

# Chapter 10. Developing a Black Feminist Research Ethic: A Methodological Approach to Research in Digital Spaces

Constance Haywood  
EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

“...Black women’s knowing is acquired through our various experiences living, surviving, and thriving within multiple forms of oppression. It is a self-defined, embodied way of knowing.”

– Patterson et al. (*Black Feminist Thought as Methodology*)

In a world of civil unrest and unending racial violence, digital platforms allow marginalized groups the space and opportunity to connect, build community, and safely network amongst each other. They also largely make room for these groups to organize and amplify the experiences, needs, and concerns of inner communities to larger publics. For example, Black women are a group that often turn to digital platforms for several personal, political, social, and community-focused reasons; for many, their very presence in these spaces aids in their efforts to push back against the overlapping heteronormative, racist, sexist, and classist systems that harm them, kill them, and, ultimately, were not created for them.

From blogging to the use of #BlackLivesMatter hashtags, digital and Internet spaces grant Black women the ability to exist, write, and work in ways that significantly add to the varied and extensive writing and rhetorical histories that they carry. As Black women have historically used language and literacy as a means of advocacy and survival, this new and forming digital history—and the literacies and practices developing within it—has influenced digital researchers to investigate the kinds of platforms that Black women communities—and Black online communities, more generally—take up. This includes (but is not limited to) research inquiries around how Black digital platforms and spaces function, how they are managed, and how they aid in communicative processes. Given the popularity and the possibilities that these technologies afford, these spaces also yield ample opportunities for writing researchers to identify and inquire into new(er) areas of research, particularly around digital and social media writing practices (Walls and Vie), online community-building (Sawyer), and digital resistance (Duthely).

While these areas rightfully deserve more attention, it is to be noted that with the work of digital research often arises ethical dilemmas. Thankfully, as a field, rhetoric and composition has always been concerned with issues of research ethics (Banks and Eble; DePew; Sidler). In the 2004 summer issue of *College Com-*

*position and Communication* (CCCC), the “Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies” was published. Briefly outlining the general values, commitments, and procedures of writing research in the overall field, this document asserts that those identifying as composition specialists should “share a commitment to [protect] the rights, privacy, dignity, and well-being of the persons . . . involved in their studies” (779). Though these guidelines did not at the time explicitly address research endeavors that take place in and around digital spaces, the shift of writing research from physical to digital does not by any means alter the grounding research principles of our field; as composition specialists, it is still among the values of digital writing researchers to ensure that those included in our research studies are protected—even if that means that we can no longer rely on prescriptive ethical frameworks to get the job done.

When it comes to digital spaces that serve marginalized populations (e.g., Black women), we find that these communities are often targeted, scrutinized, harassed, and met with an overload of digital aggressions (Canella; Reyman and Sparby; Haywood). This alone should signal to researchers that how we engage these communities in our research must be as careful and deliberate as it is contingent on our relationships to them. What happens, though, when we find that the risks associated with research and the relationships that we have with these communities directly conflict with our abilities to do the research itself? In rhetoric and composition, how do we begin to cultivate methodologies that assist us in sifting through the initial muck of emotions, processes, and ethical dilemmas that tend to come along with researching both in and around multiple-marginalized communities?

As Annette Markham puts it, “ethic is method and method is ethic.” In forming research methodologies, we must reconsider our research practices to better attend to our ethical obligations to research participants and communities. For the purposes of this chapter, I forward a Black feminist methodology, as Black feminist epistemologies view and approach ethics by emphasizing the need to reflect inwardly paying less attention to outsider knowledge(s) and giving more attention to knowledge that comes directly out of embodied experience, personal accountability, acts of care, and community connectedness (Collins “Toward an Afrocentric”). In minding this understanding of ethics, the researcher is required to remain in a reflective space where their proximity to the communities that they work with determines the methods they choose to go about their work. Thus, this chapter will combine my personal experiences with digital writing research and Black feminist thought to begin theorizing a research ethic that deprioritizes research itself and places the needs and safety of community members at forefront. By centering Black feminist theory and highlighting Black feminist (AND Black feminist adjacent) research methods across fields, this chapter calls for researchers in rhetoric and composition to place more of a priority on our ethical responsibilities to research participants and communities—especially those who identify as multiple-marginalized.

## A Story on Experience and Ethics

Following the Black feminist tradition, I find it both necessary and critical to theorize around these ideas through my own personal experiences. Before continuing with this chapter, I will recount a recent research experience, as it has both inspired my writing and driven most of my thought process(es)/work around digital research ethics over the past year.

In spring 2019, I began a project combining discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis to look at Black language and its role in both the formation and continuation of digital and communal discourses. At core, I wanted more insights into 1) how Black communities use Black Language (more commonly known as African American Vernacular English AAVE) and rhetorical practices within digital space(s) and 2) how Black community members use digital spaces in ways that allow them to build community and intentionally engage in larger public discourses. To do this, my plan was to examine a series of conversation topics/threads in a public Facebook group that I was part of. To gather the information that I needed, I planned to code and analyze exchanges between group members largely based on conversation topic(s), means of communication, common linguistic features of Black language (e.g., rhythmic language, call and response, etc.), and the invocation of Black rhetorical traditions (e.g., signifyin', use of cultural references, etc.). I had finally gotten to a point in the project where I felt that I had a good grasp of what I wanted to do, and I knew (for the most part) of how I might go about it. Still, something inside of me was not at ease.

The group that I wanted to conduct my work in is a public Black liberation group.<sup>1</sup> Anyone with access to Facebook can go search the group, join it, and access its content. Based on current digital research guidelines, there was nothing “technically” withholding me from conducting research on this space. If I wanted to, I could easily go into the space, go through with my study, and move forward with my original plan. However, as a loyal member of this group, I found myself immediately cautious when it came time to gather my data. Being privy to the kind of space that it was, the conversations that regularly took place within it, and all the important activist and liberatory work that the group regularly engaged in, I found that my own work felt almost traitorous in a sense that it would be placing an outside gaze on a space that was clearly and unapologetically FUBU.<sup>2</sup> It was in these moments that I felt the urge to reflect on my positionality to the group—as a member, as an academic, as a Black cisgendered woman, and as a Black feminist.

I also began to reflect on the space itself and the positions of the folks located within it. This space was public, but it was still intimate. It was rich with data,

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1. For the purposes of this chapter (and out of respect for the community itself), I will keep the Black liberation group mentioned anonymous.

2. FUBU, a term coined and popularized by a Black-owned clothing company in the 1990s, stands for ‘for us, by us.’ The term is often used to represent Black collectivity.

but it was also full of brilliant-minded people with varied identities, histories, and beings. Even if I did end up doing research on this space, how exactly would I encapture all of this? From this moment, I continued to ask myself a series of questions: “Would this group want this work done?”; “Who benefits most from this work?”; “Who might this work harm?”; “Are my methods invasive?”; “What power dynamics may be at play here?”; “How might I communicate my research interests to the group?”; “Is it even my place to do this work?” Riddled with multiple unanswered questions, I decided that I would contact the community administrators and respectfully inquire into conducting a pilot study on the space.

This action came after days of wrestling with the questions that ate away at my conscience. More importantly, this decision came after I spent time refreshing myself on the tenets and values of Black feminism. Remembering that knowledge-making is communal and “requires collaborative leadership among [all] those who participate in the diverse forms that . . . communities [take]” (Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 19), I felt that the most ethical action would be to first engage in a conversation with community members, as this would ultimately determine the next steps in my research process. In the first few weeks after contacting the admins, I received no response. However, after following-up on my first email, one of the group’s administrators publicly (yet implicitly) rejected my research inquiries by reiterating what the purpose and values of the group were. Respectfully, the administrators reminded the group that emails and messages inquiring into anything other than assistance with urgent, material needs would be both denied and ignored. While my name, per se, was not included in the post, I realized upon reading it that this was not the place to do research; I valued the space and the people more than I did my project. So, I started to make changes to the project altogether, with the first major revisions resulting in a change of location and purpose.

At the time, I aligned myself with this group because I carried similar values. As I write the words of this chapter, I still do. Having to abandon and reconstruct my original ideas around this project allowed me room to think more about what it actually means to work with (and protect) the people and communities that are at the center of my work. In doing this, I found that at the heart of my ideas around research ethics lies an alignment of values and self to marginalized digital communities and spaces—one that ultimately prioritizes their wellbeing and longevity over any amount of research that might be conducted (Haywood). This space of reflection has led me to begin designing a research study that bypasses me looking into the processes and inner workings of digital communities to instead examine the digital research practices and ethics carried out in rhetoric and composition. How do digital researchers in the field generally understand ethics and ethical responsibility? How exactly do our ethical responsibilities inform the methods we use in our studies? How do our methods speak to issues such as participant protection and privacy?

When it comes to digital research ethics, writing researchers tend to emphasize digital environments as places where ethical decision-making becomes re-

liant on several technological and rhetorical contexts. Often faced with the dilemma of how to approach ethical ambiguities in digital research, digital writing researchers often are unsure as to whether permissions should be garnered for the use of certain data and digital material. For example, how to decipher content in digital spaces as either private or public has proven to be an ongoing challenge. For Tabitha Adkins, in figuring out whether it is appropriate to use data from and/or conduct research around a particular space, it is first necessary to determine if members of the digital community maintain *consistent associations* or *remote associations*, both speaking directly to how community members participate within a given space (55-56). Because definitions of ethics vary by institution, field, and department, concerns around participant protection, privacy, and human harm are both consistent and reoccurring. It is for this very reason that digital writing researchers—and digital researchers, in general—are regularly encouraged to work from a range of ethical frameworks (AOIR).

While it is clear that there are digital scholars in the field who address ethical issues of protection and privacy by directly centering the people and communities located in their work (e.g., Adkins), I, too, am finding that articulations of digital ethics in the field<sup>3</sup> still largely ignore Black feminist theory as a means of methodological grounding. Perhaps this is because Black feminist theory has a history of being treated as just an “anti-racist intervention within feminism . . . [rendering] it as a disruptive and temporary event, to be addressed, responded to, and moved on from” over time (Cooper 16). Still, I can only speak from my own experiences when I say that meditating on the tenets, values, and epistemological foundations of Black feminism (Combahee River Collective; Collins “Towards an Afrocentric”; Collins *Black Feminist Thought*) is what I have found most useful in moving throughout both my life and my communities. For me, it helps to rethink and address those emotions, processes, and ethical moments I mentioned earlier that continue to emerge with this kind—my kind—of work.

## Black Feminism and Black Feminist Ethics

From its inception, Black feminism has worked to interrogate the ways that Black women experience multiple jeopardy<sup>4</sup> as well as how they come to understand the world and move throughout it. Black feminist theory sees Black women’s multilayered and complex identities (race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) as a way to think more about how major systems of oppression very rarely exist outside of each other; instead, these systems interlock and overlap (Combahee River Col-

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3. The term ‘field’ in this instance refers to rhetoric and composition as a discipline. This includes all areas within the field that engage in digital research and study (i.e., composition studies, rhetorical studies, technical communication, etc.).

4. For a full definition of multiple jeopardy, see Deborah King’s 1988 essay “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology.”

lective). This area of thought is not a new way to understand the complex relationships between identity and community by any means; as a critical social lens, Black feminist theory takes into consideration people's identities and social positionings to understand how oppressive systems work and locate how they might be dismantled. Because Black women have theorized around their own bodies, identities, communities, and positions in the world since the early 1800's (Sheftall loc. 342), they have used their experiences and knowledges to make room for change in various capacities (Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 31). Developed out of the notion that the Black women at center deserve autonomy and a means to negotiate AND be liberated from oppressive systems (Combahee River Collective loc. 4553), Black feminist values can be summarized into the following statements: 1) the sharing of experience makes room for consciousness in ways that build politics and spark change (loc. 4552), 2) radical politics tend to come directly out of attunements to identity (loc. 4568), and 3) Black feminist work must naturally and collectively benefit and liberate Black women by working to critique and dismantle interlocking political-economic systems (i.e. capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy) (loc. 4568).

Ultimately, the work of Black feminism is about positioning oneself to do work for and with multiple-marginalized folks that immediately places their well-being and needs at center. Responsibly, Black feminism does not find priority in the promotion of self, especially if that means that the self benefits from others in capitalist and imperialist ways (which, in terms of academia, may speak directly to the things that research is often and inherently tied to—e.g., publications, job hires, tenure, etc.). In the formation of a digital research ethic, values of Black feminism can directly respond to the recurrent issues of self-reflection and positionality (and how those things might inform reciprocity) as well as measures of privacy and protection. To further frame Black feminist theory as a potential methodology and ethical grounding to digital writing and rhetorical research, I pull from the work of Patricia Collins just as much as I do the work of the Combahee River Collective, as the act of centering voices and thoughts of community members across non-academic and academic spaces is, too, a value and work ethic that Black feminism maintains.

For the Combahee River Collective,<sup>5</sup> a Black feminist and lesbian group founded in the early 1970s, Black feminist thought cannot exist without the understanding that oppression is influenced by issues of race, gender, and class just as much as it is influenced by issues of sexuality and capitalism. Being one of the first feminist groups to use Black feminist theory to push back against capitalist efforts, the Combahee River Collective is responsible for some of the more central, modern developments in Black feminist values and thought. As for Patricia Hill Collins, Black feminist thought is believed to “[foster] a fundamental pragmatic shift in

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5. The Combahee River Collective is named after the river in South Carolina where Harriet Tubman led a raid that freed over 750 slaves during the Civil War.

how we think about unjust power relations” (*Black Feminist Thought* 273). This alone implies that Black feminist theory might serve as valuable to conversations around research ethics, as work around research-community relationships often speak of power through concepts such as positionality and reciprocity—concepts that are also largely found in modern feminist writing research.

Feminist researchers in rhetoric and composition have spent a rather ample amount of time thinking about how things like identity, emotion, and positionality impact research methodology and decision-making processes (Royster; Bizzell; Deutsch; Gruwell). Highlighting reflexivity, reciprocity, and transparency as issues of feminist ethics, feminist research often concerns itself with the understanding that researchers are tasked with the responsibility of handling and disseminating information that can “better the lives of women and other oppressed groups” (Gruwell 89). For example, Ellen Cushman speaks of power while presenting reciprocity as beneficial to the writing researcher just as much as it is to the community. Defined as an “open and conscious negotiation of . . . power structures [that are] reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of [people] involved in both sides of [a] relationship” (16), acts of reciprocity are the result of a recognition that the writing researcher is often in a position of power that needs to be leveled to some degree. While there is very clearly a history of reflexive practices in the field, it is to be noted that feminist research methodologies, particularly those that accentuate an ethics of care, place a rather special focus on issues of power and labor in the research process. While a Black feminist research methodology must, too, address issues of power and labor in the research process, Black feminist research methodologies address the complexities of research by 1) examining Black women’s unique, lived experience(s) and 2) using that embodied knowledge to resist, radicalize, and do work that aims to set people free.

It is without doubt that parallels can be drawn between feminist and Black feminist methodologies; however, it is to be continuously pointed out that Black feminist methodologies are developed through and by Black lived experience. In a research culture where digital spaces feel disembodied, Black feminist research practices encourage the researcher to see data as always embodied—sitting/growing/evolving beyond the screen and implicated as part of participants and their everyday lives. Bottom line, to study Black women on the web (or honestly, any multiple-marginalized group), we cannot ignore the historical, social, political, personal, and rhetorical contexts to which Black women and Black internet/tech users occupy digital space. As a Black woman researcher, it does myself, my work, and my community a disservice to ignore those contexts. In bringing my knowledge(s), my emotions, my body, and all the experiences that have been inscribed onto it into the research process, I have more room to be able to make decisions in various research situations, redistribute power, and begin shifting away from research histories that have both knowingly and unknowingly subjectivized Black people. Under a Black feminist framework, considering power and position means not only assisting researchers in thinking more critically about power itself, but also making it so that

conversations around power are repurposed to “[rearticulate and develop] knowledges that empower oppressed groups and stimulate resistance” (Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 32). As a digital research ethic, Black feminist theory makes room for researchers to reconsider, repurpose, and reapproach acts of self-reflection and reciprocity from embodied, critical standpoints.

Because Black feminism aims to do good in the world and good by others, it well-informs digital research ethics. Applying research methods that restore power and autonomy to the research subject works to address and correct histories of academic work that relied heavily on the Western gaze. The subjectivized positionings assigned to research participants and spaces have historically made room for those within academia to conduct studies on/around/with people and communities without feeling the need to consider their experiences, desires, and perspectives critically and responsibly in the process. This is especially so regarding digital research, as research in digital spaces can often seem disembodied and/or disconnected from humanity.

### Tracing a Black Feminist Research Ethic Across Fields

Ethical frameworks are often difficult to develop, mainly because ideas around ethics are varied. In those same respects, there are several ways to understand how a Black feminist ethic might operate as well as understand what the implications of that work might be in digital writing research. Because Black feminism examines multiple identities simultaneously, an ethic of this tradition must remain open to change and interpretation. Even though Black feminist thought has specific tenets and values, it is heterogeneous in how it is conceptualized and taken up both across and within Black women communities. Thus, a research ethic pulling from this tradition must shy away from likeness and stability; since it is based mainly on drawing knowledge out of embodied experience and practice, it always has room for rhetorical deliberation and development.

With digital writing research, a Black feminist ethic inherently sees digital data as tethered to humans and human experience. In terms of the rhetorical language project that I detailed earlier, my own sense of Black feminist ethics helped me (i.e., the researcher) to do the rhetorical work of choosing early methods and working in ways that carefully examined what my next steps would be. Because a Black feminist ethic needs to consistently use Black women’s knowledge and embodied experiences to determine how digital community spaces should be interacted with, it requires engaging with Black feminist texts and collaborating with Black women. In other words, at center should be Black women’s thought and scholarship, regardless of whether those at center are the researchers themselves, the research participant/community, or a combination of both. In working out of the experiences and realities of multiple-marginalized identities both on and off the web, a Black feminist ethic can help make decisions around issues of boundaries (where on the web people/communities should exist without gaze) and assist with issues of embodied



resistance (i.e., how to use one's experiences to intentionally preserve/provide space for said communities to exist in digital realms). An ethic of sorts can also help call for acts of critical self-reflection, radical acts of reciprocity, and commitments to the dismantling of oppressive systems. By emphasizing the protections and privacies of those most at risk of harm through all these things, a Black feminist research ethic intentionally makes space for those who have historically had their autonomy stripped in ways that they might have that autonomy restored.

There are a few scholars in rhetoric and composition who work out of Black digital spaces and Black women's online communities (Kynard; Sawyer; Duthely); however, it appears that digital rhetoric and writing research that directly names Black feminism and Black feminist theory as a place of methodological departure does not exist. This is not to say, though, that there aren't Black feminists in our field or that there aren't researchers who understand their research and work commitments through a Black feminist lens. While articulations of digital research ethics in rhetoric and composition tend to not explicitly use Black feminist theory as a methodology, traces<sup>6</sup> of Black feminist thought and ethics are still likely to be found. As Collins writes, "To look for Black feminism by searching for . . . Black women who self-identify as 'Black feminists' misses the complexity of how Black feminist practice actually operates" (*Black Feminist Thought* 30). This is especially so for Black feminist works outside of our field, as there are several studies that engage digital work, methods, and ethics by first considering the participants and communities at center. This is precisely why it is important to look at what is happening both inside and outside of rhetoric and composition; doing so provides a fuller view of the work Black feminist ethics can do for digital writing research in the future. Multiple scholars across fields of study pull from Black feminist theory to situate themselves to their work, understand ethical responsibility, and inform the research methods they use. Here, I turn to examples of what I would call a Black feminist and Black feminist-adjacent ethos that details methods and ethical practices driven by the identities/experiences, needs, and protections of the marginalized communities engaged.

## Critical Self Reflection and Radical Reciprocity

As previously mentioned, having and/or maintaining a Black feminist orientation to the world innately keeps one reflecting on their self, their experiences, and

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6. Natasha Jones' 2020 technical communication article titled "Coalitional Learning in the Contact Zones" is a prime example of a work within the rhetoric and composition field that can be situated within BFT. In making the argument that technical communication, composition studies, and other related fields can learn from each other, Jones uses decolonial theory and BFT to develop a narrative inquiry method. More specifically, in developing her method(s), Jones explicitly reflects on/centers the work of Black women writers and thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde.

their ways of moving about various spaces, places, and situations. When applied to research, a Black feminist approach to digital research would likely operate in a number of ways—but mostly in ways that deliberately work towards the benefit of people and communities who are misrepresented or put at the most risk. In thinking more around this, I turn to the Combahee River Collective as well as to works of digital research scholars whose practices seemingly align with what a Black feminist ethics calls for.

“As feminists we do not want to mess over people in politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. (Combahee River Collective, loc. 4669-4686)

As demonstrated here, Black feminism places a high priority in thinking more around how people should situate and understand themselves, their values, and their responsibilities in collaborating with others. For example, Keila Taylor addresses the role, benefits, and responsibilities that critical self-reflection holds in Women and Gender Studies research. By reflecting on “ethical critical practices,” Taylor posits that “in-depth interviews can be as radical as a political protest” because it makes room for storytelling practices and raises awareness of the kind of empathy needed in collecting data from Black women participants. With this, Taylor recalls moments in the interview processes where sensitive materials were shared (721). By reflecting on the moments in her interviewing and data collection processes where she had to make decisions around what to publish and what to keep confidential, Taylor locates a need for researchers to spend time not only developing trust with participants but paying close attention to the ways that participant histories and experiences impact the care in their research practices. In applying this to a Black feminist digital research ethic, reflexivity must be taken into consideration in digital research, particularly around how researcher’s relationships with the participants and communities they engage online should be an influencing factor in how they go about their work. More specifically, this Black feminist ethic keens digital researchers specifically to how one’s values 1) shape their research relationships and 2) work to locate and leverage their power/positions located within those relationships.

In social movement studies, Kevin Gillan and Jenny Pickerill help researchers to think through both the necessity and complexity of reciprocity in one’s work. By highlighting that activists themselves often face tremendous risks in their work, Gillan and Pickerill suggest that researchers enact an “ethics of immediate reciprocation” which consists of the researcher aiding the activist and/or the social movement they are studying (136). In doing this, though, they take the time to address the identity of the “activist-scholar” as well as the more common issue

of activist agendas being taken on in academia as a way to “further one’s academic career” (136). Because this move that some activist-scholars make is the complete antithesis of what a reciprocal act should be, Gillan and Pickerill stress that when it comes to research ethics, the researcher should be honest in how they come to their reciprocations as well as how those reciprocations are maintained.

I further the work of Gillan and Pickerill to emphasize the need for what a Black feminist digital research ethic would label as radical reciprocity. Radical reciprocity maintains that “researchers . . . see their work not necessarily as the ‘exchange’ that more traditional definitions of reciprocity seem to nudge at, but more-so as a collective and gradual move with the communities we engage in a forward and socially-just direction” (Haywood). For the most part, this entails that researchers’ reciprocal acts be formed within commitments to not do harm just as much as they are formed in full support of the communities they are aimed towards. Radical reciprocity also acknowledges that not all participants and communities seek reciprocity —especially if they are already resistant to engage with the researcher from the start. Additionally, in circumstances where research participants and communities deny a reciprocal relationship with the researcher, radical reciprocity means being willing to support research participants and communities outside of research and outside of personal gain.

In terms of a Black feminist ethic, the understandings and practices within this framework should strive to simultaneously engage researchers’ positions, the overlapping identities, histories, and experiences of research participants, and the overall well-being of the at-risk participants engaged in research. Emphasizing practices like critical self-reflection and radical reciprocity, this component of Black feminist research ethics works to prevent a “messaging over [of] people.”

## Positionality

Another important component of a Black feminist research ethic is the enacted commitment to considering multiple identities and histories located in one’s work. The following excerpt digs into why paying close attention to overlaps in multiple identities and histories matter:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression that is neither solely racial or sexual, e.g. the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (Combahee River Collective, loc. 4563-4577)

In the excerpt, members of the Combahee River Collective contend that overlapping identities can never really be seen as separate as these identities

build upon each other and create/give meaning to specific embodied experiences. When it comes to digital writing and rhetoric research, this kind of commitment works as a way to understand data as never being separate from humans nor human experience. Coming out of cultural studies, Nicole Brown discusses the use of mixed methods—specifically the use of computational tools and autoethnography—to add depth to the ways digital data around Black American women are collected and processed. Naming this process as a *methodological cyborg*, Brown’s meshing of the two tools speaks directly to the method’s ability to simultaneously address computation’s “racialized and gendered biases within its algorithmic assemblages” and Black feminist knowledge-making practices (65). Likewise, bioethics scholars Amal Cheema et al. highlight Black feminist theory (which they use interchangeably as intersectional theory) as a methodological approach to research based on the idea that it provides health care with ways to be more “inclusive and empowering” (1). Cheema et al. posits that by 1) developing research questions around the lived and embodied experiences of research participants, 2) choosing research methods that capture social inequities and push back against the consolidations of participants’ experiences, and 3) dedicating time to analyze and revisit empirical data, researchers have the ability to develop research processes that are more encompassing of people’s complex identities.

With both works, Brown and Cheema et al. enact a Black feminist ethic to research because they acknowledge that data is shaped by and through people. For digital research, this means we should not only view our data-collecting practices as highly complex, interpretive, and contextual, but we should also interact with that data in ways that highlight this importance. For digital methods, this, too, means that approaches to data collection and data dissemination should reflect the digital communities we work with in the various forms they take.

## Protection and Privacy

Lastly, one of the most important components of a Black feminist research ethic is a commitment to liberation. The following quote captures the kind of sentiment that current articulations of research ethics across fields and spaces seem to lack: “We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy” (Combahee River Collective, loc. 4578). In translating this through a digital research lens, I turn to works that discuss digital research sites as places where subaltern politics have caused researchers and scholars alike to “reconsider the role of digital epistemologies in everyday discourse and public pedagogy” (Hill 291). As a study out of urban education, Marc Hill submits that places and spaces like Twitter are not abstract; Black people regularly use these platforms to engage in various discourse(s), protest, and resist in very real, very tangible ways. Thus, there is a need to develop methods that approach users, communities, and

data in ways that not only work to benefit research but also work to “spotlight, protect, humanize, and, perhaps, save Black lives” (297).

When it comes to a Black feminist digital research ethic, understandings of liberation within this context submit that in whatever work we researchers do, we should in some way be aiming to 1) address and undo the many hegemonic systems that exist in digital space(s) and 2) do this work with goals (no matter how impossible they may sometimes seem) to do very little harm or no harm altogether. Within this, the commitment to liberation should recognize that many online spaces occupied by marginalized communities are already active, busy, and engaged in culturally relevant, rhetorical (and often, private) work. This work, no matter how much it may provide the researcher insights to community relationships with technology, does not exist as mere spectacle. Thus, a commitment to liberation on part of the digital researcher not only keeps this in consideration but also calls for more explicitly addressed concerns around protection(s) and privacy that simultaneously validates participants’ labor and existence while pushing back against oppressive and invasive digital practices. This, I believe, is especially relevant in working with Black women, marginalized communities, and several activist communities who experience harm and exploitation at accelerated rates in both physical and digital spaces. In reconsidering the roles that digital spaces provide, a need to reassess the harms that may come with researching these spaces is always necessary.

## Black Feminist Ethics: A Look Ahead

Since Black feminist theory prioritizes the lived experiences of Black women and Black people, a Black feminist research ethic should absolutely do the same. Black feminist epistemologies see great value in utilizing knowledge(s) developed out of Black lived experiences, and researchers who take on a Black feminist research ethic have a responsibility in carefully positioning themselves (and their methodological practices) in ways that 1) go beyond any benefit of the self and 2) demonstrate great concern and care for all parties involved. Because Black feminist theory requires digital writing researchers to examine and consider the historical, social, political, personal, and rhetorical contexts by which Black women and Black digital citizens occupy space, it also forwards a research process that assists researchers in wading through varied decision-making processes in ways that closely examine the research situations, redistribute power (if need be), and work towards the benefit of those who might possibly be at risk/harm. Because there is little-to-no digital ethics work in rhetoric and composition-related fields that draws explicitly from Black feminist theory, it is pertinent that Black feminist theory be sought after and applied in research more intentionally in coming years. By examining Black feminist and Black feminist-adjacent research ethics both inside and across fields of study, researchers can begin to trace, develop, and use Black feminist theory to construct and employ self-reflection, reciprocity, and various other methodological practices from embodied and critical standpoints.

Because developments around Black feminism should be “tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people” (Combahee River Collective, loc. 4557), I can see a Black feminist ethic being utilized to do a large range of work in digital spaces. While most of this chapter has focused on the work that a Black feminist ethic can do when engaging the work and spaces of multiple-marginalized people, it is not unreasonable to imagine a Black feminist ethic being developed to address bad actors in digital spaces or being used to deliberately push back against white supremacist narratives on the Internet. Black feminist ethics must remain anti-racist, anti-misogynist, and anti-capitalist in practices, and because online spaces continue to develop and engage new publics regularly, we need new methods and ways of researching that reflect these changes.

Moving forward, I envision a Black feminist research ethic reframing the ways digital researchers within rhetoric and composition understand their work. We need more ethical frameworks that reestablish our commitments in digital research towards the prioritization of the people, communities, and spaces located within it. To do this, there needs to be explicit acknowledgment of the roles that lived experience and positionality play in digital research. There also needs to be more of a consideration of overlapping identities/histories held by digital citizens and communities and an unmovable dedication of ourselves and our work to the well-being, needs, and desires of the folks that we engage in it. It is my belief that all these things can be demonstrated through ongoing considerations of ethics as well as the simultaneous implementations of Black feminist/Black feminist adjacent research practices. Defining an ethical framework through Black feminist theory as well as through interdisciplinary works not only gives digital researchers a broader means to support and enact Black feminist ways of thinking, but it also helps to conceptualize the place and role that Black feminism might have in research ethic conversations down the line.

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