

When Free Black Women Grab the Mic

Veralyn Williams

I was a ball of emotions as I boarded the plane for Alabama last October (2018) to co-facilitate our digital storytelling workshop for women of color. I was excited to work with my sister-friend Robin Boylorn, to meet her mom and her dog, and to work with black women from different parts of the South. I've lived in New York City my whole life, so most of the people I know and work with are from a coast. And black Southern women have most often shown up in the books I read.

Heading to the deep South also made me anxious. As a student of black American history and a news junkie, I know about the hate and violence that led to the great migration, and then to the Civil Rights Movement, and more recently to white supremacist riots. I was even (weirdly) looking forward to visiting the Lynching Museum in Montgomery while in town.

On a personal level I had just started a new job, was in the middle of a mini cash flow crisis, and was very aware that there was no one in my life who I could go to for financial support. Thankfully though, my landlord took a few days to cash my rent check.

I brought all of this with me as I met the thirteen women ready to produce a digital story.

I arrived on day-two of a three-day workshop, and the group had already bonded as if everyone had known each other for years. I was there *to teach* them how to write for the ear, how to record, and to edit their audio slideshows, but *I also learned* what raw vulnerability looks like, detached from a white gaze. The irony of experiencing that for the first time, in the "Deep" South is not lost on me.

Veralyn Williams is a Peabody award-winning journalist, producing for WNYC's *Radio Rookies* and *The Stakes*. Williams has been tackling questions on identity, social norms, and community since she picked up her first microphone in 2004. Previously, she was a member of Slate Magazine's podcast team. While there, she launched and produced Slate's film and TV podcast, *Represent*, revamped Slate's feminist podcast, *The Waves*, and produced the inaugural season of Panoply's *Family Ghost*. Williams has also worked as managing editor of *Brooklyn Deep*, a digital investigative news, analysis, and data website chronicling neighborhood change in Central Brooklyn. Through all of her endeavors, Williams aims to amplify perspectives often forgotten in the media.

The women produced stories about the black women who raised them (Tracy Dorsey), finding themselves in a predominantly white world (Delilah Gilliam), the reality of caregiving (Allison Upshaw), learning to love the skin they're in (Kristina Hamlett), and literal black girl magic (Lakeesha Harris). They fully took on the challenge of being the experts of their lives, and told stories I never would have had access to. This is what happens when you give free black women the mic/pen/stage. Without the seamless bond the cohort formed and the extremely generous trust they all showed me—I don't know if I would have been able to edit their work.

A moment with Kristina Hamlett, who wrote about overcoming the trauma of being shamed as a child about her complexion, stood out. Most of the women used the editing program, iMovie, to edit their audio stories and images, and she was struggling. When I sat with her, I saw she had the skills, but was frustrated by how long it was taking to make the edits she wanted. I told her, "you have to believe you can do this," and walked away. When she presented her final project, the next day, which she did edit, she spoke about how challenged she felt in that moment. I know the trust in that room allowed her to rise to the occasion—and to show up for herself.

Everyone in the room was holding on to so much, yet able to hold each other up. This is something friends I've had for years do for me, but it was pure black girl magic to have as intimate an experience with women I just met. I am still amazed at each person's ability to live at the intersections of black, female, queer, disabled, survivor, working-class, you name it—while also pouring so much into each other and their projects.

The responsibility I feel as a digital storytelling teacher, who is also a black woman trying to figure "it" out cannot be measured. I am grateful they allowed me to edit, critique, and amplify their stories.



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