

## **Blackgirl Blogs, Auto/ethnography, and Crunk Feminism**

Robin M. Boylorn

Growing up in rural North Carolina I could have gone my entire life without ever hearing the word “feminist.” The first time I heard it I didn’t know what it meant. It sounded awkward, vulgar, and derogatory, and when I was asked if I was a feminist it felt more like an accusation than a question. The inquiry came from a white woman professor in a graduate course who wanted a show of hands of those who affiliated with the term. Ignorant and confused I reacted the same way everyone around me did. I wrinkled my nose and squinted my eyes at the sound of the word, and felt offended at the assumption that I might be associated with it. When my white woman professor asked me if I was a feminist, she may as well have asked me if I was a bitch.

I didn’t run home and ask my mama about feminism, even though the more I learned about what a feminist was the more I thought about my mama, my aunts, and my grandmother. Woman-power and forced independence had always been our situational and circumstantial reality. My world had always been woman-centered with female father-figures and warrior women. Our uninterrogated investment in naming ourselves and creating opportunities from our circumstances was fiercely feminist, but we just called it “getting by.” I was surrounded by reluctant feminists whose involvement in my success, happiness, and well-being was informed by an understanding that didn’t require academic degrees. We were black women in a world that was as sexist as it was racist. And all we had was each other.

My mama and aunts knew all of my business and discussed it out in the open, house-public, so that anybody in the house within earshot could hear. They laughed at my anxiousness to get my period, congratulated me for good report cards, and shook their heads at my claims that I would never “fall in love with a boy.” They also celebrated with me at graduations and birthdays, patted me on the back when I got my feelings hurt, and fiercely defended me when I was threatened. I later understood

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them to be feminists, even though they had never heard the word, and would have probably wrinkled their noses and rolled their eyes if I called them one.

Black feminism (Collins) and womanism (Walker), which I discovered in the middle of living in North Carolina and moving to Florida, helped me articulate the nuances of my life as a blackgirl, combat social constructions of what being a blackgirl meant, and make sense of the interrelated oppressions I faced as a result of patriarchy, racism, and classism. Through black feminism I learned how to use my personal and inherited family stories alongside the storied legacy of black feminists to politicize my experiences and compare them to other black women. Black feminism taught me how to define myself for myself instead of relying on the problematic and skewed representations offered to me, about me, by others. Black feminism also gave me the framework to center and privilege my everyday lived experiences as useful, important, and relevant data for academic scholarship. When auto/ethnography came into the picture it made sense in the context of my black feminist politics.

### **Auto/Ethnography: Making The Private Public**

In my community it was important to keep personal business personal. It was considered scandalous for private things to be made public. When your proverbial dirty laundry was available for the world to see it had damning consequences ranging from short-term estrangement to long-term embarrassment. Sharing our stories and experiences had always been restricted to the household and between kinfolk.

Auto/ethnography, coupled with my newfound feminism, was an opportunity for me to embrace my truths and negotiate the tensions and roles I learned as a child about stories. I had to reconcile the secrecy of community narratives and the legacy of black feminist narratives. I was being pulled in two directions, one insisting that I keep my mouth shut when other people were around, and the other requiring that I live my life with my mouth open. My audience further shifted from family members to an academic audience.

As an auto/ethnographer I examine my lived experiences through a cultural lens, using creative writing techniques and research methods to interrogate my experiences while making sense of cultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams and Bochner). As a blogger I have found that writing auto/ethnographically has different risks, rewards, and consequences. There is also a duality of identity at play: the public-private self versus the private-public self. As a blogger I negotiate a public-private self that is somewhat recognizable to others, and as an academic auto/ethnographer I negotiate a private-public self, centering aspects of my identity and lived experience that are routinely left out of academic spaces. The politics of my identity as an academic auto/ethnographer, scholar, blogger, and black feminist coalesce and complicate each other.

I embrace the concept of telling my story and being vulnerable, but I am interestingly private and solitary in my everyday life. My auto/ethnographic identity, in some ways, is (or was) my best-kept secret. For example, while I have been writing au-

to/ethnography for ten years, most of my family members don't know exactly what I do or why, only occasionally reading my work, at my request. And most of my colleagues have no idea that I contribute to a successful and internationally recognized blog.

### Getting Crunk: On Being Facebook Famous

At the start of my second semester as a faculty member at the University of Alabama, I was invited to join an emergent person-of-color scholar activist group called the [Crunk Feminist Collective](#). I was both intrigued by and apprehensive about the invitation. While my feminism and investment in social justice were congruent with the goals of what the collective stood for, and I was interested in participating in a public discussion of the complicated negotiations of connecting personal politics to hip hop generation culture (which is often saturated with the misogyny and sexism feminist work seeks to eradicate), I was hesitant to join. I was uncertain because: 1) I had always negotiated my feminist politics and blackwomanness in isolation, and 2) in addition to community outreach and scholarship the collective would be creating a public blog for which I would be asked to contribute. I was excited about the prospect of joining a collective of like-minded individuals with similar politics, but I was anxious about writing for a blog or increasing my online presence. I finally decided to join the Collective because I didn't think the blogs would be widely read and I was committed to the [mission statement](#) we collaboratively created.

We launched our blog site on wordpress.com during Women's History Month (March) 2010, and I wrote my first blog, "You Are Pretty For A Dark-Skinned Girl," on April 1, 2010. The blog was a brief rant about the insult-compliment I often received growing up that implies it is oxymoronic to be attractive *and* dark-skinned. The content, not unlike my academic writing, was centered on my personal blackgirl experience and attempted to both situate and critique it. Unlike academic contexts, where the process of getting feedback from readers can take several weeks or months, I knew that my words were immediately available and accessible for anyone to see. I was nervous about the potential rejection, judgment and harshness of commenters. While academic auto/ethnography is heavily criticized,<sup>1</sup> I don't take the criticism personally; I link the criticisms to the method, not to my writing or my life. Writing blog posts for a seemingly nonacademic audience, with no particular interest in my credentials or feelings, felt uniquely risky. The blog entry was read by a handful of people (mostly other members of the Collective) and the few comments were affirming. Based on that initial experience, I decided to continue contributing to the blog.

During the first month our blog discussed issues ranging from health care, patriarchy, nonheterosexuality, politics, popular culture, representations of black women,

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<sup>1</sup> A common critique of auto/ethnography is that it is subjective, narcissistic, self-absorbed navel gazing. Some critics question its legitimacy as a methodological approach while simultaneously praising the accessibility of its provocative prose (see Anderson; Atkinson; Buzard).

dating dilemmas, reality television, and Mo’Nique at the Oscars. We generated topics from our lives, everyday experiences, and media, and offered critical reflections on issues that are important for nondominant populations. As a mode of digital media and popular culture our blogs posts were tweeted, shared on Facebook and Tumblr, “liked” and reblogged in mainstream venues.

As the blog has become more popular in terms of readers and reposts, and as I have felt more exposed, I realized that unlike my academic work, my auto/ethnographic blogs could not be hidden behind restricted access journals or chapters in books that everyday folk would rarely pick up to read. Blogging introduced my auto/ethnographies to a wider audience for the first time. The immediate feedback I received made me feel comfortable revealing private experiences in a public forum because I knew that my experiences represented other blackgirl realities. I felt it was important for me to insert and interpret my experiences as a black woman feminist and to invite readers to be vulnerable, brave and vocal about their own experiences. In that capacity my blogging goals mirror my auto/ethnographic work.

In a [story about depression](#) I wrote about the dangers of the strongblackwoman myth, telling my own story of depression alongside a response to Fantasia Barrino’s attempted suicide in 2010. Later I wrote about the [contradictory messages](#) blackgirls get about sex and pregnancy as a teenager, and how those expectations change once they get older and are expected to become mothers.

My personal narratives, in conjunction with deeply personal and political blogs about social injustices written by other members of the Collective, helped me facilitate a sense of community and activism that is often missing in my academic work. My black feminism and womanism was morphing into a more specific kind of (crunk) feminism that I embraced in my writing and politics.

Crunk feminism was a way of engaging the contradictions of my black feminism with larger black culture and as a fan of hip hop, which was my coming of age soundtrack. Being crunk was my way of streamlining my reactions to injustice. Being a crunk feminist, for me, is an extension of my rural Southern blackgirl self and my academic auto/ethnographer self because it requires ownership of my experiences. The Crunk Feminist Collective describes crunkness as “our mode of resistance that finds its particular expression in the rhetorical, cultural, and intellectual practices of a contemporary generation”(Crunk Feminist Collective Mission Statement). Getting and being crunk was a way for me to unapologetically embrace my investment in my community and myself while resisting further tropes of marginalization (Griffin). By utilizing crunkness as a strategy for responding to injustice I felt empowered and heard. I also felt exposed.

In an article that interrogates the intersection of social identity and social media, communication scholar Amber Johnson describes the promises and problems of utilizing social media as a space for mediating identity:

Social media’s asynchronous, yet ubiquitous and inviting structure yields a wide-open space for people to insert their bodies, performances, and narratives into the virtual realm. While some hide behind anonymity, others are bolder in their inser-

tion of intersectional identities. At the crux of insertion is the possibility of virality, or the incessant clicking and sharing, which results in cyber-fame, a spotlight on the self, and potential for exploitation. Because our identities fluctuate in a milieu of negotiation, conceptual change, and mediated representations, it is important to look at the ways in which social media challenges the way we perform, authenticate, appropriate, and exploit identities. (Johnson 2)

My blogger (public-private) self, rboylorn, emerged as an alter ego that allowed me to write my black feminist autoethnography (Griffin) without the shield of the academy, thus enacting and inserting an embodied and performative identity as a black feminist PhD with rural roots. While my identity is comprised of multiple standpoints and positionalities, particular identities are pushed to the forefront depending on the blog entry and topic I write about (i.e., blackgirl, academic, ally, advocate, feminist, angryblackwoman, strongblackwoman, etc). As rboylorn I use the blog as a feminist project, an open space and forum where I can interject and interrupt the cultural narratives that lack critical interrogation. As a crunk space the blog is a house for my anger and frustrations, rage and redemption. It was a place to interrogate privilege, privilege intersectionality, and consider the legitimacy and importance of marginalized lives. The blog offered me a public space to think about and through the racist, classist, sexist, ableist, heterosexist notions of reality in popular culture and everyday life. Instead of hiding behind anonymity, I began to embrace the platform of being Facebook famous.

### **Writing (for) My Life: Blogs and Auto/ethnography**

Blogs entries are intentionally brief, informative, and pointed with a (political) purpose. The journalistic quality of blogs, which makes them a combination of objectivity and subjectivity, make them a versatile medium for auto/ethnography. By being auto/ethnographic, blogs gain credibility by incorporating cultural, social and political components into subjective personal reflections. Auto/ethnographic blogs are also useful because they have the capacity to inspire cultural criticism, call for political action, and initiate important discussions about social justice (Clough). Accordingly, auto/ethnographic blogs resonate with readers due to their realness, subjectivity, emotionality, vulnerability, reflexivity, and bravery. Blogs and auto/ethnography are emotionally intelligent texts whose success is largely determined by their capacity to instigate a reaction in readers, either resonance or response. Accordingly, auto/ethnographic blogs have the capacity to be life-changing and life-affirming, helping to make possible the change we want to see in the world (Holman Jones).

I utilize my platform as a blogger in much the same way I do as a scholar, to bring visibility and voice to marginalized populations, and to raise awareness around social injustices. I also write from my lived experiences, my wounds (Weems), my truths, and my fears. In a blog post entitled "[Overcoming A-Stigma-Tism: \(An Affirmation\) For Blackgirls Who Have Considered Suicide When Closed Eyes Are Enuf](#)," I wrote:

The world stops telling blackgirls they are beautiful after while,  
if it ever tells us at all  
Mama doesn't say it  
because she thinks you already know it  
or because she is preoccupied with getting by  
Daddy might not say it  
because he is too busy calling out somebody else's pretty  
After elementary school, when you need to hear it the most  
friends won't say it  
out of fear that your pretty might be prettier than theirs  
In high school the words are hidden beneath innuendos that imply your pretty is  
conditional  
But it's not  
By the time you are in your twenties you are so used to being presumed ugly that it  
is internalized  
Sometimes the stigma of so much pain and disappointment and worry and sickness  
and stereotypes and struggles and self-hate and sacrifice and lack and  
discrimination and blackness and femaleness and being different pass down  
legacies of loss or shame  
that weigh you down  
but I have a remedy  
for astigmatism (not seeing yourself clearly)  
for the stigma (of past choices or limitations)  
of feeling misunderstood  
for the -ism that feels attached to everything you do  
and everything you are  
It's a perception problem  
You need a new lens  
so you can see yourself  
fully  
differently

abundantly  
beautifully  
Stop in front of a mirror today  
Open your eyes all the way  
Don't stop looking until you see it  
Your capacity and possibility  
Your mahogany-skinned beauty  
Your charcoal eyes  
Your frizzy/wavy/kinky/curly/straight hair  
Your wide nose  
Your luscious lips  
The pot in your belly, the junk in your trunk  
The marks that stretch from here to there  
And the moles and marks that are uniquely your own  
You are beautiful  
And being beautiful-black doesn't mean you have to be strong  
But be awake  
Be present  
Be open  
And be forgiving  
Open your eyes  
See yourself  
& love yourself  
in all your magnificence and fury  
And when you do, and tears rush into an open smile  
Show another *blackgirl*  
how badass beautiful she is  
Tell her 'til she rolls her eyes at the ridiculousness of it all  
When she doesn't hear you, because she's not used to the words,  
Tell her again  
Tell her 'til she throws up her hands, shakes her head, and smiles in sweet  
surrender

to the fact that being all of who she is  
is (and always has been)  
enuf (rboylorn October 25, 2012)



I write blogs for the same reasons that I write auto/ethnography—to make blackgirls visible, and through visibility to affirm them and (possibly) change their lives and worlds in the process.

At the time of this writing the CFC has over 13,000 followers on [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#) and [Tumblr](#) communities of almost 5,000 members. We regularly reach 25,000 people each week. For me this means the auto/ethnographies I write on the blogosphere will have a much larger readership than my academic publications, which is important because I aspire to create work that is transformative and thoughtful for academics and non-academics alike.

I underestimated the impact that digital social justice work would have on me—expanding my audience from academe to the public sphere, and thrusting me into being recognized in the blogosphere. Until I became a blogger, few outside of the “ivory tower” knew my name. I didn’t become an auto/ethnographer to be famous, but I did become an auto/ethnographer to be noticeable, and to make the research about black women’s lives more accessible. I realized through conversations about the growing popularity of the CFC that people rarely listen to phantom voices—I had to be visible to be heard.

Auto/ethnography as a method allows me to write (about/for) my life and to make sense of it. Blogging allows me to do that in a more open space, which jeopardizes my anonymity but creates a larger public space for the kinds of conversations auto/ethnography should instigate. I did not realize, until I started blogging, that my comfort with writing auto/ethnography has often been linked to the anticipated limited audience. The accountability and possibility of blogging auto/ethnography is a complicated venture that blends my identities (as a blackgirl blogger who is also a feminist and academic). Writing my life, out in the open, auto/ethnographically, has taken on a new meaning. My blog entries are the kind of house-public talk/storying that I have been doing all my life, but it is now screen-public, and out in the open to a larger and limitless audience.

### **The Making of a Blackgirl Blogger or Why Black Feminism Makes More Sense Now**

When I first heard the term feminist I didn’t know what to do with it, but now I don’t know what I would do without it. The stories passed back and forth in my family were restricted to the household, but being a blackgirl blogger means that I take house business to the streets. Being a blackgirl blogger also means that I expand my sense of community from those who are close in proximity to people all over the world. Black



feminism was never intended to be a secret, so I don't see the intentional sharing of my stories as betrayal anymore, but rather as a feminist activist act. My lived experience informs and is informed by my autoethnographic work, so going/being public as a blog writer is part of that process. It is similar to the process of becoming a feminist and learning to not only embrace it behind closed doors or in the classroom, but in my everyday life. Speaking my truth is my black feminist inheritance, and speaking out loud is my crunk feminist legacy. Making our stories public outside of academe expands our reach, our influence, our capacity and our audience. I have learned that closeted auto/ethnography, the kind that is hidden behind academic doors (and locked access journals), limits the potential of the work. Blogging forced me out of the closet.

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