We Are the Ones
We've Been Waiting For

Young Black feminists take their research and activism online

BY MOYA BAILEY AND ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

FOR BLACK FEMINISTS IN THE U.S., it has always been uncertain whether and how our words will survive. Who would have thought that the line “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for,” from June Jordan’s 1980 “Poem for South African Women,” would have ended up in a speech by a successful presidential candidate—Barack Obama—and then dispersed, unattributed, on countless mugs, T-shirts, key chains and posters? Who would have thought that classic literary devices such as dramatic irony, used by enslaved 18th-century poet Phillis Wheatley to ensure her words would be published despite unspeakable odds, would be the same devices that convinced Black literary critics her work was “not black enough” for more than a century?

When Black feminism’s words do live on, it is not by accident, default or simple popularity: It is often because Black feminists scraped coins together to publish them, as when Black women’s social clubs raised the funds for Ida B. Wells to put out her 1890s anti-lynching and anti-rape pamphlets. Similarly, nearly a century later, in the late 1980s, Barbara Smith risked bankruptcy to continue funding Kitchen Table, an autonomous press for writing by women of color.

We—the 1980s babies who authored this article—treasure this grassroots legacy, while knowing that Black feminism still lives on unstable ground. So from these roots, a new(er) generation of Black feminist voices coming out of academia are using free and direct means of publication—the Internet and its social media—to spread our visions and provoke an ongoing dialogue.

The Black feminist blogosphere that we are connected to includes more than 100 sites. To name just a couple created by Black feminist Ph.D. students at the University of Maryland, there are women’s studies student Renina Jarmon’s blog Model Minority: Thugs + Feminists + Boom Bap, which takes Black feminist theory to the streets, and Jessica M. Johnson’s blog African Diaspora, Ph.D., which “honors the activists, artists, teachers, researchers, librarians, bloggers and others who bring depth to our work.” These sites defy the voices of cynics who have lamented since before we were born that when Black feminism moved into the academy it moved away from its activist roots. We know that the work of Black feminist critical practice has never been contained within the walls of universities, and has consistently lived in popular media outlets, including pamphlets, stickers and open letters. Thus, we work with interactive modes of inquiry that challenge the ownership of knowledge within the university.

For instance, we’re involved with Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind, a blog that hosts a series of virtual and in-person “potlucks” that brings together participants from Durham, N.C., to Washington, D.C., and from Chicago to Nairobi, Kenya, to discuss Black feminist theory. In this way, we can take the research we’ve
BLACK FEMINISM IN CYBERSPACE

Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind: www.blackfeministmind.wordpress.com
Combahee Survival: www.combaheesurvival.wordpress.com
BrokenBeautiful Press: www.brokenbeautiful.wordpress.com
Quirky Black Girls: www.quirkyblackgirls.ring.com
FireWalkers: www.firewalkersonline.blogspot.com
Sister Scholar: www.sisterscholar.com
Model Minority: www.newmodelminority.com
African Diaspora, Ph.D.: www.africandiasporastudent.wordpress.com

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Black feminism has gained on the university’s dime and use it to fortify and inform popular conversations based in activist communities.

Then there’s the blog FireWalkers, a list-serv-linked network of African Diaspora women who do feminist activism and research both within and outside of the academy. Taking our name from Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Words of Fire*, we cross the artificial line between the politics of Black liberation and women’s liberation, sometimes catching fire from both sides yet continuing to move forward with purpose. With our scholarship we hope to evolve the conversations in the Black and feminist communities into a more holistic understanding of each other.

Our websites also challenge the dominance of mainstream publishing. For instance, when the mainstream media gave little attention to a series of violent acts against Black women in the fall of 2007, Black feminist University of Chicago graduate student Fallon Wilson and activist Izetta Mabley used the Web to launch the Be Bold Be Red Be Brave: Ending Violence Against Women of Color campaign. Students, faculty, community organizers and other concerned individuals nationwide posted photos of rallies and vigils in which they wore red to protest a media that seemed only able to see racist and gendered violence as separate issues, not linked, and occurring only one sensationalist moment at a time. The site quotes Audre Lorde’s words, “When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”

Another important aspect of these networking endeavors is the social—long a key part of Black feminist movements. Black feminists have created alternative rituals and understandings of beauty, love, friendship, celebration and mourning as a way to critique, reject and replace dominant norms. We’re inspired by the 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist socialist collective in the Boston area, which wrote about how valuable it was to have “found each other.”

So we, Alexis and Moya, decided to create a social network called Quirky Black Girls, which allows a diverse group of self-identified QBGs to post our own videos, music and imagery, all the while building bravery and challenging each other’s thinking. We maintain a blog, a site on social networking service Ning, a Facebook group and a Black speculative fiction reading group, and we organize regular in-person arcade nights, jam sessions, cookouts and more. We put the network in an explicitly Black feminist frame by reflecting weekly with the group on specific quotes from the Combahee River Collective Statement and Audre Lorde’s journals.

The two of us have found that our Web activism carries into our very relationships and the way we speak. When the Black women’s blogosphere grieved over the brutal multiple rape of a 20-year-old who was in her apartment and went unaided by neighbors who listened for four hours, we communicated through list-servers and blogs to create action plans in our neighborhoods. We discussed our desire for responses that didn’t involve the police and instead affirmed our faith in each other. Many ideas were spawned, including baking cupcakes in our apartment buildings and sharing them with fellow renters in order to dissolve the culture of anonymity and ambivalence an apartment complex can create.

In another action, after noticing the absence of children and their parents from activist events, Black feminists—along with other folks of color and white allies—felt the need to create child-care collectives. Online tools like Google groups and riseup.net helped us create a network of volunteers to provide this child care.

And finally, out of our desire to see, hear and feel Black women artists who create work that resonates in our souls, we are using Google Wave technology to plan a Quirky Black Girl Festival for 2012. The power of connecting people who might otherwise feel isolated and alone, but for that song that gets them through the day or that painting that rejuvenates the spirit, is a magic that the Internet seems born to do.

Our projects to create online and in-person spaces for Black feminist conversation honor and supplement the rich tapestry of Black feminism that has come before us. We are the new thread connecting patches in a well-worn quilt, both tactile and virtual. We believe that our ancestors knew we were coming, and that our elders, communities, students and future comrades have demands on us that require a fully interactive frame. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.

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