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# Motherboards, Microphones and Metaphors: Re-examining New Literacies and Black Feminist Thought through Technologies of Self

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**Motherboards, Microphones and Metaphors:  
Re-examining New Literacies and Black Feminist Thought through  
Technologies of Self**

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ABSTRACT This article examines how two African American females composed counter-selves using a computer motherboard and a stand-alone microphone as critical identity texts. Situated within sociocultural and critical traditions in new literacy studies and black feminist thought, the authors extend conceptions of language, literacy and black femininity via the agentic, powerful and knowledgeable selves of African American women, constructs that are often missing from the scholarship on young African American women and their practices of self-definition. The motherboard and microphone serve as analytical constructs for understanding critical new literacies and subject malleability, which crisscrosses in complex configurations across the experiences, histories and relationships that carry meaning for those who struggle through scenes of silence. Motherboards and microphones act metaphorically as *technologies of the self*, which resist and reformat cosmologies of black femininity that have long patterned gender oppression. The findings suggest that technologies exist everywhere, and technology related to literacy and language exists in many forms, including vocabularies of motherboards and microphones. The authors conclude that using such vocabularies for expressing identity can work through the power of metaphor

in its richest sense to offer new conceptions of self, whereby the subject becomes a personal artifact capable of immense transformative potential.

The things we call ‘technologies’ are ways of building order in our world. Many technological devices and systems important in everyday life contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity. (Matlow, 2000, p. 167)

### **Introduction**

In this article, we consider the ways in which hardware technologies – a motherboard and a microphone (mic) – embody the identities of two individuals – a mother (Larnee) and an emcee (Maya).[1] These ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988), when used as symbols in mediating the written selves of the two participants, acted metaphorically to archive particular meanings, which gave their users authority over how others understood them and how they understood themselves. Looking closely at the technologies as *identity texts*, we tease apart the linguistic and conceptual features of how each item worked as an utterance, expressing the contents of one thing through another – in this case, aspects of Larnee’s and Maya’s identities as a mother and an emcee, respectively. In doing so, we seek to understand how technologies of the self – in this case, a motherboard and a mic – can be seen as analytical constructs for understanding the complex relationship between literacies and identities, and the related experiences, histories and social constructs that can only be understood through the transit in meaning ascribed to things compared. We further suggest that meaning crystallizes in such instances of *figurative language*, which is so fully representative of the individuals and things it modifies that we often fail to recognize the elasticity of the form, particularly when it is written in the dialect of new technologies – in this case, hardware.

### **Background and Theoretical Framing**

Based on two larger ethnographies of literacy, discourse and digital literacies (Lewis, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, in press, 2014; Lewis Ellison, in press 2014; Kirkland, 2010b), this article refers broadly to theories from new literacy studies (NLS) (Street, 1995; New London Group, 1996) and black feminist thought (BFT) (Collins, 2000; Kirkland, 2010a). In addition to Foucault's (1988) notion of technologies of the self and Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) understanding of metaphor, we use NLS and BFT perspectives as a framework for exploring the participants' roles as African American [2] women seeking agency of knowledge, power and self using literacy tools that are rarely discussed in the NLS or BFT literature. For us, the convergence of these disparate perspectives centers around Larnee's and Maya's uses of new literacy things to rewrite African American feminine selves and, in the process, comment on the positions that some African American women occupy as understood through the technologies they choose to inform others of who they are. NLS and BFT theories, when considered together, complicate and complement our understandings of the world of nuanced literacies and the ways in which it sees African American women.

#### *New Literacy Studies*

NLS theories view literacy as social and semiotic – i.e. as a system of practices that play on everyday signs and symbols (Street, 1995; New London Group, 1996). NLS distinguishes itself from traditional literacy studies in that its focus is not only on the acquisition of skills (for example, reading and writing), but also on modalities (for example, print, visuals) (Hull & Nelson, 2005), spaces (Hull & Zacher, 2004) and representations/constructions of identities (Guzzetti, 2006) – that is, new literacies explore how all literacies exist and act in roles that are multiple and complementary, and extend through time and space fluidly at various angles,

which both position and reposition people, desire and relations of power (Street, 1995; Gee, 1999).

This role distinguishes a link between the activities of reading and writing as practices situated within the social structures in which they are embedded (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000). NLS questions what counts as literacy and ‘whose literacies’ are dominant, marginalized and resistant. It acknowledges how people use literacy for different reasons and purposes in different contexts (Street, 1995). We therefore raise the following questions: How did these two women represent aspects of themselves through redefined modalities? How did they use unlikely language – a motherboard and a mic – to demonstrate past and current experiences, and to shape how they each understood their own lives as they were situated in a moving world? NLS has helped us to understand the role of material language in mediating identity as social practice. It has also allowed us to pluralize figurations of technology, extending this popular research trope in ways that remake the surface of our understanding of new literacies.

### *Black Feminist Thought*

We use BFT to help us contemplate the importance of the black feminine mystique in relation to the data we are reporting. Black feminist thinkers, such as Collins (2000), recognize that understanding African American women in practice is impossible without acknowledging the agentive, dominant and knowledgeable selves of African American women. In her work, Collins acknowledges how African American women are powerful in their own right, connected through organic links of empowerment that express, through material language, social justice. Thus, the event of two African American women appropriating hardware to (re)write their selves is not a historical anomaly. Rather, these artifacts of literacy fit tightly

within a tradition of African American women reformatting their lives, using the available resources and sometimes inventing resources where none existed (Taylor, 1998; hooks, 2000).

In addition, Richardson (2002) has called attention to the multiple consciousnesses that African American women bring to their development of language and literacy practices. For Richardson, there are many varying nuances and complexities of language and literacy that are prevalent in African American communities and embodied in the crest of the African American female. These nuances and complexities shape how African American women read and are read in the world. Richardson further argues that African American women sometimes leverage literacy to prevent others from stripping them of their voice, culture, spirituality and self-preservation. She suggests that African American women can be seen as deliberate and powerful in their language and literacy practices, from their 'storytelling and performative silence' to their 'strategic use of polite and assertive language, style shifting/codeswitching, indirection, steppin/rhyming, and preaching' (Richardson, 2002, p. 687). Each of these practices represents relevant registers that African American women use to communicate and convey their unique and complex knowledge of self. Scholars such as Morgan (1999) add that women constantly negotiate and strategize their *ways of being and speaking* through non-verbal and verbal communication. Because language is a social act, African American women's use of language is strongly influenced by the social issues of race, class, sexuality and power.

The frameworks of NLS and BFT have contributed to our analysis of how Larnee and Maya used figurative language via metaphor to describe their selves. Within this framework, we look across two social settings to see how Larnee's and Maya's personal stories are united and offer testimonies of agency, power, identity, knowledge and experience. To this end, we

demonstrate how the two women chose hardware as literacy tools to articulate aspects of their identities (Lewis, 2009, 2011; Kirkland, 2010c). By using hardware as language to articulate metaphorical selves, these women embodied a much broader notion of literacy – literacy as a practice of location and relocation, and literacy as meditation on the subject.[3] Thus, our goal in this article is to examine how the women used and viewed such literacy tools – a motherboard and a mic – to express a range of sentiments located within and beyond them. In so doing, we analyze the sophistication of this peculiar practice of ‘writing’, focusing on how one of our participants, Larnee, an African American mother of four sons in her mid thirties, understood herself through a motherboard, which became a part of how she functioned as a mother and a woman (for example, ‘I call myself the motherboard’). Larnee embodied the motherboard and described parts of the equipment as serving a pivotal role based on the challenges in her life. We also examine the ways in which Maya, a young African American woman, used a mic to express who she was (for example, ‘I am the mic’). Moreover, in the case of Maya, the literacy tool elevated who she could be, relocating her in a space where her voice became a vital element in the cacophony of sounds that shade human existence. Both women help us to capture (1) the relevance of metaphor in the practice of meaningmaking and (2) the power of unlikely uses of technology in the practice of literacy.

Another part of our analysis speaks to the black female artifact and, more specifically, to the overarching ways that African American women make use of, reshape and/or remake themselves through a variety of literacy tools. In this transformation, technologies of the self personify relationships – in this case, between African American women and others (Matlow, 2000). Thus, another goal of this article is to highlight the ways in which Larnee and Maya used such personifications of things to structure thought and expand on literacy practice. In this light, we focus our analysis around two broad questions: (1) In what ways did Larnee and

Maya use their literacy tools to reimagine themselves? (2) How might the artifacts of their reimaginings extend our understandings of the relationship among literacy, technology and self?

### *Research Methods*

The data in this article shares portions of two separate and larger research studies that highlight a family's digital literacy practices in the home and the urban literacy practices of a group of young African American women in their community. Study 1 features Larnee, whom Lewis Ellison met in 2006 while working at an after-school program as a reading specialist for three of her four sons. Study 2 features Maya, whom Kirkland met in 2006 while researching the online social literacy practices of a group of young women who attended an after-school digital literacy program in New York City.

### *Data Collection*

*Study 1.* From July to October 2007, Lewis Ellison collected extensive data on Larnee's family's digital literacy practices in the home. Based on the rapport established, Larnee allowed further data collection and observations for a year. The data sources consisted of structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews focusing on the family's domains of digital literacy practice; observations of the family; the collection of audio and video recordings; digital photo collages; emails and text messages; and descriptive notes on what the family did with digital literacies in the home. Lewis Ellison interviewed Larnee once or twice a week for an average of 60-120 minutes per session, with multiple breaks when needed.

*Study 2.* The data sources included: (1) digital texts collected from the online social networking sites in which Maya and eight of her friends participated (for example, daily



snapshots of profile pages, message boards, notes, pictures, videos, etc.); (2) ethnographic field notes of Kirkland's observations of the young ladies' digital and personal interactions, their processes of participation, the nature of their reading and writing practices (i.e. what was written and read, and how) and their major daily events; and (3) (informal) ethnographic interviews with the nine participants throughout the course of the study. Field visits occurred three times a week for approximately two hours per visit over the course of two years, from fall 2006 to fall 2008. The data used for this article focuses on Larnee, the motherboard and Maya, her mic, and the meaning they made of these technologies.

### *Data Analysis*

We analyzed the data using interpretive (Hultgren, 1989) and critical discourse approaches (Rogers et al, 2005). Each approach required (1) grounding all interpretations in the collected texts and observations, and (2) examining claims and interpretations made within and across this data. Blending the two approaches, we were able to analyze emergent patterns in the data in order to chart the expansion and intensification of the young women's literacy practices. This process was loosely guided by a 'grounded theory' approach to allow for the development of theories as to how young African American women practice literacy online (see Charmaz, 2004).

Lewis Ellison read and reread transcripts with and without audio tapes, made marginal notes and questions, and developed codes to help make sense of the data. Lewis Ellison continued by transcribing the audio and video tapes, and color-coding the interview data. Kirkland coded the data in a similar way and then displayed it by using a combination of analytical matrices and narrative vignettes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) in order to examine the claims and interpretations made within and across the texts and observations (Rogers et al,

2005). We both used discourse approaches (Lewis Ellison used mediated discourse analysis [MDA] and Kirkland critical discourse analysis [CDA]) to examine the social actions in real-time activities in Larnee's and Maya's literacy practices (Fairclough, 1995; Scollon, 2001).

*Study 1.* MDA considers the relationship between language and action, and how language use is explicated in how individuals relate to a particular action. MDA allowed Lewis Ellison to analyze the ways Larnee constructed meaning through real-time interactions with the motherboard, which further allowed Lewis Ellison to actively become part of Larnee's family's everyday lives and actions in their home, and take note of pivotal actions in a given event. Using MDA in each interaction asked: What kinds of actions are relevant in this practice? What are the underlying meanings in this image? 'How [does] Discourse figure into this social action' (Scollon, 2001, p. 143)? In Figure 1, Lewis Ellison captured Larnee's verbal and non-verbal talk as actions and still images to describe these activities. It was through such interactions that Lewis Ellison observed Larnee disassembling a computer, explaining how the motherboard had become a prominent focus and part of her self as a mother (Lewis, 2009, 2011; Lewis Ellison, 2014).


| THE MOTHERBOARD & MDA |  |   |  |   |
|-----------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Time Stamp            | MDA Concepts   | Video Still   | Multimodality  | Verbal Discourse  |
| 0:20:46:03-0:22:20:00 | <p><b>Nexus of Practice</b></p> <p>“The intersection or linkage of multiple practices such that some group comes to recognize ‘the same set’ of actions...a recognizable grouping of a set of mediated actions”</p> <p>[Explaining the terminology and functions of the Computer Unit to Tisha; taking out parts of the computer unit]</p> |  | <p>(5a) Larnee touches the motherboard; proximity to the computer unit</p> <p>(5b) Tisha touches the equipment</p> <p>(5c) Larnee’s voice lowers and is very serious</p> | <p>(5a) L: This is the Motherboard.</p> <p>(5b) T: What are these parts?</p> <p>(5c) L: Roadblocks for me, is not finishing school because I’m so dedicated to making sure that my boys finish school! That’s a roadblock for me because it’s not that I haven’t completed school because it’s not my fault that I wasn’t in school, I was taken out of school.</p> |

Figure 1. The Motherboard and MDA.

*Study 2.* CDA allowed Kirkland to analyze Maya’s testimonial data (i.e. the interview transcripts) in order to uncover the hidden meanings behind her mic as they were revealed in her testimonies. Using CDA, Kirkland was able to realize the ‘taken-for-granted’ concepts (i.e. the possible connection between tool and user) that live through discourse, speech or confession (Smitherman & van Dijk, 1988; Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2004). A primary purpose for using CDA was to closely analyze the mic as a language event, explained through Maya, in order to expose the hidden associations between it and Maya’s emerging sense of self.

Across both studies, we define ‘discourse’ similarly to Foucault (1969), as a practice that produces what it purports to describe. Discourse in this article, then, can be realized through our other analytical constructs: metaphor (as personifications of the self) and literacy tools (as technologies of the self). Hence, it has been through these units of analysis that we locate discourse patterns, where literacy is a practice of performing identities in the process of making sense of one’s life and transforming one’s possibilities for acting (Gee, 1989). In analyzing discourse, we have sought diligently to: (1) ground all our interpretations in the

texts and (2) examine our claims and interpretations within and across the contexts of Larnee and Maya, and in relation to theory (Rogers et al, 2005). We present our findings below.

## **Findings**

### *'I Call Myself "The Motherboard"': reverse personification and the technologies of motherhood*

I call myself 'The Motherboard'. Just like 'Intel', in my eyes, I have one of the best processors out there. Since I could talk, I have always linked anything electronic with the way the human body works, but the one electronic thing that I most identify with is 'The Motherboard'. (Larnee)

Born with a life-threatening skin disease (epidermolysis bullosa), caught in the educational and economic wars of limited education and financial stability, and a survivor of physical and sexual abuse as a child, Larnee coped through her attraction and attention to digital tools as part of herself. She described herself with functions and features of the motherboard. She took a university computer-repair course to learn how to disassemble and reassemble a computer unit. When she cracked open the lid of the computer, she found the motherboard intact and breathing. It ignited a passion, a sense of connection, a need and a persistence to learn more. Larnee stated: 'The more I learned about the motherboard, the more I realized that I was learning about myself, about how I *connect* with family and friends and the way and how I used information that was put into me'. This activity became her oasis of sanity and serenity, and forced her to find something good that she could do on her own. When Larnee took apart the computer unit, she looked at it through the lens of her life. The motherboard became a symbol, or form, to understand such nuances. When taking apart the

motherboard, she was *taking apart* the things from her past that had confined her as an African American, a woman and a mother.

Larnee's words (as quoted above) call attention to how Larnee viewed and identified herself as the motherboard. She explained: 'I find this so ironic that the name of this equipment is called "motherboard" and how I relate this to me being a mother'. As the manufacturer of the motherboard, she took the features and functions of the motherboard to rebuild the computer back into operation mode in the same way she would take the motherboard to rebuild her own life in order to move forward. Here is where she positioned herself, as being one person but encompassed by varying digital tools of functionality. Looking at the multiple features, gadgets and prongs of the motherboard equipment, she saw herself with all of the *tools* she needed to be the primary functional unit of her family.

Tools play a major role in socio-psychological activity and serve as the driving force of 'human influence on the object of activity' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). Vygotsky described the importance and use of the cultural tools that make up sociocultural theory. He analyzed the ways that certain tools and items are used to explain individuals' lived experiences and the context and expectations of a particular group. It is through Larnee's use of certain tools that we learn how she communicated her needs and the needs of her family, how she acted, and how she handled her life as an expression of what was meaningful, relevant and valid in her culture. According to Matlow (2000, p. 168), the computer 'embodies our ideas and expresses our diversity and in this sense may be regarded as an extension of the self'. This statement is relevant to Larnee. Her fascination with the motherboard demonstrated how the motherboard related to and was symbolic of Larnee's role as a mother and the experiences that stemmed from her childhood.

Larnee became interested in technology as a child. Forbidden to go to school until she was 12 years old, and later taken out of school when she was in the ninth grade, she suffered psychological and emotional separation when her siblings attended school, while she had to perform manual labor roles in the home. Socializing herself with children's television programs, Larnee began to acquire independently what her siblings were learning in school. She began to seek out technologies with the same thirst she would have for her family. She spent a lot of time watching television and talking on the telephone, and as new technologies changed to digital tools, her need increased to purchase and upgrade more of these tools. She allowed these technologies to enhance her understanding of family and 'serve as markers of relationship and emotional connection' lost in her childhood (Turkle, 2007, p. 5). Much of this loss reoccurred when she disassembled the computer unit and pointed to the capacitor parts on the motherboard. For over two hours, Larnee stood holding the computer close to her body and demonstrated her knowledge of the motherboard as she touched each object with confidence and fervor (see Figure 2).

She explained:

These are roadblocks. Roadblocks for me, personally, is not finishing school. I'm so dedicated to making sure that my boys finish school. They *have* to finish school!

That's a roadblock for me because it's not my fault that I wasn't in school. I was taken out of school. (See Figure 1)

With tears in her eyes and silence in the room, Larnee revealed parts of herself and longed for an outlet through her learning about the motherboard and other digital tools that she could embody.

She no longer expressed the limitations that society deemed important (i.e. lack of education and economic stability), or that she was a victim of an illness that had left visible

burn marks on her body as a carrier of epidermolysis bullosa, or that she was a victim of physical and sexual abuse. Rather, her agentic voice (Hull & Katz, 2006) became alive, which, first, positioned her as being an avid digital literacy user and ‘initiator of digital tools’ (Lewis, 2013, p. 10) with her sons and, second, repositioned her identity as one with agency. Moje and Lewis (2007, p. 18) explain agency as: ‘a transformation of “selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources and histories, as embedded within relations of power”’. Thus, these technologies gave Larnee status in her household with her sons and the agentic voice to remain powerful, with her own intricacies about who she was as an African American mother and woman.

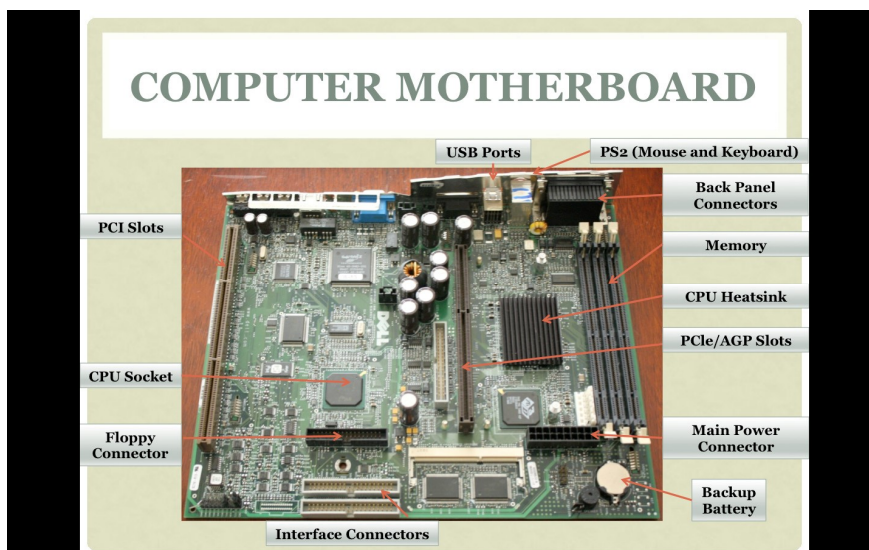


Figure 2. Computer motherboard.

### **Embodied Literacies: one computer, one mother, one body**

Literacy has always been an embodied, material act. Among other things, this means that it shapes and is shaped by its technologies. Today, we see changes in literacy

practices as people gain access to new ways of communicating and making meaning. (Bruce, 2003, p. 264)

For Larnee, the motherboard described her role as a mother almost perfectly. She read certain aspects of the motherboard as symbolic of herself. She talked about the motherboard and how digital tools were enabled as if they were cells working together and connecting to other parts of the body, which allowed them to function meaningfully in her life. For Larnee, digital literacies of this kind were powered by one main source, but ‘all of them have different outlets’. She explained that: ‘Digital literacy keeps me connected’. This example reinforces Kress’s (2000, p. 184) notion of *embodied literacies* as ‘the body’s potential for engagement with the world’. He argues that: ‘Human bodies have a wide range of means of engagement with the world; a wide and highly varied range of means of perception’ (Kress, 2000, p. 184). In other words, there are ranges of senses that play a significant role in the ways people function in the world and operate in isolation but as a part of a multimodal semiotic world (Kress, 2000). Larnee affirmed this idea when she explained that: ‘My life is shaped around digital literacies’. She also represented in her statement how the technology took over parts of her internal and external worlds. Figure 2 signifies the components of the motherboard used for storing, backing up files and connecting to data, while in Figure 3 Larnee describes herself as the motherboard.

Each identity and detail of her life was attached to operative devices that cause this tool to function. Hence, the motherboard embodied parts of her, and its functions allowed her to take on a ‘second self’ (Turkle, 2005). Turkle (2005, p. 1) explains the ‘second self’ as recognizing the ways the computer affects our understanding and awareness of ourselves, others and our world, and how we need to look at ‘the computer not as a tool, but as part of our social and psychological lives’. She argues how individuals’ experiences with computers



change the ways they think, function and act in the world. In this way, we should look beyond what the computer can do for us to how it changes what we do and how we think. Following Turkle’s line of reasoning, we saw how Larnee internalized digital literacies as embodying motherhood, whereby the motherboard was a metaphor for that aspect of Larnee’s life. In this way, Larnee viewed the motherboard as features and functions of herself. For instance, the way she called digital literacies ‘cells’ suggested four metaphors. First, the cells in her body function as significant parts in how her body operates and, second, cells take on different constructions of meaning and language, as the Latin word for ‘cell’ (*cellula*) means ‘small room’. This ‘small room’ signified how most of Larnee’s literacy learning as a child occurred, within the confines of her bedroom – where peace, love and attention were evident in her digital world (i.e. the television, pager and landline phone). Even now, the majority of the digital literacy practices in her home take place in her bedroom, which is a place where all of her sons and other family members come to play video games, use the computer, watch television, and converse both on- and offline.

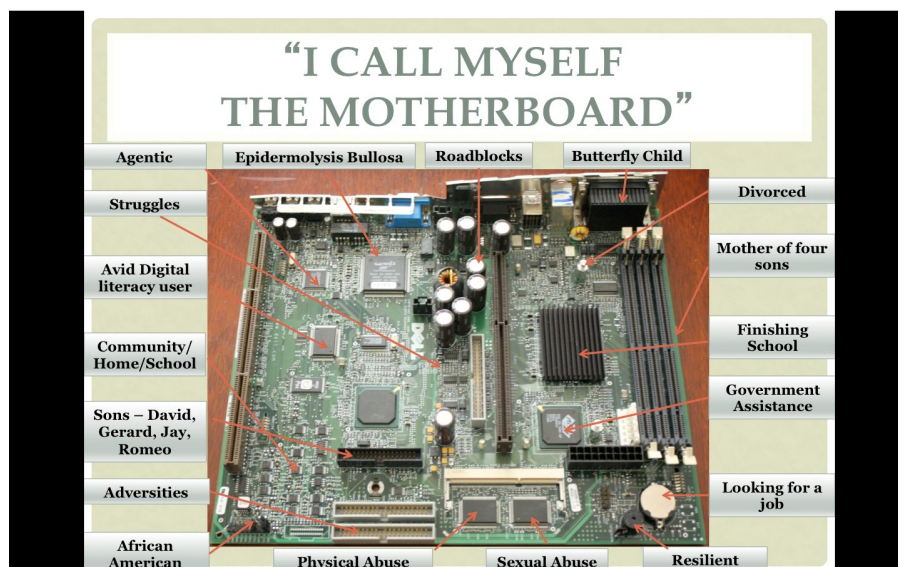


Figure 3. 'I call myself "The Motherboard"'. .

The 'cell' metaphor also symbolized the cellphone, which she considered to be an important digital tool; as she explained: 'I actually have to get on the phone at night before I go to sleep', wanting 'to feel connected to the world'. Finally, she also equated 'cell' to a prison, in which having digital literacies might, in fact, compel her to want and buy more digital tools, even when money was scarce. In addition, when Larnee was a young child, she was confined to her bedroom instead of attending school. Through these experiences, being in her bedroom may have felt as if she were in a prison (Lewis, 2009). Regardless of the metaphorical extension that Larnee made with the computer and its parts, the point here is that Larnee was using the motherboard to compose herself. In the process, the motherboard and its parts were put to work by Larnee to make sense of her life. In powerful ways, this atypical use of the computer to write the self enabled what Kirkland (2010a) calls a 'postmodern black female narrative'. These new stories of the black female self are not only constructed with the new means of today, but they also offer new possibilities for rethinking literacy and the black female story, which suddenly emerges from the shadows to a place of transcendence and luminous bliss. Thus, Larnee's use of the motherboard to understand herself and her motherhood created opportunities for her to work through her personal tragedies from childhood to adulthood.

### **'I Am the Mic': figured meanings in new literacy constructions of black females**

Similar to Larnee and her motherboard is Maya and her mic. Like Larnee, Maya constructed a sense of self onstage, using this hardware as a signifier to 'write' her self. This written self articulated *figured meanings*, which were fostered, forged and understood through the semiotic transaction between the construct and the constructed, the channel and the

channeled, where the element of the words was housed in an item of hardware – that is, Maya’s mic figured her being and shaped some aspect of her identity to conform to the limited elements and hidden possibilities in its design. In this meaning/making of self, the mic was not Maya, but Maya, the mic. And on the day when Kirkland met with her, Maya stared at the cordless microphone before releasing it and all of its potential from its sheave.

The mic, which she called ‘the single element’, was proudly balanced on the head of a mic stand. Maya choked the mic firmly with the heavy weight of her left palm, as if grasping for the power of life itself. She breathed into ‘the single element’, her quiet source of sound, and produced silence, a whisper, a shout and then song. In this moment, nothing but breath seemed to matter, as her whole existence coiled into vibration and verb, morphing into a vociferous vocabulary of meaningful echoes. The mic was an extension of this young woman – her soul, her voice, her hand. She became the mic – the mic and Maya were as one.

The first sounds of their inspired union gave glimpses of her figured meanings, where elements outside the self can pose as utterances of the subject (for example, ‘I am the mic’). Maya’s spoken word translated the language of the quiet device in her hand. Beauty and breath bent into bottomless possibilities, amplified through distant speakers – a new voice box for a new, amplified self. She was, in her own words, ‘the mic’, rewriting herself through the language of technology – in this case, a piece of hardware that she called ‘the single element’. The hardware – a hand-held metaphor for a handful of life – mirrored her potential and echoed her pain. ‘I’ve always had a lot to say’, Maya said coyly.

I just never had a place to say it. So when I’m onstage, when I got the mic, it’s a relief. It’s like all the pain that’s in me, that echoes like the sound of the mic, can be released into the air like blowing wind. It’s like the mic plugs into my pain and gives it a place to go.

Many scholars in the fields of language and literacy studies have focused on the roles of technology in reshaping/reconfiguring the literate lives of people (see Del-Castillo et al, 2003; Schmar-Dobler, 2003; Alvermann, 2008; Kirkland, 2008, 2010a; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). The conversation has generally been around the uses of hardware as a scalpel to script words from bytes (see, for example, Bezemer & Kress, 2008) and to make thousandfold meanings of pixels. Such technologies serve as discrete and complex social and para-existential portals that remake history and the self (see, for example, Knobel & Lankshear, 2008), and reposition the artistry of literacy and the location of the Other (see, for example, Kirkland, 2008).

The research and scholarly literature on literacy and technology folds together, similar to the hardware/software relationship that presents such relationships with regard to social practice (for example, the relationships among multiple hardwares, software applications and communities of practice) (see Del-Castillo et al, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Brass, 2008). Further, the literature is replete with examples of hardware – such as cellphones, personal digital assistants, speakers, monitors and so forth – conspiring with software as a tool and platform for enabling new literacies (Hull, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

Maya's moment with the mic in her hand, however, suggests another way to view the relationship between technology and literacy. For her, the mic operated as technology in the Foucauldian sense of a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18) – a method or technique through which individuals constitute themselves. Maya's recognition of herself as 'the mic' (for example, 'I am the mic') and herself 'in the mic' (for example, 'I live in the mic, the mic in me') is an instantiation of Foucault's larger idea concerning the agency humans hold to structure and shape their selves in and through the range of things available for forging figured meanings (Collins, 1999; Willis, 2002; Graue & Hawkins, 2005). In the

metaphorical transaction, the mic is both a mirror and a container/vessel. Maya could see herself reflected in its design; she could also use it as a body – as in a container or vessel – to travel beyond the inner self, reaching others in ways that only bodies can. Then, the mic, for Maya, was language, the linguistic equivalent of the word, acting as a symbol and sign for performing an unlikely comparison between subject and substance – two distinct things that find roots in a common object.

Maya used this particular technology to read and write, much like people of old used etchings, and much like Larnee used a motherboard to explain her history and herself. Maya used the mic to communicate meaning, which was achieved through the ‘concrete metaphor of life’ (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) – a comparison between visibly different things that share a common trait. ‘I am the mic’, the concrete metaphor *par exempla*, achieves its writing of the self only in relation to the subject it seeks to identify. Maya explains:

What I mean by ‘I am the mic’ is that the mic is everywhere to be heard. As a young artist, a young black woman, you [are] sensitive to voice and always aware of how you[’ve] been silenced. So your life is defined by your struggle. Your struggle over sexism, racism, struggle to get money. Your struggle to be heard and, after hearing your struggle, to deal with the shit you done put out there. But at some point you become the voice, the voice for your healing and for your liberation, the voice for others like you, and the voice that gets recognized in all ears. So where we come from the mic means everything. When you hold it, you[’re] holding power – power to speak your mind and say your truth and be heard; power to speak truth to power, you know. It’s like snatching freedom out of the hands of oppression.

The elements of comparison take concrete form in the mic juxtaposed against the young woman holding it. They themselves become the symbolic scripts for achieving not only a

type of 'writing', but also a type of critical literacy. The act of holding the mic, for Maya, was an act of transgression against social injustice ('It's like snatching freedom out of the hands of oppression'). Here, critical literacy places symbolic action at the core of struggle. It renders symbolic resistance (as opposed to symbolic oppression), where literacy reads as an act that performs the work of change, personified. So, if the mic is language and that language is a technology of the self (i.e. articulating Maya's identity), then Maya's holding of and speaking into the mic also acts as language – a technology of the scene, where the scene is extended beyond the moment and folds together contexts of history and the immediate situation where acts of freedom are numerous engaged. This language is narrative – and, in this case, counternarrative (see Delgado, 1989) – depicting the story of real historical oppression, which is revealed when Maya speaks – that is, her spoken voice, though amplified through the flamboyance of the mic, very much tells the story of the scene, of a young black woman, prior to holding the mic, saying nothing, suffering in silence in the key of her deepest despair ('As a young artist, a young black woman, you [are] sensitive to voice and always aware of how you[']ve] been silenced'). Hence, one understands Maya's statement by reading the symbols to which it is ascribed – a mic and a young lady folded together as one – and comprehends her meaning, as it collapses in that figurative place where dissimilar things become ubiquitously joined.

*Beyond 'a Life of Silence': metaphors that speak*

For Maya, the metaphor of the mic was a speaking element that communicated a meaning unique to her. She explained: 'I have always found meaning in the microphone. It breathes when I breathe. It echoes me. It allows my voice to be heard.' Through her words, the

metaphor is extended, serving as a critical literacy artifact – social commentary about the voiceless gaining voice (see Morrell, 2008; Gibson, 2010). That she articulated this further meaning is to be expected. Maya lived ‘in a life of silence’, the other character in her musings (beside the mic). Thus, the persistent but unseen presence of silence – in many ways a receptacle for the unheard – was itself a metaphor in her life, a symbol of both opposition and oppression – as she confessed, ‘clinging to her vocal chords like guilt stained with hatred’.

The mic, however, overshadowed the quiet muzzle of hushed circumstances and freed her from the ceremony of the unheard:

When I pick up the mic, it’s like I have this power. I don’t know what it is.

Something gets shaken up in me. I get a little scared; then I feel this rush. It’s like I am incredibly free.

In her freedom, Maya formed words to which she gave sound, which echoed her heart. No longer silent, she found the permission to finally breathe. ‘Sometimes I write with the mic in hand’, she explained. ‘I become a different person holding it. I exhaust and exhale.’

The difference that Maya felt is characteristic of ‘a true self’, in her words, ‘no longer hostage’. This ‘true self’ balances against the false self, which serves as not only an imposter, but also a deceiver, convincing individuals to consent to particular, yet undesired, stations in life (see Fanon, 1952). Hence, the picture that Maya painted of herself as ‘the mic’ is equally an image of her overcoming the oppression of silences.

Of course, this article is not necessarily about the symbolic instruments of liberation used by the oppressed to free themselves of their bondage. But such meanings found in symbols are, indeed, worth exploring because emblems such as a mic in the hand of a young female rapper or emcee can serve as a source of meaning, articulating in a very sophisticated way ‘the agentive self’ (Hull & Katz, 2006). This writing – the kind of meaning-making that

uses signs and symbols to forge understandings which go deeper than our known vocabulary – is the type of authentic performance that people play out on organic stages which reveal the essence of life (note here that we are critiquing writing as understood in formal academic spaces). Yet the language of this writing digs deeper still as it erupts from the pits of history, those chasms that pattern oppressions as acutely woven into the nation's fabric as the ongoing feminist struggle to transcend the quiet dilemmas of patriarchy (Kirkland, 2010a).

Then it is no small matter that Maya is female, and that the mic she holds exchanges the masculine palm for the firm feminine grip. 'I am the mic' – her words echoing the refrain of the rapper Rakim – forces listeners to acknowledge the exchange between hands from a masculine clasp to a firm feminine grasp. In this way, the metaphor is extended even further, detailing a history between men and women – a history where female hands to this day are slapped back from gripping central positions on the stage, from holding the instruments of voice where the historically silent can finally be heard. The picture it conveys foreshadows a story of women taking control. In Maya's words:

I'm not the only artist to find a spiritual connection to the mic. If you are gonna do this kind of work – and do it well – at some point you will find that you will need a voice. You don't have a choice. You either take the mic or you be quiet. And for those of us who refuse to be quiet, we become the mic. For she who holds the mic holds the power. She is center stage. She is the one who gets heard. So 'I am the mic' is a liberating gesture, an appeal to the power that is within us.

We all have voices that have been silenced, that need amplifying – especially black females. We don't always get the stage, so when we get to speak, it better be about something. But when you become the mic, you no longer have to ask to speak, or



wait to be listened to. You no longer have to be victim to silence. You can shout, scream, sing. And people will hear you, because the mic commands their attention.

Perhaps thinking about the way that people use items to communicate meanings is pushing literacy to the extreme. One might be fully comfortable with notions of literacy as only including standardized forms of language and uniform skills of parochialism – the abilities to read and write print-centralizing alpha-numeric characters only. Yet, in this comfort of simplicity, one might miss how literacies evolve – their ontological development – as in the ways that people marked time and events (and hence made meaning) by collecting objects such as sticks and stones carved stains on walls to reveal and record history; and invented scripts to stand in place of sounds (Graff, 1986).

Maya's use of the mic as a tool for reading and writing her self is particularly interesting as literate behavior in the sense that literacy has evolved in league with the evolution of technology. While one could use old literacy, as in literacy's primordial origins, to make sense of Maya's literate act (i.e. use of the mic to write her self), the mic as social language given to the purpose of literacy is situated in the new literacies, where technologies (including technologies of the self) have enhanced the associations that can be made (New London Group, 1996). In our new literate world, we read and write with new technology on digital screens and in virtual spaces. But Maya's idea of the mic suggests that new literacy has given readers and writers another resource to make meaning. It enhances our conception of technology and what we can do with it, particularly when we personify it into existential forms where the technology is an extension of the self – and in so being reveals something about us that words on a page or a primitive collection of sticks and stones cannot.

**Metaphors, Literacies and Identities: words we are made by**

Larnee and Maya wrote themselves into a fresh existence, framing the subject metaphorically through items of technology. Such framings speak to an enduring, yet ever transcending, quality of literacy: the agency of people to use things in which they find meaning to imagine and then reimagine and distribute thought and desire, the self and structure on a plain of transmission where all objects can serve as a voice and vocabulary to communicate the endless deliberations of the subject. However, this process of receiving and rendering meaning is never divorced from purpose, utility or necessity (Dyson, 2003). In both Larnee's and Maya's cases, the form, speaking through the power of metaphor, liberated a self that was either denied, misunderstood or distorted. Thus, we can understand the form – both in terms of items through which we represent things and the messages that get represented – as a complex literacy artifact (Kirkland, 2009) that pushes our understandings of NLS and, in the case of Larnee and Maya, BFT and theory.

For NLS, this means that modalisms in the historic franchise of literacy practice are continuously characteristic of the meaning-making act (Hull, 2003; Bezemer & Kress, 2008). And while multiple modes of producing meaning have been historically employed by civilizations that pre-date the modern era, individuals today such as Larnee and Maya still bend, and shall continue to bend, all kinds of forms and elements to inscribe and articulate the message of things, including selves rendered and received in conflict. The recognition of othered modalities in NLS also unearths other complexities related to the malleable anatomy of literacy and its intricate living parts. Here we have literacy as metonymy – a particular kind of metaphor that uses the name of one thing for another, of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated (as in 'wheels' used to mean 'car'). In our examples, the motherboard and the mic become part of the women they explain and, in this sense, work

metonymically (motherboard for mother and mic for emcee). Then, the tool is part of language and literacy, and acts as language and literacy themselves, extending NLS's idea of the tool beyond its function to fashion modes of representation. For Larnee and Maya, the 'tools' of the motherboard and the mic were modes of representation, language and text for articulating the self.

Further, from an NLS perspective, we see Larnee's and Maya's uses of technology as *creative acts*, which is what all literacy practices above all are, for literacy is the generation and creation of things (for example, meaning, thought, desire, etc.) that are deposited in visible or invisible places as a way to construct experience and reality. These creative acts – or creative literacy in this sense – promote the constant search for ways to produce meaning more accurately and more ingeniously. They are creative in that they appeal to innovation – such as the powerful collage of social languages and literacies that we see as an outgrowth of digital messaging, for example, where whole sentences can be reduced to a matter of characters, as in cul8r ('see you later'), or cosmetic scripts for expressing feelings, as in :-) ('happy') (see Paris & Kirkland, 2011; Lewis, 2013). Meaning, of course, is nimble and elusive, yet becomes ever more possible in creative hands.

This work also contributes to the emergent perspectives of BFT in that it adds another dimension to how we understand black female narratives of the self. Kirkland (2010a) has argued that black females shape stories across the physical and the digital to reveal what Shange (1997) describes as the black female 'metaphysical dilemma'. Kirkland suggests that black women, however, are not simply victims displaced by some supernatural social plague. They are also active in reshaping those narratives of dilemma that haunt black female lives, replacing them with themes, or 'discourses' (Smitherman, 2006; Kirkland, 2010a), of transcendence that further reshape the black female narrative itself. Hence, this work is in line

with other scholarship on BFT in that it shows how black females are agentive in reconstructing the black feminine mystique (Collins, 1986; Robinson & Ward, 1995), where some use the technologies that have boldly transformed the day to offer voice to a new, amplified, complex and emerging black female self (Knadler, 2001; Richardson, 2003; Paris & Kirkland, 2011).

For Foucault (1988), technologies of the self are the tools through which human beings constitute themselves. We suggest that such tools work metaphorically, through an economy of available comparisons that can be made in order to purchase meaning which makes one thing clearer through another. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 3): 'Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action'. Based on their understanding of metaphor, we see metaphors as structuring and influencing literacy acts, just as they construct and help individuals to understand and articulate important aspects of their identities (Gee, 1989). Here, metaphors are based on the idea that 'our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities', which is 'largely metaphorical' and 'based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). This system for thinking and acting also brings into 'awareness the social role that metaphors play in transmitting coded messages' as a way of experiencing one thing in terms of another (Hines, 1999, p. 146). Metaphors thus help us to know what we are experiencing and how these experiences can be used as representations of what is visible and embedded in our everyday language. Hence, literacy tools can act metaphorically, particularly when they personify the subject.

In this way, Larnee viewed the motherboard as a metaphor for her life. The constituent parts of the device empowered her experience, as life took on new meaning in the motherboard and its affixed parts. Similarly, Maya viewed the mic as a metaphor for herself.

Yet she somehow became a new self when wielding it. Both devices – the motherboard and the mic – were symbols for the two women. They were modes for representing new kinds of black femininity – femininities, if you will, that were elevated through the new literacy prose of forms that have been traditionally denied to black women.

Building on these perspectives, NLS and BFT, our study demonstrates the role of metaphors in the writing of lives via a motherboard and a mic. It shows how both Larnee and Maya used new technology's tools as extensions of the self. We have distinctly discussed the raw, intense and synthesized stories of power, agency, expression and struggle as represented through the figurative language of things. At the same time, we have acknowledged the role that NLS and BFT can play in examining and re-examining how these literacy tools embody and articulate practices of engagement and new practices of representing power and voice.

In this tradition, Lewis et al (2007, p. 17) remind us that: 'Power is produced and enacted in and through discourses, relationships, activities, spaces and times by people as they compete for access to control of resources, tools and identities'. Here, Larnee and Maya created relationships with objects to compete for access to power, discourses and space in the societies where they live, move and have being. By relating to the motherboard and the mic, the two women enter spaces that give them agency and voice, disrupting the trope and social castigation of the marginalized African American woman. They become whole and agentic, where functionality computes through the motherboard and expressions of the self are amplified through the mic. These new technologies – the motherboard and the mic – portrayed a new meaning not of what the tools do *for* individuals, but of what they do *to* them (Turkle, 2005). They represent a perspective on literacy and new narrative on black femininity of how new literacy tools can be used to write stories of transcendence that are mediated socially by situated practices where technologies of the self embody the subject.

## **Notes**

[1] An emcee is a generic term for an individual who performs songs or rap lyrically over a musical beat.

[2] In this article, we use the terms 'African American' and 'black' interchangeably.

[3] We refer to the 'subject' as a figuration of the agentic self constructed through and in relation to elements of power that are articulated in thought and language, human activity and complex social associations.

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