

3

ANALOG GIRLS IN DIGITAL WORLDS

Dismantling Binaries for Digital Humanists Who Research Social Media

Moya Bailey and Reina Gossett

This chapter is an exercise in creating the kind of scholarship we, the writers, Moya Bailey and Reina Gossett, wish existed. As Black queer and trans women, we want more research that addresses our lives at the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. We find ourselves inside and outside the digital and academic spaces that shape our engagement with the world around us. To borrow from singer Erykah Badu, we are analog girls in digital worlds, meaning we retain qualities that do not quite fit with the places we navigate (Badu 2000). We see this chapter as an opportunity to bring these tensions into the light and begin to unpack multiple dichotomies. We are aware of few academic spaces where collaborators like us are understood as collaborators. As Bailey has written elsewhere, digital scholarship necessitates a dismantling of the hierarchy between people in the academy and the people who inform their scholarship (Bailey 2015). Digital humanities is a uniquely hybrid space that prides itself on experimentation and innovation, making it a perfect platform through which to explain the shifting contexts of our lives.

The field of digital humanities (DH) combines humanist inquiry with digital tools that can aid in the research and publishing process of our scholarship. These practices can often open the traditionally siloed and inaccessible aspects of academic scholarship to the public. It is this facet of DH that we consider in this chapter, as we explore the interstitial spaces between the demarcated territories of the ivory tower and the world outside, real life and the digital world of the internet. Not only academics have the skills and means to integrate digital tools and humanistic inquiry. We argue that these distinctions are both real and imagined and as such need to be examined closely to determine the intricate and multilayered dynamics of each space.

We make two main arguments in this chapter:

1. The digital world and the ivory tower are powerful spaces for circulating ideas and creating access to our communities.
2. The power that the digital and academic worlds wield needs to be challenged, both from the inside and out.

Reina Gossett explores the radical potential of web-enabled content for people isolated by poverty and racial, gender, and sexual oppression. She argues that, while digital media makes visible communities that mainstream publics ignore, visibility can in fact incite its own violence. Gossett discusses the material human consequences of digital infrastructure that enables poor, queer, and trans people of color to have access to each other and to shape policy but also offers a word of caution that we should temper our embrace of digital visibility. This visibility can be either good or bad and even both. Gossett breaks down this binary by exposing both its merits and limits through the example of a campaign for the humane treatment of Synthia China Blast, a transgender Latina woman who has been incarcerated in New York for 21 years and held in solitary confinement for the past decade.

Moya Bailey explores the spread of her portmanteau *misogynoir*. Though Bailey created the word for her dissertation, its circulation in digital spaces was largely propelled by the work of womanist social media maven and Gradient Lair founder, Trudy. Bailey talks about the tensions between the academic origins of the word and its digital life that exceeds academic publications. Bailey uses the construction of the word's Wikipedia page to highlight misogynoir's slippery journey in and out of academia. Both narratives explain the power of situated knowledge and how different social locations are privileged over others, ultimately arguing for a more nuanced digital scholarship that can attend to these complexities.

Digitally Visible, But at What Cost

Reina Gossett

While clicking the “submit” button below an online comment form might look nothing like traditional images of labor—say, workers toiling on factory lines—this is the magic of capitalism once again working us over. Most of us don’t even know we are working. But every Facebook post, tweet, or online article comment made on a for-profit website is a form of no-wage labor that grows the massive wealth of tech industrialists. Today, billions of us inhabit a form of volunteerism in which we work countless hours a day providing free content for social media corporations.

(Meronek & Stanley n.d.)

Some years back, having been inspired by online platforms like the Crunk Feminist Collective and the work of black feminist online laborers like Moya Bailey and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, yet feeling the intensity of transphobia filter through the experience of community isolation, I started bringing online the work and political legacy of trans women of color activists and artists living in New York City in the post-Stonewall Riots era. I wanted to know who else had felt this way and why.

Because of historical erasure and a host of other violences, many of the lives of trans people of color—specifically trans women of color, drag queens of color, and people who identified as transvestites or transsexual—were only accidentally archived. While working on this

project, I frequented formal archives and came across traces and imprints—whether on film or in bequeathed papers—of the life I was searching for.

I made a Vimeo account to start video blogging and sharing interviews and archival footage. I also made a Tumblr account to write about the people whose lives touched mine, including Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, as well as the organization they started, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. One of the videos features Sylvia Rivera fighting her way on stage in 1973 to remind a white middle class gay movement that poor people and people in prison matter. This video turned into a symbol for many people of the lingering violences of trans women of color being exiled from social movements as well as our long legacy of resisting that kind of erasure.

As the project got bigger, people began to tell me about the power they felt in the work I was doing, reflecting back the importance of our life and how meaningful that action can be for those of us who have been navigating isolation, trial, and emotional violence for a long time. That in turn has helped many of us connect with each other online and IRL in order to have an even bigger impact on social movements seeking to change structures, systems, and the way we interact with each other.

This was not my first experience navigating digital activism. In 2007 I started organizing with a Queers for Economic Justice grassroots project called the Welfare Warriors. Those of us in the Welfare Warriors had all experienced poverty, and many of us were currently living in it. We knew our experiences, if ever told, were not authored by us and certainly not meant to be shared with an audience of other queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people living in poverty. We wanted to change that and learn from each other, so we started a Participatory Action Research (PAR) group with CUNY Graduate Center. Our mission was to:

- lift up the voices of people who do not have a voice;
- document and expose injustice that exists beyond public view;
- document the creative ways that people survive, resist, have each others' backs, and foster liberation;
- share information with others about how to deal with shelters, housing, public assistance, and the courts, to make the process less hard and isolating; and
- support social change campaigns.

We did this by writing, making art and video work about living on assistance, asking each other about the experiences of being a lgbtgnc person navigating poverty, and telling our stories. We consistently discussed how isolating poverty can be, especially as it is entangled with other forms of violence, such as homophobia, racism, ableism, and transphobia. We talked about strategies and how we dealt with violence, a lot of us sharing our experiences of staying in whatever home (hotel, apartment, and shelter) we could and not going outside as a way to avoid violence.

As we started writing *A Fabulous Attitude*, our PAR report on “low-income lgbtgnc people surviving & thriving on love, shelter & knowledge,” I began to learn about Twitter blogging. This followed an immersive trip with the Welfare Warriors to the 2010 Allied Media Conference, where I learned new online organizing strategies as well as the limitations, violences, and activism around the tech industry, such as where internet lines are laid down, how they displace Indigenous communities, or how Facebook and Google are gentrifying communities of color. As scholars Jian Chen and Lissette Olivares point out:

The “virtual” network infrastructure does not only rely on conductors (cables, towers, satellites), nodes (connecting points, protocols, packet switching), and devices (computers, mobile phones, digital cameras). It also depends on a labor-intensive economy that includes creative work along with cassiterite mining, semiconductor manufacturing, [and] the production and laying of fiber-optic cables in regions of Africa, Latin America, and Asia Revealing the hidden labour of the transnational bodies found on the integrated circuit is mandatory for a critical understanding of global media networks and commerce.

(Chen & Olivares 2014: 247–8)

So for those of us committed to dismantling interlocking oppression, examining *how* we get the internet and *who* gets to access it is as crucial as *what* is on it.

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In 1998 New York State passed a regulation that banned access to hormones and all surgeries commonly sought by transgender people. The impact was quick and deep, as thousands of low-income transgender people and transgender people of color were cut off from life-saving care and denied much-needed treatments. In response to the regulation, trans and gender nonconforming Medicaid recipients and allies engaged in a long term campaign to fight back, knowing that the issue was not just about policy but about who could go to a doctor, who had access to healthcare, and who could live.

In 2014, an announcement repealing the regulation came after a long campaign for healthcare that engaged a variety of strategies, including our communities combining legal advocacy in the form of a class action lawsuit against the state; IRL direct actions, such as marches and interruptions, with digital activism such as a change.org petition; online video PSAs about trans healthcare; a set of catchy infographics; and the hashtag #TransHealthcareNOW, which put pressure on the Department of Health through exposing their discrimination in public ways. One of the most thrilling efforts was in May of 2014, when a group of us involved in the campaign went to the HxRefactored Conference (which for a time advertised itself as happening in “Brooklyn, America’s trendiest suburb,” reflecting the very real links between tech and gentrification) for tech designers and developers, with a focus on healthcare. At the conference, New York’s commissioner of health spoke.

As the commissioner was setting up his laptop, we passed out our information and then rushed the stage with a banner that read, “New York Needs #TransHealthcareNOW End Medicaid Discrimination.” From the stage, we explained why we were protesting. The positive reception from the crowd—who gave us a standing ovation for the action and for engaging the commissioner of health about why New York state discriminated against trans people—completely took us by surprise, and so did the widespread media coverage of the campaign afterwards, including coverage on digital platforms such as Upworthy, Autostraddle, and BuzzFeed (Maddie 2014). Seven months later, and after 16 years of denying basic healthcare to low-income transgender New Yorkers, Governor Cuomo and the New York State Department of Health announced that New York’s Medicaid programs would now cover transgender healthcare.

The repeal announcement came in response to the incredible persistence of our communities in demanding this care and grassroots campaigns led by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), Make the Road NY, Trans Justice of the Audre Lorde Project, and the Trans Women of Color Coalition. The newly adopted regulation is not perfect—it does not cover young people under eighteen, and it does not apply to all forms of gender-affirming care. But as someone who worked on the campaign to end New York’s regulation against healthcare for trans people, I consider this a momentous victory, one that reflects that trans people and our allies are powerful and capable of changing the world and each other.

While this campaign marks a certain kind of success for the digital activism tactics in our healthcare campaign, one particular moment raised significant concerns about the strategy of digital activism and visibility for the trans liberation movement, one inextricably linked to ending all forms of oppression, including the violence of the prison industrial complex.

Around the same time that the healthcare campaign received significant media attention, the SRLP launched a campaign to end solitary confinement on behalf of incarcerated community members and specifically of Synthia China Blast, an SRLP client and Prisoner Advisory Committee Member, who has been incarcerated in New York for over 21 years. Synthia, a transgender Latina woman, experienced family rejection, lack of access to safe education, homelessness, police profiling, and violence because she is transgender. The violent gender policing and various forms of trauma she experienced as a youth have only been reproduced and exacerbated while being held in various men’s prisons operated by the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) over the past 17 years.

Synthia has been placed in isolation for over a decade for her own “protection,” but, in reality, this has negatively affected her mental health and disallowed her from accessing any programs that would incline a parole board to grant her parole. SRLP created a petition page using open source CiviCRM, featured Synthia on the SRLP Prisoner Advisory Committee blog, and partnered with actress and producer, Laverne Cox, to create a video to increase awareness of both Synthia’s case and the broader use of solitary confinement, punitive or otherwise. While the video and campaign were featured on BuzzFeed, the immediate backlash was overwhelming. Anti-trans online activists used Synthia’s conviction for the second-degree murder of Ebony Nicole Williams as an opportunity to pressure Laverne Cox to stop partnering with the SRLP and also put pressure on the SRLP to stop supporting Synthia (Molloy 2014). The SRLP responded with a statement in which they wrote:

We do not research the underlying convictions of our PAC members because we do not believe a state conviction tells the entirety of a person’s story. Nor do we believe that anyone should live in fear of sexual violence on a daily basis or be subjected to other forms of violence solely because of their gender identity or conviction. Not only is this a basic foundation of our work, but it is something the constitution requires.

(End Solitary campaign video information 2014)

What I found powerful about the SRLP’s campaign to end solitary confinement is that it does not fit a framework of respectability (the respectable nonviolent trans prisoner) in order to raise questions about who, even in incredibly marginal communities, has access to a level of visibility in the first place, without facing scrutiny and backlash. By “respectable,” I mean a person whose actions and identity are most sympathetic to a white supremacist/transphobic viewer as opposed to a person whose actions and identity challenge the white supremacy and transphobia at the very roots of how “respect” or “respectable” is defined.

The decision to support someone living through such intense violence was deeply linked to a victory that took place months after the backlash from the campaign to support Synthia China Blast and end solitary confinement. New York City (NYC) decided to put new limitations on its use of solitary confinement for people in NYC jails. Having received a very different kind of online reception from #TransHealthcareNOW, and having worked to abolish the prison industrial complex and its entanglement in and enforcement of transphobia, racism, ableism, and isolation, the SRLP received backlash to its ending solitary confinement campaign. This backlash raised serious questions about using visibility through digital platforms as a means to support the liberation struggles of oppressed people. To me, the most urgent questions were: What do we open up ourselves and our communities to when we seek out visibility?

In November 2014, after the SRLP faced significant backlash around supporting Synthia, Eric A. Stanley organized a multigenerational panel of Black trans women, including myself, CeCe McDonald, Jeanetta Johnson, and Miss Major, entitled, “We Cannot Live Without Our Lives: A Conversation on Anti-blackness, Trans Resistance and Prison Abolition” at the University of California, San Diego. During the panel, we discussed and problematized the function of visibility for Black trans women, including how it could be used as a tool of criminalization and increased punishment, such as in Synthia’s case, not a tenant of liberation.

So often, visibility uses the lens of respectability to determine who, even in the most vulnerable communities, should be seen and heard. I believe that, through the filter of visibility, those of us most at risk to state violence become even more vulnerable to that violence. As Eunsong Kim writes in “The Politics of Trending,” when we use Twitter “trending” as a way to determine what is important, we often do not notice that we are using a framework, particularly a secret, proprietary algorithm of a company, to understand what is important:

#Ferguson has been used over 2,000 times on March 1st alone . . . clearly surpassing the usage of the current US trends of #WeWantTheCup and contending with the usage of #ExplainAMovieByItsTitle. Basically, #Ferguson should be trending everyday. . . I bring this up to point to how the “journalistic scholarship” around visibility and trending is completely and utterly misinformed, misframed and just plain silly. The exceptional attention given to hashtag discourse by critics, news platforms and journalists—to what they perceive to be evidence of visibility—takes the focus away from the spaces created by gendered and racialized users, and re-writes it as a singular confrontation racialized/gendered users are having with white audiences within a white space. This rewriting positions trending tags to be isolated explosions. It does not labor through the possibility of communal, ongoing engagement and sustainment, for better or for worse.

(Kim 2015)

Kim lays out key ways communities resisting oppression are already “hacking a commons” in the face of the violence of visibility and trending:

- the communities that congregate around tags, regardless of their trends
- the users that notice when important topic[s] (such as #Ferguson) are not trending, and use alternative tags (such as #mediablackout)
- users who pre-emptively create “when in jail” accounts (planning the heist!!!)
- anti-doxing collectives

- users on Twitter & Tumblr, that retweet/retumble posts but tag their critique (for example, this is not native looks through various “native” “indian” tags and retags the “original” with links on appropriation, genocide, and add: appropriation.)

(Kim 2015)

These actions by users belie the myth of the slacktivist or armchair activist who just uses social media for consumption. There are vibrant communities using corporatized platforms in so many ways that create a new landscape for digital media. As we go forward, we must work to ensure that this work is appreciated, though perhaps some of it needs to remain invisible to propel the kind of changes we wish to see in our world.

Misogynoir and the Politics of Citation

By Moya Bailey

As a digital humanist, I often try to explain and defend the field and its potential within academia. Recent articles in both mainstream and academic presses have tried to contextualize the DH terrain for skeptical audiences (Gold 2012; Barnett 2014; Grusin 2014; Kirschenbaum 2014; Leroi 2015). Digital humanities employs digital tools in the service of humanities inquiries that would be difficult to study without these implements. I think often of Lauren Klein’s coding of a script that makes James Hemmings’s significance in the Thomas Jefferson archive undeniably clear (Klein 2013). What would have been a painstaking study of thousands of documents can be automated within a digital repository. DH also encompasses humanities questions posed of our digital age. For those of us already convinced of the possible breakthroughs DH can provide, internal struggles within DH often hinge on the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and disability are frequently missing from practitioners’ analysis. I am connected to a group of like-minded DH enthusiasts who strive to create social justice-oriented scholarship. Under the umbrella, #transformDH, we focus on the ways that using digital tools to help investigate concerns related to those most marginalized in society can be of great benefit to our research while simultaneously encouraging our colleagues to examine the ways race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability are present in theirs.

I have argued that there are many scholarly projects that, while not officially claimed by DH, have digital humanities components (Bailey 2015). These projects remain on the periphery of DH discussions but may find significant traction in other arenas. It is in that spirit that I wish to say a bit about my own portmanteau, *misogynoir*, and its proliferation in digital spaces, such as Tumblr, Twitter, and online journalism, despite its limited impact within scholarly communities. Although it has limited use in scholarly spaces, misogynoir’s presence within academia and production by an academic give it the validity required to appear as a Wikipedia entry (Misogynoir 2015). This strange refraction, in which academic origins are privileged over the origins within the networks that use the word, offers some new theoretical terrain for DH to consider. Where can DH be done, and whose scholarship counts as DH?

As the conceiver of the word misogynoir, I appreciate its prevalence, but I know that digital feminists beyond the academy are primarily responsible for its promulgation. In particular, Trudy Hamilton, womanist scholar and creator of the site Gradient Lair, has penned several posts that expand misogynoir beyond my initial writing about the word. I highlight her work to emphasize the need for a conception of DH that makes room for people outside the academy. Digital humanities should also grapple with what humanity looks like in a digital age—a gesture that requires a focus beyond the ivory tower.

Misogynoir describes the co-constitutive, antiblack, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women, particularly in visual and digital culture (Bailey 2010). In conversations with friends and colleagues, I struggled to find a way to describe the specific types of violent imagery that seemed to target Black women in popular spaces. For example, in July 2014 the hashtag #ruinablackgirlsmonday was used to spread and celebrate images and ideas that would ostensibly ruin a Black girl's day. Many of the images and language in the hashtag perpetuate age-old stereotypes of Black women's supposed unattractiveness and hypersexual nature, while promoting white womanhood and femininity as desirable. Many of these images included white women with shapely bodies, particularly round butts, implying that there was no reason to date a Black woman for her supposed curves if there are white women who look like the women in the pictures (no black girls 2014). The media malignment of Black tennis sensation, Serena Williams, particularly her depiction in digital news media, is atrocious and has been since her career started as a teenager (Cooper 2015). Similar memes often depict Black women failing at being desirable to Black men or men generally. I wanted to name this type of racialized, gendered representation as a specific constellation that targets and polices Black women's desirability, and in so doing I found that other Black women had noticed this phenomenon as well.

As a graduate student I was invited to join a people of color writing group called the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC). In one of my earliest pieces, I used misogynoir to talk about the ways I felt Black women were being misrepresented in rap lyrics. Many in the CFC started to use the word in their own pieces for the blog, and slowly but surely it started to be adopted in other digital spaces. The crucial turning point was when womanist digital activist, Trudy, started to use it on her Tumblr, Gradient Lair.

Trudy wrote several eloquent posts in which she discussed how misogynoir operates, opening up the word to new audiences on the periphery of academic circles. Her post, "Misogyny, In General vs. Anti-Black Misogyny (Misogynoir), Specifically," provides several examples that illustrate the ways in which the anti-Black misogyny that Black women experience differs from the misogyny white women experience (Trudy 2013). This post received nearly 1,000 reblogs and likes on the Tumblr platform. Her use of misogynoir to make sense of events in her own life and in digital culture helped move the word into new spaces and prompted questions about its meaning. The word is able to move at lightning speed in this digital age. Only ten academic articles use the word despite numerous online journal articles, blog posts, and tweets, many from Trudy. Academic articles are primarily the ones cited to corroborate the word's significance to Wikipedia, despite Trudy and others' use of it in popular publications such as *Salon* and *Ebony* (Cooper 2015; Lemieux 2015).

On May 11, 2014, Michelleyc, a student at Barnard College, created a page for the word as part of a class assignment for her English class ("User" 2014). Students in the class, "The Worlds of Shange," were required to create and edit Wikipedia pages that related to themes of Ntzoke Shange's work ("Education Program" 2014). Michelleyc also edited the Wikipedia page of Michelle Wallace to include a more robust account of her work's relationship to Black feminism, and other classmates also made edits that explicitly named Black feminist contributions to existing articles.

The creation of the misogynoir Wikipedia entry was an assignment for an undergraduate class, though its introduction to that audience was through blog posts and Tumblr posts. While Wikipedia is derided by academics as an inappropriate source for students to cite in their research papers, it is becoming more acceptable for students to create Wikipedia content that draws on what would be considered more reliable sources, like academic articles and books.

However, in the rapid world of digital publishing, the articles that reference misogynoir debuted years after my initial blog post on the CFC. This lag time within academic publishing means that topics can remain contested until they are corroborated by an academic authority. Despite creating the word and being in the academy, I am not an appropriate source for the Wikipedia article unless I have published an academic article that can be cited.

Michelleyc and other Wikipedia users linked Trudy's Tumblr posts as source material for their explication of the term and its popularity. The Tumblr posts by Trudy were removed as sources for the Wikipedia article because Wikipedia has strict rules about what counts as a source. Tumblr and other blog posts are not considered reliable sources, or as reliable as print publications or academic journals. Despite the word first appearing on a blog page and growing in popularity in digital spaces that are more accessible than digital academic journals, the academic journals are what lend the word credibility. In fact, according to the talk page that documents the conversations about the entry for misogynoir, there was concern that the word should be removed from Wikipedia because it was not properly cited ("Talk" 2014). It was only in December of 2015 that Trudy was added to the entry. She is now properly credited as creating the lexical definition of the word, though she has since retreated from the web given the abuse and mistreatment she has experienced (Trudy 2015).

Wikipedia works by allowing users to generate content, which is then reviewed and edited by other Wikipedia users. There has been a lot of documentation about the ways in which cultural disparities show up in Wikipedia, particularly questions about the way that sources must be vetted via traditional media like print publications, books, TV, and movies. Blog posts are not considered valid sources. Following debate in the entry's talk page about whether my initial post on the CFC was an acceptable source, it was allowed to stay. Despite the fact that it was the digital adoption of misogynoir that drove the creation of its Wikipedia page, it is the limitedly available scholarly publications that prove that the word is important.

I think digital humanities theories and practices are of use here, where the old practices of vetting information have not been adapted to address the ever changing and quickly evolving nature of our increasingly digital world. Part of the work of DH is explaining the importance and utility of digital tools for creating new standards. When we look at DH, we see the importance of innovative and nontraditional approaches to knowledge production. If Wikipedia is an online digital encyclopedia, why would it not value the digital from which it emanates?

Though I coined misogynoir, I know I am not solely responsible for its use and successful deployment across a variety of platforms and users. Trudy and others really built the use of the word through their use and promotion. That labor should be compensated, but how do we do that? By publishing this piece in this anthology I may have validated the very thing that I wish could be validated through digital production.

Conclusion

We hope that this chapter puts into perspective the potential of DH beyond the academy and for people who are not academics. Researchers doing digital humanities work are both in and outside the academy, requiring new methodologies around publishing and promotion. Social media platforms and other digital tools are advancing social justice causes and spreading important information that needs to be heard by multiple audiences in multiple locations. This chapter is another example of the kind of work we wish to see.

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ANALOG GIRLS IN DIGITAL WORLDS

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