Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory

Kishonna L. Gray

I'm tired of not seeing me. I'm tired of not hearing my story. Mainstream media will never get me right, so we have to take it upon ourselves to do it. Yeah, social media gives us this opportunity. (SteaMagsandNolias, personal communication, July 5, 2010)

We can blog all we want, we can post all the pictures and memes and videos till our hearts are happy. But what are we really doing? What are we changing? Nothing. It's just more internet mess. (TastyDiamond21, personal communication, July 5, 2010)

Black women have varied responses when employing Internet technologies for empowerment. New communication technologies have expanded the opportunities and potential for marginalized communities to mobilize in this context counter to the dominant, mainstream media. This growth reflects the mobilization of marginalized communities in virtual and real spaces, reflecting a systematic change in who controls the narrative. No longer are mainstream media the only disseminators of messages or producers of content. Everyday people have employed websites, blogs, and social media to voice their issues, concerns, and lives. Women, in particular, are employing social media to highlight issues that are often ignored in dominant discourse (Shirky, 2011). However, access itself neither ensures power nor guarantees a shift in the dominant ideology. Many women recognize the potential of social media to improve their virtual and physical outcomes, but they also recognize the limits to which technologies can
sustain a narrative counter to the current hegemonic structure. As TastyDiamond21 suggested, regardless of how much content women create, the Internet will never have the power to dismantle society’s dominant structures.

Just as with feminism and feminists, there are multiple variations of cyberfeminism (Brah & Phoenix, 2013; Crowley-Long, 1998; Mouffe, 1992; Narayan, 2013). In this chapter, I argue that Black cyberfeminism may address the critique that traditional virtual feminist frameworks do not effectively grasp the reality of all women and may help theorize the digital and intersecting lives of women (Gray, 2013). Operating under the oppressive structures of masculinity and Whiteness that have manifested into digital spaces, women persevere and resist such hegemonic realities (Gray, 2012a). Yet the conceptual frameworks intended to capture the virtual lives of women cannot deconstruct the structural inequalities of these spaces. Cyberfeminism, technofeminism, and other virtual feminisms may address women in Internet technologies, but they fail to capture race and other identifiers that must also be at the forefront of analysis.

Black cyberfeminism, as an extension of virtual feminisms and Black feminist thought, incorporates the tenets of interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances to better theorize women operating within Internet technologies and to capture the uniqueness of marginalized women.

Examining the Possibilities and Limitations of Cyberfeminism

Cyberfeminism is useful in contextualizing the virtual nature of women’s lives. Broadly, cyberfeminism is a notion that the Internet has liberating qualities that can free us from the confines of our gendered bodies (Bromsøth & Sundén, 2011). The premise, however, has been criticized as both utopic and irrelevant to women’s circumstances in new technologies. We cannot just forego our bodies in virtual spaces, because much of our real-world selves are emitted into these spaces. The discussion must move beyond the confines of the digital and be reexamined for its potential to mobilize women in both digital and physical spaces. The virtual and physical selves are inseparable. We must critically engage with the recursive relationship between our physical environments and our virtual selves, and we must use the framework to improve women’s lives.

Women of color have long recognized that self-determination is a critical component to moving beyond the parameters of hegemonic ideology (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought in particular argues for self-definition, a reclaiming of identity, and empowerment for all women and other marginalized groups. In this essay, I build on cyberfeminism and Black feminist thought to articulate the utility of a Black cyberfeminist framework in examining the issues that continue to impede the progression of marginalized women in media, technology, virtuality, and physical spaces.

The Internet has been touted for its liberatory promise (Magnet, 2007), but the potential for such transformation could be thwarted by attacks on women in technology. For instance, Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, Anita Sarkeesian, and others have been systematically targeted for being social justice warriors (Kain, 2014): #GamerGate, which began as an online movement concerned with ethics in game journalism, morphed into an attack on women and feminists. The continued sexism permeating gaming culture is part of a larger culture in technology that devalues women as full participants. This type of structural inequality is not adequately addressed by cyberfeminism. However, by incorporating a critical feminist stance, such systemic problems can be articulated while moving toward meaningful ends for women in these spaces.

How likely is it that Internet technologies can reach their liberatory potential? Many women remain on the periphery of Internet technology. Internet technologies and virtual communities are assumed to be White and masculine (Daniels, 2013; Gray, 2012a; Kress, 2009). These unequal power relations are accepted as legitimate and are embedded in the cultural practices of digital technology. But many women have resisted this perpetual state of second-class citizenship. Black feminists in particular have outlined a template for countering the hegemonic narrative often operating in technology. By blending cyberfeminism and Black feminist thought, I provide a frame to begin the discussion of allowing women to exist on their own terms and to craft their own narratives. This framework is not new, but it is distinct, given its purpose and intent. This approach details women’s experiences and also provides meaningful solutions to combat inequitable power structures.

Black Women, Identity, Media, and Control

Media portrayals offer singular visions of women’s lives, their behaviors, and their roles. Women are consistently underrepresented and misrepresented across various media (Glascock, 2001; Signorielli, 1997). Feminists are
particularly concerned about the representations of women and femininity that promulgate unrealistic standards of physical appearance (Ward & Harrison, 2005); girls and women evaluate themselves based on these idealized representations (Field et al., 1999; Groesz, Levine, & Mumen, 2002; Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994).

There are additional concerns for women of color. Television represents women of color as hypersexual, promiscuous, and immoral (hooks, 1992; Patton, 2001). Many media outlets rely on updated versions of minstrel-era stereotypes, such as the hot-tempered and loud-mouthed Sapphire, the domestic servant or Mammy, and the promiscuous Jezebel (Emerson, 2002; Stephens & Phillips, 2002).

These images are in constant clash with women’s reality. Women and girls face conflicting messages about who they are, who they should be, what they can become, and how they should act (Richardson, 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007). Additionally, the racialized element inherent in mediated imagery further serves to perpetuate dominant ideology in the lives of women of color. Conflicting constructions of Black womanhood only serve to reify who is and who is not eligible for full inclusion into womanhood. Black women have long had their identities constructed by outside forces, by masculinity, and by other entities not valuing Black women’s agency.

Black women and girls struggle for self-determination and self-definition against their ghettoized and distorted representations (Richardson, 2009). Hegemonic ideologies dominate the narrative of female life in the public sphere; women must work hard to resist these destructive forces. Social media have provided a means to combat these oppressive narratives and allow women the ability to define their own realities. As cyberfeminists contend, Internet technologies are an effective means to resist repressive and oppressive gender regimes and enact equality (Orgad, 2005; Plant, 1997; Podlas, 2000). However, because Internet technologies still embody hegemonic ideologies and privilege Whiteness and masculinity, the potential to resist dominating structures of oppression may be slim (Kress, 2009). As TastyDiamond contended, the tools afforded to women in digital spaces and in technology may allow marginalized bodies to make a temporary difference, but these tools have limited ability to effect genuine change.

This concept reflects a core component of Black feminist thought. As Lorde and Clark (2007) posited, the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. This is fundamental reality that those with consciousness recognize: The oppressed will never be given full access to spaces, websites, blogs, social media, and other Internet technologies. Although technologies were never created with the intent to destroy the hegemonic structure, they can provide temporary or partial gains in countering the establishment. And because they provide empowerment to the women who employ them, they are useful. But this compels one to ask whether the marginalized can ever truly be liberated from their oppressor. Using cyberfeminism as a starting point, it is necessary to critically examine the frameworks’ limited ability to effect change.

Cyberfeminism and Technofeminism: Exploring the Tensions

From the beginning, cyberfeminism situated itself firmly in the intersections of theory, media art, and online networking (Paasonen, 2011), imploiring a postmodernist belief in the interests of cyberspace, the interweb, and technology, and collapsing previously oppressive binaries such as human/machine and subject/object in a liberating action (Wajcman, 2008). The goal of a cyberfeminist perspective is to combat how women on a global scale are affected by the growing communications and technology fields and how within these spaces there can be opportunities to resist and reconstruct. Studying the various practices and engagements with this new technology takes the cyberfeminist from an examination of women in the work force (Shih, 2006) to organizing feminist political voices through online networking (Everett, 2007; Minahan & Cox, 2007). As Hawthorne and Klein (1999) framed it, “it is a philosophy which acknowledges, firstly, that there are differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse; and secondly, that Cyberfeminists want to change that situation” (p. 2).

Strengthening this perspective, Brophy (2010) argued that cyberfeminism addresses the complexity of the intersection of gender and power in digital technologies, becoming a medium allowing effective resistance and equality (Daniels, 2009). Wajcman (1995) argued that the new digital technologies provide a way to destabilize the conventional gender differences established by patriarchy. Furthermore, this ever-growing space can become a place for the (re)imagination of the woman’s own self, creating a projection of herself onto the intraweb (Everett, 2004). As Wajcman (2008) summed up, “young women in particular are colonizing cyberspace where, like gravity, gender inequality is suspended. As a result, our interactions are fundamentally different because they are not subject to judgments based on sex, race, voice, accent or appearance” (p. 12).
Indeed, Plant (1997) stressed that cyberfeminism is a posthuman insurrection, a new system allowing women via computers a means to resist the patriarchal world, a place where our brains matter, a location where networks, not hierarchies, operate. In this world, we are finally free from the confines of our bodies; this utopian ideal allows us to leave our bodies and to interact freely among other users. Cyberfeminism suggests that virtual spaces are locations where differences and social contexts can be erased, and our existence is defined on merit alone (Brophy, 2010; Puente, 2008).

**Technofeminism: A Liberating Concept or More of the Same?**

Although there have been a number of attempts to clarify the postmodern ideal of cyberfeminism, Wajcman (2004) has harnessed a number of attributes centering on gender and technology into a theory she calls “technofeminism.” For Wajcman, technofeminism is a theory constructed in response to the broad scope and utopianism of original cyberfeminism, utilizing a social science approach to technology to understand the interconnectedness of gender and technology, not just in its ability to produce a reality where women can shed their worldly attributes and become anyone they desire, but as an emancipatory notion that encompasses both the positive aspects of technology and the pitfalls experienced by those women who are consumed by the modes of production. Wajcman’s hope, with technofeminism, is to provide a concise guideline for an emancipatory politic in contrast to cyberfeminism’s disconnection with the practical. Technofeminism differs from cyberfeminism in the sense that it is a clear and concise theory that treats technology as a sociotechnical artifact and allows us to avoid the pitfalls of an unfocused utopian idea. Technofeminism holds that technology can best be understood as both a foundation and a product of gender relations. Taken in such a context, the cultural project of technology, its purposes, and the skills required for its use all find gender to function as a means to understand how one is to negotiate such spaces (Wajcman, 1995). For technofeminism, gender is produced simultaneously with technology.

Technofeminism encompasses notions of technology in a broad sense, refusing to isolate the means of production from the technology’s consumption. This notion allows feminist scholars to interpret not only the emancipatory developments some women are able to achieve but also the exploitative requirements for female workers in developing countries who are chained to the production of said technologies (Wajcman, 2006).

Still, technofeminism is not inclusive enough. Wajcman’s (and others’) often oversimplified, tidy narratives run counter to the feminist propensity to both/and rather than either/or. Additionally, although technofeminism emerges from third-wave feminism, it makes few claims of multiplicity, complexity, and intersectionality.

Painting these broad strokes to historicize various feminist strands is a tactic Paasonen (2002) criticized as intended to “recontextualize” the past in order “to affirm the present, implicitly suggesting the ‘progress of contemporary culture’ and its ‘hip attitudes’” (p. 362). One charge for feminist (and other) scholarship, then, is to continue to press for ways to talk about past feminist movements and scholarship without creating a model where feminisms lose their plurality and become articulated as tales of progress, ignoring the struggles (Paasonen, 2002). Unfortunately, Wajcman sometimes falls into this trap of recontextualized, oversimplified articulation of past feminist ideas by lumping all cyberfeminists into one large group. Because of the limitations and shortcomings of both cyberfeminism and technofeminism, I urge an incorporation of a critical race feminist stance to better situate the current realities of wired women.

**Black Feminist Thought in the Digital Era**

Dealing with historical and contemporary oppression and marginalization, the lives of marginalized women in the digital era require an engagement with an emancipatory theoretical orientation, one that recognizes the distinctness of their shared and lived experiences. But even with the common threads woven into the patterns of women’s lives, the ability to thwart the nature of dominant ideology proves daunting:

While an oppressed group’s experiences may put them in a position to see things differently, their lack of control over the apparatuses of society that sustain ideological hegemony makes the articulation of their self-defined standpoint difficult. (Collins, 2000, p. 185)

Collins (2000) outlined four perspectives unique to the standpoint of Black (and other marginalized) women: (a) self-definition and self-evaluation, (b) the interlocking nature of oppression, (c) the embrace of intellectual thought and political activism, and (d) the importance of culture. In what follows, I discuss these tenets and move toward a theoretical framework to understand the liberatory potential inherent in media and technology for women whose lived realities are reinforced through the intersecting nature of their ascribed identities.
Self-Definition and Self-Evaluation

Identity development theories address the significance of oppression in how one begins to develop identity, but the literature is limited in its examinations of multiple oppressions. The literature also fails to address the psychological impact of racism and oppression on women of color. Focusing on a specific identity or form of oppression in isolation may obscure inaccuracies in a psychological analysis of identity development in oppressed people (Smith, 1991); examining only gender or only race fails to capture the existence of women of color.

The oppressed have a unique standpoint in that they share particular social locations, such as gender, race, and/or class. Although damaging imagery of women of color permeates society, we can find evidence of contestation, resistance, and agency. These individuals share their meaningful experiences with one another, generating knowledge about the social world from their points of view. Despite this knowledge generation, oppressed populations lack the control needed to reframe and reconceptualize their realities. But particular advantages present themselves with the diffusion of information technologies: Women can create and control virtual spaces largely unregulated by the hegemonic elite. These spaces have the potential to foster the development of a group standpoint negating the impact of dominant ideology.

With these alternate spaces in place, women can begin to define their own identities and realities and influence perceptions of womanhood. They can resist the prevalence of controlling images (Collins, 2000), which reflect a system used to physically, economically, and socially control Black women. The power to manipulate images of Black women in such a way creates oppressive imagery that appears “natural, normal, [and] inevitable” (p. 5).

Interlocking Nature of Oppression

The ability for hegemonic imagery to influence perceptions exposes the ideological dimensions of women’s oppression. Within this hegemonic domain of power, only ideological images characterizing marginalized women as less than human could advance and legitimate a system so fundamentally built on human degradation. This dynamic has existed since the arrival of colonists and since slavery. The images are merely recycled and remixed to further women’s oppression.

Yet marginalized women consistently resist and rarely internalize these images (Collins, 2000); indeed, Black women struggle to indict the legitimacy of images such as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and so forth, as well as the integrity of those who circulate them. This process, which reveals the strong presence of a counterhegemonic consciousness, can be engaged via digital media. The relative ease with which digital spaces can be created presents oppressed groups with the ability to control and create positive content influencing our own images. For Black women, the Internet provides the potential space in which to thwart negative representations disseminated through the media (Collins, 2000).

Given the interlocking systems of oppression marginalized women experience, knowledge is especially prized for its functionality and intentionality and for its ability to help navigate and enhance one’s life and community. Social networks, virtual communities, and other digital media are an extension of traditional communities, such as churches, families, and workplaces.

Embracing Intellectual Thought and Political Activism

Throughout Black liberation movements, intellectualism has been at the core of the struggle. Intellectualism simply means the knowledge that one has about who one is. It is not rooted in educational attainment. This knowledge of self propels one to the realization of liberation. Drawing parallels from the academic settings discussed by Collins (2000), Black cyberfeminist communities seek collaborations and community building among all groups working to dismantle hegemonic structures, thus highlighting the expansion—the deconstruction—of the terms intellectual and activist. Many feminists adopt an either/or approach, assuming the role of either intellectual or activist, but Black feminists urge that the space must be open for all to take equal part, existing at the intersection of intellectualism and activism.

Action and thought are not at odds but complementary. According to Collins (2000), Black feminist thought leads to Black activism; a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. For Black women as a collective, the struggle for self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another.

Empowerment and Embracing Culture

Empowerment is another important tenet of Black feminist theory. Women’s power has the ability to produce transformation (Miller, 1991). Power in this sense is not about control, power over, or dominance. This power is
practical; it exists in thoughts and emotions that may influence others, thus igniting interpersonal change and leading into a larger movement. Black women have historically used their power to empower others (Collins, 2000). One of the strongest movements occurring as I write this centers on #BlackLivesMatter. Having its roots in the death of young Black men at the hands of White police officers, the empowerment felt within the Black community and non-Black allies is directly linked to that interpersonal change.

In discussing empowerment, Collins (2000) noted that the center of Black women’s activism “reflects a belief that teaching people to be self-reliant fosters more empowerment than teaching them how to follow” (p. 235). Personal empowerment comes in the form of self-definition and “self-knowledge as a sphere of freedom” (p. 130). The ability to be independent of the definitions set by the power structure and to produce what one wants to produce about oneself is a form of freedom.

Dei (1995) used empowerment within an indigenous knowledge framework, theorizing that empowerment is the self or agency having the power to voice and articulate concerns. Therefore, the possibility exists that the notion of empowerment could decentralize the hegemonic power of the dominant culture and make space to use indigenous knowledge.

Empowering one’s self leads to embracing one’s culture. During the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, the call for Black power was about affirming Black humanity. White America often assumed it was the call for power and superiority over White society. Instead, it was the move to defend dignity, integrity, and institutions within Black culture. As David Chidester (1992) articulated, “it was patently not about abandoning our black communities and rejecting our black culture, but about developing the one and embracing the other” (p. 200). The same premise applies to Black cyberfeminism.

**Imagining Black Cyberfeminism**

Black feminism can address concerns in the virtual lives of women leading toward a critical cyberfeminist framework. Here I modify the tenets of Black feminism to reflect women in digital realms. Specifically, Black cyberfeminism concerns itself with three major themes: (a) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces, (b) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces, and (c) the distinctness of the virtual feminist community.

**Social Structural Oppression of Technology and Virtual Spaces**

Matters of institutional racism, damaging stereotypical images, sexism, and classism are routinely addressed by Black feminists (Potter, 2006). Incorporating the inherent masculine bias in technology and the default Whiteness of virtual spaces (Gray, 2012a), this theme is imperative to the creation of a Black cyberfeminist framework. Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) argued that the Internet is far from liberatory but rather is a space that continues a “cultural map of assumed whiteness” (p. 225). Kolko (2000) pointed out that attempts to make race and ethnicity present are met with color-blind resistance. The assumed White masculine body excludes women and people of color; the mere presence of their bodies marks them as deviant in these spaces (Gray, 2012b). Deviant social behavior manifests in the materiality of the body. Blackness and any association with Blackness are punished in virtual spaces, leading to the exclusion of marginalized women.

Ignoring the diverse lives of virtual inhabitants also leads to the inability of marginalized bodies to define their own virtual realities. Marginalizing narratives perpetuated through the media reinforce limited conceptualizations of women. Black cyberfeminists urge women to regain control of hegemonic imagery, and Internet technologies allow for this. But as the limits of cyberfeminist and technofeminism illustrate, women need to ensure that they do not recreate oppressions. As I wrote this, I was reminded of an innovative form of Black cyberfeminist activism in the creation of the Twitter hashtag, #whitefeministsont. Online writer and blogger Mikki Kendall started the hashtag in response to the Whitening of feminist spaces where voices of color and otherwise marginalized women are excluded. The tweet, “My Feminism is More Important Than Your Anti-Racism: How to Properly Rank Oppression,” immediately differentiates feminism by race and highlights the privileges and oppressions yet to be addressed within the feminist community. It also highlights that traditional spaces can be co-opted, allowing marginalized women to address their grievances. In this situation, marginalized women identified the power of social media to address the racialized distinctions within feminism.

**Intersecting Oppressions in Virtual Spaces**

The second theme of Black cyberfeminist theory is that women must confront and work to dismantle the overarching and interlocking structure of domination in terms of race, class, gender, and other intersecting oppressions. Because individuals experience oppression in different ways,
we must not create a one-size-fits-all understanding of oppression. Black cyberfeminism requires understanding the diverse ways that oppression can manifest in the materiality of the body and how this translates into virtual spaces.

Black cyberfeminism also requires a recognition of the privileges that some marginalized bodies hold before we can begin dismantling these privileges and understanding the multitude of ways that intersectionality can manifest. Such an understanding might have prevented what was referred to as the feminist Twitter war and avoided claims that Black women and other women of color lead to toxicity in virtual spaces. As Jessie Daniels (2015) explained, “the dominance of white women as architects and defenders of a framework of white feminism” that still permeates must be critically examined. So in the post proclaiming, “... my oppression is greater than yours,” White feminists are criticized for ranking oppression, dismissing grievances of women of color and other marginalized groups. This ranking runs counter to the goals of Black cyberfeminism. Ranking oppression only leads to further marginalization of groups already on the periphery.

Black cyberfeminism, in the spirit of feminism, encourages a privileging of women’s perspectives and ways of knowing, because race, gender, class status, disability, sexuality, and a host of other identifiers generate knowledge about the world. Valuing these perspectives is the only way to liberate women from the confines of hegemonic notions deeming these identities unworthy.

Black cyberfeminism also recognizes that the lived experiences of women manifest in the virtual world as well. Women do not have the luxury of opting out of any aspect of their identity. By privileging these once marginalized identities, Black cyberfeminist spaces can begin to move women toward progressive and meaningful solutions to hegemonic notions about women.

Although all women share a common struggle, examining their intersecting realities reveals the distinctness of their lived experiences. Women may share sexual oppression, but it is not clear how this can unite all women whose lives, work, life expectancy, and family life are also structured by the hierarchies of racism, ethnicity, colonialism, or nationalism.

Power differences among women are so great that even the similar struggles against men are different. Women’s struggle with technology is indirectly a struggle with masculinity, patriarchy, and male privilege; marginalized women also struggle with Whiteness. Cyberfeminists’ inability to incorporate the structural nature of inequality results in a limited vision of liberation. As Fesl (1984) recognized, women cannot stand together against oppression if we stand in different power relationships to one another, but as the feminist Twitter war illustrated, power differences along racial lines continue to keep feminist communities divided.

Accepting the Distinctness of Marginalized Virtual Feminisms

Black cyberfeminism also addresses the distinct nature of how women utilize virtual technologies. Women have used social media for activism and change, as well as to advance contemporary feminism. The Internet has propelled activism and empowerment in that many individuals can take action on a single issue. The tenets of Black cyberfeminism never detach the personal from the structural or the communal, which sets Black cyberfeminism apart. The key is in how marginalized women, specifically Black women, communicate and how Black women’s Internet usage is a continuation of their offline selves.

Black women have used their social, cultural, historical, political, and religious reality to create their own language. Scott (2002) suggested that they even use specific words to emphasize their unique group membership. Hobbs (2004) found that the online forum of the magazine Essence was used to create an African American discourse space in which the cultural norms of the African American community are discussed and reproduced (p. 10). Research such as this is significant for Black cyberfeminism because it values different ways of knowing and being. Black women recognize the diverse ways of speaking, without privileging standard American English. An examination of Black women’s blogs revealed their engagement with both their personal experiences and structural inequalities (Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010). Conversations that once occupied beauty salons, church meetings, and kitchen tables are now present in online spaces. Black women’s experiences in physical spaces influence their participation in online settings.

Black women were once touted as poster children for the digital divide. What wasn’t understood was the cultural and technical savvy that Black women incorporated to use technology on their terms and for their own purposes. A technology may have been created for one purpose, but Black women will employ it to fulfill their own needs, thus displacing the hegemonic establishment.

Black women engage in a variety of cultural forms beyond traditional virtual methods of blogging or tweeting. Black women employ music (Kopano, 2002), poetry or spoken word (Johnson, 2010), and other cultural art forms in their online lives. This direct extension of the physical into the
digital acknowledges the accessibility and viability of these cultural artifacts to reproduce Black feminist thought.

In addressing the accessibility of different ways of producing knowledge, Black women’s engagement with art recognizes the class boundaries inherent in traditional means of cultural production. When considering gender, race and class issues must also be acknowledged: The Black feminist tradition is rooted in a belief that multiple oppressions cannot be separated, and Black feminism at its core is a strategy of resistance against the multiple oppressions of patriarchy, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so on.

Digital social media are important in that they represent, for women of color and other marginalized groups lacking resources, a path to a space where their voices are heard. The once voiceless can be heard, and that leads to empowerment. Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites have allowed women to empower themselves and mobilize their communities. As Black Twitter has illustrated, people of color have co-opted traditional virtual spaces for their own means to communicate and empower their communities. So by employing the cultural tradition of sygnifyin’, marginalized bodies can express themselves with others without fear of retaliation or being othered within the spaces (Florini, 2013).

Black women’s use of social media also reflects their incorporation of digital technologies and their continued efforts on the ground. Twitter and Facebook have been used to organize marches, highlight continued sexism on college campuses, and draw attention to any number of issues. Maybe, in fact, because of Black cyberfeminism’s simultaneous engagement in the virtual and physical communities, the master’s tools will be able to dismantle the master’s house.

**Black Cyberfeminism: From the Streets to the Information Highway**

Black cyberfeminism, which represents the blending of multiple ideas into a cohesive analytical framework, simultaneously contributes to and widens the scope of cyberfeminism, technofeminism, and Black feminist thought. Although all three share many theoretical assumptions, values, and aims, their confluence is truly as distinct as the women who exist within Black cyberfeminism. Stemming from feminism’s third wave, Black cyberfeminism represents a true engagement with the digital in the lives of wired women that encompasses a self-consciously critical stance toward the existing order with respect to the various ways that the digital affects women.

By bridging cyberfeminism and Black feminist thought, this framework is able to interrogate how women have understood their oppressed status, recognized the gendered and raced nature of the digital divide, and have made sense of their realities and experiences. Importantly, women are not passive bystanders in the information age waiting for their turn. As Collins (2000) confirmed, women have refused to become victims and have resisted marginalization in the information age. This resiliency has allowed women to bring the struggle to virtual spaces, thus empowering their communities.

Black women are urged to recognize the distinctness of our cultures. It is this deep heritage that provides us with the energy and skills needed to resist and transform daily discrimination. As women, we must embrace the history of our oppression, understanding that this history informs how power relations pervade our lives. We can’t simply adopt privileged points of view and expect significant change to occur in either the virtual or physical world. We must embrace one another’s oppressions and even privileges, recognizing that we all come from distinct realities converging in virtual spaces. There must be an affirmative action to be inclusive of a variety of women and viewpoints. Women working together is the only way to achieve significant changes. We cannot adopt the exclusionary approach of previous generations of women. We must recognize our privileges—racial, heterosexual, linguistic, and so forth—and move toward fairness and equality for all women. Digital spaces provide us with a significant opportunity to accomplish this feat.

**References**


Digital Human Rights Reporting by Civilian Witnesses: Surmounting the Verification Barrier

Ella McPherson

The scene is a dusty stretch—possibly of road—framed by rubble, old tires, barrels, abandoned vehicles, and crumbling walls. The footage is shaky, giving the impression that the camera is handheld. A man runs out of a doorway and shots ring out—small puffs of smoke erupting behind and ahead of him, suggesting that bullets are hitting the wall along which he runs. A moment of calm and then the camera pans left to a young boy, probably around eight years old, getting up from the ground. The boy begins to run toward an abandoned car; the shots recommence, and a puff of smoke emerges from his chest. He falls, slow-motion, first to his knees and then to his side. He lies there, face away from the camera, for a few seconds, then begins to run again, head down, toward the car. He drops behind it, then emerges dragging a younger girl in a bright pink top by the arm. They both run back the way he came, ducking at first, then running faster as the shooting continues. Throughout, male voices that seemingly issue from behind the lens excitedly talk, regularly crying “Allah Akbar!” The video ends a few seconds after the children exit the frame to the left.

This video first appeared on YouTube, posted by a new account on November 10, 2014, and titled “SYRIA! SYRIAN HERO BOY rescue girl in shootout.” The video quickly went viral, reposted by Syrian activists and racking up millions of views. It also made headlines in the mass media; the New York Post, for example, ran a story the next day titled, “Harrowing Video Shows Boy Saving Girl from Sniper Fire in Syria” (Perez, 2014). Then, in a shocking turn of events—though not so shocking, perhaps, to the YouTube and Reddit users who had been questioning the video’s authenticity in comment threads—the BBC uncovered the video’s cinematic origins.


