

‘Woke’ and reading: Social media, reception, and contemporary Black Feminism

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Abstract:

This article examines social media’s role in crafting the audience for and reception of contemporary black feminism. A largely popular and populist movement, contemporary black feminism is realizing the grassroots dreams of earlier black feminists by deploying the technologies at writers’ and readers’ fingertips. Instagram-celeb poets like *Salt*’s Nayyirah Waheed, *bone*’s Yrsa Daley-Ward, and *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*’s Aja Monet; Twitter powerhouses like writer Roxanne Gay; internet book club phenoms like *Well-Read Black Girl*; and subscription clubs like *Noir Reads* and *Candlelit Books* all are in the public sphere, crafting a black feminist readership for, and more importantly, *with* ‘the people’. The apparent immediacy, accessibility, and collaborative nature of social media platforms have generated different forms of reception and have created new types of social activism. Thus, my paper will examine: 1) the social media forms through which readers are accessing black feminist texts; 2) the types of reception these forms invite; 3) the ways virtual reception has shaped further the production and marketing of black feminist writers; and 4) ultimately how all of such is fueling a new wave of social consciousness and participation. I conclude that contemporary black feminism reflects its contemporary moment – popular, media savvy, confrontational, young, transnational, intersectional, and ‘woke’ – and invites us to reexamine our theories about books and reading in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: black feminism, reading, social media, social justice.

In a 2016 interview, Glory Edim discusses the motivation behind creating her now wildly popular multi-platform book club, Well-Read Black Girl (WRBG). She recounts that she hoped WRBG would provide

Affirmation ... a space where you can just tell stories, you can see yourself in the stories, you can love yourself, love your culture, love your heritage, and

what it means to be a black woman. There aren't a lot of spaces for that to happen, and because my book club has become that space I cherish that and I want more people whether it's online or off to have a place where you can go find someone who looks like you, someone who respects you, and someone who wants to uplift you. (Hairston)

Edim is not alone in her desire to create a particularly black space for women to share stories, affirm self, and create community. Indeed, the 2010s have witnessed an amplification of black women's voices as writers, readers, cultural critics, and social activists. The connections between black literacy and feminist activism are not new, as women including Alice Walker, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Oprah Winfrey have advanced reading as a mechanism of personal and social change throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Today's black women writers and readers are drawing from and adding to that heritage, promoting reading through both conventional and new media, for they, like Edim, 'want more people whether it's online or off to have a place where you can go find someone who looks like you, someone who respects you, and someone who wants to uplift you.'

This article examines the relationship between reading, social media, and contemporary black feminism. Instagram-celeb poets Yrsa Daley-Ward, Aja Monet, and Nayyirah Waheed; Twitter powerhouses Roxane Gay and Brittney Cooper; Internet book clubs *Well-Read Black Girl*; subscription book clubs *Noir Reads* and *Candlelit Box*; and platforms for young black readers including *We Read Too* and *Sweet Pea Girls* all are in the public sphere, crafting a black feminism for, and more importantly, with 'the people.' Contemporary black feminist writers and readers are engaging in literary conversations in a range of ways, from virtual meet ups to Instagram stories to retweets to tags. Edim's desire for affirmation is echoed throughout the varied work of black women writers, readers, and organizers as they seek to create an empowering space of their own subject to neither racist nor sexist institutions. In this way, they are constructing what media studies scholar Lisa Gitelman has called counterinstitutions – 'loosely self-organizing assemblages ... that defy institutionalization partly by reproducing it cacophonously' (*Paper Knowledge* 149). Social media seemingly allows black women and feminists to voice their black womanhood as they choose and in all its variety. As writer Morgan Jerkins discussed with Aminatou Sow on the podcast 'Call Your Girlfriend', contemporary black feminists do not feel the pressure to be representative or to speak for all black women or 'The Race.' They reject that mantle, recognizing as Roxane Gay does in her essay 'Feminism (n.): Plural,' that there is no one right way to be a black feminist (xi). Thus, when we examine black feminist use of social media, we see that they are constructing 'publics' that are both individual and communal, local and global, cathartic and revolutionary. Networking allows them a pluralism that is antithetical to essentialism and demands an interactive collectivism that is both a model for and product of contemporary black feminism.

Of course, this is not to say that social media is without problem. New media scholar Axel Bruns rightly warns against overly romanticizing social media as a revolutionary panacea, for at its most basic, social media is a capitalist venture designed to profit corporate shareholders, not users. Although users themselves put the ‘social’ into ‘social media,’ Bruns wonders whether it is really ‘a capitalist paradise in which ‘the willing seduction of the consumer into production’ is complete, [and] where production and distribution remain driven very much by corporate interests’ (12).¹ Changes to platform design and usability aren’t meant to foment revolution, but rather to earn capital of which users do not see one cent. Media theorist Jodi Dean has been more forceful in her dismissal of new media’s revolutionary or even democratic potential. She contends that Internet platforms demand passive political involvement (*Publicity’s Secret* 3) and that circulating information isn’t real democracy but rather the ‘fantasy of participation’ (‘Communicative’ 107, 109). Furthermore, user participation is mediated by perpetually changing formats and seemingly inexplicable (and inexplicably changing) algorithms. Users are thereby positioned as subject to these changes rather than the originators of them. Thus, one can claim that these forms have their limits.

Nevertheless, black Americans have always encountered limits to their efforts to acquire literacy and they have found ways to use oppressive structures against themselves to revolutionary effect. Whether facing laws prohibiting literacy, Jim Crow schools and libraries, or financial obstacles to book ownership, black Americans have had to work with, against, and around structures that would deny them full participation in the intellectual, political, and social life of the nation. By locating black feminist social media usage within a larger history of black women’s radical readerly politics, the liberatory potential of this complicated media form can be seen. The apparent immediacy, accessibility, and collaborative nature of social media platforms have generated different forms of black feminist reader reception and are inviting new types of social activism. The popularity of these platforms suggests new possibilities for social change during a time of white supremacist and misogynoir resurgence in mainstream political and media institutions. Black women and readers are working to produce their own knowledge, challenge dominant narratives, and create connections for both personal and communal empowerment. To demonstrate such, this paper will: 1) trace a history of black feminist literacy and radical organizing; 2) examine the ways in which social media has become a site of resistance for contemporary black feminist writers, readers, and publishers; 3) discuss the types of reception these forms invite; and 4) explore how these forms of media and reception are fueling a new wave of social consciousness and participation.

My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter²

In the 2014 *Ebony* piece ‘Black Feminism Goes Viral,’ Jamilah Lemieux celebrates the ‘robust crop of young Black feminists online who keep pushing the conversation forward, doing activist work in communities and generally taking no prisoners when it comes to racism and sexism.’ In many ways, contemporary black feminism is realizing the grassroots dreams of

earlier black feminists by deploying the popular and populist technologies at writers' and readers' fingertips. These women believed, as did the poet Audre Lorde, that 'We must establish authority over our own definition' (173), and thus they worked to change not only the image of American readership but also the image of America itself.

Today's black feminists have inherited a rich tradition of radical black literacy. As I discuss in my book *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature*, the story of black Americans reading runs parallel and often counter to the larger narrative of American literacy.³ The best-known story of African American literacy is the story of its denial in the south. Laws prohibited enslaved blacks from learning to read – laws that were extended during Reconstruction and modified in the Jim Crow era. Nevertheless, southern blacks found ways to read. Covert, individual practices like those Frederick Douglass details in his *Narrative* were one way in which enslaved peoples challenged a system designed to keep them in mental bondage.⁴ Black and white abolitionists worked to ensure Negro periodicals such as *Freedom's Journal*, the *Colored American*, and David Walker's pro-literacy abolitionist tract, *Appeal*, found their way into enslaved hands, using the matter to teach reading and the message to teach literacy's revolutionary power (Bacon 8 and Levine 27). Some newly emancipated black soldiers convinced Union troops to teach them to read so that once the war was over, they might be prepared 'for their future lives as citizens and self-dependent free men and heads of families' (Cornish 369 & 381). Other southern blacks took advantage of the Freedman's Education program, a Reconstruction endeavor in North Carolina seeking to help build a stronger black community (Goldhaber 199). And, in the first part of the twentieth century, initiatives like the Faith Cabin Library program responded to Jim Crow library practices, helping southern black communities fund, build, and run over one hundred libraries (Lee 179).

In the north, African Americans organized literary societies as early as 1770, providing what scholar Elizabeth McHenry has called 'places of refuge for the self-improvement of their members,' and enabling 'acts of resistance to the hostile racial climate that made the United States an uncomfortable and unequal place for all black Americans, regardless of their social or economic condition' (3, 7). By the Civil War, northern African Americans had set up more than fifty libraries and 'debating and reading-room societies' (Albritton 23, 28) as a way for black Americans to 'voice their demands for full citizenship and equal participation in the life of the nation' (McHenry 18). Into the 1950s and 1960s, black women's book clubs continued to serve as a site of organizing. Women would read and discuss books on race issues, and then would organize boycotts, letter writing campaigns, and voter canvassing.⁵ Likewise, encouraging literacy was a significant feature of the work SNCC and other civil rights organizations performed. As one Freedom Summer librarian recalled, organizers saw 'widespread interest and enthusiasm for the library as integral to the arsenal of weapons of the nonviolent movement' and made sure that 'each civil rights headquarters houses a library, which is used by students, parents, and teachers' (Braverman 5045).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, black feminists called writers, thinkers, and activists to recognize, as bell hooks did, that ‘literacy should be a goal for feminists even as we ensure that it doesn’t become a requirement for participation in feminist education’ (108). They called for texts that were accessible to all women, not just those who’d had access to higher education (*Combahee* 4). Groups like the storied Combahee River Collective created study groups to help educate black women on the nature of their oppression and the means by which they could overcome it, stressing, ‘We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work.’ They believed study groups would combat ‘the fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation,’ and that reading and writing would help create an organized and revolutionary community (*Combahee* 17).

Nevertheless, to some degree black feminism of the 1980s suffered from the problem endemic to much of the postwar Left – absorption by the academy and seeming disconnection from everyday people. While key figures in black feminism including hooks, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Demita Frazier were active in grassroots work, their primary commitments were necessarily to their universities. Frazier herself recognizes this in a 2017 interview, noting black feminism has ‘been academically co-opted. And I wouldn’t say co-opted if it weren’t for the fact that there’s still this big divide between practice and theory, right?’ (138). Hip Hop Feminist Joan Morgan made a similar claim earlier in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999): ‘When I thought about feminism – women who were living and breathing it daily – I thought of white women or black female intellectuals. Academics. Historians. Authors. Women who had little to do with my everyday life’ (37). Morgan echoes what an earlier, but by then institutional-mainstay, hooks argued when she claims, ‘if feminism intends to have any relevance in the lives of the majority of black women, if it intends to move past theory and become functional it has to rescue itself from the ivory towers of academia’ (76). For Morgan and many other black feminists of the late 1990s, that revolutionary space was hip hop.

For Oprah Winfrey, it was television. Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club began in 1996 and its effects cannot be underestimated: hundreds of thousands of books sold; authors made into celebrities; and people reading books who claimed not to have done so for twenty years (Rooney 14). It was, as Nobel-prize winning Toni Morrison put it, a ‘reading revolution’ (qt. in Farr 1). While club members represented all races, the fact that a woman of color began, selected, promoted, and ran it as part of her show’s larger project ‘to use television to transform people’s lives, to make viewers see themselves differently and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home’ (qt. Rooney 13), reflects the central role that reading has played in empowering black women. Further, Oprah’s club was one of the first to use new media (television and later the Internet) to create readerly communities and to give more women of color access to books and ideas in their own homes.

As we have moved into the twenty-first century, social media has taken up this mantle. Whereas earlier black feminist efforts to educate and organize were largely limited to print, current black feminists benefit from print and digital media. In fact, many black

feminists attribute their increased media presence in traditional and new media forms to social media. The writer, actress, and producer Issa Rae acknowledges this in her book *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2015): 'If it weren't for social media, I don't know that black women would even be a fully formed blip on the radar... Online content and new media are changing our communities and changing the demand for and accessibility of that content' (46). Rae identifies access, creative agency, and community building as the primary benefits that social media provides black women in the contemporary moment. Social media content is driven primarily by users, and Rae acknowledges that black women have deployed social media to demand the representation they've been denied elsewhere. Without using formal terminology, Rae attributes black women's ascendancy to what media scholars call 'networking.' In *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond* (2008), Bruns similarly contends that what the 'network model makes possible is the existence of a distributed but coordinated community, organized not according to the directions of a central authority to which all other nodes in the network are subordinate, but by the community's own protocols of interaction' (15).

Reading has always been an act of resistance in black communities, and that is one reason that black feminist use of social media to promote literacy troubles some scholars' dismissals of new media as solely oppressive, neoliberal, capitalist institutions. Even Jodi Dean has granted that social media bears potential for empowering and productive connection. In 2013 remarks at 'Unlike Us #2,' Dean discussed how 'the pleasure of social media ... is that of connectivity as a direct reaction to precarious labour. In social media, people produce for others all the time; whether those products are affect/emotions or all kinds of content, they are powered by a productive force that arises of our combined efforts' (Iorga). Contemporary black feminists see the Internet as enabling those previously denied a voice by white supremacist and patriarchal institutions to express themselves, connect with others, and organize (or 'combine') so that their particular needs are met. As Bruns, Gitelman, and Caroline Bassett underscore, media are products of history, including the social, economic, and cultural forces shaping a specific space in time, even as media create new modes for history-making. The needs of a particular people at a particular time demand or necessitate the creation of media that can meet those needs (Gitelman, *Always Already* 10).⁶

Social media has become the space black women needed to voice and respond to their particular struggles in twenty-first America. In her best-selling book *So you want to talk about race* (2018), Ijeoma Oluo writes, 'thanks to the power and freedom of the Internet, many ... people of color have been able to speak their truths' (4). Despite making gains in publishing, entertainment, and politics, black women still do not experience economic, social, or political parity in America. Black women earn 64 cents to the dollar that white men earn, black women are arrested at higher rates than white women although they commit a lower percentage of crime, black women die at three times the rate of white women in childbirth, and black women comprise only 22/535 members of Congress⁷ Further, black women in America continue to have their particular struggles either ignored or minimized

by many white feminists. As Jerkins argues in *This Will Be My Undoing* (2018), 'It's true that we are *all* victims within a patriarchal society and we must fight. But the fight to empower all women under the veil of feminism has historically and presently centered white women. The word 'all' switches to whiteness as the default' (23). White centering was evidenced in the 2017 Women's March, in the 2017 Day Without a Woman work stoppage, in the 'Lean In' movement, and in how the #metoo movement initially erased its black founder, Tarana Burke, and neglected to recognize the particular violence experienced by women of color.

Because white feminist bodies and movements consistently fail to see or hear them, black feminists are turning to forms of media and organizing that enable their stories to be heard. Fifteen years after her Hip-Hop Feminism breakthrough, Morgan 'praises social media for enabling young women to connect with thought leaders around issues of gender ... without a classroom. It enables feminism to meet them where they are and where they live, which is actually where I think they should be getting it' (qt. in Lemieux 130). Today's black feminism is a multimedia movement, for new media and social networking allows greater access to these ideas. No longer limited by economics, education, or location, most black women can tap into these conversations about texts, narratives, and issues pertaining to their lives.

Social Media and Social Reading

On 2017's World Poetry Day, *The Bookseller* proclaimed, 'social media drives 16% sales increase,' identifying 'Instapoets' as just some of those triggering this boost. In reflecting on this development, Trapeze Publishing's Emma Smith notes,

I think people (young women in particular) are looking for genuine and empowering messages to engage with, especially online; readers are searching for words that really mean something, that are representative of diverse voices and inspire positive change. Poetry is the perfect medium for sharing content that is impactful, beautiful and important. ... Social media lends itself to anyone who has a voice and can pack significance into few words, so poetry thrives online. (Cowdrey and Onwuemezi)

Empowerment, authenticity, diversity, and change: these elements seemingly unique to social media are what enable not just women in general, but women of color in particular to find their voice as writers, readers, and thinkers. However, it isn't just poetry readership that has seen a social media bump – fiction, essays, humor, and self-help genres too have benefitted from writers' use of various social media platforms.

Because the range of social media platforms contemporary black feminists deploy is vast, I'll focus on just one: Instagram. In addition to black activist organizations (For Harriett, Afro Punk, Colorlines, Black Voices, and Huffpost Black Voices); black feminist celebrities (Chescaleigh, Tracy Ellis Ross, Phoebe Robinson, Jessica Williams, Roxane Gay, Janelle Monaé, etc.); and grassroots black feminists who use Instagram to create, project, and

promote a certain image of contemporary black feminism, many associated with the book industry and readers themselves are using Instagram to promote new texts, offer up book reviews, post inspirational quotes from authors of color, discuss ideas read, and alert members of virtual book clubs to meet-ups 'IRL.' Yes, major publishing houses also use Instagram to announce and promote their book lists. Random House offers a beautifully curated account with fashionable models holding colorful book covers in picture-perfect settings. The account capitalizes on any occasion to market books, as evidenced by a May 25, 2018 photo of four women holding books and glasses of wine with the tagline, 'Nothing goes better with a glass of wine than a great book! #NationalWineDay.'⁸ For Random House, Penguin, Scribner, and other big-name publishing accounts, growing the bottom line is the governing principle for posts and user engagement. Contrastingly, while black feminist writer, reader, and club sites do encourage the purchase of books, commerce is neither the only nor primary aim. Self-affirmation, community building, and political organizing assume central positions in these sites, linking reading to revolution and distinguishing these uses of social media from those of the mainstream.

One of the more popular and successful of these ventures is Edim's 'Well-Read Black Girl,' 'Dedicated to the phenomenal Black women on our bookshelves' (website). WRBG began as a digital newsletter, developed its own website, and now has made its mark on Twitter and Instagram. As of March 2019, WRBG has more than 200,000 Instagram followers and over 1,450 posts since its first on 15 May 2015 which read 'build community and celebrate #blackwomenwriters.' Early posts featured pictures of classic black feminist texts as well as inspirational quotes from black women writers including Lorraine Hansberry, Pearl Cleage, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker. As the account developed, posts contained more new books and authors, as well as pictures of Edim with the club's featured writers. WRBG has cemented its focus on 'emerging authors, so people who have debut books,' for in addition to building community, Edim is 'looking to build space for authors who may not get a lot of mainstream press and publicity' (Crum). WRBG is both a virtual and actual book club, hosting monthly meet up sessions with featured authors, including Naomi Jackson (*The Star Side of Bird Hill* 2015), Stephanie Powell Watts (*No One Is Coming to Save Us* 2017), and Zinzi Clemmons (*What We Lose* 2017). In so doing, WRBG has crafted space in which writers and readers support and learn from each other. The club has become so popular and influential that Edim won the *LA Times* 2017 Innovator's Award. Carolyn Kellogg, *LA Times* book editor, recognized the ground-breaking way in which WRBG has allowed for community building, saying, 'We are delighted that our Innovator's Award will go to Glory Edim, founder of Well-Read Black Girl ... Going from a hashtag to a cultural force, Well-Read Black Girl created a vital new space for literary discussion and engagement' ('*LA Times* to Honor').

Because of the club's success in providing this 'vital new space,' WRBG hosted its own festival in September 2017, offering members a chance to translate their online conversations into real time and space, therein adding another dimension to its readerly community. Edim's KickStarter goal for the festival was \$15,000; in the end, it garnered

close to \$40,000, again signaling the need that this particular reading venture has filled for contemporary black women. The sold-out event featured Naomi Jackson as keynote, and also offered a writing workshop led by the writer, teacher, and co-founder of the Hurston/Wright Foundation, Marita Golden. Best-selling and award-winning writer, Tayari Jones, said of the festival, 'The good will and optimism in the air changed every person in that room ... We each left the conference knowing that we were part of a movement celebrating black women *not just as readers and writers, but as members of a community*' (Vineyard, emphasis mine).

Follower comments on WRBG's Instagram underscore these feelings of optimism, community, and change. For instance, in response to a May 20, 2018 post announcing an upcoming selection, Charlene Carruthers's *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (2018), comments include variations on 'Thank you' and 'Yes,' as well as @mystrengthandmyshield's 'Adding to my list! Need more diversity of voices' and @annika.izora's 'Oooh im bout to get this.' Significantly, the comment feed also features comments that tag other users to alert them to the book, therein enacting a form of community and archive building. For instance, @chill_thecre8or writes, '@r_michele @mercedesfu thought y'all might enjoy a good new read. [heart emoji] y'all.' Comments on the May 15, 2018 post about Camille Acker's *Training School for Negro Girls* – a book inspired by Nannie Helen Burroughs, founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls – include the usual 'going on my list' and 'yes' responses. More important, however, are responses like @srmilesauthor's: 'The industry has really been doing a better job with Black Girl covers'; @tolanihershelf's: 'Natural hair on book covers is my new favorite thing [three heart emojis]'; and @madisonbleuie's: 'We passed by the school grounds daily for decades. It is something else now but the original gate is still there on Nannie Helen Burroughs Ave. in DC. Will have to add this book to my reading list.' These comments demonstrate key dimensions of contemporary black feminist reception: first, the desire for positive representation of black women and the black female experience; second, a longing to celebrate black women's heritage; and finally, a need to converse with other black women about these issues.

WRBG's success and the need it fills draws from the long history of African American book clubs. What distinguishes from them, however, is the ways in which its social media platforms elasticize space and time, allowing readers to feel 'present' in the conversation regardless of when they access a post. While they may not be able to attend a Brooklyn meeting or watch its live-stream, they can read a post, offer a comment, or tag a friend whenever they have time to do so. Such an act creates an immediacy that allows for feelings of inclusion. Likewise, responses to comment posts stretch space and time, continuing a conversation that may have appeared to be 'over,' therein bringing it back into cultural currency and 'the now.' Granted, Instagram's mysterious feed algorithm impacts how users engage with WRBG's posts and reminds users that social media platforms mediate their experiences even as they enable forms of creative control. Nevertheless,

Instagram's usage operates within cyclical as opposed to linear time, allowing black women greater access to other black women's stories, ideas, and community.

Subscription book clubs, including Noir Reads and the new Candlelit Box, similarly use Instagram to sell books and create conscious readerly communities.⁹ It is in the latter that they distinguish themselves from other subscription services. While the pioneering Book of the Month Club (BOMC) also uses Instagram to advertise its service, its archive is similar to that of the major publishing houses: stunning images of the books for sale and the fashionable people who read them. Once again, the commercial intent is central. Noir Reads and Candlelit Box also use Instagram to sell books; yet, their aims move beyond the bottom line to include black affirmation and community organizing. For instance, the image Noir Reads' feed projects is one that is grassroots (Instagram images and stories include a handful of organizers doing the work of packing books, stacking boxes, and putting stamps on packages); 'woke' (posts include pictures of Colin Kaepernick, #BlackLivesMatter members, action alerts, and so forth); and intersectional (posts are feminist, transgender, and transnational). Comments range from, @yapha2018's 'Love new finds. Thank you' (2 July 2017), to @dashofhearts's 'What a great service...never knew something like this existed [heart emoji]' (1 July 2017), to @booksfightback's 'adding this to my must read list' (8 August 2017). More deliberately activist are posts like 22 August 2017's in which Noir Reads called followers to contact Missouri Governor Greitens to demand a stay of execution for Marcellus Williams, a black man who'd been exonerated by DNA evidence but was still scheduled for death. Comments on that post included: 1)

@myloveaffairwiththewrittenword's 'Doing this now! Capital punishment is inhumane and barbaric enough, but to ignore evidence and go ahead with the execution is evil!'; 2) @marvelouskris_'s black power fist emojis; 3) and, eventually, @_shes_a_kings_kid's and @jasbelin's celebrations when the execution was stayed. With this post, followers translated ideas they'd read in previous book club selections into direct action – selections including Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2015) and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). The popularity of these accounts signals that readers are seeking out intersectional and activist readerly communities and the type of connections that these communities provide. These accounts offer a *first* step in readerly activism, modeling how one might get involved and pointing followers to 'IRL' organizations to join to continue in activist work.

Furthermore, Instagram subscription clubs reinforce the primary benefit of these organizations: access. Original mail-order clubs were successful because readers lacking access to libraries or bookstores could have the latest 'expertly selected' books delivered to their front door. BOMC's co-founder, Harry Scherman, 'believed many more people could be persuaded to become book readers if they were given better access to books as well as to the kind of advice that would explain not the particulars of a book's content but how it would address readers' interests, desires, or needs' (Radway 236). In mid-twentieth century America, African Americans began their own subscription clubs, including the Negro Book Club, the Frederick Douglass Book Club, and the Progressive Book Club, offering black

readers new ways of accessing books when Jim Crow laws impeded library, bookstore, and university access (Matthews 60). A similar ethos informs Noir Reads and Candlelit Box, for both organizations seek to give black readers greater access to books that are timely and topical, books that have received positive reader feedback on earlier posts, and books that address an evident need in the black community for representation and social justice.

Perhaps the most visible literary users of Instagram are those black ‘Instapoets’ who have come to international prominence via their skillful use of the platform.¹⁰ The coining of a new term to describe these writers demonstrates the extent to which their version of creating, publishing, and marketing has changed the face of contemporary poetic practice and reception. But more importantly, *readers* are flocking to Instapoets as an accessible and radical form of reading. Why radical? First, book ownership has long been the privilege of folk with funds. Instapoetry is available to anyone with Internet access – personal, school, or library. Second, Instapoetry largely circumvents the publishing industry – an act which recognizes how publishing historically has been a venture largely run by and profiting white men. Independent presses like Third World, Broadside, Kitchen Table, and Haymarket have been run with and for people of color; yet, they too must charge money for their books to survive, and despite efforts to offset costs to make literature accessible for all, they are still subject to market forces. Instapoetry has succeeded despite the publishing industry, which is not to say that black Instapoets would turn down the benefits a publishing house can provide (Yrsa-Daley Ward is now with Penguin and Aja Monet with Haymarket). However, Instapoetry allows for a type of freedom that conventional presses do not normally allow – unless they think it will make them money, which Instapoets are proving they can.

Aja Monet’s Instagram account is a lesson in the platform’s possibilities for readerly and community organizing. Monet has over 22,000 followers and over 3,553 posts thus far. Her account is deliberately political, and posts include information about various actions, images of Monet with other black writers and activists, alerts about upcoming readings and festivals, and articles about issues ranging from the prison industrial complex (April 17, 2018) to the killing of Palestinians by Israeli forces (May 19, 2018). Monet’s use of poetry is radical and communal – connecting poets and people, local and global, past and present. On World Poetry Day, Monet posted an image of a marked-up manuscript page from the late black feminist poet, June Jordan. The text proper reads:

But it is your only life that we come together, this morning, to honor and to celebrate. Any time we come together, any time we can come together to celebrate the lives of children, the precious life of Black children, I think to myself: This is how we should start: This is how we should begin to build another way, another kind of humankind, a really new nation. We have to begin by cherishing our children...

Monet’s hashtags on this image include, ‘#HappyWorldPoetryDay,’ ‘#NeverAgain,’ and ‘#marchforourlives,’ for this post not only coincided with World Poetry Day, but also aligned

with the student-organized national march against gun violence. These hashtags connect current and past movements to protect children, and links Monet's own work to that of a black feminist ancestor. Further, the quote featured is about 'connection'; thus, Monet's post offers meta-commentary on the centrality of networking to preserving and celebrating black life. The post received 112 likes, as well as comments from fellow writers Mahogany Browne and Rosado Lakes.

Even a cursory scrawl through Monet's feed amplifies her claim, 'There are people who have come before me who have endured more than I ever could have imagined, and the least I could do is sit down and write a fuckin' poem about it' (Holder). Monet reposts this post from *Vice*, and reader comments include variations on @catindigo's 'Tell it!' and @ava_eliza's 'Yassss! You are so inspirational! [heart and praise be emojis]'. Her repost also receives more substantive responses, like @ahlaamabdiljalil's 'You are a gift to all of us. We thank you. We love you. We praise God,' as well as those like @jrabs11's: 'Want you to know I've been playing your poems for my Creative Writing students in Saugerties, NY. Little town with some big-hearted poets. They were stunned today by 'What I've Learned.' Thank you for being intelligent and brave and oh so talented [smiley face emoji]'. Monet often responds to these more substantive comments, for example, replying to @jrabs11, 'Thank You So Much For Sharing! So grateful for your work and support,' presenting herself as a woman of the people. She locates her populism in her writing, telling *Vice*:

I wanted to connect to people, you know what I'm saying? I wanted to build bridges to change conditions I saw a lot of people struggling through. I don't understand people who do anything in their lives without some level of connection to how it affects other people. I never thought of myself as separate from everyone else. You're taught that poetry is an act that is often carried out in solitude, an isolating act, but in actuality it should bring people together, and it should be a part of how we address the conditions that we're facing – how we reimagine the world we live in. (Holder).

And Monet's readers have received her work as just that – a connective force for good.

Whereas Monet is constantly and publically on the move, Nayyirah Waheed is notoriously private. Nevertheless, she has been called 'perhaps the most famous poet on Instagram' (Henderson) and uses the platform to share pictures of her short, minimalistic poems. As of 8 April 2019, Waheed has 728K Instagram followers, her posts average thousands of 'likes,' and until recently, her feed was almost solely pictures of poems from her two self-published books, *salt*. (2013) and *Nejma* (2014). Her confessional style of poetry has caught the attention of many outside of the academy, and has been covered in publications including *Jet*, *VIBE*, *The Guardian*, *New York Daily News*, *Teen Vogue*, *Wired*, and *The Telegraph*. Waheed's poetry tackles immigration, neocolonialism, police brutality, domestic

violence, and racism both institutional and internalized, therein locating her within central contemporary black feminist discussions.

From their Instagram handles, Waheed's followers appear to be predominantly female and represent a range of races and ethnicities. Some followers identify as LGBTQ in their handle or comments, whereas others self-identify as heterosexual and cisgender. Followers have also responded in languages other than English (Spanish, Portuguese, and Nigerian), signaling an international, in addition to an intersectional, readership. Waheed embraces the label 'black poet,' saying, 'For me, I think that's a beautiful thing. It may not be why people say it, but it's beautiful to me. I want black to be attached to me in everything I do. It may be being used as a weapon, an insult, a stabbing divisive instrument, but I receive it in a way that strengthens, affirms, and nurtures me ... that feeds me' (Waheed, 'Interview').

One exchange in this interview underscores Waheed's commitment to blackness. Ezibota asks: 'It's taken some time for a lot of white critics to understand black writing. A lot of poets like Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni and even Sonia Sanchez were often critiqued negatively because their work was nothing like Shakespeare or Robert Frost. What do you think of this?' Waheed replies:

Their opinion means nothing to me. Who are they to me? What is their sound . . . their mouths to our words, our emotions, expressions, or experiences? We don't need validation. I actually want their hands off of our work. Our work is a different universe, a requiring of a different set of senses. That which they do not fully understand, is meant for them not to understand, as it is not theirs.

While the interview's comment section demonstrates black readers recognize the important role that racial difference plays both in craft and reception, one white reader commented:

I loved her poetry; it spoke to my soul but I have pale skin and I now realize after reading this that I am not supposed to understand it, and the writer has no interest in the fact that I was deeply moved by this poetry. to me it seems strange to deny that all humans are capable of feeling light and magic and pain in our souls. Her poetry made my breath catch in my throat and my heart surge and I wish she could understand that she can move white people too, and we are human just as she, capable of being astounded by such succinct and masterful poetry. (Ezibota)

Waheed has many white followers (if we are to take profile pictures as accurate demographic identifiers), and these white followers can be moved by her poetry. However, Waheed's poetry and limited Internet presence both speak to her intent to create a deliberately black space for black women to engage in conversations about issues that

reflect their experience. Waheed's interview, like Edim's rationale for creating WRBG, reveals black women's efforts to reclaim space for themselves and resist white readers and critics' efforts to claim blackness for their own.

Somewhat shockingly, in November 2017 Waheed deleted all of her posts.¹¹ In a note to followers, she claimed she wanted a fresh start. This type of purge is atypical, for the number of posts, in addition to number of followers, signals status. An Instagram archive is a contemporary canon, demonstrating the development of one's work and its reception. To delete several years of posts is to delete that archive and to deny readerly access to those poems. Such a purge complicates ideas of community, erasing interaction between readers that had been manifest in the archive and prohibiting users from going back to rediscover a poem, idea, or conversation to make it new. At the same time, Waheed's decision to delete these posts could be read as a variation on her other practice of reposting poems she's already shared, thereby recycling presentness and inviting re-reading at different moments in time. While perhaps frustrating to readers (and those scholars researching and writing on Instapoets), user control of creation is part and parcel of social media's freedom and flexibility – it is always already changing and never complete.¹²

In the responses to Waheed's new posts, we can see how this social media platform invites particular types of reader reception.¹³ Responses can be grouped into several categories, including gratitude, catharsis, identification, and community building, with few comments offering traditionally academic types of interpretation. The most frequent response to Waheed's poetry is gratitude. Every poem post prompts 'thanks,' 'thank you,' or heart emoji comments. This type of response is the easiest – an emoji or a 'thanks' do not require much effort. Yet, many of these expressions accompany a 'like' to the post, suggesting the reader felt compelled to go beyond merely double tapping the photo and to record publically their appreciation for the poem. Other followers write more. For instance, in response to Waheed's poem *-lace*, @maya_dara writes:

i love you so so so much [four heart emojis] you are a wonderful wonderful human and i am grateful to you for your work and the gift you give to the world through sharing your words. I can not begin to write how deeply you work has touched me, but i wanted to let you know your presence and your light are deeply appreciated [four praying hands emojis] you are magic [stars emoji].

Expressions of gratitude are often accompanied by an admission along the lines of the post by @girlrandi who writes, 'needed that,' signaling a cathartic function to readers' engagement.

Affective responses connecting catharsis with identification run throughout Waheed's comment feeds, suggesting black women are seeking a venue to voice their hurt and to find others with whom to heal. Representative responses include 1) @joymalonedotcom who writes, 'I pray my art can make people feel the way your words

make me feel' (*-therapy*); 2) @zahra_nabilah who writes, 'I needed to read this. Thank you [purple heart emoji]' (*-therapy*); and 3) @tenderheart who comments, 'I say this to myself every day' (*-grieve*). Some followers offer up 'amen' or 'praise be' emojis, and some effusively gush: 'Absolutely. Positively. Exactly. Unconditionally. Unequivocally. For sure. Hell yes' (@damnitjammit).¹⁴ Other expressions of identification include the over 66K selfies hashtagged '#NayyirahWaheed' which use Waheed's poems as captions. A Google image search of '#nayyirahwaheed' too reveals that some followers have literally embodied these words in the form of tattoos, taking identification to the extreme.

Affect trumps aesthetics in these responses, and of course, this is one reason why many poets, publishers, and literary critics have been dismissive of Instapoets. In the *Guardian* article, 'How do I love thee? Let me Instagram it,' reporter Huma Qureshi writes that Instapoets are 'poetry's new superstars . . . but are they any good?' She cites Rishi Dastidar, assistant editor at the poetry magazine *The Rialto*, whose critique is typical:

It's important to remember that poetry is not just about the uncontrolled expression of how you feel, but how you shape that expression. . . .What makes you a poet is learning the craft, spending time reading other poets and bringing writerly tools to the emotions you are trying to convey. I think it's great if people are enjoying poetry through social media but the next step would be to read more poetry and understand what else is out there.

Instapoetry's critics say it's bad poetry, most often citing a lack of editing, a lack of craft, or a surplus of affect as the primary offenders of taste. These criticisms of affect are not new; Janice Radway and Joan Shelley Rubin identified them long ago.¹⁵ However, these criticisms have resurfaced in relation to a genre most popular with women and most populated by women poets of color, suggesting that poetry is still largely subject to Western, male standards of value.¹⁶

Yet, affect and lack of polish facilitate one of the more important functions of Instapoetry, namely, popular community creation. Affect's immediacy connects virtual readers in ways that would be difficult otherwise, allowing them to belong to a community of feeling across time, space, sexuality, nationality, and so forth. Readers praise the unfinished quality of Instapoetry as more 'real' and 'raw,' for engaging them in ways that heavily worked or stylized poems do not. Instagram comments also reveal that an overflowing of feeling prompts more deliberate acts of connection, like when followers tag a friend in the comments and invite them to read and share in the poem. Some readers go beyond mere tagging, like @theonlynana, who responded to Waheed's post of *-i have spent my whole life alone. Loving you. / when we choose fear.* @theonlynana writes, '@dre5_rms reminded me of you. Should follow her. She's dope.' @jovie2005 similarly responded to a posting of *-meditation: @poppieseed86 These poems are everything! [prayer and heart emoji].* On Waheed's post of *may love find you. / even. / when you are specifically. strategically. / hiding from it,* one follower tags a friend with '[crying laughing emoji] I'm

tagging you because I know you are strategically hiding. [two laughing emojis].’ Other community-building type comments use the poems to reference or amplify real meetings, conversations, and events, for instance, like when one reader posted, ‘@natashabrazil made me think of our convo the other day.’¹⁷ In this way, followers are participating in a form of ‘intercreativity’ – a type of engagement that is a ‘step beyond mere interactivity’ in which participants help generate a collective intelligence which digital media scholars claim has the ‘potential to disrupt the status quo’ (Bruns 16, 17).

Thus, black feminist social media users hold disruptive potential to institutionalized oppression in their fingertips. One would do well to remember Bruns’ caution about overly romanticizing new media forms here, however; it is a caution older generations of black feminists echo. For example, in a recent interview, Barbara Smith recalls how the women with whom she was organizing in the 1980s ‘actually understood that you could not really deal with sexism and the exploitation of women if you didn’t look at capitalism and also at racism’ (50). Demita Frazier similarly recalls that ‘we knew it was important for us not just to have a theory around the position of women relative to patriarchy. We had to have an economic analysis as well’ (131), and bemoans what she sees as the lack of economic theorizing in contemporary black feminism. Can capitalistic tools like Instagram ever be revolutionary? Can they be used to combat interlocking systems of oppression?

One could cite Audre Lorde’s contention that ‘*The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*’ (112), but to do so would misrepresent the focus of and potential in this speech-turned-essay. Here Lorde is calling out white, mainstream, and institutional feminists who recommend adopting patriarchal models to fight sexist oppression. Lorde contends that these practices reinforce white patriarchal power, and proposes instead developing new systems that allow for connection and coalition: ‘Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive *be* and the active *being*’ (111). The creativity Lorde seeks in systems of interdependence has largely been realized in black feminist uses of social media. While the platform was created by and enriches others, black women from all walks of life are using social media to actively create an ‘*I*,’ asserting a ‘*being*’ in opposition to racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and classist institutions and ideologies. Social media is enabling contemporary black feminists to realize intersectional organizing and empowerment. Black women are neither passive receptacles nor mindless users of digital platforms, but instead creators akin to what Bruns has termed ‘producers’ – new media users who are creative, collaborative, generous, and actively involved in content creation and reception (2). Therefore, they occupy a subject position, an ‘*I*,’ as opposed to an object position, or a ‘*you*,’ that is defined for and by others.

#blackfeminism

While the range of media black feminists deploy in twenty-first century America is as diverse as the women using it, what connects them is the use of story to raise consciousness and promote change. In her memoir *Ordinary Light*, U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith shares a

lesson her daughter learned at school: ‘When we tell our stories . . . we make power’ (278). Edim echoed this sentiment in her interview with Tahirah Hairston: ‘Each person has a story inside of them, and when a black woman does it just feels powerful, it feels uplifting, and it needs to be heard.’ She underscores this idea in her introduction to the October 2018 anthology, *Well-Read Black Girl: Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves*. Edim asserts that WRBG is ‘a call to action for Black women to freely define their own narratives on their own terms’ (‘Introduction’ xviii). Black feminist readers and writers are using social media to voice their stories and make power for themselves and their communities. They are using it to call black women ‘to action’ as beings that are part of large, intersecting communities. Two examples of black feminists who have translated their revolutionary reading into direct action stand out: the co-founders of #BlackLivesMatter, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors-Khan. In an interview with radical scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Garza shares that her black feminist consciousness developed in part through reading key texts including *The Combahee River Collective Statement* and *This Bridge Called My Back*, as well as other works by Smith, Lorde, hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and the late Ntozake Shange (‘Interview’ 147). Cullors-Khan, similarly links her revolutionary consciousness and activism to reading. Her memoir tells the story of reading Mildred Taylor’s *The Gold Cadillac* in middle-school and realizing, ‘the fear drawn out across those pages is the same, is my own. Finishing it, I wanted more. I wanted confirmation that that which we did not speak of was real. Which was why I asked, ‘Please, Ms. Goldberg, may I have more books to read?’’ She thanks her teacher for giving ‘me stories I devoured, child-size bites of the fight for freedom and justice’ (21). Both Garza and Cullors-Khan devoured books about ‘freedom and justice,’ including books about black women’s struggles in particular, and found themselves therein. As a result, they were driven to share what they’d learned, translating these ideas into radical praxis for others to then access, engage, and make their own.

Lorde’s active, creative ‘I’ that is at once its own being and also part of an intersectional community is central to contemporary black feminism thought as discussed, modeled, and practiced on social media. Black feminist writers, readers, and activists are looking to and drawing from literature to generate conversations about the issues impacting their lives: domestic violence, police brutality, immigration, maternal health, and sex and body positivity. What the various comment threads demonstrate is that these are more than ‘issues’ to black feminist readers – these are their lives, and thus readers have much to contribute and choose to do so in venues to which they have access and where they feel accepted, safe, and heard. Their comments signal an overwhelming desire to connect to other women of color via the written word. They further reveal that these black women readers feel authorized to do so sans classroom, degree, or benediction from some expert. Additionally, black readers are thinking relationally about their reading experience, considering writers, other readers, and other subjects connected to the issues in a text. In so doing, they are building community; or, to put it another way, they are doing the work that Toni Cade Bambara advocated in her forward to *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) – the work ‘to make revolution irresistible’ (viii). These readers may or may not be in the streets,

but they are on their screens and they are voicing themselves, ultimately, making story and finding power.

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Notes:

¹ Instagram, owned by Facebook since 2012, was projected to earn \$4 to 6.4 billion in ad revenue in 2017 and is anticipated to double that and earn over \$10 billion in 2019 (Levy; McCarthy).

² This is both the title of Instapoet Aja Monet's first book of poetry and a variant of a recurring line in Jamila Woods' song, 'Black Girl Soldier.'

³ In particular, Chapter 3 maps out a broad history of black literacy in America, and Chapter 6 focuses more on radical reading by women of color. See Matthews, Kristin L. *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature*. U of Massachusetts P, 2016.

⁴ See Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass in The Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 1845. Mentor Books, 1987.

⁵ For an extended discussion of these clubs, see Anne Meis Knupfer's *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*. U of IL P, 2006.

⁶ Social media itself was a popular creation. Internet developers didn't conceive of its social dimension; rather, users were the first to adapt the Internet for person-to-person interaction (Bassett 140).

⁷ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/01/racial-gender-wage-gaps-persist-in-u-s-despite-some-progress/>; Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017);

<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/07/568948782/black-mothers-keep-dying-after-giving-birth-shalon-irvings-story-explains-why>; and <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44762.pdf>.

⁸ This post has since been deleted. Stored in my archive.

⁹ Noir Reads is a black book club service that features work by men, women, and non-binary writers alike. While not specifically for black women, its intersectional emphasis makes it a black feminist organization. Candlelit Box is a newer service featuring women writers of color, although not black women solely. It features black women as part of a larger coalition of writers of color, or as its account description says, 'Curated Wellness & POC Lit.'

¹⁰ While there are successful male Instapoets, the bulk of press and followers focus on women, particularly women of color.

¹¹ Significantly, pre-purge commenters were 2-1 women of color to white women. The post-purge comments include many more white women, raising the question about Waheed's more recent exposure.

¹² See Gitelman's *Always Already New* and Bruns' discussion of "produsage" (22-23).

¹³ I recognize that 295 posts (as of 23 October 2018) is a small sample size. When I began this project, there were over 1,000 posts with which to work. Nevertheless, the "essence" of her readers' responses is still evident.

¹⁴ Comment taken from a post screen-captured on 17 September 2017. Post has since been deleted.

¹⁵ See Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Rubin's *Making of Middlebrow Culture*.

¹⁶ While this article focuses on black Instapoets, other successful female poets of color include Lang Leav and Rupi Kaur.

¹⁷ Comment taken from a post screen-captured on 17 September 2017. Post has since been deleted.