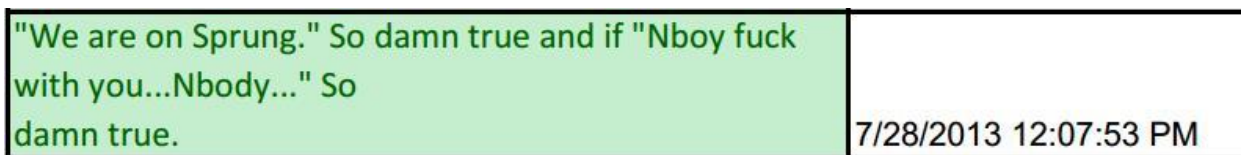


Figure 15 A screenshot of a Scandal fan comment to Ekhoﬀ's YouTube video recap of the 2013 NAACP Image Awards (BarbaraJean2; Scandal at the NAACP Image Awards YouTube Comments; YouTube, 28 Jul. 2013; Web).

4.3.1.3 *Play, re-enactment and racebending*

The two vloggers engage the realities of race and gender, but also take many opportunities to “play” with these constructs as well when they “racebend.” Warner references Patricia Hill Collins to say that: “As cultural producers, critics, and members of an audience the women are positioned to intervene strategically in the imaginative construction, critical intervention, and social condition of black women” (Warner 2015:38). Play can be a means of such intervention and imaginative construction. Through play, Bondy Blue and Tangela disrupt, reconstruct, and complicate Black women’s subjectivities.

According to Warner, racebending is a form of fan-generated work in which the writer changes the race and culture of central characters or re-positions a character of color from the margins into the center. This process allows for negotiation between the original performance and the audience (Warner 2015:39); the audience is essentially asked to accept the revision or re-position. I extend Warner’s conception of racebending to include the re-assignment of race and cultural specificity of white characters in order to imagine or play with the possibility of them having the positionality or markers of a person of color. Specifically, I look to how both Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ play with notions of race and manipulate the race, culture and gender of white, male characters in order to emphasize salient points about how race operates in the show and in the real world. The vloggers do this through characterization in their reviews and by posing rhetorical and hypothetical questions. Racebending as a performance is a meaning-making practice between the YouTubers and their audience.

In season 2, episode 17 Bondy Blue asked the rhetorical question, “what if Cyrus was a Black man?” She speculated that Cyrus would be in jail for his many illegal and unethical actions if he were a Black man based on her knowledge and perception of the criminal justice system and the inequities in treatment between white and Black people.

Bondy Blue racebended in more subtle ways as well without explicitly naming race. Bondy Blue did this by reenacting scenes using her own ratchet language and AAVE even when performing the role of white characters who do not use that language. While she did not overtly invoke race by calling it out, when she reenacted the scenes in this way, she essentially asked her audience to suspend their knowledge of a character’s race and culture and accept a new one, the one that she provided which was Black and ratchet. For example, in her review of episode 11 from season two, Bondy Blue performed a conversation between Fitz and his father Big Jerry that took place in that episode. Both characters are white, Republican and upper-class men who do not use Black language in their communication. While recreating Fitz’s monologue, Bondy said, “Vote for your boy, Fitz!” and acted out Fitz dropping the microphone after saying this line to his constituents. This reenactment assigns a Hip-hop persona and embodiment to Fitz. Here Bondy is not trying to persuade the audience that Fitz is an emcee with swagger. Instead, she uses this racebending as a meaning-making strategy to make the language and storyline more relatable and interesting to her audience. This still involves a suspension of perception for the audience to understand that regardless of the lexicon being used, the essence of the message remains the same.

A similar example of this kind of racebending is evident when she reenacted a scene from season two episode 13 with the white, wealthy, male tycoon Hollis Doyle. Doyle is cornered in an elevator by two hitmen and trying to get himself out of the situation. Bondy’s translation of

his plea to the hitmen is, “I ain’t down with that fuckshit” and she included his typical Southern drawl laugh. “Fuckshit” is a Black slang and vernacular term frequently used by Bondy Blue that is used to describe something foul, incredibly ridiculous or otherwise something one would not want to be associated with.

Bondy does this with the white, female characters as well, like Abby in episode 13 when she is angry that Olivia and the Gladiators have sabotaged her relationship to then district attorney, David Rosen. Bondy translated Abby’s rant about knowing her colleague ruined her relationship to say: “I knew that’s what you were going to do, because that’s what we do; we fix shit. That’s what we do. We just go ‘head and fuck over people’s lives and fuck over people’s relationships. And I ain’t never gon find no good ‘D’ in my life. Y’all made me mess it all up” (Blue Episode 13).

Here, Bondy gives Abby a ratchet rant instead of her original whiny, hysterical one. Using different words, Bondy relates the same meaning Abby felt – “fucked over” – or double-crossed by those close to her. Ratchet-Abby, unlike whiny-Abby, laments over losing and not being able to find good “D” or “dick/sex as good as David’s again. Bondy’s Abby is not concerned with appearing polite or respectable. She is overtly sexual and articulates her sadness over the loss of a good relationship and good penis.

A much more overt and pronounced example of racebending in Bondy Blue’s *Scandal* reviews took place during episode when she characterized James, Cyrus’ husband, as a Black woman. In the original scene, James is upset and confronting his husband Cyrus for his illegal tampering with an election that is threatening both of their freedom. Bondy said:

In true Black bitch fashion, James goes home and goes the fuck off on Cyrus. ‘Your election rigging is gonna cause one of us to go to jail, and lemme tell you something bay-bay, okay? I am not for jail, okay? This beautiful white man is not for fucking jail. I have asthma. I can’t be no goddamn fugitive. I’m for 5-star hotels and catered meals and shit,

okay? I'm for vegan diets and music after 12 o'clock to soothe the soul, okay? I am for very classy shit and jail ain't classy, bitch! You need to get yo life, okay? Because I cannot perjure myself. (Blue Episode 13)

In her reenactment Bondy maps characteristics and markers of Black women's discourse including ratchet language, hand and neck rolling, and talking with attitude onto James. While some of the above features may also overlay with characteristics of queer male discourses, there is a marked difference in James actual monologue and Bondy's version. Moreover, Bondy specifically states that James is behaving in "true Black bitch fashion." For her, this appears to mean being ratchet and "going off" on someone. This is yet another way in which she is able to use her platform in order to play with and forefront Black, female identities. She blends stereotypical characteristics of classiness such as five-star hotels, catered vegan meals, soothing music, and being high-maintenance and needy with stereotypical markers of Black womanhood such as ratchet language, including the use of the word "bitch," her tone, eye- and neck-rolling, and flipping weave out of her face. Extending Anna Julia Cooper's argument that only Black women can determine when and where Black women enter, Black women on YT are determining *how* Black women enter. In this example of racebending James, Bondy Blue shows expanding the realm of possibility for *how* Black women enter and exist freely can impact how others do so as well.

In another example from the same episode Bondy Blue transformed the straight-laced but love-struck POTUS Fitzgerald Grant into a slick-talking dude from the hood pleading for Olivia to wait for him until he leaves his wife. Bondy's Fitz said, "I'm not here for this bitch. I'm getting a divorce whether she likes it or not! Liv, please just wait for me, baby. Please just put them panties on freeze for me. Please just wait for me, bitch. I'll be there in a minute!" (Blue Episode 13). Bondy did Kerry Washington/Olivia's lip quiver dramatically and said, "I'll think about it." Here, like in most of Bondy Blue's recaps, the use of the word "bitch" is frequent and

fluid in its use. “Bitch” is neutral in its connotation; Bondy uses it to refer to the woman Fitz does not want as well as the one that he actually wants to be with. “Bitch” for Bondy Blue is gender neutral and used at times to refer to male characters as well as female ones. This is consistent with the AAVE use of the word. Bondy’s depiction of Fitz “talking that talk” with phrases like “put them panties on freeze” accomplishes several things: 1) it changes the script to one that reflects the language Bondy is familiar with as well as her identity, 2) it allows Bondy to race Fitz and assign him an alternate race that mirrors Olivia’s race and in doing so she also races Olivia, and 3) makes the dialogue and meaning more relatable to her audience.

4.4 Findings

Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ use YT as a platform to perform their identities as Black women in ways that subvert the spirit of colorblindness of *Scandal* and the sentiment expressed by many during Barack Obama’s presidency. This spirit and aspiration while seemingly well-intentioned served to render the specificity of Black women and their experiences invisible in the show. Along with not fully seeing Black women, this spirit enables people to ignore the extraordinary accomplishments of Black women, the adversities they face, and more importantly, the possible solutions to their oppression. The vloggers center and create more visibility for a range of Black womanhood including “ratchet” identities that are often seen as deviant, deficient, and diametrically opposed to intelligence and respect. However, as Janelle discussed, Black women have a need and desire to push back against those constraints and what she determined to be unreasonable and unfair set of expectations placed upon Black women. Fulfilling those needs and desires requires space, and I argue that it is YT’s connectivity as a social network as well as its transparency and immediacy that makes it a welcome space for Black women’s identity performances and community building. YT is easily accessible in the traditional sense since it is

a broadcast network free to anyone with wifi and a data plan. It is also accessible in the sense that it allows Black women to make use of it in ways that are meaningful to their lives; creating an online space that allows them to push back against boundaries and constraints that they face. Their agency is in their intentional performances of their Blackness and femaleness in all of the ways that *they* choose for themselves. They use their own identity performances to make room and advocate for subjectivities that are oftentimes shunned and silenced such as the angry Black women, Tanishas-with-the-head-scarf, and true Black bitches. There is a real power in this subversion of colorblindness because the vloggers not only highlight aesthetic or cultural features of Black womanhood, but the challenges that come along with it as well. Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ’s use of AAVE and ratchet language, purposely invoking race and gender where it is not written in, and playing with and suspending the boundaries of those identities is what creates spaces of greater freedom for them and other Black women on YT, and as my other case studies suggest, social media in general.

The use of serio-ludic discourse in these broadcasts was significant to the Black female subscribers as my survey results indicated. This playfulness and humor is also a highly effective method in addressing more serious issues such as the side-effects of white hetero-patriarchy, such as the hypervisibility and policing of Black women and intersectional erasures of Black women.

With all of the power of play and possibility that YT and other video-based social media platforms and features they may provide, there are still limits. As seen with the Black counterpublics on Twitter, serio-ludic discourse can be used to broach socially contentious issues. The groups’ *ethos* and agency online, however, is constricted to its *ethos* and agency offline severely limiting the effectiveness of their message or call for change. This is not a dire reality

for Olivia Pope or those in Shondaland; however, the consequences can be maddening for Black women and men in real life.

Black women like Philando Castile's fiancé, mother, and daughter are still left without justice. Despite Diamond Reynold's presence of mind and courage to broadcast the aftermath of police officer's bullets tearing into Philando Castile's body in real-time, no lasting change has been enacted to protect Black and Brown bodies from state violence. Diamond had the technology and power to show the world the scene. They bore witness – an officer shot into a car at least seven times with a woman and child in it and killed a man who had not committed a crime. People wept as they listened to a child attempt to make sense of madness and comfort her mother. Fueled by sadness and anger people circulated the video to raise awareness and raised their voices on- and offline to demand justice and reiterate that Black Lives Matter. Yet on June 16, 2017, the former officer, Jeronimo Yanez, was found “not guilty” of the manslaughter charge against him for taking Castile's life. Black people and those who empathized filled up timelines across social media with feelings of rage, disgust, sadness, and hopelessness. While a 12-person jury decided Yanez's legal fate, they will not have the final say. Philando's mother Valerie Castile took to social media soon after her official press conference to express her rage. Seated and buckled in a car, she used a cell phone to post her “real” feelings for the world to see. She said:

Hey Facebook and everybody around the world. I'm sure y'all done seen this bullshit that happened today. Fuck what they talking about. Yea, I'm going 'live' now. I've been holding myself, trying to be strong and not say the wrong things because I already know how they get down... They murdered my motherfucking son with his seatbelt on, so what does that say to you? They got free reign to keep killing us any kind of way they want to... Fuck the po-lice... Now this is the real Valerie Castile... And they gon keep on killing us as long as we just sit down and take it. Do what you muthafuckin do. Whateva. Peace out. I hope that muthafucka die tonight. Hello!?

In her two-and-a-half minute video, Castile repeated the words “do what you do” resolutely in a way that simultaneously sounded like a resignation to the “bullshit” killings and a rallying call for revenge and protest. Her statement, “do what you do” likely referred to previous periods of unrest in the last several years after the acquittal of an officer involved in the death of a Black person. She wanted people to hear and feel her “real” self and feelings. She exhorted her viewers to take their freedom, and was clear that she was not opposed to violence as a result of this verdict. Her post was ratchet and did not take the “respectable” and peace-making approach as other mothers in what she described as “this fucked up mother’s club” of women whose children have been murdered by police.

In the hours after the verdict, no one knows what will happen next. Maybe *this* will be the incident or the post that compels people to fight back in some manner and refuse to accept the injustice anymore. Maybe we will continue to watch White Supremacy Live. With all of the ingenious ways Black women find to fashion social media for their purposes and liberation projects, how can Black women leverage the power and possibility of who they are and social media in order to dismantle the life-sucking white hetero-patriarchy *offline*?

5 Bey-ware – Construction Ahead: Beyoncé and Identity Performance in the Formation of the Black Feminist Blogosphere

“All, all, all in together, girls, how you like the weather, girls? Fine. Fine. Super fine. January, February, March...”

On December 13, 2013, pop singer Beyoncé Knowles “broke the Internet” with the unannounced midnight release of her self-titled visual album *Beyoncé*. In addition to the buzz, the album created within her fan base, the “Beyhive,” *Beyoncé*’s themes of sexual pleasure, motherhood, and self-possession along with the sampling of Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s speech on feminism, inspired feminists to weigh in on the Internet as to whether or not Beyoncé *could* be a feminist. Black feminists posted their competing views about this issue following the album’s release, and many were quick to characterize this as “war.”²⁷ The reduction of this important discussion to a virtual destructive force, however, obscured the agentive power the writers and their readers exerted in the process. Despite dissent among these bloggers, I argue that the publishing of their blog posts worked together to discursively build the Black feminist blogosphere, not a “war” as the media suggested.

For me, the quick succession of the blog postings were reminiscent of the jump rope game-song, “All In Together Girls,” in which a group of young girls jumped into the rope together and sang the months of the year and upon hearing their birthday month, exited the rope. In the game, each girl and woman finds her space and jumps in sync. There are moments of alignment when two or more are in the rope at the same time and times when they go their own course when exiting the rope. In a similar fashion, in the female-centered space of the Black

²⁷ Cooper, Brittney. “The Beyoncé wars: Should she get to be a feminist?” Salon. 12/17/2013 2013. Web. 06 Sept. 2013. salon.com/2013/12/17/a_deeply_personal_beyonce_debate_should_she_get_to_be_a_feminist/>.

feminist blogosphere, I read this group of online posts concerning Beyoncé as an online conversation because of their shared content and the ways in which they implicitly and explicitly reference each other in agreement or to take one another to task for their positions on issues of feminism and Black female identity in the United States. To understand this particular occurrence on the Black feminist blogosphere, it is important to understand the significance of aspects of 1) the external elements of the rhetorical situation or ecology – the topic and actual blogosphere, and 2) Black women’s agency – how the writers perform their identities within the Black feminist blogosphere through Black female discourse. Brittney Cooper, Black feminist scholar and member of the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC), asserted that Beyoncé’s album release prompted her and others to consider questions such as: what kind of Black women get to be in the public sphere? What does it mean to be a successful, powerful Black woman who owns her body in a particular way? Can you be a Black woman and be down for the cause and own your beauty and show your body, or do you have to engage in some other kind of performance a Black womanhood? Part of her work and that of the CFC is helping to answer what it means to be a Black woman. Black feminists were able to grapple with these questions collectively because of the way they use their voice, language, and discourse practices to create their own online space on the blogosphere in which to discuss the issues.

In addition to Black language, the writers in this chapter also used *representin*, *recognizing*, and the “*to your face*”²⁸ dialogic style in order to perform their identity. Aside from the actual arguments asserted in the individual blog and article posts about *Beyoncé*, I argue that this conversation is significant because the blogosphere allowed these women to weigh in, represent for Beyoncé and other Black women, and share their perspectives and grievances out in

²⁸ *Representin* and “*to your face*” have been defined and discussed in more detail in Chapter One

the open to each other's "faces" in ways that created space for all of the Black feminist to jump all in and have their voices heard. Survey and interview data helped provide a fuller understanding of the bloggers' experiences as well. See Appendix G and H for the blog survey and interview protocols.

This chapter explains the unique opportunity that the blogosphere provided these women to have a collective conversation across diverse geographic, disciplinary and ideological boundaries (Leow 2010:236) before an extensive audience. It explores their collective rhetorical production as well as the rhetorical strategies they employed. To that end, this chapter examines 27 blog posts and online articles about Beyoncé, her visual album and feminism that were authored by Black feminists from December 13, 2013 to January 31, 2014 and places them in conversation with one another to show how they explicitly or implicitly called each other to task on issues of feminism and Black female identity in the United States. Through rhetorical analysis attending to themes of identification (Burke 1969) and collective *ethos*, I show that these writers used the blogosphere to articulate a collective investment in the advancement of Black women and girls. In my initial analyses of the posts and the writers' categorization of one another, I charted their stances along a continuum between "academic feminism" (Malaklou 2013) and "homegrown feminism;" (Cooper 2013, Malaklou 2013) a feminism of lived-experience. The project explores this continuum and ultimately shows how the Black feminist blogosphere and those who make it up complicate such representations.

The online Merriam Webster dictionary defines a blog as "a Web site that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer; also: the contents of such a site."²⁹ Beyond this technical definition, blogs have broader social functions. Blogs can be

²⁹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blog>

emotionally intelligent texts designed to evoke reactions, resonances and responses from their readers (Boylorn 2013:77). Blogs, therefore, can feed off of an active audience able to contest, support, and complicate meanings and hold writers accountable to a broader public beyond the ivory towers of academia (Leow 2010, Powell 2010). This is in part because blogs can facilitate conversations between academics and nonacademics. The creation of a blog and blogging itself is a form of agency (Lewis 2014). Blogging is participatory as well. In their study of blog activity, Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel loosely defined participation as “involvement in some kind of shared purpose or activity” (Lankshear and Knobel 2006). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) found that a blogger’s participation was impacted by the number of respondents to the blog; the larger the blog’s audience the less likely a blogger was willing to engage readers in the comments’ section. Instead, commenters on the blog tended to interact with one another instead (Lankshear and Knobel 2006). Even when a blogger does not participate in the “conversation,” blogs are social practices and can be sources of deeply participatory literacies, which are rich and complex. (Lankshear and Knobel 2006).

The blogosphere allows private reflections, behaviors and identities to become public and rhetorical, as with motherhood blogs (Powell 2010). Wider and more true-to-life varieties of these reflections, behaviors and identities can be reflected online through the blogosphere. Discourse in the blogosphere, like other forms of online discourse is “messy” (Grabill and Pigg 2012). Regarding motherhood blogs, for example, Rebecca Powell argued that the construction of motherhood is fluid: “There are no straight narratives, no fixed positions, just messy lives” (Powell 2012:47). This fluidity is evident in the feminist continuum I put forth reflecting the discourses of feminism; because a closer inspection of the actual blogs shows constructions of Black womanhood and Black feminism that do not fit neatly into the constructed categories.

Access to contribute to the actual dialogue, however, is only an initial step. Voices need an audience to truly be part of a larger public conversation. A greater audience promises a louder voice and, theoretically, more power. While greater physical Internet access may allow more voices to enter into public discourse, current systems of power lend validity and volume to some voices while virtually ignoring others. While the Internet may offer access to a public sphere, an intellectual, patriarchal hegemony persists (Harp and Tremayne 2006:259). This is a reality and possible constraint that Black women must work against in their blogging.

Traffic flow to a particular blog site is an indicator of success on the web. One way to achieve high traffic volume is through the number of links directing others to one's site; however, the sites that attract most of the links are ones that fit within the "traditional public realm" and are run primarily by men (Harp and Tremayne 2006). The feminist blogosphere is an intervention that privileges the blog posts, sites and voices of women.

5.1 Feminist Blogospheres:

The blogosphere has become a useful tool for feminists in particular. The blogosphere is a digital public forum for feminist consciousness-raising whereby individuals, groups, collectives and coalitions can be mobilized for grassroots activism and even more playful forms of activism that disrupt the status quo, widen possibilities and open channels of connection (Brown 2011, Durham, Cooper, and Morris 2013). The potential for power and agency that blogging holds for girls and women is not restricted to official blog sites, but also extends to social media platforms that allow micro-blogging like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, which have morphed into virtual command centers (Brown 2011, Durham, Cooper, and Morris 2013). These practices may become mainstays in the future of feminism as they help women and girls "talk back," have more agency as cultural producers, form local communities and global networks (Keller 2012).

Yet while the term “feminist blogosphere” may appear to describe a neat and discreet online enterprise, because of the “messy” nature of online interactions and discourse as well as the “messiness” caused by the bringing together of feminists representing different waves and agendas (Keller 2012), the feminist blogosphere has points of both unity and fissures. Any assumed cohesion of the feminist blogosphere, Rachel Leow (2010) argued, is due to the unity of subject: “It is their feminism and the self-conscious context of female experience that most overtly links these blogs” (Leow 2010:240).

As I share in this chapter, the performance of this self-conscious identity and the manner in which it is performed also presents opportunities for identification and unity. Upon closer inspection it is clear that the nature of the feminist blogosphere varies as do offline feminist communities. It also presents similar concerns. For example, the feminist blogosphere can represent and maintain the same linguistic and cultural hierarchies as feminism in real world academia instead of realizing the ideas of universal feminist inclusion (Leow 2012, Loza 2014).

In her article “Hashtag Feminism #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the other #FemFuture,” Loza (2014) cites Black feminist writer Trudy of the blog Gradient Lair’s reminder that the “quest for ‘unity’ through erasure and silence” is oppression. Leow (2010) argued that the feminist blogosphere both has the challenge of “fulfilling its own commitment to redressing marginality” and is perhaps also in the best position to address these issues through public scholarship, writing, action and research (241-242). The Beyoncé blogosphere conversation is an example of a redress to the intersectional erasure (Crenshaw 2015) on the feminist blogosphere.

Loza (2014) posed the question of whether or not mainstream feminism would forever be the domain of white women or if “the digital media praxis of women of color, their hashtag

feminism and tumblr activism, their blogging and livejournaling, broaden and radically redefine the very field of feminism?” (2014). The work of redefining the feminist landscape is precisely what takes place on what I, and others refer to as the Black feminist Blogosphere (Bailey and Gumbs 2010, Rapp, Button, Fleury-Steiner and Fleury-Steiner 2010). This blogosphere within a blogosphere like other communities for Black women was born out of necessity to combat intersectional erasure (Crenshaw 2015). Citing Jamie Nesbitt Golden, Loza wrote on the need for separate, sacred spaces for WOC online:

We create our own safe spaces when the safe spaces created by others fail. We mount up against Internet trolls, lend emotional support, and publicize people and projects generally overlooked by popular feminist outlets. Social media has made it possible for black feminists in Johannesburg to connect with black feminists in St. Louis and all points in between. Blogs written by women of color from one side of the globe become topics of discussion on the other side in a matter of minutes. (2013) (Loza 2014)

Oftentimes, however, when Black women share their stories of racism and sexism or talk back online they are characterized as being divisive, toxic or bullies and even blamed for tarnishing online feminism (Loza 2014). Similarly to offline Black and women of color feminist movements, Black feminists come together and engage one another in ways to fight oppression and ensure that the feminist revolution will take place online and off (Loza 2014).

For Black women, the blogosphere provides an additional space to continue Black women’s and Black feminist traditions of story- and truth-telling in significant ways. Scholar and Crunk Feminist Collective blogger Robin Boylorn (2013) wrote:

Speaking my truth is my black feminist inheritance, and speaking out loud is my crunk feminist legacy. Making our stories public outside of academe expands our reach, our influence, our capacity and our audience. I have learned that closeted auto/ethnography, the kind that is hidden behind academic doors (and locked access journals), limits the potential of the work. *Blogging forced me out of the closet.* (Boylorn 2013:80) [emphasis mine]

Bringing these stories out in the open affirms and makes Black women and girls visible while

disrupting and interrogating normative spaces and narratives (Boylorn 2013). Even so, more work must be done to ensure that even the Black feminist blogosphere is inclusive and open to all women including homosexual (Jordan-Zachery 2012) and transgender women. Black women's sustained "conversation" about a specific topic, like Beyoncé, provides opportunities for multiple voices and perspectives to join in.

I chose to discuss the postings analyzed in this chapter within three major categories: academic feminism, homegrown feminism, and middle-ground feminism. The terms "academic feminism" and "homegrown feminism" emerged directly from the online blog and article postings from the Black feminist bloggers I analyzed. The term "academic feminism" was introduced into this larger discussion by writers (Coleman 2013, Cooper 2013, C. Francis 2014, Hobson 2014, Kendal 2013, 2013b, Malaklou 2013, Richards 2014 and Trudy 2014) who occupied "middle-grown" and "homegrown" feminist positions. In many cases, academic feminism was viewed as a status quo form of feminism based on text-book theories and external standards armed with gatekeepers and officers to police who is in compliance and who is not. Some bloggers like M. Shadee Malaklou (2013) also equated academic feminism with "white feminism" and Western epistemologies. White women were not the only ones against Beyoncé's feminist proclamation though. Trinibagonian blogger Cate Young's explained how Black women could also be categorized as white feminists. Young asserted that "white feminism" is a term used frequently in online contexts referring to a mainstream feminism that is one size-fits all and does not understand or consider cultural contexts or nuances. White feminism, however, is not problematic because of mere differences of perspective or opinion, but because this "one size fits all" presumes that gender is represented and experienced in universal ways. Its lack of intersectionality does not factor in the real ways that race, class, sexuality, and gender

presentation impact one's experience. This sometimes results in biases like those against Hip-hop feminism, or a feminism that is trans-exclusionary as Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recently demonstrated.³⁰ To be clear, people of any race can be white feminists, and not all academic feminists ascribe to white feminism. Many of the bloggers who I identified as privileging academic feminism had critiques that did factor in race, but did not identify with Beyoncé or the other homegrown feminists' lived experiences.

Homegrown feminism is a term introduced into the conversation by Brittney Cooper (2013) and Malaklou and is a feminism born out of the everyday lived experiences of Black women that addresses the particular needs of the people practicing it. Cooper (2013) asserted that while Beyoncé's version of this may not be "radical social justice feminism," it celebrates the power of women, female friendships and recognizes and calls out sexism. This embodied form of feminism was oftentimes also used interchangeably with "Black feminism" and "womanism" in the posts. Middle-ground and homegrown bloggers' discussion of homegrown feminism highlighted the space that it allows for diversity among Black women, including transgender women and women across the African Diaspora. This homegrown Black feminist politic can extend to non-Black women of color as Malaklou (2013), a Middle Eastern scholar, demonstrates with her contribution to this discussion. These differences between "academic" and "homegrown" feminist approaches of the bloggers proved to be significant in terms of their views of Beyoncé and her feminism and how they expressed and supported their arguments. One aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the discursive identify performances of the Black

³⁰ Adegoke, Yemisi. "Chimanda Adichie: I have nothing to apologize for over transgender women comments." CNN.com. 23 Mar. 2017 2017. Web.
<<http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/23/africa/chimamanda-adichie-transgender-row/>>.

feminist bloggers discussed in this chapter created the space in which all of these feminists could be “all in” and accounted for.

5.2 Academic Feminism

The five writers in this study who I classified under the category of academic feminism articulated critiques of Beyoncé’s feminism that relied primarily on logos appeals grounded in investments in overturning structural oppressions against Black women. These critiques were leveled primarily against the singer and her music as well as the Black feminists who support her identifying as a feminist.

The writers in this category, Christa Bell and Mako Fitts Ward of Real Colored Girls, LC of colored girl confidential, Tanya Steele, Charing Ball and Akiba Solomon, primarily critiqued Beyoncé for calling herself a feminist because of her highly sexual performances, corporate affiliations that many equated with self-commodification and what they deemed support of patriarchy and capitalism. They also argued that she is not critical enough. Many appealed to other Black women and feminists to not be deceived by her claim. These feminists identified with canonical Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks; hooks who later called Beyoncé a terrorist.³¹ hooks’ argued that Beyoncé and her album committed psychological violence against Black girls because she and her performances represent an investment in imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy. They did not identify with or recognize Beyoncé’s brand of feminism; and therefore, did not represent for her. Figure 16 is a word cloud based on the combined text of each of the posts in this category with the top five

³¹ Foster, Kimberly. “bell hooks in Conversation on Protecting Black Girlhood.” *Shine*. Web. <<http://shine.forharriet.com/2014/05/bell-hooks-in-conversation-on-protecting.html#axzz3aB0gVDcT>>.

signed by white men. She implies that Beyoncé either does not have agency or uses her power to dupe the masses and uphold the system of inequality. She urges her readers to see past this and not allow themselves to mindlessly worship an idol that has been crafted to protect a status quo (LC 2013). She identifies with Beyoncé as a Black woman, but appears to disqualify her from being a feminist and down for the masses because she has a level of wealth that LC cannot identify with. Her critique of Beyoncé's feminism is based on the presumption that a pure space free from capitalist influence exists. While it goes without saying that Beyoncé has a level of wealth that LC, her readers, and I cannot fully comprehend, the fact that a white man signs her checks does not preclude her from being a feminist; a white man signs most people's pay check as a result of white supremacy and capitalism. It may be fair to argue that Beyoncé's music does not overtly challenge capitalism and patriarchy; however, as the other writers in this chapter argue, there is more than one way to be a feminist, and Beyoncé is increasingly using her financial resources to fight against systemic inequalities against Black people and women in particular.

Others like Charing Ball (2013) conceded that there are "fem-positive" themes in *Beyoncé* and that if Beyoncé says she is a feminist, then she is a feminist. However, like LC, Ball argued that Beyoncé still places herself on top of a hierarchy and contradicts some of the tenets of feminism: "Through her self-empowering message Beyoncé wants us to know that she is not just a boss, but queen. She is not just a queen, but a king. Oh yeah, and she is not just a king, but a rich one as well" (Ball 2013). Ball makes the case that Beyoncé's assertion of "boss" status undermines her argument for the equality and empowerment of all women.

While Ball's post suggested that this perceived contradiction may be a passive action, filmmaker Tanya Steele (2013) was more skeptical in her read of Beyoncé's decision to include

samples from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx Talk "We Should All Be Feminists." She suggests that Beyoncé added "a dash of feminism" to the album in order to stave off feminist critique while maintaining her young fan base: "But, because there is phraseology by a Feminist on ONE track – 'Flawless,' Feminists can claim Beyoncé as being both in control of her sexuality and 'sex positive.' Beyoncé, on the hood of a car, flexing one butt cheek for the camera, now becomes 'sex positive'" (Steele 2013). The distinction that Steele attempted to make between sexual autonomy and being sex positive may indicate her lack of understanding of sexual autonomy and its significance for Black women. It is clear that she does not identify with this expression of sexual autonomy.

Steele, does not identify with other feminists who support such autonomy either. Throughout her article, Steele emphasizes her confusion over Black feminists' support of Beyoncé and suggests it may be in part because of their defense against the "White Feminist gaze." However, Steele insists "...we have to critique Black women with an honesty and rigor that may be uncomfortable" (Steele 2013). Steele seems to suggest that Black feminists, like Melissa Harris Perry, who Steele cited, are 1) being dishonest, 2) not being rigorous in their critiques and/or are 3) afraid or unwilling to be made uncomfortable in giving critiques.

Another bone of contention among feminists regarding *Beyoncé* was whether or not they identified with and approved of Jay Z's verse in the song "Drunk in Love." In what Ball called the misappropriation of Ike Turner's domestic abuse of Tina Turner, Jay Z raps the lyrics "eat the cake, Anna Mae," in which, despite its possible sexual double entendre, there is an intertextual reference to the depiction of domestic abuse against singer Tina Turner. The lyric conjures the image of Turner, whose birth name is Anna Mae, being forced to eat a piece of cake against her will in the biopic *What's Love Got to Do with It?* The ire aroused by the lyrics

highlight the extent to which many Black women in particular identified with Turner as both a victim of abuse and a Black female heroine.

Editor and journalist Akiba Solomon called out Beyoncé’s endorsement of these lyrics in her article, “Eat the Cake, Anna-Mae.” Solomon did not write about the lyrics initially, but decided to weigh in later after taking issue when Beyoncé mouthed the controversial words along with Jay Z during their 2014 Grammy Award’s performance; Solomon (2013) called it “anti-feminist,” in her blog. Solomon wrote, “I’m disappointed in Beyoncé. I wish in this moment she could have been more Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and less ‘Cater 2 U.’ But maybe that’s just too damn much to ask” (Solomon 2013). Solomon’s critique of Beyoncé was not as pointed as some others and reflected knowledge of the singer’s range of subjectivity as a woman and performer.

When interviewed, Solomon explained:

I was just really annoyed. I thought it was like tacky and irresponsible and I was just offended by it. I just did not appreciate it at all. . . Beyoncé in particular, seemed even defiant when she did that performance. And so I think that was what got me most irritated, because you are two grown people at this point and you know what you’re doing, and you’re like just showing off for company.” (Solomon Interview 2015)

Her interpretation of Beyoncé’s stance through her experience as a Black woman is clear in the way she used the Black idiom “showing off for company.” That company, a mixed audience, included non-Black viewers.

Solomon felt Beyoncé drew a line in the sand with that performance. She did not buy explanations that interpreted the lyrics through a Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission (BDSM) lens, but said she wrote in response to some of the rationalizations she had read on Facebook. Solomon did not discuss that particular angle in her blog post, but she felt she

accomplished her goal by getting her angst off of her chest and articulating a counterargument to the popular discourse. This is one service she believes she offers her readers:

One of the reasons my readers liked the blog that I did was because they would say, you know, ‘I knew something was off, but you put into words what I was feeling or what I was thinking’. And I think that that’s what a lot of online writing is about...someone making official what we feel in a way that was not available to us, and when I say us I’m talking about Black people; that was not available to us ten years ago. (Solomon Interview 2015)

Solomon sees her role as articulating ideas that her readers, other Black women, can identify with on the blogosphere. Blogging helps her to establish a collective *ethos* by allowing her to make her and other Black people’s perspective official in a way that was not previously available. With respect to this particular conversation, Black women make up the primary audience that she is validating through her blog posts.

Solomon said she observed within this group of Black women that younger women are publicly identifying with feminism in a way that she did not at their age. Now as a woman over 40, Solomon recalled that it was taboo to be called a feminist and would cause defensive reactions when she was younger. Online spaces have helped to make this shift. It took time for Solomon to identify with being called a Black feminist, as well, because for her it was narrowly defined as a specific kind of political project:

I did not feel like I was a participant in Black feminist organizing or movement building, but since then I’ve kind of relaxed because the definition of feminist, of Black feminism has gotten so much clearer that I do feel like I can say that online I’ve written feminist material – but Black feminist material. (Solomon Interview 2015)

Like literature on the blogosphere highlights (Harp and Tremayne 2006, Keller 2012), online spaces, in this case the Black feminist blogosphere has helped to open up what Solomon considered “political” as well as how she perceived “feminism” and her role in it.

One strategy employed among academic feminist bloggers was disidentification and the deliberate distancing from Beyoncé. Bell and Fitts Ward (2013) of the blog *Real Colored Girls* took their critique of Beyoncé and her feminism to the next level by launching a scathing attack of Beyoncé's feminism and the Black feminist blogosphere which they termed "Beyhive bottom bitch feminism." Based on "Pimp Theory," they defined a "bottom bitch" as:

The one in the whore's hierarchy who rides hardest for her man. She's the rock of every hustler economy and her primary occupation is keeping other ho's in check and getting that money. She isn't trying to elevate the status of her sister ho's. She isn't looking to transform pimp culture. The bottom bitch is a token who is allowed symbolic power, which she uses to discipline, advocate for, represent and advance the domain of the stable. In pop culture, she represents the trope of the chosen black female, loyal to her man and complicit in her own commodification. (Bell and Fitts Ward 2013)

While Bell and Fitts-Ward admit that "bottom bitch" is an unfortunate metaphor for Beyoncé, they argue it is justified because Beyoncé is married to "Big Pimp" Jay-Z who refers to himself as two men publicly associated with physically abusing Black women, "Mike" (Mike Tyson) and "Ike" (Ike Turner), in his verse in Beyoncé's song "Drunk in Love"; therefore, they said they were left with no choice (Bell and Fitts Ward 2013).

The two issues they said they had with Beyoncé's claim to feminism were: 1) her alleged pro-capitalist "rip off" of feminism and 2) feminist allies flirting with bottom bitch feminism to silence critics (Bell and Fitts Ward 2013). They say:

These questions asked, we do understand the terror and mistrust some black women may feel when confronted with representations that reflect us to ourselves as brilliantly beautiful. We also get the impulse that these same women may have to criticize and destroy such images. But this is not that. Our critique of Bey as a feminist doesn't come from a place of fear. Indeed it may even be more a critique of the black feminist blogosphere. Our real fear is of a burgeoning cadre of institutional gatekeepers of appropriate black feminist politics going in hard with their facile analyses, shaming and silencing black women with alternative reads of B. (Bell and Fitts Ward 2013)

While Bell and Fitts Ward 2013 acknowledged how their words would be perceived, they did little to alleviate such perceptions through the language they use or the stances they took. They evoke a singular sense of *ethos* and feminist authority.

Despite such a strong claim about the group of feminists who support Beyoncé, who I would classify as homegrown feminists, Bell and Fitts Ward did not name or include hyperlinks to any of these “gatekeepers” who they say sought to silence other views. The intentional ambiguity here seems to work against the notion of saying or making a claim “to someone’s face” even though the blog post is accessible for anyone with Internet access. Based on the other posts by Black feminists curated for this project, there are a number of writers and posts that the two could be referring to including, Mikki Kendall’s “Beyoncé’s New Album Should Silence Her Critics,” or Brittney Cooper’s “5 Reasons I’m Here for Beyoncé, the Feminist” both of which call for the recognition of Black women’s choice and autonomy being central to feminism and defend Beyoncé against what they suggest are unreasonable critiques.

Bell and Fitts Wards’ *pathos* appeal regarding a real and longstanding investment in feminism rooted in Black female ancestry got *real* in a way that implied an in-group understanding, even when it was not anything nice:

...with our cultural work which we will infuse, at all times, with an ethic of care and responsibility. Coontocracy of assimilationist corporate negroes is in full effect, riding for patriarchal capitalist agenda and having us believe that somehow Bey’s success is a step toward some dystopic vision of progress for Black women. There may be empowerment for some folks but by and large it is a false hope steeped in capitalism and individualism, supporting the escapist desires of rampant pornographic consumerism. (Bell and Fitts Wards 2013)

They used their identification and shared knowledge with the other feminists to further distance themselves from them. This pointed critique of Beyoncé’s feminism and other Black feminists who identify with it not only made the distinction between them and others in terms of

ideology, but was also alienating in terms of the language used. Although Bell and Fitts Ward claimed that they were not approaching the topic and their audience from a place of “who gon’ check me, boo?”³³ but one that encouraged open discourse, the use of terms such as “coontocracy,” “assimilationist,” and “corporate negroes” suggest otherwise. Cooper, for example, shared that she felt attacked when she read Bell and Fitts Ward’s post. The post is an example of the call-out culture among activists. Call-out culture is defined as the public naming of instances of oppressive behaviors and language, including those that are racist, sexist, ableist, etc.

Writer Asam Ahmad argued that call-out culture is toxic because it is often a public performance more about improving the social face of the speaker(s) and punishing its target rather than bringing about an actual desired change.³⁴ Bell and Fitts Ward called-out other Black feminists for what they perceived as elitist, capitalistic, opportunistic gatekeepers. Equating support of Beyoncé’s claim to feminism as “bottom bitch feminism” in which folk are “riding for capitalist patriarchal agendas,” however, positions Bell and Fitts Ward as gatekeepers of their own particular brand of feminism, and reinforced a singular *ethos*.

5.3 Homegrown Feminism

An appreciation of the Black feminist fore-mothers such as Lorde and hooks and the vital stake that Black women have in navigating a racist, patriarchal, capitalist society reverberates through the “middle ground” and “homegrown” feminist points of this continuum on posts about *Beyoncé*, but the priority given to them is different. The academic feminists like Bell and Fitts Ward (2013) asserted that their love and respect for these ancestors would not allow a

³³ *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, “New Attitude, Same ATL” (Season 2, Episode 1)

³⁴ Ahmad, Asam. “A Note on Call-Out Culture.” Briarpatch. 2 Mar. 2015 2015. Web. <<https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/a-note-on-call-out-culture>>.

perverted “image of feminism” in the trappings of “hip hop machismo.” This pure image of Black feminist past is contested by homegrown feminists such as Cooper (2013) who argued:

But newsflash — everybody didn’t go to college. So when women of color start waxing eloquent about how our grandmothers and mothers were the first feminists we knew and many of them would ‘never’ use the term, I wonder then why we don’t understand Beyoncé’s homegrown brand of feminism...No, it ain’t well-articulated radical social justice feminism, but if you need a Ph.D. to be a feminist, then we’ve got bigger problems, folks. AND I’ll take a feminist that knows how to treat her homegirls before one who can spit the finer points of a bell hooks to me all day erry-day. (Cooper 2013)

Here, Cooper’s message and delivery pushed back against both academe sanctioned feminism and discourse by using “crunk” language like “all day erry-day” to perform a homegrown Black feminist identity. In this performance she clearly articulated that she not only recognized radical-social justice feminism, but the homegrown feminists past and present. She also dealt a double-jab at academic feminist critics by explicitly stating that Beyoncé’s feminist praxis is more important to her than theoretical knowledge, and implicitly that Bell and Fitts Ward do *not* know how to treat their homegirls or fellow feminist colleagues.

Most of the women who chimed in on the Black feminist blogosphere regarding *Beyoncé* supported the singer's claim to be a feminist. The 14 bloggers in this section, Trudy, writer and critic for the Gradient Lair, Cristina Coleman, Mikki Kendall, Maryam Kazeem, Brittney Cooper, Kara Brown, Whitney Teal, Brittany Spanos, Nicole Froio, M. Shadee Malaklou, Monique Ruffin, Akilah Richards, Maya Francis and Janell Hobson, primarily praised her proclamation and described her as an example of “homegrown” feminism. These Black feminists saw her not only as a pop star, but as a Black woman who is still growing. For most writers who supported Beyoncé’s feminism, “real” was understood as the everyday, lived experience of becoming and being free in a Black and female body. The consensus among these Black feminists was that academic feminism and credentials are not requirements for their feminism.

They cited a variety of other feminists and their own feminist journeys as well as how they personally experienced the album *Beyoncé*. Figure 17 is a word cloud generated from the combined text from the blog and articles in this section. The top five repeated words in this section were: Beyoncé, Black, feminist, women and feminism. This word cloud suggests that for this collection of posts, blackness and racial identity was vital to the conversation and these women's understanding of gender and feminism.

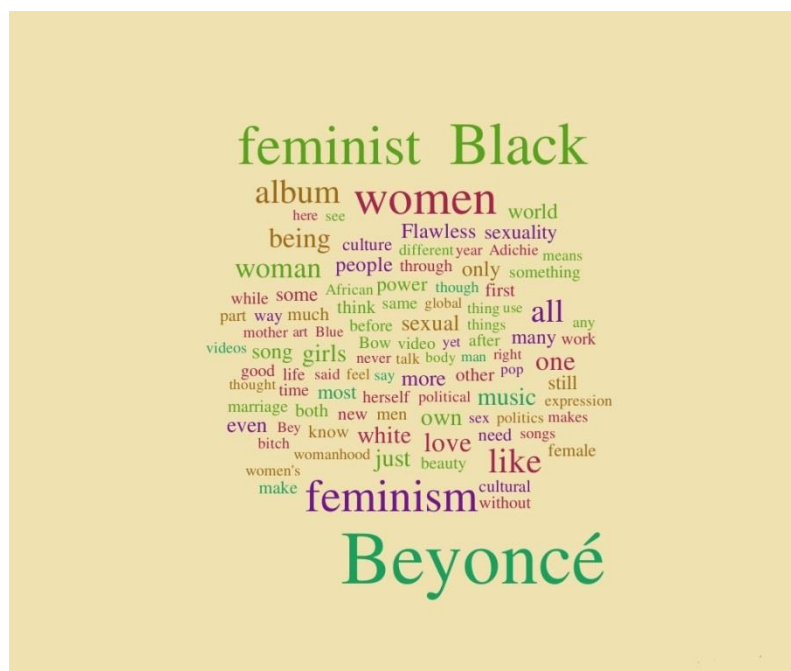


Figure 17 Homegrown Feminism Word cloud generated from the 15 blogs posts in support of Beyoncé's feminism

These writers showed a collective *ethos* through their support of Beyoncé's feminism based on the belief that all Black women have the right to define themselves and express their agency and autonomy in ways that reflect their lived realities. Many of the women in this group had their own share of academic credentials, but unlike the "academic" feminists, these women did not rely primarily on feminist theory and logocentrism, but related to Beyoncé through their own experiences and their bodies; they understood and identified with her, not as only a pop star, but as a Black woman.

Identification with Beyoncé as a Black woman with similar ways of understanding and being in the world is a key feature of the blogs and articles in this section. A primary way that writers such as Kara Brown (2013) and Brittney Cooper (2013) performed their identities and showed identification with Beyoncé was by *representin* (Richardson 2007) for Beyoncé and other Black women and girls. In this case, these homegrown Black feminists spoke from their ontologies and epistemologies instead of ideals from dominant discourses of feminism which are often white and middle-class.

Perhaps these bloggers were quick to represent for Beyoncé because Beyoncé first represented for them. In her post, Christina Coleman noted that *Beyoncé* was released during a time when Black women were being excluded from important white feminist conversations online. She said that Beyoncé brought Black women to the forefront of feminism and invalidated the criticisms of what it means to be a feminist by claiming she is one: “because if the internet is any indication, black women aren't feminists and academic feminists (aka white feminism) is the only form” (Coleman 2013). In the months and weeks preceding Beyoncé’s album release, several major discussions had taken place online among feminists on Twitter revealing ways in which white feminists still dominate public feminist discourses and seek to silence Black feminists. It is within that rhetorical situation that Beyoncé acted as an auxiliary to Black feminism through the release of her album.

Beyoncé was released during at the end of a year of vigorous ongoing online conversations among communities of white feminists and feminist of color. In April 2013, eight months before the visual album’s release, The Barnard Center for Research on Women released its report “#FemFuture: Online Feminism” arguing that the Internet is the most prominent space of feminist activism, but that feminists’ work online was unsustainable under the conditions at the

time; conditions that have not much changed. A major critique of the report and its hashtag #FemFuture was that it perpetuated intersectional erasures in online feminist work. Black feminist Mikki Kendall's hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen addressed the limitations of white feminist solidarity and began trending on Twitter four months later on August 12, 2013. Kendall's hashtag and others that followed including #FastTailedGirls brought attention to the experience, needs, and feminist activism of Black feminists and reiterated that Black women and women of color have different feminist expressions based on their material conditions and lived experiences. It was shortly thereafter that *Beyoncé* stirred the already boiling pot and symbolized Black feminism incarnate for some or the anti-feminist for others. The album release and Beyoncé's feminist declaration provided an issue for homegrown Black feminists to galvanize around. Their responses were in part defenses against white feminists' anti-Blackness, but more importantly acts of self-determination. Beyoncé and her album represented for Black women and their claim to feminism on their own terms and all of forms it takes – overtly sexual with butt-cheek out, man and family inclusive, homegirl-loving, and all.

- April 2013 – the hashtag #FemFuture emerged and highlighted fissures between white feminists and feminists of color online
- August 12th, 2013 - the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, coined by Mikki Kendall, trended worldwide
- December 3, 2013 - the hashtag #FastTailedGirls was co-created by Mikki Kendall and Jamie Nesbitt Golden to discuss the sexualization of Black girls
- **December 13, 2013** – Beyoncé released *Beyoncé*
- December 17, 2013 – hashtag #NotYourAsianSidekick created by writer and activist Suey Park's sparked online discussion about race, gender, privilege, feminism and intersectionality
- December 18, 2013 – Megan Murphy wrote the post “The Trouble With Twitter Feminism” that officially launched the white feminist backlash against predominantly WOC-led hashtag feminism (Loza 2014)

- December 20, 2013 – The Huffington Post UK published an essay entitled “Stop Bashing White Women in the Name of Beyoncé: We Need Unity Not Division”

One example that prompts these women to push back against dominant reads of *Beyoncé* is the interpretation of the lyric “bow down bitches” from the song “***Flawless.” Cooper (2013) represented for Beyoncé by explaining that one of reasons she was “here” for her as a feminist was because “sometimes bitches do need to bowdown.” She continued, “...The world would be better if women would learn that we don’t have to take everybody’s shit. Not the white man’s, not the Black man’s, not the state’s, not the hating ass next-door neighbor, not your frenemy’s. Nobody’s” (Cooper 2013). The possible opponents that Cooper lists, men, the state, and other haters, indexes her position as a Black woman. Her examples also emphasize the fluidity of the term “bitch” and Black vernacular terms in general; “bitch” can be a person, place, thing, or even verb and is not gender specific. Cooper showed her identification with Beyoncé through her positionality and similar language use.

Brown (2013) identified with Beyoncé in a similar way and went a step further to clarify who indeed does and does not need to bow down: “Beyoncé isn’t telling me to bow down – she’s talking to all the people who refuse to respect her achievements. I don’t need to bow down to Beyoncé because I’m standing right beside her” (Brown 2013). She, like Cooper, expressed a shared positionality through her metaphor of being side-by-side with Beyoncé. Brown’s line of logic concerning the use of the word “bitch” to refer to specific women is usually dismissed when male rappers and singers use the terms “bitches” and “hoes” in their songs to refer to women. Brown and other homegrown feminists give her a “pass” or permission for several reasons. One, because Beyoncé is also a woman and is seen as a part of the “in-group,” it is permissible for her to use the reference within certain contexts. Also, because of the way many Black women relate to Beyoncé and represent for her, they give her the benefit of the doubt and

presume she has respect for them. Brown's belief that she is not included in the group of "bitches" Beyoncé is referring to may also stem from an understanding that all women or Black women cannot be grouped together, but unlike sexist distinctions, the criteria separating the "bitches" from non-bitches in Beyoncé's case is not based on misogyny or hierarchies of respectability. Brown, like Cooper, is clear that "bitch" is gender-neutral and can refer to "people" in general.

Some Black feminists identified with Beyoncé in more specific ways. In "I Repeatedly Fought Back Tears While Jamming to Beyoncé's New Album Because Free Black Girls Are Not As Much A Thing As We Should Be," Whitney Teal (2013) identified with Beyoncé from a shared Southern, Christian Black girl perspective and described her as a "downhome" Black woman who is also "free" (Teal 2013):

Beyoncé's a woman, a black woman, a black woman of a certain mold, a class of black girls the old folks may describe as 'down home.' We grew up in black neighborhoods, were raised in black churches and use phrases like 'home training.' We are black girls living in worlds where an intact black family with a strong, male head is still, and probably always will be, the goal.

Through her intimate knowledge of the mores of Southern, Black, Christian communities Teal was able to recognize the expectations *Beyoncé* defied. She claimed that Beyoncé both "serves" and "subverts" this world. Teal continued to make the connection between *Beyoncé* and real Black girls' liberation:

She's this kind of black girl, yet she's free. That is what matters. This album is a celebration of the marriage of privilege and intellectual movement that a lot of black women – particularly Southern, Christian black women of this mold, which I am also a part of – do not have access to and are not allowed to attain, let alone claim and express and shout the way Beyoncé does wither self-titled album.

Teal's identification with the need for this kind of freedom was so strong that it brought her to tears. She highlighted the oppressive nature of Southern, Christian, patriarchal politics of respectability that forces Black women to constantly defend themselves against historical

narratives and stereotypes of Black women as hypersexual and deviant. But whereas Steele (2013) saw Beyoncé's feminism as flawed because of how her "flexed butt cheek" on the hood of a car could be perceived as reifying such stereotypes, Teal saw this move as liberating because it disregards the constraints against Black female sexuality that she is familiar with. This is clearly not the only barometer of Black female liberation, but as Teal (2013) eloquently stated, "We aren't free if we can't have a grown woman conversation about mouths on genitals...Beyoncé gets us a little closer to that goal" (Teal 2013). Teal represents for Beyoncé by in her "clap back" against those that who she insinuates are hypocritical because they have performed fellatio on "more than a few penises" and therefore can also be seen as hypersexual. She used shade to perform her identity as a Black, downhome girl in support of Beyoncé and Black women's sexual liberation.

Demetria Lucas, Monique Ruffin, and Akilah Richards also saw Black women's sexual liberation and wholeness as a crucial element of real, lived, feminist expression. In her explanation of how Beyoncé represents a pillar of feminist expression Richards stated, "Her sexuality and overall out-loud exploration of her body and her feminine being-ness are how she practices radical self-expression. To this woman, that form of expression aligns her with what she finds empowering, freeing, and - yes - feminist" (Richards 2014). Richards shared that she identified with this "sexed-up" feminism and that the album spoke for her in some ways. The line demarcating the level of sexual expression permissible to be considered feminist appears to coincide with the amount of sexual expression the individual feminist identifies with.

This type of radical expression and being is vital to *Beyoncé*, and *Beyoncé* as an expression of womanism, Trudy of the *Gradient Lair* blog argued, is about wholeness: "Alice Walker's original definition of womanism mentions that a womanist is 'committed to the

survival and wholeness of entire people.’ This commitment includes breaking out of the oppressive shell that seeks to keep Black woman as one stereotype or another and not full human beings” (Trudy 2014). Trudy used also used a canonical Black feminist in her discussion of Beyoncé’s feminism, but unlike the feminists discussed in the previous section, Trudy invokes Walker to reinforce a community *ethos* in the service of nurturing whole Black women and the wholeness of an entire community.

Trudy also represented for Beyoncé by looking to her own words to discern what she was trying to accomplish with her album. This is markedly differently from the writers on the academic feminism end of the spectrum, specifically Bell and Fitts Ward (2013) who used her husband Jay Z’s lyrics to speculate and make judgments about Beyoncé’s feminism. Trudy cited Beyoncé explaining her different personas and her evolution as a woman: “Yoncé is Beyoncé. Mrs. Carter is Beyoncé. Sasha Fierce is Beyoncé. I’m finally in a place where, as I said earlier, I don’t have to kinda separate the two anymore. We’re all one. It’s all pieces of me and just different elements of my personality, of a woman, because we are complicated” (Trudy 2014). Trudy’s choice to include Beyoncé’s words in her post follows the mandate among Black women that a speaker have the right to be present to represent their own experiences in a conversation (Morgan 1999). In doing so, Trudy demonstrated her identification with, recognition of, and respect for Beyoncé as a Black woman. This move to include Black women being spoken about publicly on social media in the conversation also evident on Twitter, such as when Aaliyah “mentioned” @NICKIMINAJ in tweets so that she would have the opportunity to respond.

In addition to making the move to include Beyoncé in the conversation, Trudy also invokes communal *ethos* by situating *Beyoncé* within a larger Black music landscape and expression of Black womanhood. While Beyoncé’s particular use of music to explore Black

womanhood, and the intersection of race and gender in Black women's lives may be new, Trudy argued that it is a part of a larger cultural tradition: “***Flawless Feminism’ is a fresh approach but one with historical ties in Black womanhood and Black musical oral history/tradition. It’s not the only way but a way of navigating the beautiful complexity that is Black womanhood” (Trudy 2014). The distinction here between *the only* way and *a* way may very well be a specific “clap back” and rebuttal to Bell and Fitts Ward’s accusation of the flawless feminism advocates trying to dominate the discourse and silence others. Even if not directed toward specific authors, it is clear that Trudy is not allowing such constraints and misrepresentations to stand.

Checking and correcting was a strong impetus for other bloggers to enter the discourse and represent for Beyoncé as well. When I interviewed Brown, she elaborated on this motive for entering the conversation:

I just wanted to provide a counter to the arguments that I thought were wrong. I think with Beyoncé people really try to diminish her and I think they do that with a lot of women and a lot of people of color...so if you were actually a fan of Beyoncé and you’ve been paying attention to her career, the message is that she was thinking about in that self-cut album is not that different from things she’s been saying for a long time...I really just wanted people to have the respect for her that I think she deserves and that that album deserves it. (Brown 2013)

In her post, Brown had no problem calling out Black feminists and others to give her critique to their face. She represented in this way for Beyoncé and other Black women, because she said she does not like when women of color are being treated unfairly or being held to different standards; it makes her want to come to their defense.

For example, Brown called white, male writer Tom Hawking’s article “Why ‘Beyoncé’ Makes Me Want to Die”³⁵ critiquing the song “Flawless” “unaware blabbering” because she said

³⁵ Hawking, Tom. “Why 'Beyoncé' Makes Me Want to Die.” Flavorwire. 13 Dec. 2013 2013. Web. <<http://flavorwire.com/429583/why-beyonce-makes-me-want-to-die>>.

it lacked knowledge of Black women's perspectives (Brown 2013). Brown said that many Black women later commented and let her know that they appreciated her write-up defending Beyoncé, which in turn was also a defense of many of them. Brown said Hawking ultimately admitted that she made a good point and was correct and they have become very friendly on Twitter since then (Brown 2015).

Brown could not change everyone's mind though. While she could not remember if Bell and Fitts Ward responded specifically to her post, she remembered seeing that they were still writing with the same "bottom bitch feminism" argument despite Brown's very specific counters to their argument. One example Brown offered to refute their argument was Jay-Z's statement on record explaining that he regretted his former "big pimping" stance and lyrics. Brown said, "I don't think [Bell and Fitts Ward] focus on the relevant part of the argument at all. I think they just had an issue that they had a problem with and they were gonna make that a thing no matter what" (Brown 2015). This is illustration of the blog posts not operation as a conversation in which participants read and responded to one another. Nevertheless, Brown and others representin for Beyoncé is an example of diva citizenship in that they worked to change the narrative about Beyoncé so that those who read the posts came away with a more nuanced sense of Black womanhood and identity even if momentarily.

5.4 Middle-Ground Feminism

It is evident that all of the writers discussed so far were motivated by investments beyond Beyoncé as an individual, and the middle-ground feminists highlight the bigger picture of fully realizing a free and whole expression of Black womanhood and feminism. Most of the six bloggers in this category, Britni Danielle, Hillary Crosley Coker, Brittney Cooper, Demetria Lucas D'Oyley, Mikki Kendall, and the late Consuela Francis, tried to account for perspectives

on both ends of the feminist continuum. Most of the bloggers expressed knowledge of academic feminism, yet also expressed identification with Black women’s feminism of lived experience. Bloggers in this category pled for Black feminist bloggers to stop fighting over Beyoncé’s feminism. They argued for peace and maintaining focus on more important matters. They cited a variety of feminists, including Beyoncé in order to support their claims for understanding real-life feminism. Figure 18 is a word cloud based on the combined text of the blogs and articles in this category. The top five key words among these posts were: Beyoncé, feminist, feminism, black and woman. This ranking is similar to that of the academic feminist word cloud except here, the word “black” occurs more frequently than “woman” indicating a shift in emphasis between race and gender among this group.

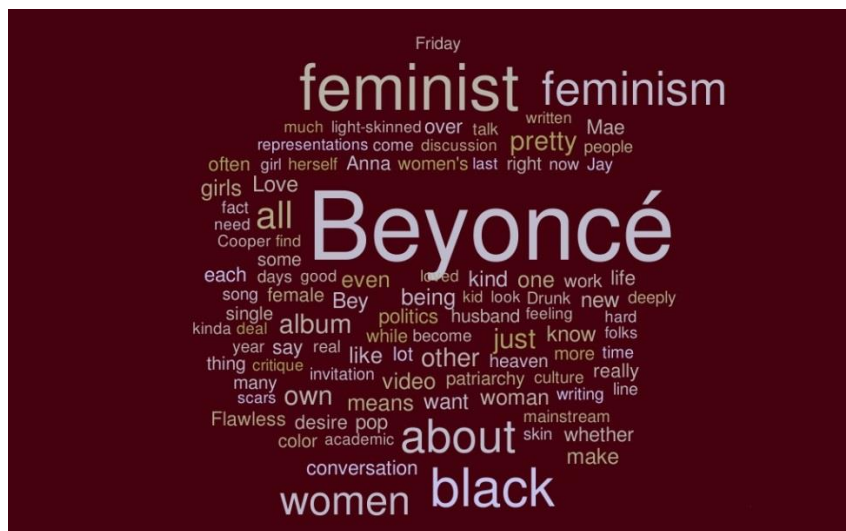


Figure 18 Middle Ground Feminism Word cloud generated from the six blogs written by Black feminists positioned in the middle of the continuum between the “academic feminists” and “homegrown feminists”

In this section, writers like Brittney Cooper (2013b) acknowledged the contention in the larger conversation among Black feminists, expressed attachments to both academia and the real lived experiences of Black women, and attempted to step back and mediate between the two. Cooper (2013b) identified her own position as being “here” for or on board with Beyoncé being

a feminist in her CFC blog post (2013a), but said that “sisters” had been “going hard in the paint” about all the ways that Beyoncé is a “patron of patriarchy.” From the start, Cooper showed her attempt at extending an olive branch to those with opposing views by calling her opponents “sisters;” identifying other Black women as kin. Next, she called attention to the part that both sides have played in the “war”:

As only black women can, we (yep, me included) have been throwing all manner of eloquently written, righteously indignant shade at each other (y’all should see my Facebook wall), asserting on the one hand that the Bey-haters are the stuffy denizens of respectability policing and declaring on the other that the Bey-hivers are uncritical embracers of a woman with deeply contradictory practices and politics. (Cooper 2013b)

Cooper invoked collective ethos through her use of “we” and by writing in response to and in conversation with other Black women who have recently written about this topic. Cooper suggested that passions were running high in this particular conversation among Black women because of the collective identification that the participants have with what it means to be Black women and experience related trauma and oppression:

I know, I know. I don’t do well with the internecine kinds of vitriol that black women inflict on each other, in the name of critique and truth-telling. I’ve witnessed our vehement criticism of everyone from Oprah to Beyoncé, to the fictional Olivia Pope. So that’s the thing about this debate about Bey’s feminism. For all the intellectual posturing that frames it, our investment in whether Beyoncé *gets* to be a feminist or not is deeply personal and emotional.

The personal, we keep learning, is political.

To be clear, I don’t want to suggest that black women are overly emotional and therefore incapable of legitimate, critical and rigorous engagement with Beyoncé’s art and politics. We are absolutely capable of it, and frankly, I’m glad our forms of intellectual engagement are not dispassionate paeans to objectivity. We have some skin in this game and we own it. (Cooper 2013b)

Here, Cooper explicitly countered the argument that Harp and Tremayne (2006) found about female bloggers not being political or capable of engaging in important intellectual

discussions due to their gender and the presumed emotion that will accompany their posts. The inclusion of the personal for Black female bloggers, as Cooper highlighted, is a choice and is political in and of itself. The explicit nature in which the homegrown feminists' in the posts analyzed in this study use of the personal as political is firmly rooted in the Black feminist tradition and politic. The way in which the Black feminists in this chapter jumped onto the blogosphere performing their individual identities and collective Black feminist ideology expanded not only what feminism could look like, but what political discourse is as well to include Black-girl-tell-it-like-it-is-to-your-face discourse.

Cooper candidly put the arguments and the *shady* ways in which they were being delivered, i.e. name calling out in the open on “front-street.” To put this article in context, it was published on Salon.com on December 17, 2013, four days after *Beyoncé* was released, two days after Bell and Fitts Ward’s post, and one day after Crosley Coker’s post; two of the most critical posts toward Black feminists supporting Beyoncé.

Even without naming names, it was clear to me and likely others who were paying attention to the quickly unfolding debate that Cooper was referring to the “Beyhive Bottom Bitch Feminism” post. In light of this, Cooper played the middle-ground and mediator position in her article by saying what she needed to say “to the face” of her opponents without being “in your face” in her approach. She used repetition and the pronoun “we” in order to articulate the shared experience of the Black women weighing in on the issue of Beyoncé and feminism regardless of the stance they take on it: “We have some skin in the game and we own it. That’s a good thing. But we don’t just have skin in the game. We have scars in the game” (Cooper 2013b). Taking a “we” approach, as opposed to an “us/them” approach is a strategic move for middle ground feminists in this project as she evokes a collective *ethos*.

When interviewed, Cooper shared that she was not surprised by the initial resistance to Beyoncé’s album or feminist proclamations, but she was surprised by how malicious the tone of the conversation became, especially from feminists she knew like Bell (2013): “I was like, ‘what the fuck?’ It was vicious and brutal and very mean spirited, and I saw it fairly early because Christa [Bell] and I are friends on Facebook. So that reaction and the reaction of a lot of my friends made me just try to get to the bottom of what was happening” (Cooper 2015). Cooper shared that she was particularly mindful of her approach to the topic in her article for Salon.com; because of the wider and racially mixed audience at Salon, she wanted to levy a critique of the conversation without pathologizing Black women. Cooper’s goal was to connect the internal conflict Black women were struggling with to its roots in white supremacist patriarchy which she argued Salon readers were implicated in. Identifying with and validating Black women’s feelings, Cooper set out to attack white supremacist patriarchy instead of other Black feminists:

We are very good as academics in making some of these arguments about politics and intellect and frequently there’s another level to them and there about our feelings – cause I just kept feeling like people were mad at her like in some kind of high school drama in which she’s the light-skinned long-haired pretty girl who gets all the dudes and the girls who can’t do that have a critique of patriarchy, right? So they’re over in another corner being like we’re feminists and we know that the reason all the dudes are flocking her is because of white supremacist patriarchy, and then what happens is she flips the script and says I’m a feminist too. That’s what it felt like to me and I felt like we should sort of own that and then see if we could have a more honest conversation. (Cooper 2015)

Cooper identified both with Beyoncé who she recognized may be the victim of a critique that is misdirected as well as the feminists “in the corner” who have been victimized by white supremacist patriarchy. This is an example of how the Black feminist blogosphere provided Black women with a space to collectively bleed their pain that was triggered by Beyoncé’s album and create a space for possible collective healing. Cooper’s raw honesty about these communal issues in such a public forum as Salon illustrates Boylorn’s (2013) point about Black

women using blogging to make “home business” public. Yet there is a delicate balance to strike in blurring the line between Black women’s private and public business in the blogosphere; Cooper said she always attempts to signal that she is writing for Black women and men. It is clear that Cooper’s collective *ethos* is deliberate and in part reflects the way in which the personal, political, and feminism are unified for her. She is clear about her intent to build community as opposed to tear it apart.

Consuela Francis, the late writer of AfroGeek Mom and Dad and Director of African American Studies at The College of Charleston, took a blended approach between her academic life and life as a Black girl outside of the Ivory Towers. Francis went beyond her classroom and scholarship to better understand Beyoncé’s “Flawless” feminism:

For my kid and my stylist, Beyoncé’s invitation wasn’t invitation to argue the definitions of feminism. Both of them are trying to figure out how to be healthy, happy, free black girls in the world and they’re reading “Flawless” as an invitation to explore feminism as a possible path to happy, healthy freedom. Their engagement with Beyoncé, with feminism, is not academic but is real. (C. Francis 2014)

This perspective shifted the conversation. Francis defined “real” and “real black girls” as Black girls and women not employed by or enrolled in a university (C. Francis 2014). She presented a necessary perspective of the differences between the ways Black women and girls in and out of the academy are reading Beyoncé’s visual album, particularly the song “Flawless.” Those in the academy or that have more theoretical knowledge of feminism were skeptical of Beyoncé’s feminism, according to Francis, while her beautician and daughter, “real black girls” who do not identify with the word “feminist,” were more open to conversations about feminism *because of* Beyoncé’s album. According to Francis, the “real black girls” appeared to be less concerned with titles and theories, but more interested in figuring out how to be self-actualized and how to live as free Black women (C. Francis 2014). This engagement with the

album, Francis emphasized, is not academic, but is real. Although she was an academic, her findings highlighted the importance of the “real,” “homegrown,” “lived experience” of Black women and girls and approached this issue from a feminist rhetorical framework that asked what the album *Beyoncé* actually *does*.

Cooper (2015) also found that one of the benefits of this discussion on the Black feminist blogosphere was that the album and discussion inspired more Black women and girls’ self-inquiry and inquiry of what feminism could mean for their personal liberation Cooper’s younger cousins who were aware of her feminist work were not prompted to discuss feminism with her until after listening to *Beyoncé*:

Now we been friends on Facebook, so they see me saying feminist shit all the time, but Beyoncé prompted them to actually be like, let me ask my one feminist family member what that means and let me you know really think about you know how it relates to my life or whatever, and so that also let me know that Beyoncé had accomplished the kind of thing we say we’re trying to accomplish at CFC which is that we wanna have a conversation about feminism with people who don’t have Ph.D.’s and so it bothered me when all those feminist Ph.D.’s were like, ‘she ain’t a feminist,’ and I’m like she’s done more to get young women to start thinking about feminism than you ever will. (Cooper 2015)

Cooper’s cousin’s new found interest in feminism after listening to and watching *Beyoncé* shows that they may have identified or want to identify more with Beyoncé the pop-star than with their big cousin the scholar. Cooper and Francis’ examples of “real Black girl” responses to Beyoncé’s album highlight the importance of pop culture feminism (Kendall 2013b) and feminist expression (Richards 2014); feminist expressions readily accessible through pop culture based on individual and everyday life. While this is the feature that likely led many new, young women to inquire after feminism about *Beyoncé*’s release, it also what likely inspires the fear and angst of academic feminists. The beauty of the creation of the Black feminist blogosphere, however, is that it provided room for all of these feminist voices to be heard. Beyoncé-inspired feminist

inquiry is even more apparent since the release of her second visual album *Lemonade*. The numerous syllabi inspired by the Black female and womanist aesthetic and themes in *Lemonade* are a step toward bridging the gap between academic and pop/homegrown feminisms.³⁶

The feminists in this section were concerned with both theory and praxis. They supported Beyoncé’s feminism based on the belief that all Black women have the right to define themselves and express their agency and autonomy in ways that reflect their lived realities. “Middle-ground” and “homegrown” feminists both see the lives and struggles of individual women as important as struggles against institutional oppression.

Ultimately, the rhetorical focus of the blog posts was to “move the crowd” (Banks 2011) one way or the other. Cooper’s posts were specifically directed at those who were open to movement. In Cooper’s estimation, the “conversation” only moved those who were in the middle or undecided, such as those who did not know what feminism was or were ambivalent about it, but for those who were already clear about what their feminist politics were or were not, there was stasis and not much actual dialogue.

Language was another means of identification used in the online posts analyzed in this chapter. Black language use online, as in face-to-face interactions, is always a choice. In her article on her Black undergraduate students’ choice to use of Black language and rhetoric online, Carmen Kynard (2007) found that it was influenced by having a Black audience. Kynard saw that her students used vernacular online and not the “standard” to express their most heated disagreements about racial politics (Kynard 2007). This use of Black language and rhetoric, Kynard (2007) argued, had the potential to be a critical intervention in changing the normalcy of hegemonic middle-class discourse and achieving Black liberation (Kynard 2007:337).

³⁶ Benbow, Candice. www.candicebenbow.com/lemonade/syllabus. 2016. Web.

Solomon, Cooper and Brown all said that they strive to have conversational tones in their online posts. Their language choices are made in relation to their audiences – most often other Black women. The bloggers interviewed expressed that they use informal, in-group and Black language strategically in order to connect with specific audiences, particularly other Black women as well as for emphasis and tone. Solomon said, “For me it’s important to have a voice and maybe have a little like sly things that maybe your Black readers get that White readers don’t get. I like that a little. It makes me feel like I’m communicating on a different level” (Solomon 2015). This different level of frequency helps to create collective *ethos* and a separate space for Black women to communicate.

Similarly, Cooper (2015) shared that she chooses her language based on the audience and how she wishes to engage them. It is not uncommon in her CFC posts to have the words “fuck” and “discursive” in the same sentence. She said:

When I write for CFC, I curse a lot. I use a lot of slang; it is my way of signaling that I see my readers as a particular group like home girls or like-minded folks that I can just have like a regular, we’re just talking kind of conversation. I try to have that blend of like, yeah we’re professors and there’s no denying that so some of the four syllable words come through, but we’re also just homegirls and we’re hip hop generation so a particular kind of ethos around language is present there. (Cooper 2015)

Here, Cooper performed her identity as a Black female academic who is invested in maintaining her connection to her homegirls and home language. She works to make sure that “real” Black women are able to identify with her and see her as representin for them. This shift in language helps to disrupt hegemonic discourses on the blogosphere.

Brown also said she also uses “colorful language” in order to get her point across as well as to reflect the way she normally speaks and be recognizable to other Black women. In the *Beyoncé* blog discussion, Brown said she had two objectives:

A lot of it is on one hand I was trying to trying to deconstruct arguments that I didn't agree with, but on the other hand like I said, I was trying to write it for other Black women and other women of color who I think shared my views of the album and understood it the way I think Beyoncé meant for it to be understood, so in that sense, I wanted to write the way I talk about it in a conversation with other friends and writers. (Brown 2015)

This use of “colorful” and Black language expresses passionate disagreement similarly to what Kynard found in the language use of her students.

Cooper revealed that she used different conversational styles, and keeps a different context in mind for her salon readers: While those articles are still conversational, she imagines the discussion with a different audience; instead of a chat with homegirls, her writing is more akin to how she would give social commentary in an academic space. For the Beyoncé posts for Salon, she imagined a group of racially mixed “liberal-minded folks.”

Identification is not synonymous with community on the Black feminist blogosphere. Despite these efforts to connect with their readers, the bloggers did not see much community building among one another. Cooper, Solomon, and Brown agreed that Beyoncé is polarizing and causes strange reactions. Reflecting on those blog exchanges, Cooper said:

There's the pro Beyoncé feminists – it's like back in the 80's the pro-porn feminists and the anti-porn feminists, it's like today Beyoncé is like the stand in for that. You're a pro-Beyoncé feminist or an anti-Beyoncé feminist, and those are like camps, I don't know that people would call them that, but they in some ways really are. (Cooper 2015)

Though my argument is this chapter has evolved to assert that the responses to Beyoncé were more about identification than about distinct categories. Cooper and other writers I interview agreed that these “camps” are still a reality in discussions regarding Beyoncé. This is not altogether “bad” or indicative of “war” though.

The discussions were not simply broken down along anti-Beyoncé and pro-Beyoncé lines; the Black feminist blogosphere revealed the fluidity and messiness of the fixed categories that

myself and others in the conversation believed existed. For example, Solomon does not fit neatly into the “academic,” “middle-ground,” or “homegrown” categories. She is not a radical leftist, but she still called out what she saw as “un-feminist” actions by Beyoncé. In describing her position, Solomon said:

Before I would’ve situated myself in the first group. I used to see Beyoncé as magical. I mean I just think she’s so incredibly talented and I think she’s extremely gifted. I definitely was not in a camp like she’s not doing anything about patriarchy cause I don’t want Beyoncé to do anything about patriarchy, cause what would she do? I don’t think it would turn out that well. I just think she should do what she does. (Solomon 2015)

Solomon was not conflicted with the same push and pull as LC. She expressed admiration for Beyoncé without needing her to be all things. The silver-lining in the discord according to Solomon is that there is more representation:

I think the reason why this became so divisive is because it invited a lot of people who never thought about this stuff into a conversation...[Beyoncé] put a lot of academic Black feminists in the same conversation as you know women who don’t do this for a living. (Solomon 2015)

Bringing diverse groups together is a feature of social media and the blogosphere in particular that Black women took full advantage of in order to answer the questions. This aligns with the literature on how blogging opens up space for a richer diversity, interrupts the status quo and of options, and widens possibilities (Brown 2011). This space and diversity also provides accountability in the blogosphere because this can help advance academics’ understandings of how women outside academia “experience, and think about, racism and sexism” (Leow 2010:236), or as Francis argued, how “real” Black women and girls get down. Solomon experienced this opening of space first-hand. As a middle-aged woman, she said she often feels excluded by pop-culture media; however, that was not the case in the Black feminist blogosphere: “I think this gives Black women from all kind of ages and orientation or whatever like it gives

them a place where they can still have their voice heard and they can still talk to one another” (Solomon 2015). This sentiment was also expressed by Linda in chapter three with her ability to stay up-to-date with pop-culture on Twitter. Unlearning and learning does not always take place, but certainly cannot take place without tensions.

When it is all said and done, creating this space and freedom is work and comes at a cost, particularly for Black women online. Cooper contended that the most vibrant Black feminist work is happening online; however, the Black women doing that work are doing the work for free or are “severely undercompensated” (Cooper 2015). According to digital humanities scholar Lisa Nakamura, this is in part due to social media’s ability to obfuscate the labor of women of color, by reaping the benefits of such labor while hiding the bodies.³⁷ Despite the amount of labor Black feminists engage in online, much of it is invisible and not recognized which is a reflection of Black women’s agency being under-recognized offline. More specifically as it relates to online spaces, Nakamura (2015) highlighted that people typically do not like to see any form of labor that they benefit from. Black women make enormous contributions to online public spheres considering their presence and participation alone makes it possible for others to show up online as well (Nakamura 2015). This participatory labor is twofold – communicative and emotional. The propensity to avoid looking at labor practices and conditions coupled with Black men’s discourse and rhetoric being more highly regarded reinforces the invisibility of Black women’s labor online. An example of this is Black, male, civil rights activist DeRay Mckesson being hailed by the media as a leader of the Black Lives Matter movement of which he has no

³⁷ <http://transformdh.org/2015-conference-thatcamp/livestream/>

formal affiliation,³⁸ when Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, the names of the three queer Black women who lead the Black Lives Matter movement are less known. Attribution of leadership to men like McKesson and Shaun King obscure their contributions. The women called this type of oppressive treatment out for what it is on their website, but even that calling-out is labor:

When you design an event/campaign/et cetera based on the work of queer Black women, don't invite them to participate in shaping it, but ask them to provide materials and ideas for next steps for said event, that is racism in practice. It's also hetero-patriarchal. Straight men, unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions. Perhaps if we were the charismatic Black men many are rallying around these days, it would have been a different story, but being Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy.³⁹

These words are posted in bold, large font at least three times the size of the other text on the page. These women call-out others trying to co-opt their work and make them the help. They refuse to let anyone interested in connecting and participating in the movement overlook this harmful practice, their accomplishments, or all of their identities. However, as Nakamura has argued, the call-out culture and its toxicity that many women of color feel pressure to engage in is also labor.

The lack of adequate acknowledgement and compensation makes models of online work by Black women unsustainable in the long term, especially because writers need to have a day job. This is one of the material consequences of the freedom of the blogosphere. The Black feminist blogosphere in particular is a place where women perform the labor of writing in the name of self-expression and advancing Black women and other marginalized groups and do so

³⁸ Ellsworth, Marcus Patrick. "Modern Black Liberation is More Than DeRay Mckesson." MTV News. 4 Feb. 2016 2016. Web. <<http://www.mtv.com/news/2735998/the-21st-century-civil-rights-movement-isnt-as-homogenous-as-youre-being-led-to-believe/>>.

³⁹ <http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

usually without being compensated. Even attempts at monetizing blogging can be very limited. Black women committed to this work are left to find ways to sustain their efforts. For example, Cooper said she strategically uses her income from her work for Salon.com in order to keep up with the demands of giving rigorous social commentary there and at the CFC that does not have the same financial resources (Cooper 2015). Cooper is fortunate to have a full-time academic appointment and salary, and said that getting paid to blog is a perk for her because it funds some of her indulgences. For other women, blogging is not a side-hustle, but a way to sustain a livelihood. Solomon, a journalist by trade shared that the economic climate for online writers is challenging now, especially when a journalist like herself is expected to go from being paid \$2.00/word from a magazine to \$200 total for an online piece. The lack of resources also limits the types of stories writers can pursue. For example, researching and writing long-term, in-depth, investigative stories are often not feasible.

Emotional costs are high as well. While many Black feminists already understood white feminist spaces, including the feminist blogosphere to be contentious and hostile, many bloggers found that Black feminism and the Black feminist blogosphere had become an unsafe space immediately following the release of *Beyoncé*. Cooper recalled feeling the change:

I felt like it became a moment where people were comfortable doing all manner of verbal and discursive violence to each other in the name of Beyoncé and in the name of feminism, so that “bottom bitch beyhive”, whatever, was violent. I read that to be discursively violent, and even in a later moment when bell then said that Beyoncé was a terrorist– it’s violence. (Cooper 2015)

Threats to social face within the Black feminist blogosphere through shade throwing, reads and the like came with serious repercussions such as “feminist cards” being pulled as well as people’s legitimacy and “street cred(ibility)” being questioned. The very public nature of the blogosphere increased the span of the audience and the impact of such threats. The effects were

felt offline as well. Cooper remembered a lunch companion feeling afraid of being attacked by her if they discussed Beyoncé. Cooper was shocked and explained she did not need or want to debate and/or alienate an actual friend when neither of them knows Beyoncé in real life.

There are other intense connections between Black women's offline and online lives. Regarding blogging and her identity as a Black woman, Cooper (2015) said that blogging reminds her that racial and gendered identities are not decoupled from online identities even though many presume digital experiences are disembodied because her readers bring her body online. She said that people have looked up her picture and emailed her calling her derogatory names like “fat cunt” and “fat nigger-bitch,” and suggested that she get a gym membership.

For Black women, there is no escaping embodiment online, and instead of trying to many of them leverage it. Other Black feminists like Boylorn also express embodied and performative Black feminist identities through blogging: “While my identity is comprised of multiple standpoints and positionalities, particular identities are pushed to the forefront depending on the blog entry and topic I write about (i.e., blackgirl, academic, ally, advocate, feminist, angryblackwoman, strongblackwoman, etc)” (2013:77). Similarly, Cooper has, at times, embraced the subjectivity or “public self” (Keller 2012) of the “angry Black woman” online; however, not in a stereotypical sense. Cooper, who owns what she considers a justifiable rage, said that it fuels her confidence:

I'm mad as fuck. I'm mad that people do bullshit to Black people and Black women, and writing becomes an opportunity to say that to folks like you're doing this and it's terrible, so it is like my most productive channel for that Black woman rage, so I do see it as a taking care of myself; either I write it or it destroys me from inside out because that rage is real and it's rooted in legitimate kinds of injury. So writing becomes my outlet to be able to say to people you've injured us and they listen. They don't always hear me, but they do listen. (Cooper 2015)

This process of healing through choosing the subjectivity of an “angry Black woman” is not limited to a solo-project for Cooper, but is a part of her larger Black feminist project, one that is moved forward through the use of the Black feminist blogosphere; Cooper works to make room for all Black women’s liberation and choice of identity, including Beyoncé. Cooper said, “We’re always trying to say to folks whatever performance of Black womanhood you engage in, as long as it’s like healthy, and life-affirming and you know at some level invested in your own liberation, that is something we can co-sign and stand behind it” (Cooper 2015). This is a message Cooper argued that Black women, in particular, need to hear.

The tension over Beyoncé, her album, and her feminism revealed a larger truth for the Black feminist blogosphere; a message that incidentally also resounded on Beyoncé’s album; feminism is not only sugar and spice and everything nice and is certainly not about consensus, because women have the right to their own voices. At the CFC, Cooper said they call such upheavals “productive dissonance” because something is still generated in that moment:

People need to know that Black feminism is a space of debate and disagreement and contestation. We don’t all think the same, and we have particular kinds of states around what it means to live feminist. That’s how we generate bodies of thought and so I think that that moment generated us a body of thought about a particular thinker that also pointed to other issues that matter. (Cooper 2015)

Cooper’s reflection shows that the Black feminist blogosphere is a reflection and mediation of Black feminism. The Black feminist blogosphere makes the abstraction of Black feminism(s) concrete and visible for interrogation. The disagreement evident in the Black feminist blogosphere conversation regarding *Beyoncé* served an important role. It generated more ideas and possibilities providing emerging feminists with more options on how to *be* feminist and in doing so provided a number of constellations of identification. The varied configurations of feminist identification would not be visible without the contestation, and that visibility is crucial

in today's political climate, because as Cooper explained, "In a world that tells us that we don't matter, even evidence of the fight, as hard as they are, are evidence of us trying to live give our best selves, so that, I think, is an accomplishment" (Cooper 2015). Instead of a war among feminists that is destructive, in the big scheme of things a larger statement about the importance of Black women and girls, and Black feminism was made. Cooper's invocation of the phrase "we don't matter" is a clear nod to the work of the political activism of the Black Lives Matter Movement and again, pushes against the narrow boundaries about what is and can be considered political. Beyoncé and her music *been* political before visual rhetorics of Black Power Movements and Black Girl Magic were invoked in her 2016 Super Bowl performance of "Formation," and more importantly, Black feminists were the first to recognize.

5.5 Findings

These concerns about the freedom and well-being of Black women and girls span throughout the Black feminist blogosphere. I initially contended that the combination of Beyoncé as such a contentious topic, the accessibility of the blogosphere, particularly the Black feminist blogosphere, and Black women's dialogic discursive styles allowed for a robust discussion with coauthorship and the social construction of intentionality. Upon closer analysis, I found that Black women's online discourse has carved out the online space that is known as the Black feminist Blogosphere; this has in turn provided more space for Black feminists of all varieties to engage their varied constituencies and one another, co-author and co-construct new knowledge. These online exchanges among these women immediately following the release of *Beyoncé* reveal attempts at balancing concerns of theory with those of practice as well as disruption of structural inequality with individual freedom. This conversation also illuminates the heterogeneity within the Black feminist blogosphere and the nuances of intersectionality within

Black feminism. Part of the Black feminist blogosphere project is about building and creating a better world; one in which women and girls, cis and trans, can be free and thrive (Cooper 2015).

These writers articulated the constant awareness multiple consciousnesses of race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography as well as other categories of identity and tensions surrounding navigating them. By having this conversation through the Black feminist blogosphere, the diverse voices were able to jump all in together and be heard by their respective audiences even when not by each other.

The Black Feminist blogosphere has auxiliaries. In this case, Beyoncé and her album served as an auxiliary for the Black feminist blogosphere. This is evident in the way young women inquired more into feminism. More still needs to be explored in terms of what the album *Beyoncé does* for Black women and girls, both academic, “real” and those in between. Other questions include: What did the conversation do for its audience(s)? Who, if anyone, was left out of the conversation? And, for those writers who explicitly stated that their intent was to create a dialogue, how can we keep such dialogues going?

While I am not a fan of the word “war” to describe these interactions, in this instance, like Cooper, I do acknowledge the fight(s) that took place. However, I see them within the larger context of Black women’s struggle to be happy, healthy and free in the world. My hope is that these scuffles are reminiscent of an old-school neighborhood fight: one in which we scrap it out discursively, go home, clean our wounds and are back to being “play cousins” tomorrow. *And* if “*N’body*” else dare comes for us or our family, they will have hell to pay because of the strength of the Black feminist blogosphere after undergoing such productive dissonance.

6 Chapter Six: “My Mic Sound Nice”: The Implications of the Amplification of Black Women’s Voices and Rhetorical Agency on Social Media

On September 16, 1992 thousands of New York City police officers rioted in front of City Hall and the surrounding areas including the Brooklyn Bridge. The unrest was supposed to be a peaceful protest of off-duty officers in opposition to Mayor David Dinkins’ push to have an all-civilian review board to monitor altercations between police and civilians. David Dinkins was the first Black mayor of the city and was subject to all of the racism and disrespect most Black “firsts” endure. This riot to undermine the mayor’s authority was unique, however, in that it was carried out by officers employed by the city with the charge of protecting and serving the people, but who chose to do the opposite instead. This rebellion highlighted a question that persists today: who should police the police?

As a Black girl living in Queens, NY at the time, this was an alarming question to consider. Witness and news accounts told of disorderly officers yelling racist epithets and holding signs depicting the mayor in racially derogatory ways. By climbing atop cars, blocking traffic, overturning motorcycles, and shouting aggressive chants like “take the hall!” the crowd of overwhelmingly white officers not only disrespected Dinkins, but their oath and the city. There were also reports of drunken officers defiling City Hall with trash and urine. Again, as a young Black girl at that time, these events, images, and implications were terrifying. I wondered if the so-called top official of the city was taunted and undermined in such a way because he was Black, what then would happen to me; a regular Black girl with no title at all? Frustrated and in need of a way to express my hurt and anger, I wrote a letter to Mayor Dinkins sharing my appreciation for his effort to make our city more just for all as well as my disgust at the actions

of those members of the NYPD. Shortly thereafter, I received a letter from the mayor's office expressing appreciation for my concern for the mayor and encouraging me to continue to believe in hope and justice. That response meant a lot to me because it meant that someone, hopefully the mayor, had read and responded to my letter. My voice was heard and someone thought it important enough to render a short but specific response to me. I do not know how I would have processed that moment when I became keenly aware of such public racism and anti-Blackness if I did not have writing as an outlet. I did not have peers or other community who were interested in social justice issues in the same way or who would listen to me.

I had experienced a similar feeling of isolation and a need to have a voice the previous year when President George H.W. Bush announced that the United States would be initiating Operation Desert Storm in Kuwait in 1991. My school held a town meeting in the auditorium during school hours for students to voice their concerns. Interested students were excused from class so they could attend. My main concern was the disproportionate amount of Black and Brown enlisted soldiers who would be at the highest risk for injury and fatality because they were more likely to be fighting on the front lines. When it was my turn to speak from the podium, I urged my peers to listen to the statistics and consider the implications of the commander-in-chief's order. No matter how close to the microphone I leaned in or raised my voice, my words were drowned out by laughter, conversation, and the theatrics of card games being played. I was exasperated, disheartened and terribly scared for all of our futures. Fortunately, Robert Croonquist, my freshman English teacher and current Facebook friend, cared enough to console me. Once again, though, I did not have a community of peers or others with whom I could share my concerns or receive support from.

There was no Twitter, hashtags, or Facebook group to take part in. I did not have a blog or YouTube channel that I could watch or broadcast from. Not many of my friends from New York City even remember the police protests of 1992. There is no hashtag to search online to read counterstories to mainstream media accounts of what happened that day. There are likely stories in independent newspapers stored on microfilm or digitized tucked away in libraries. This moment in history, like many others, are out of sight and out of the public's consciousness and memory. However, the concerns that prompted them are ever present. I ventured down these memory lanes to highlight the connection between memory, voice, and agency and its importance for Black women. I do not take up the canon of memory directly in this dissertation, but it is worth a mention as an undercurrent in this project because of the presumed ephemerality of social media and Black women's efforts to be present and recognized in these spaces. In each platform studied, Black women's identity performances on social media fight back against their intersectional erasure. Many of the users I studied deliberately post and show up in these spaces the way that they do to make their presence known; and to affirm that their lives and other Black women's lives matter to them. In doing so, many of the users manage to "turn their mic up" online as Kimberly described it in our interview. Voice and volume are necessary for Black women's rhetorical agency and, as this dissertation demonstrates, are accessible in new ways through social media.

6.1 The Possibility and Power of Black Women's Identity Performance Online

In this dissertation, I set out to better understand Black women's rhetoric on social media by analyzing the ways they used discourse and language to perform their identities. I forwarded the premise that identity performance online is a form of rhetorical agency that creates the need for responses and nuanced claims in the conversation and moves conversations forward from the

abstract to the concrete (Grabill and Pigg 2012). Because language and identity are inextricably related for Black women in face-to-face communication, I looked to see what forms of cultural language and discourse they used in their CMC and identity performance online. I focused on Black women's discourse and literacy practices in my rhetorical analysis of online posts to the popular social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. I used survey and interview data from Black women who use those forms of social media in order to better understand the online posts. I administered four anonymous online surveys; one survey for each online site (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the blogosphere). In total, I analyzed a total of 94 online survey responses. I followed up with survey respondents who indicated that they would like to share more information about their use of their respective social media site, and I conducted 14 computer-mediated qualitative interviews.

Black women's discourse and agency online inform the field's current understandings about three main areas: Black women's discourse and language, rhetorical agency, and digital identity. Returning to Geneva Smitherman's questions regarding Black women's language and discourse in the 21st century, this study confirms that the African American Verbal Tradition is still vital and not only the purview of Black men. Black women's discourse, literacies, and language are vital to their rhetorical agency online. The women in this study used Black discourse practices and language across all four platforms studied. Some of the Black discourse practices found were signifying (Mitchell-Kernan 1972), testifying (Smitherman 1999), recognizing (Hill Collins 2000, Kynard 2010), and representin (Richardson 2007). All of these are seen as general Black discourse practices, but they were also employed as Black girls' literacies; the women used these practices specifically to assert themselves as Black women and to support and protect other Black women. There were other practices identified as Black

women's discourse practices in FTF settings that were used in the women's CMC, such as: the use of culturally-toned diminutives, talking with attitude, reading dialect, and embodied expressions (eye-rolling, neck rolling, swinging hair, head-scarf wearing). Like FTF language and discourse practices, these choices have social and political implications. Non-white participants online have the option to blend in discursively; therefore, deliberately performing race and gender online is an important mode of agency and resistance against erasure and marginalization.

Cheryl Geisler's argument that subaltern group's rhetorical resources are often not recognized is salient with regard to Black women on social media. This study shows that Black girls' literacies are a valuable rhetorical resource online. Black girls' digital literacies on social media like other Black girls' literacies: are multiple, tied to identities, historical, collaborative, intellectual, political/critical (Muhammad and Haddix 2016). Social media provides opportunities to extend these characteristics. For example, online and social media spaces give Black women and girls' increased ability to work collectively by co-writing and co-constructing knowledge through various networking and network-created spaces. Black women and girls utilize features of these platforms such as structured groups, hashtags, searchability, and hyperlinks to connect, share, discuss, and build information and knowledge across many demographic categories. Even on a platform like YouTube that does not have the same interconnectivity and sociality built in, Black women and girls use discourse and literacies including language to create spaces and stay connected in order to collaborate. Social media amplifies the impact of collaboration for Black women, i.e. investment in and the viral circulation of the hashtag #SayHerName. The most prominent and longstanding example of collaborative and political Black girls' literacies online is the formation and widespread reach of

the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. This is a perfect example of how Black girls' literacies on social media can take on new meaning and power when collaborative because, as chapter three shows, it enables Black women to circumvent traditional patriarchal power structures. The ways that Black women discuss events such as Beyoncé's album release across different platforms and spaces shows the multiplicitous nature of Black girls' literacies on social media as well.

There is a synergy between Black women's discourses and literacies and technology that enables Black women's rhetorical agency on social media. As Tanya stated, there is a "partnering" that Black users do with social media platforms to bring cultural ways of being and meaning-making to them. Black women include their offline discourse and literacy practices in their social media and use them similarly online. However, the sites and their features also allow for and promote the development of new discourses and literacies. Hashtags and user-generated videos are two prominent digital literacies that Black women utilize on social media to amplify their message and impact. Two prominent examples include the hashtag #SayHerName that rallied the Black community around domestic and state violence against Black women and the Facebook live videos surrounding Philando Castile's death by his fiancé and mother. The reach of these messages extends far beyond what could have been achieved through face-to-face means or any genre of print. This broader reach is also enabled by social media that are free and easily accessible via wifi, networking, and other features that are specific to each platform.

Black women's identity performances online through discourse and language also push back against interfaces' ability to erase race and the disciplining power of the interface including attempts to prescribe representative norms and patterns (Kolko 2000). It intervenes in the way interfaces mediate interactions between users as with YouTube. Online experiences today are

less likely to be completely disembodied, even when the body is not present. As Brittney Cooper shared regarding her experience as a blogger, identity is “narrated” and performed in order to clarify power relations. Black women gather on social media platforms to express themselves; however, they are not met with warm utopian, post-racial spaces that do not *see* their racial identities or fully democratic spaces that embrace their identities and grant them full freedom.

Black women resist the notion of bodily abstractions online by deliberately performing their identities with the desire to be their authentic selves. In this respect, Black women’s deliberate identity performances, whether embodied or not, are significant acts of self-determination as seen in Cooper’s decision to embrace being an “angry Black woman.” While identity performances do not necessarily constitute subversion of hierarchies, Black women’s identity performances challenge the ordering and the naturalization of hierarchies through constant engagement with and against these boundaries in ways that have the power to reconfigure them. These discourse created spaces also include the ratchet playscape spaces of possibility created on YouTube where white men can behave in “true Black bitch fashion” and Black women can read a white, male POTUS for filth. Incidentally, Congresswoman Maxine Waters has gained acclaim online and off for her pointed *reads* of the current president that come striking close in tone to the fictional reads of the president on *Scandal* by Bondy Blue and Tangela Ekhoﬀ.

I initially thought that Black women’s online rhetoric/discourse and literacy necessarily created community and that unity should be the goal. However, that is not the case, and it does not need to be. I found that Black women discursively created Black-women-dominant spaces that increase the visibility and legibility of Black women and their concerns. In many cases this visibility did facilitate consubstantiality where participants are able to identify with one another,

offer support and affirmation, and build solidarity through communal celebration and processing of trauma and pain. These spaces, like Black feminist Twitter and Bondy Blue and Tangela's YouTube *Scandal* fandoms, also disregard notions of respectability, expand and create spaces of possibility, protection, affirmation, and freedom that also include shade, contestation, and disagreement. More importantly, through discursive identity performances Black women create spaces online with range and depth that are real, authentic, whole, and increasingly vital for individual and collective survival. Although these spaces are ephemeral and do not abide by the same spatial boundaries as face-to-face or brick and mortar spaces, they make it possible for collective meaning making among Black women and the co-authorship of lasting texts through searchability. This rhetoric facilitates organization and resistance against oppression and colonization on- and offline.

Examples of this online agency extending offline include Tanya's meet-ups and phone conversations with Black women she met and interacted with on Twitter for social support and "real world" Black natural hair care meet-ups that originate online. More recent examples of deliberate offline connections include the *Black Girl Gathering* events across the country organized by Kimberly Foster, founder and editor of the Black feminist blog *For Harriet* and Black women's 2017 boycott of *Shea Moisture* products in protest of their erasure of Black women with darker skin tones and kinky-curly afro-textured hair.

For Black women, though, visibility and searchability proves to be a double-edged sword. It allows users to expand their knowledge and networks as well as build brands and followings while at the same time leaving them open to trolls and "hunters" who seek to call attention to posts and people who challenge oppressive ideologies like white supremacy. Security and privacy concerns by Black women in this study were real and expressed in all four social media

platforms. Increasing potential and actual threats to Black women's physical and economic security continue to present great barriers to their free expression online. This is in part because as Herring argued, offline power dynamics appear in online spaces. The social media sites mirror offline imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2013). While concerns about security and privacy were not explicitly expressed in interviews with members from the closed-Facebook groups, the fact that these groups are closed and private, however, is indicative of the need for privacy and protection for these culturally specific groups where Black women and others desire to speak freely. Public Twitter pages have the most risk associated with them because public posts are accessible to Twitter's 328 million monthly users⁴⁰ and even those without Twitter accounts. The emotional labor involved with trying to protect themselves and combatting forms of oppression online comes at a prohibitive cost as well.

There are several things I would do differently with regard to this study. One limitation of this study is the sample size of the online posts. A larger sample size of online posts would have likely revealed additional kinds of identity performances and strengthened the claims I have made about Black women's discourse and literacy practices online. While additional examples of Black women-dominant discourse for each social media platform studies would have been ideal, the number of posts analyzed across all four platforms did provide a strong foundation from which to build on in order to better understand Black women's identity performances.

The interview data for this study was incredibly rich and instrumental in shedding light on how Black women perceive their identities and participation on social media. Understanding their intentionality was vital to theorizing their discursive and rhetorical choices online. One way that I could have further enhanced the quality of the interviews would have been to share

⁴⁰ Sparks, Daniel. "How Many Users Does Twitter Have?" The Motley Fool. 27 Apr. 2017 2017. Web. <<https://www.fool.com/investing/2017/04/27/how-many-users-does-twitter-have.aspx>>.

transcriptions of the completed interviews with the interviewees and provide them with the opportunity to confirm or clarify their responses. This is something I will return to in the phase of revisions for the book project.

In hindsight, I wish that my survey and interview questions elicited more in-depth responses about participants' gender and sexuality as well. As Addison and Hillgoss (1999) asserted, categories such as "women" and "girls" can empower some, but marginalize others who do not fit within the cultural norms assigned to those categories. Some participants overtly acknowledged the need for inclusivity in their interviews and I know that not all of the members of the groups I studied are hetero-cis-gendered women; however, I missed opportunities to learn how the gender and sexuality of the Black women in the study impacted their identity performances. Part of the reason I chose to analyze Bondy Blue's YouTube recaps of *Scandal* in chapter four was because of her openness about her bi-sexuality and her discussions of sexuality in her videos. She declined my request to interview her for this study. Moving forward I will be intentional about examining the impact of these factors on Black women's identity performances.

6.2 The Future of Black Women's Rhetorical Agency Now

In the end, issues of Black women's agency and safety online are direct reflections of Black women's agency and safety offline. The constraints that Black women feel in these areas highlight several implications for Composition and Rhetorical Studies' pedagogy, research, and activism at this time when so much of our writing and rhetoric takes place online; even the administration of White House appears to be controlled by social media now. In taking up Geisler's (2003) call to further explore unrecognized rhetorical resources, I extend the argument that online spaces are crucial to subaltern groups (Banks 2006, Kynard 2010), by looking at how those spaces are created. In addition to structural or platform-created spaces like a Facebook

group, discourse-created spaces are formed by participants. The very discourse and literacy practices of Black girls and women that have been maligned in society and the classroom (K-16) are the practices that not only help to get Black women free, but work to benefit and create a more just world for the rest of society. It was Rep. Maxine Waters who started calls for Donald Trump's impeachment by talking with attitude and enacting a politics of disrespectability even when mainstream media continued to give him a platform to speak without any criticality or accountability. As Black girl magic and discourse become more pervasive and accepted in our broader culture and society, it is time that it is welcomed into our classrooms in meaningful ways as well. This is not an argument about Students' Right to their Own Language or just about the acceptance of home languages for the sake of the individual student. I am suggesting that there is much to be gained by *all* students from the level of rhetorical sophistication that the women in my study demonstrated in their discourse, literacies, and language. And while there is much future work to do in terms of operationalizing and concretizing these moves in a way that can be employed pedagogically, a manageable and appropriate start would and should be to embrace and encourage organic, user- or student-informed practices. Again, this requires a shift in thinking from allowing non-dominant discourses to be permissible to realizing that they are valuable and at times preferable.

The limitations of the carry-over of Black women's rhetorical agency from online spaces to offline realities are real and a reminder that our work cannot be isolated online or to the classroom. Diamond Reynold's Facebook Live video of the aftermath of Philando Castile's murder touched the hearts of thousands of online viewers, but it did not move all 12 jurors in the shooting officer's trial to find him guilty of manslaughter. This is further evidence of Geisler's

call for us to balance the concern for educating students in rhetorical agency with working to develop a society that grants agency more broadly and equally.

If concern for our students and others' rhetorical agency and safety on- and offline is not incentive enough, there is another concern that hits closer to our academic homes. There has been a steady increase in attacks on academic freedom since the cases of Saida Grundy and Zandria Robinson because of their tweets. On June 26, 2017 Trinity College in Connecticut placed a Black, male, Associate Professor named Johnny Eric Williams on leave after backlash over an article and post he shared on social media that took a critical stance regarding race. Just the week before that, a Black, female, adjunct professor named Lisa Durden was fired over backlash from a Fox News television appearance in which she was interviewed about a Black Lives Matter event she hosted. The latter example demonstrates that the medium in which views are shared is not the issue at hand, but the problem of white supremacy and its impact on whom "has" agency; social media only amplifies and calls attention to the inequality that already exists. Fortunately, it may also provide tools and strategies for activism that addresses these systemic issues. We are equipped as a field to understand and contextualize these issues and work toward solutions.

Social media is an active site of activist conversation and organizing and Black women are at the forefront of this work. This study begins the very important work of understanding Black women's rhetorical agency through discursive identity performances as well as its potential benefits and costs. Building on this research I will expand the size and content of the samples for analysis in order to further theorize a framework of digital Black womanhood. This is a necessary move to better understand the issues of agency and safety and the lack thereof that Black women are most vulnerable to, but that increasingly impacts larger swaths of the

population. The reality is, if we want to know the future of rhetorical agency, freedom, and justice when the right to free speech is tenuous and the current president of the United States actively works to delegitimize the press, we need to look to Black women.

Who else but Black woman will stand courageously and speak back to authority with fire in their lungs in the face of their man bleeding out or in the wake of their child's ruthless murder? Who else but Black women will call out systemic racialized and gendered violence against them in the midst of officers accosting and knocking them to the ground? Who else but a Black woman can sit "carefree" and unbothered while in the midst of so-called benign white feminist pageantry and call it out? Who else but Black women can speak with conviction about injustice intersectionally and with inclusivity of all those who are marginalized including gay, transgender, and non-gender conforming people of color? *Nobody*. Black women's identity performances online may not always be nice, but they are getting louder and are a force to reckoned with.

Appendix A

Survey Protocol

For Closed Facebook Group Participants

- 1- Are you a) female b) male c) non-gender conforming d) other (include write-in option)
- 2- Do you identify as a) Black b) African-American c) Person of Color d) White e) other (include write-in option) f) None
- 3- Why did you join this group?
- 4- How long have you been a member of this group? a) 0-11 months b) 1-4 years c) 5+ years d) not sure
- 5- How many people in the group have you interacted with face-to-face outside of the group? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6+ d) not sure
- 6- What words would you use to describe the other members of this Facebook group? a) community b) family c) friends d) acquaintances e) strangers f) colleagues g) other (include write-in option)
- 7- How would you describe your level of participation? a) a lurker – just read other posts, occasionally like other posts b) semi-active participant – likes and adds occasional posts to the group page c) very active participant – frequently responds to other posts and comments and adds posts to the group page d) other (include write-in option)
- 8- How many times have you posted to the group? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 9- How many times has another group member “liked” or commented on one of your posts? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 10- How many times have you “direct messaged” or “chatted” with a group member? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 11- What is the best feature of this group? a) it is private b) similar people (race and gender) c) Facebook d) social support – get tips and questions answered e) community f) other (include write-in option)

- 12- What other social media sites do you use? a) Twitter b) Instagram c) Tumblr d) YouTube
e) none f) other (include write-in option)
- 13- How free do you feel to express your opinions and views in the group? a) completely free
b) somewhat free c) it depends on the topic d) not free at all
- 14- I agree with the views shared in this group a) never b) rarely c) sometimes d) most times
e) all the time
- 15- Are you willing to share more about your social media experience in a brief Google
Hangout online interview a) yes, b) no c) maybe

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Facebook Participants:

Researcher Questions:

- How do Black women use language and literacies to exercise agency and build community in digital spaces?
- To what extent do they use vernacular literacy practices and/or practices from FTF African American women's speech communities?
- What kinds of identities/subjectivities and communities do these practices help women to create?

Interviewer Questions:

- 1- How long have you been a member of (Natural Hair/ Homeschooling with Uhuru) Facebook group?
- 2- Why did you join the group?
- 3- How would you describe your experience in the group so far?
- 4- Can you recall a time that you posted to the group? Please describe the experience. (What prompted you to post? What happened during and after you posted?)
- 5- Why did you post to the page?
- 6- What kind of response did you receive?
- 7- How often do you post to the group?
- 8- How would you describe the Facebook group (Natural Hair/Homeschooling with Uhuru)?
- 9- Can you recall a time when you responded to someone else's post? Please describe that experience.
- 10- Do you remember what prompted you to respond?
- 11- How often do you respond to other's posts?
- 12- How comfortable do you feel posting on the site?
- 13- How would you describe the language you use on the site?

14- How does how you post to the site compare to ways you communicate when you write or speak?

15- How would you describe your online identity within the group?

Changed to: How does your participation in this group impact your identity as a Black woman?

16- Do you discuss similar topics offline?

17- If yes, can you describe such an offline conversation?

18- Is this similar or different from your identity when you are not online? How?

19- Why do you continue to communicate in the group?

20- Do you ever use less formal language or slang on the site? Why or Why not? How do people relate to you when you do?

Appendix C

Survey Protocol

For Twitter Participants

- 1- Are you a) female b) male c) non-gender conforming d) other (include write-in option)
- 2- Do you identify as a) Black b) African-American c) Person of Color d) White e) other (include write-in option) f) None
- 3- Why do you follow @NickiMinaj?
- 4- How long have you followed @NickiMinaj? a) 0-11 months b) 1-4 years c) 5+ years d) not sure
- 5- How would you describe your level of interaction with @NickiMinaj's page? a) a lurker – just read other “Tweets,” occasionally Retweet other posts b) semi-active participant – Retweet/Reply to @NickiMinaj's Tweets and occasionally “mentions” @NickiMinaj in your Tweets c) very active participant – frequently Retweet/Reply to @NickiMinaj and her other followers and frequently “mention” @NickiMinaj in your Tweets. d) other (include write-in option)
- 6- How many times has @NickiMinaj “mentioned” you in her Tweets or Retweeted or replied to one of your Tweets? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 7- How many times have you “mentioned” @NickiMinaj in your Tweets? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 8- How many times has another follower of @NickiMinaj “mentioned” you in their Tweets or Retweeted or replied to one of your Tweets? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 9- How many times have you sent a “direct message” to or received a “Direct message” from another follower of @NickiMinaj? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 10- How free do you feel to express your opinions and views on @NickiMinaj's page? a) completely free b) somewhat free c) it depends on the topic d) not free at all

- 11- I agree with the views shared on @NickiMinaj's page a) never b) rarely c) sometimes d) most times e) all the time
- 12- What words would you use to describe @NickiMinaj and other followers of her page? a) community b) family c) friends d) acquaintances e) strangers f) colleagues g) other (include write-in option)
- 13- How many people in the group have you interacted with face-to-face outside of @NickiMinaj's page? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6+ d) not sure
- 14- What is the best part of @NickiMinaj's page? a) current information about Nicki Minaj b) similar people (race, gender, age, Hip-hop) c) Twitter d) social support – get tips and questions answered e) community f) interacting with @NickiMinaj g) other (include write-in option)
- 15- What other social media sites do you use? a) Facebook b) Instagram c) Tumblr d) YouTube e) none f) other (include write-in option)
- 16- Are you willing to share more about your social media experience in a brief Google Hangout online interview? a) yea b) no c) maybe

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Twitter Participants:

Researcher Questions:

- How do Black women use language and literacies to exercise agency and build community in digital spaces?
- To what extent do they use vernacular literacy practices and/or practices from FTF African American women’s speech communities?
- What kinds of identities/subjectivities and communities do these practices help women to create?

Interviewer Questions:

About a specific post

- 1- Name?
- 2- Occupation?
- 3- How long have you been using Twitter? Following @NICKIMINAJ?
- 4- Why did you start following her on Twitter?
- 5- Can you think of a time that you posted to @NickiMinaj’s page on?
- 6- What happened/what reaction did you receive when you posted your Tweet?
- 7- How did you feel about the response?

Attitudes about Tweeting on @NICKIMINAJ’s page

- 4- Please describe a scenario in which you might feel prompted to Tweet @NICKIMINAJ?
- 5- Please describe a scenario in which you might hesitate to Tweet @NICKIMINAJ?
- 6- What kind of situation Tweet would prompt you to reply to or Retweet @NICKIMINAJ?

Language choice

- 7- How would you describe your language you use when you Tweet @NICKIMINAJ or “mention” her?

- 8- How is the language you use when Tweeting @NICKIMINAJ group similar or different from the language you use when you usually write?
- 9- How is the language you use when Tweeting @NICKIMINAJ similar or different from the language you use when you speak?

Identity

- 10- How does your participation in this group impact your identity as a Black woman?
- 11- How is that identity similar to and/or different from your identity offline?

Community and group meaning

- 12- How do you feel when you are reading and replying to Tweets from @NICKIMINAJ or “mentioning” her on your own?
- 13- What does community mean to you?
- 14- What kind of advantages or freedoms, if any, does communicating on Twitter and with @NickiMonaj and her followers provide for you?
- 15- In what ways do the interactions on @NICKIMINAJ’s page feel or not feel like a community to you?

Appendix E

Survey Protocol

For YouTube Participants

- 1- Are you a) female b) male c) non-gender conforming d) other (include write-in option)
- 2- Do you identify as a) Black b) African-American c) Person of Color d) White e) other (include write-in option) f) None
- 3- Do you subscribe to this YouTube channel? A) yes b) no
- 4- If yes, why do you subscribe to this YouTube channel?
- 5- How long have you subscribed to this YouTube channel? a) 0-11 months b) 1 year c) 2+ years d) not sure
- 6- How would you describe your level of interaction with this YouTube channel? a) a lurker – just watch episodes and read comments b) semi-active participant – watch episodes occasionally post comments and “like” other comments c) very active participant – watch episodes and frequently post comments and respond to others’ comments d) other (include write-in option)
- 7- How many times has the channel creator replied to one of your comments? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 8- How many times has another viewer replied to one of your comments? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-10 d) 10 or more e) not sure
- 9- How free do you feel to express your opinions and views in the comment section? a) completely free b) somewhat free c) it depends on the topic d) not free at all
- 10- I agree with the views shared in this channel’s videos a) never b) rarely c) sometimes d) most times e) all the time
- 11- What words would you use to describe the channel creator and other viewers? a) community b) family c) friends d) acquaintances e) strangers f) colleagues g) other (include write-in option)

- 12- What is the best part of this YouTube channel? a) commentary about *Scandal* b) the host's personality c) similar people (race, gender, age) d) YouTube e) social support – get tips and questions answered e) community f) interacting with host and other viewers g) other (include write-in option)
- 13- How many other YouTube channels do you subscribe to? a) 0 b) 1-4 c) 5+ d) not sure
- 14- What other social media sites do you use? a) Facebook b) Instagram c) Tumblr d) Twitter e) none f) other (include write-in option)
- 15- Are you willing to share more about your social media experience in a brief Google Hangout online interview? a) yes b) no c) maybe

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for YouTube Participants:

Researcher Questions:

- How do Black women use language and literacies to exercise agency and build community in digital spaces?
- To what extent do they use vernacular literacy practices and/or practices from FTF African American women's speech communities?
- What kinds of identities/subjectivities and communities do these practices help women to create?

Interviewer Questions

Please state your name?

What is your profession?

How long have you been using YouTube?

How would you describe your experience on YouTube so far?

What types of videos do you go to YouTube to watch?

What YT Scandal Reviews do you watch? BB? Or Tangela Echhoff? Who else?

Why do you watch the reviews?

What are the best parts?

What would else would you like?

About a specific post

- 1- Why did you post a comment to _____ episode on _____'s YouTube channel?
- 2- What happened/what reaction did you receive when you posted your comment about the episode?
- 3- How did you feel about the response you received?

Attitudes about Posting on YouTube

- 4- Please describe a scenario in which you might feel prompted to post a comment about one of _____'s episodes.
- 5- Please describe a scenario in which you might hesitate to post a comment about one of _____'s episodes.
- 6- Do you discuss similar topics when you are offline, in face-to-face situations?
- 7- How would you say these discussions are similar or different?
- 8- What kind of situation would prompt you to reply to someone else's comment?

Language choice

- 9- How would you describe the language you use when you post comments to _____'s channel?
- 10- How is the language you use when commenting similar and/or different the language you usually use when writing?
- 11- How is the language you use when commenting similar and/or different from the language you use when you are speaking?

Identity

- 12- How does your participation in this group impact your identity as a Black woman?
- 13- How is this identity similar to and/or different from your identity when you are offline?

Community and group meaning

- 14- How do you feel when you watch and/or respond to a Scandal recap on this channel?
- 15- How do you feel when you read and/or respond to other's comments about a Scandal recap on this channel?
- 16- What does community mean to you?
- 17- In what ways do the interactions on this channel feel or not feel like a community to you?

Appendix G

Survey Protocol

For Blogosphere Participants

- 1- Are you a) female b) male c) non-gender conforming d) other (include write-in option)
- 2- Do you identify as a) Black b) African-American c) Person of Color d) White e) other (include write-in option) f) None
- 3- How long have you been blogging? a) 0-11 months b) 1 year c) 2+ years d) not sure
- 4- How would you describe your level of blogging activity? a) primarily a lurker – mainly read other blogs and comments b) semi-active participant – occasionally publish blog posts, “like” and comment on other blogs c) very active participant – frequently publish blog posts and respond to other blogs.
- 5- Do you post on a) your own blog site b) a collective or organization’s blog site c) both
- 6- On average how many “likes” does a single blog post of yours receive? a) 0 b) 1-9 c) 10-40 d) 50+ e) not sure
- 7- On average how many comments does a single blog post of yours receive? a) 0 b) 1-9 c) 10-40 d) 50+ e) not sure
- 8- Approximately what percentage of comments do you respond to on your blog? a) 10% or less b) 25% c) 50% d) 75% e) close to 100% f) not sure
- 9- Approximately how many times has someone blogged directly in response to or linked to one of your blog posts? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-9 d) 10+ e) not sure
- 10- How free do you feel to express your opinions and views in your blog posts? a) completely free b) somewhat free c) it depends on the topic d) not free at all
- 11- How often do you comment on other blogs? A) never b) rarely c) sometimes d) often
- 12- Approximately how many times have you blogged directly in response to or linked to someone else’s blog post? a) 0 b) 1-5 c) 6-9 d) 10+ e) not sure

- 13- What words would you use to describe those that comment on and respond to your blog?
a) community b) family c) friends d) acquaintances e) strangers f) colleagues g) haters h) other (include write-in option)
- 14- Why did you choose to blog about Beyoncé and her visual album and/or its relationship to feminism? a) the topic was intriguing b) you wanted to add a missing perspective c) to clarify a misconception about the topic d) to rebut a viewpoint concerning the topic e) you enjoy writing f) to enter an engaging conversation g) to educate others h) to show solidarity e) other (include write-in option)
- 15- What audience did you direct your post(s) toward? a) Beyoncé b) other bloggers c) scholars d) Black women and girls e) Black feminists f) white feminists g) all feminists h) the general public i) all of the above j) other (include write-in option)
- 16- How many other blogs did you read about Beyoncé's visual album and feminism? a) just mine and those in response to it b) a few others c) as many as I could d) close to all of them
- 17- What words/phrases would you use to describe the flurry of blog posts on the topic between December 2013 and January 2014? a) war b) conversation c) energizing d) exhausting e) unnecessary f) significant g) inclusive h) elitist i) communal j) bonding k) informative l) dirty laundry m) defensive n) third wave v. second wave o) black v. white p) young v. old q) other (include write-in option)
- 18- What social media sites do you use? a) Facebook b) Instagram c) Tumblr d) Twitter e) YouTube f) none g) other (include write-in option)
- 19- Are you willing to share more of your social media experience in a brief Google Hangout online interview? a) yes b) no c) maybe

Appendix H

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Blogosphere Participants:

Researcher Questions:

- How do Black women use language and literacies to exercise agency and build community in digital spaces?
- To what extent do they use vernacular literacy practices and/or practices from FTF African American women's speech communities?
- What kinds of identities/subjectivities and communities do these practices help women to create?

Interviewer Questions:

Name

What is your occupation?

How long have you been blogging/writing online?

How and why did you get started writing online?

What education or professional background, skills and knowledge do you feel qualify you to write online in the capacity that you do?

How long have you been writing for your current blog/news site?

About a specific post

- 1- Why did you publish your blog post about Beyoncé on _____ (date)?
- 2- What did you hope to accomplish? Do you feel you accomplished that? Why or why not?
- 3- What happened or what reaction did you get when you published your blog?
- 4- How did you feel about that response?

Attitudes about posting in the group

- 5- Please describe other possible scenarios in which you might feel prompted to publish a blog post (on this topic or others)?

- 6- Please describe a scenario in which you might hesitate to publish a blog post (about this or other topics)?
- 7- What kind of situation would prompt you to comment on or respond to someone else's bog post?

Language choice

- 8- How would you describe the language you use in your blog posts, specifically the one on Beyoncé?
- 9- How is the language similar to or different from the language you use when you usually write?
- 10- How is the language you use in your blog posts similar or different from the language you use when you speak?

Identity

- 11- How does your blogging/writing online in this way impact your identity as a Black woman?
- 12- Please describe your online identity as a blogger?
- 13- How is this identity similar to/different from your identity when you are not blogging? offline?

Community and group meaning

- 14- How do you feel when you are reading and responding to other blogs? Publishing your own posts?
- 15- What kind of advantages, freedoms, affordances, if any, does communicating through your blog provide for you?
- 16- How would you describe the kind of interactions during those blog exchanges about Beyonce?
- 17- How do you define "conversation"?
- 18- What does "community" mean to you?
- 19- What relationship is there, if any, between "conversation" and "community"?

20- What does “war” mean to you?

21- In what ways did the blog posts about Beyoncé, her visual album and the topic of feminism feel like a conversation, or not?

22- In what ways did the blog exchanges about Beyoncé, her visual album and the topic of feminism feel like community building, or not?

23- In what ways did the blog posts about Beyoncé, her visual album and the topic of feminism feel like a war, or not?

24- What, if anything, do you think these blog exchanges accomplished?

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- Warner, Kristen J. "ABC's *Scandal* and Black Women's Fandom." *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and LadyLorn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Elana Levine. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 32-50. Print. *Feminist Media Studies*.
- Winn, Maisha T. *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Teaching for Social Justice*. ERIC, 2011. Print.
- Xie, B. "Multimodal Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Support among Older Chinese Internet Users." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13.3 (2008): 728-50. Print.
- Zappavigna, Michele. "Ambient Affiliation: A Linguistic Perspective on Twitter." *New Media and Society* 13.5 (2011): 788-806. Print.

LATOYA L. SAWYER

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Education

- August 2017 Ph.D. in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric
 Certificate of Advanced Study in Women and Gender Studies
 Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
- Dissertation *"Don't Try and Play Me Out!": Black Women's Digital Rhetoric
 and Agency on Social Media*
- Directors:
 Committee: Eileen Schell and Gwendolyn Pough
 Patrick Berry, Steve Parks, Adam Banks
- 2009 M.A. in Newspaper, Magazine, and Online Media
 S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
 Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
- 1998 B.A. in English
 Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY

Academic Appointments

- 2012-Present **Part-time Faculty**, English Department
 Quinnipiac University, Hamden, CT
- July 2013, 2014 **Instructor**, Wuhan University Summer Intensive English Program
 Wuhan University, Wuhan, China
- 2011-2012 **Teaching Assistant** (instructor), Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and
 Composition
 Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Fellowships, Awards & Distinctions

- College of Arts and Sciences Summer Research Fellowship*
 Syracuse University, 2015
- Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV) Fellowship*
 National Council of Teachers of English, 2014-2016
- College of Arts and Sciences Summer Research Fellowship*
 Syracuse University, 2013

Fellowships, Awards & Distinctions (continued)

College of Arts and Sciences Summer Research Fellowship
Syracuse University, 2012

Scholar for the Dream Award
Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2012

Graduate Assistantship
Syracuse University, Writing Program, 2011-2012

Graduate Fellowship
Syracuse University, African American Studies, 2010-2011

Publications

Sawyer, LaToya L. "All in Together Girls...': Black Women Make Online Community, not War, Over Beyoncé and Feminism." *Peitho*. 18.1 (2015) Web.

Haddix, Marcelle and LaToya L. Sawyer. "I Am My Child's First Teacher': Black Motherhood and Homeschooling as Activism." *Laboring Positions: Black Women, Mothering, and the Academy*. Ed. Sekile Nzinga-Johnson. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2013. 75-90. Print.

Nduati, Nyaboke, LaToya L. Sawyer, and Marcelle Haddix. "Review of *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* by Mariana Souto-Manning." *Education Review*. 15 (2012). <http://edrev.info/reviews/rev1152.pdf>

Sawyer, LaToya L. "She who Wears the Masque: Creolization in Nicki Minaj's Performance as Rhetorical Agency." *Race and Cultural Practice in Popular Culture*. Eds. Rachel V. Gonzalez-Martin and Domino R. Perez. Rutgers University Press. Under Review.

Refereed Conference Presentations

"Who Bows? Who Gets to Eat Cake?: Black Women's Identification and Healing through Reader Response to *Beyoncé*." Conference on Composition and Communication. Portland, OR. March 2017.

"Who Can Be Carefree in CMC?: The Use of Black Female Literacies in the Construction of the Carefree Black Girl Online." Literacy Research Association. Nashville, TN. November 2016.

"My Inner Anna-Mae' and Eating Cake Online: Cultural Rhetoric and Identity Performance in Defense of Beyoncé's Feminism on the Black Feminist Blogosphere." Cultural Rhetorics. Michigan State University. September 2016.

Refereed Conference Presentations (continued)

“Beyoncé isn't telling me to bow down’: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency on the Black Feminist Blogosphere.” Rhetoric Society of America. Atlanta, GA. May 2016.

“Carefree Black Girls in CMC: AAVE as Agency on Twitter.” Poster Presentation. National Conference of Teachers of English. Minneapolis, MN. November 2015.

“MINE: The Mind/Body Connection to Beyoncé’s Feminism on the Black Feminist Blogosphere.” Feminisms and Rhetorics. Tempe, AZ. November 2015.

“All in Together Girls...”: Black Women Make Online Community not War Over Beyoncé and Feminism.” Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition’s New Work Showcase. Conference on College Composition and Communication. Tampa, FL. March 2015.

“The Risks and Rewards of Motherhood in the Academy: Making Various Perspectives Visible.” Roundtable. Conference on College Composition and Communication. Tampa, FL. March 2015.

“Tweeting with Attitude: Uses of e-AAVE and Agency on Twitter.” Poster Presentation. National Conference of Teachers of English. Washington, DC. November 2014

“Yall betta than me!': Black Women’s Testimony, Attitude and Solidarity on Facebook.” National Women’s Studies Association. San Juan, PR. November 2014.

“‘The Booty Don’t Lie’: Black Women’s Use of the Body and Play to Demonstrate Rhetorical Agency.” Conference on College Composition and Communication. Indianapolis, IN. March 2014.

“Tweeting that Talk: Performance and Agency in Hip-hop Female CMC.” 5th International Conference on the Linguistics of Contemporary English. Austin, TX. September 2013

“It Takes a Virtual Village: Othermothering, Facebook, and Black Female Agency Online.” Computers and Writing. Frostburg, MD. June 2013

“She that Wears the Masque: Creolization in Nicki Minaj’s Performance as Rhetorical Agency.” 6th Annual African American Studies Spring Symposium. University of Texas at San Antonio. April 2013

“I’m a #Muthaf@cknmonsta: Hip-hop Female Discourse and Agency in Online Spaces.” Rhetorical Society of America Conference. Philadelphia, PA. May 2012.

Refereed Conference Presentations (continued)

- "#WhereThemGirlsAt? Exploring Online Female Literacies and Discourse Practices." Conference on College Composition and Communication. St. Louis, MO. March 2012.
- "When Barbie Speaks: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Persona and Performance of Nicki Minaj." Feminist Workshop. Conference on College Composition and Communication. St. Louis, MO. March 2012.
- "Who You Callin' A Bitch/ Ho/ Vixen?: Rethinking the Role of Female Emcees in Critical English Education." National Conference of Teachers of English. Chicago, IL. November 2011.
- "When Barbie Speaks: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Nicki Minaj." Black and Brown Feminisms in Hip-Hop Media Conference. University of Texas at San Antonio. San Antonio, TX. March 2010.

Invited Talks

- "Feeling Myself: Nicki and Beyoncé's Performance of Carefree Black Girls." University of Texas, San Antonio, San Antonio, TX. September 23, 2016.
- "Discourse Analysis of Women's African American Language in Online Spaces." University of Texas, San Antonio, San Antonio, TX. November 9, 2016.
- "Bad Bitch Central': @NICKIMINAJ and Signifying on the 'Bad Nigger' Online." University of Texas, San Antonio, San Antonio, TX. November 9, 2016.
- "Critical Engagements with Digital Humanities." University of Texas, San Antonio, San Antonio, TX. November 9, 2016.
- "Sing a Black Girl's Song': Black Women's Use of the Body and Play as Invention." Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. April 2, 2014.
- "Play in Your Deep: Nuances of Hip-hop Feminism," Quinnipiac University. Hamden, CT. April 1, 2014.
- "Who You Talking To?: Negotiating Black Discourse Practices, Rhetorical Situations and Web Presence." Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. November 2011.

Teaching

QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY, Hamden, Connecticut

EN 101	Introduction to Reading and Writing	Fall 2012-2016
EN 102	Academic Writing and Research	Spring 2012-2016
SB 211	Business Communications	Fall 2015, 2016, Spring 2016
EN 220	The Short Story as Genre: Women of the African Diaspora	Spring 2012

WUHAN UNIVERSITY SUMMER INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM, Wuhan, China

	ESL through Music in U.S. Culture	July 2013, 2014
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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, Syracuse, New York

WRT 105	Practices of Academic Writing	Fall 2011
WRT 205	Critical Research and Writing	Spring 2012

Service

Guest Tweeter/Curator: Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition
Twitter Page. September 2016.

Reviewer: *English in Computer-Mediated Communication: Variation, Representation, and Change*,
February, 2015.

Co-Interviewer: Dr. Angela Davis, "In Search of Political Openings: (Re) Writing the
Prison/Education/Military Industrial Complex," Conference on College Composition and
Communication. Indianapolis, IN. March 2014.

Chair: "At the Center of the Center: Identification and Invention in Marginalized Communities."
Rhetorical Society of America Conference. Philadelphia, PA. May 2012.

Writer: WikiComp Collective. NCTE & CCCC sponsored project. Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
2011-12

Community Literacy Engagement

Founder/Facilitator: Quinnipiac University Sister Reading Circle, Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Connecticut, Spring 2013 – Present

Developed and presently facilitate this literacy and social support group for self-identified Black, female undergraduate students at Quinnipiac University

Presenter: “Writing Your Mission Statement,” Writing Our Lives Youth Writing Conference for students grades 6-12, Hughes Academy, Syracuse, New York, November 2010.

Co-facilitator: Syracuse Community Courses, Syracuse, New York

12-week, free community courses on selected topics on African American Rhetoric with Dr. Adam Banks

The Queen of Real and the Real MLK: Nina Simone, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the Movement in Their Own Words Fall 2010

Ebonics and the (Continued) Miseducation of the Black Student Fall 2009

Teaching Artist: Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse University, Summer 2005 –Spring 2007

Developed and taught numerous creative-writing classes and workshops at winter-break and summer camps for youth 7-14 years-old, including poetry and spoken word.

Co-Founder/ Teacher: SAFE – Saturday Academy Fostering Excellence, Syracuse, New York, July 2005 – May 2007

Collaborated with local educators and community members to start the free Saturday learning academy for middle-school students of African descent in the Syracuse community.

Freelance Writer, New Readers Press, U.S. Publishing Division of Laubach Literacy, October 2000-February 2001

Wrote news articles from the Associated Press and other syndicated sources for adults learning to read in English at fourth to sixth grade reading levels.

Administrative Experience

Program Director, Mercy Works, Inc., Syracuse, NY, 2007- 2010

Researched, developed and directed programs serving approximately 200 youth annually. Actively sought out and wrote grants for projects, programs and new initiatives

Research & Teaching Interests

Rhetorical Theory

Writing Pedagogy

Digital Literacy and Identity

Pan African Rhetoric

African American Discourse

Hip-hop Culture

Literacy Studies

Black Feminisms

Discourse Analysis

Professional Memberships & Affiliations

Conference on College Composition and Communication

National Council of Teachers of English

Rhetoric Society of America

Literacy Research Association

Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition

National Women's Studies Association