4 Colored Girls Who
Considered Suicide/When
Social Networking Was Enuf

A Black Feminist Perspective on Literacy Online

DAVID E. KIRKLAND

"...bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical/dilemma."

– NTIMBA NLANGE

The storied lives of Black females saturate the spaces they occupy. As literacy artifacts, these stories, these well-written lives, tell us many things about what and why young Black women write. They also teach us about ourselves—about who and what we are and can be. It comes as no surprise, then, that these stories, which have stretched across the quiet distances of a too often overlooked femininity, are moving fast forward toward the new histories being written and rewritten by Black women online through new technologies.

My first encounter with such stories, which I call Black female literacy artifacts, came offline during my childhood. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my mother. She was a street-wise woman, a daughter of inner-city Detroit, a victim of its unfulfilled possibilities. It was in that beaten-up city—home of chronic poverty, plight, and my own passions—that my mother came to cultivate stories of a young woman surviving yet starving.

"It ain't never been easy to be a woman," she would lament. "But we women have a power, and that power is our curse." She would continue commentary like this for hours on end, attempting to reconcile the shame she felt from selling her body.
“Yeah, I sold my pussy,” she would rudely blurt out usually under the influence of some mind-numbing substance. “But I didn’t sell my soul.” It was not unusual for her to share such details with me. She would often openly render her secrets when intoxicated like the time she reached into her oversized black bag that seemed to have everything in it from random snacks for eating to useful tools for fixing things. I had never known my mother to be a writer, but from the depths of this black bag emerged a little, well-used notebook, protected only by a worn cover and joined by a thin spiral wire that was bent out of perfection. With a combination of deep agony and relief, she cuddled that notebook between her clinched fingers before opening its timid pages. Smear ed in random but purposeful directions were a series of thoughts, numbers, and hard to read markings that resembled both poetry and prose. There were also doodles of cantankerous scenes, images of naked women and slobbering men, notes on her suicidal thoughts, and prayers to God for forgiveness. In that well-used notebook in her purse, my mother had constructed a multimodal, handwritten world that, although it made little sense to me then, has helped me to understand the powerful and humanizing event of literacy in the lives of some young Black women.

“I remember the first time.” She paused. Silence. “I came home that night and wrote it all down.” She turned to a creased and torn page in her accusing notebook—its wrinkled edges jagged and used. She began to read:

“Tonight I did it,” she continued, rehearsing the common wisdom of the street: “I had to do what I had to do.” As she read, the air between us thinned. My mother’s eyes swelled with moisture as she continued with her story. “My babies can’t eat air. And it didn’t last that long anyway. But I am still ashamed of myself, but I can feed my kids and I didn’t have to rob no banks. I don’t know if I will do it again, but I will do anything to feed my kids, or I’ll die.”

Touched and troubled by her, then, seven-year-old note and its genuflection to death as a human option, my quiet eyes clinched to beat back the tears that were amidst due to her confession. She turned to me, pain still afflicting her voice. “I gotta support y’all some way. Money don’t grow on trees,” she would explain before ending with that, now, all too common refrain. “It ain’t never been easy to be a woman.”

Many years later, I sit with my mother’s notebook gripped in my curious hands, seeking to understand literacy in her life, hoping that the secrets of her literacy will reveal the secrets of literacy in the lives of the young girls I am studying at Brooklyn Community Gardens (BCG)—a community center in New York City. In contemplating my mother’s words, her stories, I am reminded of what Ntozake Shange (1997) once wrote: “...bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical/dilemma.” I know that Shange couldn’t have read my mother’s notebook because it was composed long after Shange had penned her choreopoem. For her part, my mother never read Shange’s poetry or saw her plays, an observation of which I am sure because she didn’t seem much into reading or viewing plays back then.

Whatever the case, Shange’s statement, in its modest clarity, helped me to understand not only what but also why my mother wrote. The statement hints at a theme that transfixes itself onto the stories of many Black women, even my mother’s—a metaphysical dilemma which utterly shapes her life. She writes to understand this dilemma, which unfortunately she shares with other women. She writes to overcome it, to reconstruct and rewrite herself beyond it. Understanding this, I wondered: How does this particular purpose for practicing literacy, the purpose of rewriting selves, look in today’s online social universe? What types of practices and products do young Black women yield in their digital rewritings? Moreover, what do their digital products—the particular Black female literacy artifacts that render the stories of Black women visible online—reveal about the nature of Black female iDentities, struggles, and strengths? For the remainder of this chapter, I seek to answer these questions.

**An Organic Pheminism: Viewing Black Female Digital Texts through New (Male) Eyes**

To answer the questions I posed earlier, I use what I call an organic pheminist framework, which is a feminism taught to us—each of us—through the particular stories/lives of the females we encounter and know. It is organic in that it is not the rigid product of academic debate or the pointless perspectives of prideful pontification. My use of the “ph” spelling in pheminism as opposed to the traditional “f” is meant to set off this particular meaning, a meaning that distinguishes organic pheminism from traditional uses of feminism. In doing so, I seek to locate my register, pheminism, within African American linguistic conventions (e.g., the use of “ph” to spell phat [as opposed to fat] in hip hop linguistics to create a deliberate homophone which serves a greater rhetorical effect). This particular play on language, or semantic inversion as Smitherman (1999) refers to it, offers interlocutors a way to appropriate codes not belonging to them (and codes of power imposed on them), and makes codes their own. In this way, I am attempting to (re)define a feminism that is sensitive to the female experience, but one that can also be picked up by non-
My Positionality

In order to write about young women like Maya, I found myself writing about a metaphysical dilemma that, as a male, I have had relatively little true contact with. However, through my mother, I have somewhat come to know this dilemma—if only as a caring onlooker. And just as writing about my mother could never be done in simple terms, writing about the online literacy lives of Black females and their metaphysical experiences could not be simply done.

To tell their stories, I have chosen to incorporate my own story by leading with my mother’s story. Like the stories of the young ladies I studied in Brooklyn, I found in her story, in her writings, a literacy artifact never easy to examine, in part, due to its sheer complexity and raw emotion. Such artifacts have cracks in them and ruptures that my masculine mind, by itself, could not quite understand, a fragility that my hardened hands alone were not fit to handle. I was confronted with tough questions: How could a woman sell her body? How could she pursue death in the face of life? Such questions in the writing of her story took new shape in my head, particularly when reading the online writings of the young Black women I studied: How could a person, a woman, not do anything, everything—including selling her body—in order to survive, in order to raise her children?

Some will undoubtedly question, with squalid accusation, why I am using my mother’s story instead of another literary source. I began this piece by using my mother’s story for two reasons: First, I learned of the metaphysical dilemma of being a Black female through my mother’s writings. In order to best represent this dilemma, I felt that I myself had to be honest and include her in this work. Second, as you might have guessed by now, I am not a Black woman. In order to add some legitimacy to this work—of which I am not sure how much I can lend it—I feel that it is important to illustrate, through my story, where I exist in this story. This existence for me includes my mother, her metaphysical dilemma, and what it has taught me about understanding Black female narratives.

Still, other critics among us would say that my mother had other options—that she did not have to sell her body and contribute pages to divulging shameless secrets. I would say that they, like me, have never been a woman, and certainly not a Black woman. This is not to apologize for the success of patriarchy in leaving Black women with such measurable options. It is to render patriarchy void and, in a sentence, place myself squarely within this work: Momma, I understand.

Black Feminism: A Theoretical Framework for a Male Researcher

Reading Black feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins has informed my organic phenomnological perspective. While we learn a lot through living, things that are lived are not always as they appear, particularly when lines of race and color are breached and performed to balance life’s inequities. For Collins (1993), Black women’s stories are testimonies to their emerging power as agents of knowledge. By viewing the young women I studied, including my own mother, as “self-defined,” “self-reliant” individuals, I am seeking to speak to the importance that self-sanctioned knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. One distinguishing feature of this perspective is “its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change” (Collins, 1990, p. 221).

Given this, I have sought to follow what James Baldwin has instructed, to search deeply within answers for the questions they conceal. From a Black fem-
inist perspective, real conditions prompt very real questions (Collins, 1999, 2000; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; James & Sharples-Whiting, 2000). What do the stories of Black women say about our physical and digital realities? As a literacy researcher, I must ask: What does it say about the changing and expanding role of literacy in lives increasingly lived online? What does it say about teaching and learning literacy, about young women and men poised to participate in a multicultural global society with complex physical and virtual borders (Kirkland, 2008, 2009)? The answer to my essential question about my mother, then, was not a simple matter of right and wrong. That is, my mother is not a bad person. She is, in her own right, a phenomenal woman. This answer suggests a much deeper question: Why did the world not afford this phenomenal woman—and many like her—other choices?

Regardless of the offerings of what seems to me to be a stingy world, Black feminist thinkers promote (and sometimes chastise) the idea of resilient (or strong) Black women (hooks, 2000; James & Sharples-Whiting, 2000; McDowell, 1985). Such women are capable of redefining realities, as in the case of Ida B. Wells who, with her pen, changed how we would know the story behind the treatment of Blacks in the post-Civil War South. Such women are also capable of rewriting history as to reveal the unique female story that quietly endures, though absent in the careless chronicles of men. We see this in the annals of writers such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, whose transcendent zeal for storytelling has produced works that themselves have reshaped history. But ultimately, the resilience of the Black woman is captured in her effort to redeem or rewrite a self in the stew of her sexuality and sisterhood, in the powerful midst of meddling men and their malign manners (Foster, 1996; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Hartman, 1997).

This observation is not to bash the world and its shortcomings. Should you, dear reader, be interested in that sort of work, I can refer you to several sources. However, in this work, I want to use what I have learned from Black women and from observing and reading about them to explore the narratives of Black females and illustrate how new digital ones are being written and embedded within rich traditions of counter-storytelling (Carby, 1987; Doriaña, 1991; Foster, 1996; Fox-Genovese, 1988). I also hope to show how online social communities like MySpace and Blogspot have helped young Black females extend this tradition.

Sharing Stories: A Note on Method

I blend two traditions—ethnography (cultural analysis) and literary criticism (text analysis)—to analyze the emergent patterns in two (not including my mother's) Black female narratives. Including these narratives, I explore or incorporate into my analysis four data sources: (1) my mother's notebook; (2) the archived works of Black women such as Shange; (3) fieldnotes and transcripts of the conversations and testimonies of my research participants (both male and female) from BCG; and (4) the online stories of two Black females—a rap posted on YouTube and two poems written by Maya.

Through my analysis of these sources, I hope to argue that Black female digital narratives chart the expansion and intensification of Black female lives, stories of Black women that have bumped up against a myriad of new and old social realities. I maintain that these stories should be given much attention, read in literacy classrooms so that students—both male and female—can understand the conditions of women today in order to transform those conditions for a better tomorrow. I hold that such a process presents a therapeutic pedagogy—where pedagogy is designed to promote healing, social awareness, and righteous understanding. My process of interpretation is, thus, grounded in an organic phenomenism, as organic phenomenism teaches us to learn from the everyday lived stories of our sisters. It is also guided by a "grounded theory" approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which seeks to contribute to existing theories and develop new understandings of particular phenomena, in this case literacy in online social communities and Black female identities. My goal for this chapter is to help readers better understand how young Black women practice literacy and tell their stories online.

Revisiting My Mother's Notebook: The Sexual Politics of Literacy Online

The final lines in my mother's notebook are incomplete. They read: "If I have to do it again, I cannot..." The pages end. Her written words are muted. Yet, her story continues with me along with a set of longing questions hard to refuse. What is it to a boy who wishes for his mother but cannot find her? He is not a boy at all, but a motherless child. Some kind of reverse bastard. But even his description tells her story. In an organic sense, I carry her story with me everywhere I go, even into the field where I am observing and talking to youth about reading and writing online.

It was in the field where I met one particular young lady. She reminded me of my mother. I wondered if she was what my mother must have been like when she was younger. The young lady looks at me, glad for an audience. I looked
back at her, drawn by her familiar presence. I asked what she was doing online:

"I'm chatin," she said, popping a piece of gum against her spaz tongue.

"Chatin with who?" I responded.

"This boy who like me."

I peeked over her shoulder to grab a look at this boy who "like her." She was clicking through an album of pictures on his Facebook page. There was a gleam in her eyes. She thought the boy was cute. There was also a gleam in mine—more like a startled glare; this was no boy. The young man pictured looked older than me.

Though I was concerned by the virtual voyeurism that I was witnessing, the interaction with the young female participant was instructive. I learned through the interaction about the kind of back-and-forth play that was practiced online, a random game of peeping, where looking at someone's pictures was a way of "reading" that person. This observation was at least true for my young female participant. I began to wonder: if she was looking at a boy online, then certainly some boy was looking at her too. And if the boys are looking at the girls...I began to worry!

Not long after my interaction with the young lady, I had the opportunity to join a group of boys who were on their MySpace pages. Upon joining them, I asked what they were doing:

"Looking at this girl," one of the guys answered.

"Can I look too?" I asked, hoping to get a sense of what exactly they were looking at. Before they could really answer, I positioned my curious head closer to the computer screen. There she was. A young lady with her lips poked out, holding up deuces with one hand while her other hand rested firmly on her raised hip. I looked back at the young men, now intensely watching them and listening to their interaction. Perhaps, it was normal for young men to "look" at girls; however, the way they looked at her was odd. The young men's sensation with flesh was to me no less loathsome than the cruel and dehumanizing appetites of those who devoured the sight of captives during chattel slave auctions, reducing men and women to morsels of meat. The young men were looking at images of young ladies, rating them as if they were mutton.

"Man, she a 8," one of them called out.

"Naw, she a 10," said another.

I paused, noticing the stitch of untutored masculinity in the room, which in years would become full grown adult perversion. For the story that these young men were writing about young Black women, played in the Jezebel set (Hartman, 1997), where Black female bodies have long been put on display for masculine use. Such bodies were and continue to be auctioned off by prying eyes and, in this case, limited even more by an unseemly ratings system that results from stunted maturity.

Ironically, the boys pointed me to a Black female narrative. They were listening to a rap song they found on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PC0p3IZ3KAU). The young man probably did not view the rap as I did, as a Black female narrative. Nevertheless, this particular literacy artifact told the story of a young Black female, Shaunte Andrea Jones, whose tragic story is a powerful reminder that the perversions that grow out of youthful peeping do not always grow old. When left unchecked, they sometimes grow worse.

The rap, which can be found on YouTube, ironically warned against the dangers of online social contexts such as MySpace. In the rap, Shaunte Andrea Jones is lured into the world of MySpace by its stark social appeal and the possibility of gaining friends along with male attention. On MySpace, Shaunte dabbles in the delight of boys, posting suggestive images of herself, and reveling in the attention she would get. But the story moves along tragically, as some Black female narratives do (Fox-Genovese, 1988). Not all the attention that Shaunte gained was innocent. A certain man much older than Shaunte—a pedophile and would-be murderer—happens upon her page. He introduces himself to her, communicates regularly with her, and gains her affection. The two meet offline. It would be the last meeting Shaunte would ever have. He rapes and kills her.

This true story, elemental of the metaphysical dilemma that writers such as Shange observe in their stories of Black womanhood, is yet another example in a sequence of stories about Black women. It shares in the tragedy of my own mother, who bartered her body to men for money. It is the story—taken to the extreme—of my young female participant, who used her online time to peek at older men. It is the story of the pictured young lady holding up deuces whom the boys I sat near rated. Such stories, especially when taken together, are awful and real—a reflection of our worst fears. They also remind us of Shange's metaphysical dilemma—the struggle of being Black and female. Moreover, while the online stories of young Black women experience the same tragic pulls as their offline kin, the Black female narratives of Web 2.0 seem a bit more depressing, if only because, in that world, young women like Shaunte Andrea Jones find another place to be objectified, abused, and made targets of men. The difference, then, between the online and offline worlds of Black
females can be seen in little boys rummaging through pictures—a sordid kind of visual literacy where value is misplaced in an informal rubric that rates and objectifies females. The difference can also be read in the stories of young women like Shaunte, which reveal the invisible presence of men who stalk cyberspace for young female victims. Of course, these exposed habits of men are not new. They have been long with us, learned through a culture that fetishizes sex through the procession of billboards that line our streets and the orgy of magazines that teases at our eyes in grocery stores. There is also the television—an old technological domain where patriarchy is passed on. And of course there are the many other forms of pimp media that trade on female images for profit.

And yet, what feels unique to me about the online narratives of Black females today is a sort of new metaphysical dilemma—the dilemma of being alive, Black, and female in a virtual world with no prefixed borders. It is in this porous and vacuous space (Kirkland, 2009) that I have come to know Shaunte Andrea Jones, the unpleasant boys who introduced me to her, my curious young female participant, and a host of people like them. To my modest mind, they tell (or at least come together around) stories of new Black femininity, its new dilemmas, and the digital literacy artifacts surrounding its iDentities. It is through such artifacts that I begin to see my mother’s story anew. I see that she is unlike her sisters who survived the chains of chattel slavery; my mother would never relinquish herself to an auction block. However, in a time that has replaced chains with clicks, I somehow feel that—unlike my mother—young Black females of today find themselves lodged along an auction row anyhow, lost within a kind of peevish, murky Ebay (auctioned new millennial style) with their electronic feet fettered to a stable podium of timeless oppressions.

Digital Rewritings of Black Female Narratives: Metaphysical Transcendence

Black women are not simply victims of the digital age (or of any other age for that matter). While some online Black female narratives, riddled by histories of sexual politics, gravitate toward oppression, others transcend victimization and seek to rewrite history. With the growing sensation in literacy studies to glamorize the so-called digital literacies, we have yet to begin to seriously study such stories or explore the many and complicated truths that they tell. Importantly, we are yet to examine the ways in which young Black females are tirelessly reading and writing off the page, deciphering and scripting digital selves in the expanding contexts of cyberspace (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). For many Black females, this digital construction of meaning, both in making sense of themselves and of their surrounding worlds, defies the complication of histories of oppression and exploitation, of times where being Black and female lent itself to unprecedented abuse (James & Sharpley-Whiting, 2000).

In such narratives, Black women inherit strength to struggle. They spill words into open digital spaces to carry them through the silent tempests of patriarchy. They use electronic instruments such as blogs to navigate the troubled seas of this manufactured cyber channel. But more specifically, in online social communities, many young Black women, like Maya whose poetry you will read below, forge identities, fully immersing, even baptizing themselves in such digital waters. In the stew of their stories, they cook up powerfully new flavors. They visit one another to share in each other’s secrets, forming strong social relationships and friendship bonds. These relationships are illuminated through the brilliance of image and word. Their images and words tell a story not only of struggle but also of triumph; they narrate the new literate journey through which young Black women increasingly chart their lives.

Of course, the digital literacy boom is not confined to Black females. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than half of what it calls “online teens,” or teens who use the Internet, are older girls, between ages 15 and 17. These young ladies also use social networks and have created online profiles (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). “For girls,” the report continues, “social networking sites are places to reinforce pre-existing friendships,” while boys use the Internet and visit social networking sites to flirt and make new friends (p. 1). Their description of teen purposes for online social networking raises important issues some of which I’ve already alluded to, such as the gendering of participation in online social communities and the sexual politics associated with “reading” and “writing” online.

Findings, such as boys flirting, also suggest that traditional gender roles and power relations have indeed spilled onto teen purposes for online participation. However, what is less clear is how such purposes shape not only teen online social participation but also other things such as their language use and literacy practices and how youth see themselves and are seen by others. Still such questions about language, literacy, and iDentity intensify when race and gender are introduced, particularly for Black females, whose experience with literacy has been documented as “pervasive and emotionally charged,” “both historically and institutionally” different than females of other races (Sutherland, 2005, p. 400).

Therefore, the dilemma of being Black and female is stitched in the seams
place of lived triumphs. The following poem, written by Maya and posted on her blog, is an example of this:

    note to self:
    you are not alone
    i
    love
    you.
    always,
    yourself

Maya’s poem beckons to the unity of dialogism, where self speaks to and responds to self (Bakhtin, 1981, 1993; Dyson, 2003). It is through this dialogue that Maya’s poem gains meaning—at the intersection between internally persuasive and authoritative voices that speak within/to her (Bakhtin, 1986). Her being, her iDentity, is further revealed in the content of her poem’s message, which is a declaration of love and, paradoxically, a reminder/letter to a lonely self that she is “not alone.” In this “note to self,” the themes of the Black female narrative embraces its other tone—one of resilience and strength. Maya refuses to be a victim, and if it must be this way, she has the power, a relative degree of autonomy, to love herself and transcend her present condition. In this way, Maya rewrites the story of tragedy commonly associated with narratives of Black women (Foster, 1996; Higginbotham, 1992; hooks, 1981) into a story of triumph, in which young Black women like Maya are uniquely loved (cf. Fisher, 2007; Kirkland, 2009; West, 2008).

While there is power in her rewriting, the true power of the poem is in its placement on Maya’s blogspot page. By publishing the poem electronically, she has simultaneously claimed a space for herself in the digital universe, and her (re)telling of story in this particular domain subverts the tragic pulls of Black female narratives as peddled by patriarchy. This is done imaginatively in the visible presentation of her words, which fall neatly down the descending line of a scrolling page. Maya’s words also sweep across the screen, doing a digital dance of sorts, which is no less impressive as they move in step with the heart-felt tones of determination and a transcendent clarity. For Maya, “There are many [stories] of women online that degrade us. I’m interested in using the Internet to empower us.”

Perhaps no less empowering is another one of Maya’s poems, published on Maya’s MySpace page. Its title: “a seedhead dandelion born in brooklyn.”
There is a woman whose spirit is paper thin on this phone
the plum of her lips is haggard dry, chapped
death is inching at her god and the “I can’t do this anymore” linger in the air like an
awkward silence gathered humid thick
she is a novel beauty struggle story living where life is an absent-minded gift
a miracle is fucking wild in her blood,
tortuous insane magic murmuring in her needle plucked veins
and she should die the way life dealt with her
like this, like some victim.

Where the hell are these angels
conjuring these mornings she lives to see,
who are these cosmic forces pinching at her skin?

Her heart is yelling at me a deep shade of blueberry blows
and I feel the confusion stretching in her shoulders
window broken self-esteem,
can hear the deriving tear yawning on her cheek
her hands are gutter, drain spouts
I wish I knew how to hold a home broken, together.

This woman is where I curl my face, the only cooling power person
that can bend my shape, so backward, so straight.
I am sudden struck affected at the soft sheen peel of her words
and it will always be so, no matter her lift or draft.

This woman on the phone is my mystery flaw, my compliment beauty mark.
I know the tender “I will do whatever it takes for you” love of her being,
still staring into the brown of my no good father’s shaped eyes.

A woman that owns her heartbreak and raises its child,
is an all too strong spine of a life
I wish there were words I could offer this woman
beautifully disastrous as her love
in these splitting fragile moments,
each billow of her pain hovering in my chest like a celestial ohm.

Of the many poems that Maya has written, this particular poem struck me as unique and quite powerful. Maya balances things in it that are Black and female—a metaphysical dilemma and its metaphysical transcendence. She doesn’t appear interested in denying the struggles of Black women. Rather, in the bleak and oft-unspoken reality of quiet words, she embraces them: “I am sudden struck affected at the soft sheen peel of her words and it will always be so, no matter her lift or draft.” Still, “she is a novel beauty struggle story living where life is an absent-minded gift—a miracle is fucking wild in her blood.” The issue of miracle, the miraculous resilience of the captive and captivating female soul, through Maya’s words, gets found in the tenure of “a novel beauty.” Though the metaphysical dilemma exists, there is a transcendence—a hope within her “in these splitting fragile moments,” despite “each billow of her pain hovering in my chest like a celestial ohm.”

There are wishes in Maya’s Black female story—her poem—and also dreams, which are themselves transitory, a celestial offering of solidarity and refuge from an ill-forsaken metaphysical dilemma. And common to the wishes and the dreams is a spirited message which rests between the lines of sad sounds. Such was also the case in Maya’s first poem and its appeal to human agency—a self-encouraging love that competes with an utterly disastrous benevolent form of the same (“I know the tender ‘I will do whatever it takes for you’ love of her being”). It is not that Maya does not see (or render well) the metaphysical dilemma of being Black and female. In fact, she does it too well, using a “tortuous insane magic murmuring in her needle plucked veins and she should die the way life dealt with her like this, like some victim.”

It is in her refusal to take the victim’s stance that Maya begins to transcend this dilemma, as she traces the woman’s tragedy to audacious places of hope to find an element of reaming and mockery in her words that denies it. Maya will not be just “like some victim,” and the written woman she reveals in her poem—though faced with Shange’s metaphysical dilemma—will be no victim either. She will—they will together—metaphysically transcend it.

Even narratives like the one told in the poem, ones capable of metaphysical transcendence, do not exist in a neutral female-friendly space because online social communities are contested sites, layered in the same complexities that constitute the physical and historical geographies in which they are embedded. We hear this in Maya’s poem, a recentering of sorts, which has been given life in our expanding online social universe—and, there, it is given volume and voice. Its transcendent meaning is in rejecting the objectifying forces that seek to hijack Black female iDentity by polluting online social spaces with misogynistic impulses that get fully featured in wall posts, inboxes, message boards, and picture play. While the semiotic and symbolic relations of this new Black feminine iDentity—which the boys have little power to trade on for pleasure—gains a voice of its own, a new set of stories emerges more powerfully than the old. They speak to broader concerns as to what it means to be a woman, a reader, and a writer in the 21st century.
Reading Black Women Online: Toward a Therapeutic Pedagogy

As I set my printed pages of Maya’s poetry on a pile next to my mother’s notebook, I begin to think about what literacy artifacts found in the online worlds of Black women mean. Of course, I think in relation to what I know and have come to know about women based on my relationships with them, my observing and learning from them about their lives and ways of thinking. Indeed, I could never think like a female nor write her story from the same place that she does. But this organic lens that she lends me moves me to see the digital worlds of Black women anew. From this vantage point, I begin to question: What do these worlds, these new transit boundaries, mean in relation to Black female iDentity, to Black female literacy, and to the overall changing story of Black female histories? Importantly, I ask: What do they mean to the boys who I found rating images of Black females online, to girls like Maya, Shaunte, and my Black female participant who, like the boys, vacillated in and out of a voyeuristic virtual realm. What do they mean to stories past, to my mother, whose own lived narrative gets balanced in my hands as not to be lost in the litter of time? For me the answers to these questions all point to a new century literacy classroom, where online narratives of Black females can be shaped, shared, and studied in order to promote healing, social awareness, and a righteous understanding of Black femininity.

In essence, the answers to my questions deal with the emergence of a therapeutic pedagogy that deals in the organic stuff of the Internet—those tensions alive in our everyday social interactions and personal narratives that grow out of the real conditions of real people. Therapy in its most basic sense seeks to heal, but it first seeks to reveal so that we as joint participants in this thing called life, being more aware of its most harmful and dangerous tendencies, can reinvent it.

A therapeutic pedagogy follows a similar process as Freire’s (1995) “problem-posing” approach to education. It first seeks to empower the individual to knowledge of self and other, and our surroundings by introducing the substances of those things from where they are best found. Indeed, Black females are writing and rewriting the substance of themselves in digital dialect in the formless fibers of cyberspace. They do so in meaningful ways that require us to visit them so that we can know them and act upon what threatens to hurt them. At times, this visit may look different for females than for males, for Blacks than for Whites. That is because individuals may require unique treatments based on their own social make-up. The boys who rated the girls online, while capable of appreciating a conscious rap song about patriarchy gone wild on the Internet, were not in place to visit images of Black females where they could truly know them without posing a threat to them. By contrast, Maya, whose interactions online were literally virtual therapy, was in a place to help others heal through her own words and meditations.

Imagine the boys who rated the girls online and my voyeuristic female participant studying Maya’s poetry for its deep meaning, tracing for themselves the metaphysical dilemma of being Black and female and the metaphysical transcendence of her resilience. Imagine them in the classroom listening on YouTube to the story of Shaunte Andrea Jones, rapped in the oral technology of rhythm and verse. What might they learn about being Black and female; what might they learn about themselves that might heal them—that might help heal other Black females? They too could claim a digital space to tell their stories, for the telling of stories is itself therapy.

Youth are already charting the digital dimension and sometimes without tracing its links to politics or the past. This is disheartening because the ways Black females experience digital spaces and script their stories there suggest that we do more with them. These spaces are not stable or static but changing like the stories of Black women that dwell within them. Therefore, it is important for educators to act in ways that allow us to know Black women today. In cyberspace, these women are unlike my mother. They are, more and more, becoming writers of their own stories. Obaining the evidence of this and studying this evidence, for me alone, has been transformative. I believe that, if taken to scale in classrooms, such a study of digital texts will make for more informed, more loving, and more sensitive youth.

At its most fundamental level, the significance of such an approach to the Internet and its online social worlds is simple. It is tied to taking Black females seriously and respectfully by seriously studying their ways with digital words. Moreover, it sets out to reverse a pattern of history so deeply ingrained that adolescent Black female digital literacy practices come across as performances that deviate from the social norm. But, the online writings of Black women cover a range of traditional topics that are as normal as birth and life: from love to abandonment and from rape to abortion. By analyzing these topics, any study of Black female online narratives will provide a critically grounded and academically-rich literacy learning experience for all students. Such an experience can in turn lead to new literacy policies, practices, and pedagogies capable of connecting young women and men to discussions of esteem, power, place, performance, and purpose. Importantly, such an experience can offer reprieve to our young women walking the delicate tightrope of being Black and female in
a new digital world—a liberatory place “...for colored girls who have considered suicide but are moving to the ends of their own rainbows.”

Note

1. All names of people and places in this chapter are pseudonyms.

References


