TO BE GIRL, DIGITAL, AND BLACK: BLACK GIRLS' DIGITAL MEDIA
PRODUCTION AS CULTURAL DISCOURSE

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A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Women's and Gender Studies

Written under the direction of

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

To Be Girl, Digital, and Black: Black Girls' Digital Media Production as Cultural Discourse

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This dissertation investigates the cultural discourse of girlhood that Black girls produce through use of digital media. I combine Black Feminist frameworks with media studies and spatial humanities to interrogate the productive possibilities of Black girls' digital media practices. My project asks: How do Black girls use digital technologies to create photographs and videos that contribute to conversations about race, gender, and sexuality, and what might these images and conversations reveal about how Black girls both navigate and create spaces through cultural production? I employ semiotic analysis and ethnographic methods to understand how Black girls come to engage with digital media, how these interactions shape girls' sense of self, and how these practices position Black girls as theorists of Black girlhood. By approaching Black girlhood as a site of production rather than merely consumption, my research shifts the focus in the existing literature on Black girlhood from a deficit or delinquency model to a productivity model. The project refuses a simplistic consumer-producer binary and offers a more nuanced and accurate account of Black girls' media practices.

In the first chapter, I contextualize Black girls' contemporary media engagements within historical constructions of girlhood in the United States, arguing that racially nuanced understandings of girlhood can lead to more expansive imaginings of what the Internet can do in the realm of social justice. The second chapter examines the Instagram posts of three celebrity Black girls to put forth a theory of Black girl semiotics. I use this theorization of Black girl semiotics to illustrate how Black girls can leverage social media to produce, control, and reclaim narratives about Black girlhood in ways that would not be possible through other mainstream media platforms. The third chapter analyzes the Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube activity of "everyday" girls. This chapter combines focus group data, interviews, and visual analysis to explore how the digital, physical, and conceptual layers of Black girls' geographies affect their digital content. Finally, the fourth chapter presents Willow Smith's Afrofuturist visual and sonic expressions as manifestations of free Black girlhood that function as a point of departure for imagining and constructing Black girl futures.

Ultimately, I conclude that Black girls' digital media productions function both as sources of Black girls' knowledge and artifacts of Black culture more broadly. Attending to how Black girls document, interpret, and share their experiences has significance not only for building the field of Black Girlhood Studies but also for the ongoing debates about practices of archiving, the role of digital media technologies in our everyday lives, and potentialities (and limitations) of digital media in social justice activism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As the first person in my family to earn a Ph.D., I begin these acknowledgements by honoring my grandmother, Willie Jean Moore Greene, because *she* was the first person in our family to earn a bachelor's degree. She sacrificed so much to attend Fayetteville State University during a time period when it was unheard of (and even frowned upon) for a wife and mother of four to leave home in pursuit of a degree. My grandmother's educational and life journey has inspired me, and I never imagined that she would leave this Earth before I finished my doctoral studies. I will always feel her presence, and this dissertation and degree are for her.

I would like to thank my committee for their unwavering support and trust in my work. To my dissertation chair, Brittney Cooper, thank you for meeting with me before I ever took my first doctoral class to reassure me that I belong in academia. You model Black Feminist mentorship in so many ways, and I am so grateful to be a part of your Black Feminist praxis. To Nikol Alexander-Floyd, thank you for always believing in me and for your mentorship; I'm especially grateful for your feedback on my most recent publication when it was still in the developmental stages. Judith Gerson, thank you for always encouraging me and for all of your efforts in helping me get IRB approval for the dissertation research. And Jack Bratich, thank you for helping me to solidify my intellectual identity within the field of media studies.

Along with my committee members, there have been several other members of the Women's and Gender Studies Department who have contributed to my success. Nicole Fleetwood, thank you for allowing me to pursue my interest in Black visuality by supervising an independent study and for pushing me to theorize. Deborah Gray White,

thank you for challenging me to find Black girls in history and for encouraging me step out of my writing comfort zone. Jasbir Puar, thank you for helping develop as a writer and for working with me to revise my seminar paper from your class into my very first publication. Monique Gregory, thank you for always making sure my paperwork was handled, especially when I moved away for my fellowship. Suzy Keifer, thank you for your help with logistical matters around courses, tuition remission, and scheduling.

I have had the privilege of completing a dissertation fellowship at University of Virginia's Carter G. Woodson Institute, and I am very grateful to the Institute's faculty and my colleagues for providing me with space and community to finish the dissertation. I would especially like to thank Deborah McDowell for organizing and running the workshops, Maurice Wallace for providing helpful feedback on my work, as well as Debbie Best and Shelley Thomas for handling logistical matters. Thank you to Corinne Field for collaborating with me in my work on Black girlhood. Meredith Clark, thank you for your continued support of my work and helping me network within media studies. Ruth Nicole Brown, thank you for participating in my fellowship workshop as my guest critic and for the valuable feedback you offered on a chapter of my dissertation.

Publishing at any stage can be a trying process, but I want to thank the editors that worked with me to publish articles in both *The Black Scholar* and *The National Political Science Review*. Special thanks to Jessica M. Johnson who not only served as one of the editors of the Black Code Studies, but who has provided me with several opportunities to network and expand my presence as a scholar. I would also like to thank Julia Jordan-Zachery for being so generous throughout the editing process and helping me get my *NPSR* article to a publishable point.

Thank you to my best friend of fifteen years, D'Ana Hill Young for continuing to have my back and being so supportive. And thanks to all the friends that I've made along the way who have offered encouragement: Al Valentin, Lexi Smith, Rosemary Ndubuizu, Aria Halliday, Lydia Kelow-Bennett, Dara Walker, Josie Cudjoe, Marlene Gaynair, Marlaina Martin, Dionne Bailey, and all of my friends in the #AcWri Group.

Thanks to my family, but especially my mom, Renee Greene. Having you around has been an absolute joy. Thank you for helping with the little everyday things so that I could focus on writing and for just generally being the best mother ever.

To my husband, Tyrone Wade, thank you for your support and your love. Thank you for learning with me, for attending my conference presentations, and for just being so proud. The easiest part of this journey has been sharing it with you.

And last, but definitely not least, thank you to **all the Black girls** who offered their time, stories, laughter, and realness to this project. My work would not be possible without you. To remix Black girl lyricists Aryn and Savannah from the viral "Excellence First" video: You are smart. You are strong. Your life matters. You're a blessing.

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INTRODUCTION: BLACK GIRLS AS CULTURAL PRODUCERS AND THEORISTS

This project came to fruition through daily encounters–whether in my personal or professional life–with intra-generational differences in approaches to digital technologies. One example of such an encounter, which served as an especially revelatory moment for me, occurred during my family's Thanksgiving dinner.[1] I was home in Kinston, North Carolina at my (maternal) grandparents' house, the house that has been the center of our family functions since it was built. As much of a tradition as the turkey, post-dinner activities involved the grown folks sitting in the kitchen talking while the children–five girls ranging in age from six to twelve–played outside. After being outside almost all afternoon, the girls came in the house excited to show us what they had been doing all day: making a dance video. Each girl had a part, and the oldest one edited the video in order to make the choreography flow seamlessly with the lyrics of the song in the background. Aside from thinking the finished product was incredibly cute, the video made me wonder about the mundane nature of digital technologies in the lives of children living in the United States and how the ubiquitous nature of these technologies shapes what it means to be a Black, girl child in this moment.

This project investigates the cultural discourse of girlhood that Black girls produce through use of digital media. My project asks: How do Black girls use cell phone applications to create photographs and videos that contribute to conversations about race, gender and sexuality, and what might these images and conversations reveal about how Black girls navigate social environs shaped by the operations of race and gender politics?

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[1] My family is not blind to the problematic nature of Thanksgiving, but it remains one of the few times during the year when we can all get together.

My approach to these research questions centers my understanding of bodies as affective/affected virtual-physical assemblages[2] that reflect the permeability of digital/physical borders. One of the broad implications of my research lies in theorizing the spatiality and materiality of the digital, and along the same vein as writers like Katherine McKittrick, I am interested in how Black girls both navigate and create spaces through cultural production. While the video described in the opening anecdote sparked questions about impact, it also made me excited about the creative potential (Brown 2013) that digital technologies enable and foster within Black girls. Therefore, my work - as is custom in Black Girlhood Studies - positions Black girls as contributors to and theorists of public conversations on race, gender, and sexuality by demonstrating how the imbrication of mobile technologies with everyday life blurs the distinction between media consumer and media producer and challenges strict separation of the physical and the virtual. To further explain the precedent for naming Black girls theorists, I draw from both Barbara Christian and Cherríe Moraga. In "The Race for Theory" (1988), Christian explains how dominant definitions of theory often fail to acknowledge people of color's theory as such. She writes:

> "For people of color have always theorized-but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity" (68)?

Related to Christian's assertion that people of color theorize in ways that go unrecognized by the academy, Cherríe Moraga's (1981) "theory of the flesh" describes

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[2] Here, I am using assemblage in the Deleuzian/Guattarian sense of encounters.

one specific format of this theorizing. Moraga describes "[a] theory in the flesh" as "one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we attempt to bridge the contradictions of our experience…we do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words" (23). This kind of work aptly describes what Black girls are doing in their everyday lives through their digital production. The analyses put forth in this dissertation, intervene in the fields of Black girlhood studies, media/technology studies, spatial humanities, and Black visuality in order to interrogate the productive possibilities of Black girls' digital media practices.

Black Girlhood Studies

The field of Black Girlhood Studies is a burgeoning and rapidly expanding area of inquiry. One of the key interventions of my project involves centering Black girls as cultural producers and theorists in part as a corrective to early 20th century studies of Black youth that have contributed to understandings of Black girls as inherently corruptible and delinquent. Among these early studies, rooted in concerns about urbanization, E. Franklin Frazier's work on Black families had a tremendous impact on perceptions about Black youth. One of Frazier's most famous works *The Negro Family in the United States* offers some analysis of the impact of urbanization on Black youth. While Frazier (1939) does not spend a lot of time talking solely about Black girls, the spaces in the book devoted to Black girlhood are telling. For instance, in the chapter on unmarried mothers Frazier argues that "the constant flow of simple peasant folk from rural districts to the poverty and disorganization of city slums constantly re-creates the problem of unmarried motherhood" (347). Among the unmarried mothers Frazier

discusses, "a large portion…are relatively young," and "their sex delinquency is due in part to the lack of parental supervision" (348). The chapter on rebellious youth continues this line of thought that involves connecting Black girlhood "delinquency" to sexual behavior. Frazier argues that Black boys are more often brought before the courts for delinquency than Black girls. However, he notes that of the Black boys and girls brought before the courts in 1929 in Nashville, "Nearly half of the boys were charged with stealing; whereas the majority of the girls were charged with incorrigibility[3] and disorderly conduct" (360-61). This observation reveals the arbitrary nature of Black girls' "crimes" because their offenses were based on their perceived inability to enact appropriate femininity.

While Frazier does not blame Black girls and women directly for "Negro illegitimacy," the data that he cites perpetuates a stigma against unmarried motherhood, which stems from misogynist practices of vilifying women and girls who engage in sexual behaviors without applying the same scrutiny to men and boys who engage in the same behaviors. Furthermore, Frazier's argument that Black girls' "early sexual knowledge" and "sexual appetite" (351) result from growing up in "disorganized" and impoverished environments in which the "normal" family structure does not exist reinforces classist notions that demonize and pathologize the impoverished. At best, Frazier represents "delinquent" Black girls as victims of their circumstances and environments.

While Frazier's study dates back nearly one hundred years, such sociological studies that position Black girls as problems to be corrected have produced long-lasting

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[3] "The charge of incorrigibility against 50 of these girls involved five specific offenses: sex delinquency, truancy, ungovernability, running away, and continuous association with vicious companions." (363)

effects that continue to shape current discourses about "at-risk" youth, where "at-risk" becomes code for Black children who transgress behavioral norms that have come to signify (aspiration to) middle-class status. When applied to Black girls, the "at-risk" label – much like Frazier's study – is still often preoccupied with Black girls' sexual behavior (Hughes et al. 2009). However, there are contemporary models that address Black girls' perceived delinquency without reducing Black girls to criminals. *In Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, Monique Morris (2016) discusses the consequences of these narratives about Black girls as criminals and delinquents. Morris explains how people attach these labels to girls from early ages. This labeling impacts how Black girls navigate institutional spaces and functions to funnel Black girls into the school-to-prison pipeline. While Morris thoughtfully engages these histories and contexts of Black girl criminality, she refutes the notion of Black girls' inherent delinquency. In addition to the enlightened critiques of Morris, both the African American Policy Forum and the Ms. Foundation have released reports that demonstrate how the perceived criminality of Black girls has contributed to policies that have material consequences. In the "Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline" report, the Ms. Foundation identifies how several components of Black girls' sexual victimization become criminalized. Truancy, running away, and prostitution are oftentimes symptomatic of sexual abuse, but girls who engage in these behaviors are punished for their "crimes" instead of given tools to cope with their trauma. The authors point out inadequate mental health and medical services in detention centers for girls and offer research and policy-based solutions such as providing gender-specific counseling and health services, enacting a Safe Harbor laws for girls who are victims of sex trafficking, and providing adequate training to juvenile justice workers.

The authors also point out the links between the child welfare system and the sexual abuse-to-prison pipeline. Even though this report discusses girls of color *within* the juvenile justice system, the goal is to refute the narratives that so often criminalize Black girls (and girls of color in general).

While these policy-based analyses offer crucial discussions about the effects of Black girl criminalization, Black girlhood studies as a field still needs more accounts of Black girls' experiences in their own words, and these accounts should represent the range of subjective complexities that Black girls embody. One of the early works associated with the development of Black girlhood studies as a field that positions Black girls as both knowledge receivers and producers is Kyra Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play*. Through an exploration of the games Black girls play, Gaunt (2006) aims to show how "black girls' play is not only indicative of, but central to, understanding African American expressive culture and black popular musical aesthetics" (9). In this way, Gaunt approaches Black girls' play as serious grounds for Black feminist theorizing.

Building on Gaunt's foundation, the work of Ruth Nicole Brown positions Black girls as cultural theorists. In *Black Girlhood Celebration*, Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) sets out to "start the dialogue of a way to be new about Black girlhood" (2). In part, Brown uses her theorization of Black girlhood(s) to respond to mentorship models that seek to "save" Black girls. By initiating this dialogue, Brown asks us to enact a praxis of Black girlhood studies that does not seek to discipline Black girls' bodies or behaviors. One of the guiding principles of Brown's work is that "Black girls' lives are inherently valuable" (3). Another driving force behind Brown's assessment of Black girls insists upon the "creativity and ingenuity" (15) that comprise Black girls' everyday lives and cultural

productions. Brown's understanding of Black girls' value and creativity and her insistence upon approaching Black girls from a productivity model takes Black girls' contributions to cultural discourse seriously.

Brown's productivity model approach also shows up in Oneka LaBennett's ethnography *She's Mad Real: Popular Culture and West Indian Girls in Brooklyn*. In this text, LaBennett (2011) offers perspectives of girlhood that emphasize racialized conceptions of the girl subject. As the book's title suggests, LaBennett chronicles the school, work, and social lives of a group of West Indian girls in Brooklyn, examining the impact of their various interactive spheres on their development, values, and identities. *She's Mad Real* deals with mostly contemporary subject matter, such as the cultural influences of hip hop or dancehall reggae, but the experiences of the girls included in the text complicate the idea of blackness and, therefore, are useful in understanding racialized constructions of girlhood. By centering the stories of her research participants, LaBennett allows Black girls to theorize *their own* experiences. Bettina Love takes a similar approach to Black girls' knowledge production in her text *Hip Hop Lil' Sistas Speak*. In this book, Love chronicles her time working with Black girls at a recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia, using her ethnographic work to illustrate the imbrication of Black girls' identity formation and the messages they receive about race, gender, and sexuality through hip-hop.

These types of work that center the voices of Black girls are essential to the continued development of Black girlhood studies as a field. My work builds upon the work of Gaunt, Brown, LaBennett, and Love by exploring the productive possibilities of Black girlhood specifically within the context of digital technologies. Given the

prevalence of digital technologies, contending with the role of these technologies in

Black girls' everyday lives and practices not only contributes to a greater understanding

of Black girls' lived experiences/realities, but also allows for a deeper understanding of

Black girls as cultural producers.

Black Girlhood Spatialities

Part of understanding Black girls as cultural theorists involves conceptualizing

Black girlhood as an inherently spatial formation (Brown 2013). The theoretical

intervention that my work makes into these conversations about Black girls' spatialities

lies in the exploration of what Black girls' digital media practices reveal about the

materiality and spatiality of the digital. Geographic terrain describes physical

location/locales while conceptual terrain refers to thought processes. Digital spaces

overlap with both of these terrains, simultaneously reflecting the realities of physical

geography and the manifestations of thoughts. Therefore, Black girls' digital media

productions help to construct cartographies of Black girlhood by elucidating the multi-

layered terrains–physical, digital, and conceptual–that Black girls must navigate.[4]

Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* remains one of the key texts that offers

a Black Feminist approach to spatiality. In this text, McKittrick (2006) argues that

Blackness, and Black womanhood in particular, is not "ungeographic," but instead uses

Black women's stories to show "how bodily geography can be" (44). *Demonic Grounds*

is premised on the idea that "geography is not, however, secure and unwavering; we

produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what

it is" (xi). With this claim in mind, McKittrick discusses the alterability of space and the

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[4] Thanks to David Bodenheimer for helping me articulate these spatial layers.

theoretical and material possibilities of Black geographies throughout the text. Borrowing Sylvia Wynter's use of "demonic grounds," McKittrick defines the demonic as a force that "invites a slightly different conceptual pathway…and acts to identify a system (social, geographic, technological) that can only unfold and produce an outcome if uncertainty, or (dis)organization, or something supernaturally demonic, is integral to the methodology" (xxiv). Using case studies of Black women's histories and literature, McKittrick presents Black women's lives as examples of demonic grounds that are not predetermined but whose uncertainty opens up new possibilities for coexistence. Ultimately, McKittrick's Black Feminist spatial analysis builds up to a praxis of interhuman geographies that she believes will be key in finding solutions to social ills through "put[ting] demands on traditional geographic arrangements" by "expos[ing] the racial-sexual functions of the production of space and establish[ing] new ways to read (and perhaps live) geography" (143).

McKittrick's discussion of Black women's cartographies lays the foundation for understanding Black women's space-making practices and technologies, but we cannot assume that Black women and Black girls approach, navigate, and create spaces in the same way as Black women. The works of Ruth Nicole Brown, Aimee Meredith Cox, Marcia Chatelain, and LaKisha Simmons provide useful frameworks for parsing out these differences.

In *Hear Our Truths*, Brown (2013) presents her work with a group of women and girls called SOLHOT, which stands for Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths. Describing the driving principles of SOLHOT, Brown articulates Black girlhood as a "spatial intervention," a site for space-making that is "collective and creative" where "uncertainty

and complexity motivate, and revolutionary action is the goal" (1). Through this text

Brown demonstrates the need for Black girl spaces and the possibilities that unfold when

these spaces are created. Brown's declaration of Black girlhood as inherently spatial is

also reflected in the works of Aimee Meredith Cox, Marcia Chatelain, and LaKisha

Simmons. In *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, Cox

(2015) tells the story of her ethnographic work with Black girls at a homeless shelter in

Detroit. To foreground the text, Cox makes clear: "I do not consider Black girls units of

analysis I need to romanticize to counter negative representations. Black girls are not the

problem. their lives do not need sanitizing, normalizing, rectifying, or translating so they

can be deemed worthy of care and serious consideration" (8). Cox demonstrates how

"citizenship and everyday acts of political engagement undergird all aspects of Black

girlhood" (19). Cox centers Black girls' space-making throughout the text, noting how

the girls interact with the city (and citizens) of Detroit and their responses to

environments outside of Detroit.

While Cox takes an ethnographic approach to Black girls' space-making,

Chatelain and Simmons both explore Black girl histories in relation to Black girl

spatialities. In *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*, Chatelain (2015)

chronicles the first wave of the Great Migration (1910-1940) through the lens of Black

girls. Of the texts about the Great Migration, Chatelain's is unique in its focus on

childhood and Black girls specifically. Chatelain's work discusses multiple layers of

Black girl spatialities by showing how Black girls fit into the geographies of the Great

Migration broadly and navigated the growing urban locale of Chicago, specifically.

Ultimately, Chatelain uses Black girls' relationships to particular spaces during the Great

Migration as a way to analyze Black girls' movement and critique attitudes and policies

that emerged from attempts to restrict this movement. Like Chatelain, LaKisha Simmons

(2015) focuses on local politics in her book *Crescent City Girls*, which explores the lives

of Black girls growing up in New Orleans. In the opening chapter, Simmons discusses

how segregation forced Black girls (and Black people in general) to engage in a process

of "mental mapping" because Black people had to be aware of the specific places where

their Blackness put them in harm's way. While Simmons points specifically to how Black

girls used mental mapping to navigate physical spaces, her concept of mental mapping

overlaps with digital and conceptual space as well. For instance, Black girls' sense of the

world (or conceptual space) shapes what they post in digital spaces. My project expands

theories of Black girl spatialities to include digital space-making as an indicator of Black

girls' participation in and responses to various social phenomena.

The Relationship between Black Feminist Theory and Black Girlhood Studies

As Black girlhood studies continues to grow as a field, the question of theoretical

frameworks–both informing and emerging from Black girlhood studies–becomes more

pressing. While the relationship between Black girlhood studies and Black Feminism

may seem obvious, there are tensions that exist regarding recognizing Black girlhood as a

distinct stage from Black womanhood.

As a pioneer of Black girlhood studies, Ruth Nicole Brown has been doing this

work in terms of parsing out the distinctions between theorizing from Black women's

lives and Black girls' lives. In a guest blog post for *Sapphire Unbound*, Brown (2012)

offers an in depth discussion of the "language of Black girlhood." In this piece, Brown

not only describes her work with SOLHOT but also begins spelling out key tenets of a

Black girlhood studies theory. In this theory of Black girlhood studies, Brown emphasizes "the space of a Black girls' gaze," "visionary space of Black girlhood liberation," and "Black girl poetics." Brown's work with SOLHOT (and the work of Black girlhood studies broadly) encompasses and operates from "a methodology of Black girlhood that insists on valuing Black girls' lives." Ultimately Black girlhood studies and its theoretical frameworks must acknowledge "the complex genius of Black girls and beyond." While Brown recognizes that SOLHOT participants, "speak and enact Black womanists/feminists sensibilities and actions," her emphasis on Black girls' knowledge marks an important distinction between Black girlhood studies theory and Black Feminist theory: the idea that Black girlhood theories stem from what Black *girls* know themselves, not from what we as women claim to know about them. That's not to say Black girls cannot be Black Feminists or that they cannot use Black Feminist theory. It just means that Black girlhood has its own frameworks that are derived from/adjacent to Black Feminism but necessarily captured by Black Feminist theories rooted in the experiences of Black women.

Two important conceptual inroads into fleshing out a theoretical framework for Black girlhood studies are "Black girl standpoint" (Lindsey 2015) and "Black girlhood imaginary" (Daley et al. 2017). In "Let Me Blow Your Mind," Treva Lindsey (2015) uses hip hop feminism to articulate a theory of Black girl standpoint, a modification of Patricia Hill Collins' (2008) standpoint theory which comes from "Black women's historically contextualized identities as fluid, organic, interdependent, multiply, and socially constructed locations" (61). According to Lindsey, "Black girl standpoint theory posits Black girls as central figures from which theory arises. The specificity of 'girlhood' can

be accounted for in a standpoint theory anchored in the unique, but diverse experiences of Black girls" (61). It is important to note how Lindsey remixes Collins' concept of standpoint in order to address the primary critiques of standpoint theory as "a false unity and coherence" (White 2001, 61). As E. Frances White (2001) argues, Patricia Hill Collins' theorization of Black women's standpoint theory reflects "the conscious decision to mute" the "array of voices" (61) of Black women. For White, Collins' standpoint theory operates from a place of essentialism "that may actually be contributing to certain forms of class oppression" (62). Rather than framing standpoint from an essentialized "Black girl," Lindsey's deployment of standpoint makes room for Black girls speaking and theorizing from their experiences without deliberately ignoring differences between Black girls and assuming their experiences are monolithic. Therefore, it is Lindsey's version of Black girl standpoint, which acknowledges the range of Black girlhood, that I elevate in my discussion of Black Girlhood Studies theories.

Along similar lines as Lindsey's Black girl standpoint, the concept of Black girlhood imaginary – developed by Lashon Daley, Kenly Brown, and Derrika Hunt – refers to a "rupture birthed out of Black feminism" that seeks to "disrupt the silences and illuminate the space between Black girlhood and Black womanhood." In a description of conference proceedings in which the collective publicly introduced Black girlhood imaginary as a framework, Daley (2017) notes: "BGI prioritizes the experiences of young Black girls as we employ performativity, temporality, and positionality to interrogate Black girlhood as a social phenomenon. Accordingly, we trace Black girlhood through the imaginary in order to deconstruct and go beyond the fixed perceptions of Black girls." Both of these concepts acknowledge their roots in Black feminist theory, but

that they are both derivative from and something different than Black feminist theory.

Therefore, Black Feminist theory certainly provides a lens through which we can

examine Black girlhood, but it is not automatically the primary theory that emerges from

Black Girlhood Studies. What is at stake in distinguishing Black girlhood studies theory

from Black Feminist theory is the recognition of Black girlhood as a distinct stage.

Marking Black Girlhood Studies theory as its own epistemological framework avoids

conflating girlhood and womanhood and superimposing Black women's experiences onto

those of Black girls.

Intersections of Black Girlhood and Media Studies

One of the primary interventions of my project is to shift the frame of reference

for understanding Black girls' engagement with media. While many studies focus on

Black girls (and Black youth in general) as media consumers, my project seeks to

uncover what might be possible if we explore Black girls as media *producers*.[5] My

approach to Black girls as cultural producers puts Black girlhood studies in conversation

with media/technology studies in an effort to understand what looking at the

particularities of Black girlhood can tell us broadly about advancements in digital media

technologies. This line of inquiry follows established theories and methodologies of

looking at race and gender in conjunction with media studies.

One of the pioneers of critical race-based approaches to media and cultural studies

is Stuart Hall. In "Race, Culture, and Communications," Hall (1992) gives a brief

overview of cultural studies as a field and his involvement with the Centre for

Contemporary Cultural Studies at University of Birmingham. Hall argues that "cultural

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[5] Prosumer is a more accurate term, but I am focusing on the producer component as an understudied part of the producer/consumer hybrid.

studies insists on the necessity to address the central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society and a culture in the most rigorous intellectual way we have available" (11). In this call to address urgent questions of our societies, Hall explores the complexities of race and racism, noting commonalities and geographic specificities. Hall asserts the centrality of race to cultural studies and admonishes against "turn[ing] dispassionate eyes away from the problems of race and ethnicity that beset our world" (18). While Hall emphasizes the importance of race in cultural studies, he does not privilege race over gender, sexuality, class, or other markers of difference. In "New Ethnicities," Hall (1996) describes how intersectional approaches to cultural studies disrupt essentialist understandings of blackness, noting: "The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity" (444). Hall discusses difference within "the black experience" in order to describe a shift in Black representational politics in which "how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role" (443). Hall's arguments about the constitutive functions of representation are useful for exploring Black girls' digital media practices because their media productions reflect how they construct sociopolitical meanings.

Following in the same tradition as Hall, Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow expand the studies of race and media to include digital forms. Their edited collection *Race after the Internet* illustrates how the Internet has not become a post-racial utopia and instead extends processes of racialization to the digital realm. As Nakamura and Chow argue in

the introduction, "race itself has become a digital medium…Critical race scholarship…must expand its scope to digital media and computer-based technologies" (5) since "the Internet and other computer-based technologies are complex topographies of power and privilege" (17). Nakamura and Chow explain how youth of color are increasingly adopting digital technologies as part of their everyday lives (6) and offer several explorations of digitality and race that help me make connections between Black girls' understandings of race and their participation in media production.

While Nakamura and Chow devote a few chapters to youth technology practices, danah boyd's *It's Complicated* explores the role of social media in teens' lives from their own perspectives. Elaborating on a theory of networked publics, boyd (2014) explains how "teens are looking for a place of their own to make sense of the world beyond their bedrooms. Social media has enabled them to participate in and help create…*networked publics*" (5). This idea of networked publics plays a central role in boyd's analysis of how and why teenagers use social media, noting that "social media enables a type of youth-centric public space that is otherwise inaccessible" (19). boyd addresses the role of technological determinism in how many adults perceive teens' engagement with social media and illustrates how these utopian and dystopian approaches distort the realities of teens' experiences with digital technologies. She explores social media practices at the nexus of race, gender, and class and makes connections between virtual and physical worlds by arguing that what teens express online "mirrors, magnifies, and makes more visible the good, bad, and ugly of everyday life" (24).

boyd focuses on youth in general, but one of the primary reasons that girlhood has come to the forefront as a topic of study lies in trying to make connections between girls'

consumptive practices and larger cultural phenomena such as the development of mass media and advertising. Shayla Thiel-Stern (2014) pieces together a mass media history of girlhood in *From the Dance Hall to Facebook: Teen Girls, Mass Media, and Moral Panic in the United Sates 1905 – 2010*. Thiel-Stern argues that teenage girls constitute a marginalized group, and that media representations of teenage girls in crisis contribute to a larger construct of gendered social surveillance and policing. Along similar lines, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2014) discusses a category of YouTube videos in which teenage girls record themselves asking viewers to comment whether they are pretty or ugly. Banet-Weiser argues that while most analyses of these types of videos attribute them to the low self-esteem of their producers, these videos actually represent a form of neoliberal branding that has come to characterize many post-feminist media cultures associated with girls. Banet-Weiser also points out connections between this video genre and centrality of middle-class whiteness in mainstream constructions of girlhood.

Despite interventions like those of Banet-Weiser, approaches to media and girlhood rarely place emphasis on what girls *produce* with digital technologies, and the works of Mary Celeste Kearney aim to rectify this problem. Kearney (2006) discusses the dramatic changes that Internet technology has made in media production processes in *Girls Make Media*. Kearney presents girls' media production as linked to their subjective development and as a counter-discourse to problematic notions which imply that males and adults are the primary producers of culture. Given these assertions, Kearney argues for increased investment in studying girls' media creations. In her edited volume *Mediated Girlhoods*, Kearney (2011) contributes to the field of girls' media studies with the "primary objective of raising public awareness and critical thinking about girls' media

culture, as well as girls and girlhood" (4). As a whole, this text looks at both historical implications of girls' media and the some of the most recent developments (at the time of writing/publication) in digital media, exploring how girls around the world engage with these technologies. One of the things that stands out about this text is the diversity of girlhoods represented. In this way, Kearney veers from the tendency within girls' media studies to center white, middle-class girlhood.

What differentiates my project, yet carries on the conversations established by these scholars is that my project looks *specifically* at *Black* girlhood and media studies. While girlhood studies and media studies seem to be natural partners, scholarship that looks at intersections of *Black* girlhood and media is not as robust and/or tends to be focused on consumption. For example, Bettina Love's (2012) account of her interactions with Black girls in *Hip Hop Lil' Sistas Speak* highlights the messages these girls receive from hip-hop. Throughout the text, Love contextualizes the girls' engagement with hip-hop within a broader Atlanta culture to which hip-hop and strippers are central. Love uses her ethnographic work to illustrate the imbrication of Black girls' identity formation and the messages they receive about race, gender, and sexuality through hip-hop. While Love does show how Black girls create discourse around gender and sexuality, the framework for this discourse is primarily consumptive.

Among the few studies that speak to Black girls' media production, Christina Baker, Amanda Staiano, and Sandra Calvert (2015) conducted research with 24 urban, low-income African American adolescents, and found that across age and gender, the students' videos—which the youth created as a part of the research —had similar features and lengths, suggesting that "African American youth share a common media viewing

culture that seems to translate into a common production style" (543). Focusing on Black girls specifically, Carla Stokes (2007) approaches Black girls as media-makers, providing an analysis of their homepages in order to understand how they develop sexual scripts online. Much like Love, Stokes explores connections between hip-hop music consumption and the development of sexual scripts. Through a combination of textual analysis of homepage content and interviews with Black girls between the ages of 14 and 17, Stokes depicts digital space as experiential for Black girls (179) and highlights the need for more studies that explore how Black girls "interact with [and] produce media" (172). These studies provide some theorization of Black girls' media production but still indicate consumptive influences as the main indicator of what Black girls will produce in digital spaces.

While the aforementioned authors theorize media practices themselves, other authors have outlined the productive possibilities presented by Black girls' engagements with digital media. In "One Time for My Girls," Treva Lindsey uses a hip-hop feminist framework to describe the empowering features of two videos: "I Love my Hair," which was featured on Sesame Street, and Willow Smith's "Whip My Hair." As Lindsey points out, hair politics comprise a crucial component of black female identity/expression. Lindsey uses the popularity of these two videos to show how media, with appropriate media literacy, can be an empowering space for Black girls. In *Spectacular Girls*, Sarah Projansky (2014) establishes the dominance of a can-do/at-risk girl dichotomy within mainstream media. However, instead of focusing on representations of girlhood that fit within this dichotomy or centering the dichotomy itself, Projansky presents her project as one that "makes alternative versions of girlhood visible" (10). Projansky theorizes

alternative girlhoods in opposition to a "can-do/at-risk dichotomy" (13) which praises

certain girls for their ability to uphold normative standards of girlhood while

simultaneously marking other girls as imperiled and more susceptible to "deviant"

behavior. In some ways, Black girlhood(s) already constitute alternative girlhoods among

hegemonic conceptions of the white, middle-class girl figure, and the digital can function

as one tool to visibilize Black girls *as* girls and demonstrate the complexities of Black

girlhood(s).

Finally, Anna Everett (2012) takes an enthusiastic approach to youth's digital

media engagement. She lauds user-generated content as an alternative to "traditional

media cultures and industries, which normally are driven by large media corporations and

conglomerates" (146). Based on Everett's assessment, "it is difficult not to be optimistic

about the myriad ways youths of color today successfully appropriate digital media tools

to speak truth to power, to enliven the promises of digital democracy, and to retrofit…'the

digital public sphere' to suit their own generational concerns and agendas" (148).

Everett's assertion regarding youth of color appropriating digital technologies toward

their own agendas relates to my project's exploration of how Black girls utilize digital

platforms towards self-expression. My project continues these conversations by centering

Black girls' perceptions of their own engagement with media.

Black Visuality

Related to and often overlapping with media studies, theories of Black visuality

also inform this project. Like media studies, visuality as a concept has undergone intense

revisions as more scholars bring intersectional cultural analyses to visual studies. In

addition to showing how Black girls use visual technologies to facilitate space-making,

my project adds to conversations of Black visuality by suggesting that Black girls'
production of visual content within digital spaces unsettles some of the "traditional"
Black feminist literature regarding visual representation of the Black female/femme
body.

Vernacular photography has long been a central element of Black communities.
(Thompson 2015, Campt 2017). In *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African
Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, Krista Thompson (2015) highlights connections between
hip-hop culture, visual technologies, and political participation among African diasporic
communities. Thompson examines the extent to which African diasporic people,
especially teenagers and young adults, make political claims about representation through
their use of vernacular photography and videography. Thompson makes explicit
connections between youth and visual media technologies throughout *Shine*. In fact, one
premise that foregrounds the text is: "Especially among young people, images…dominate
how people in the African diaspora experience culture, music, their sense of the world,
and their places within it" (1-2). One of the main arguments that Thompson makes is that
for Black youth, visuality constitutes an avenue for becoming and gives them a means to
disrupt various political imaginaries. Through a description of the after-image, Thompson
describes a process of "representational becoming" (16) that occurs through the
utilization and manipulation of visual technologies.

While Thompson uses contemporary manifestations of Black visuality, the
political deployment of visuality among Black communities can be traced back to much
earlier developments in mass media. In *Picture Freedom*, Cobb argues that Black
visuality is more complicated than what is visible and also includes what is invisible.

Using the metaphor of the parlor, Cobb outlines an approach to Black visuality that

accounts for space, discourse, subjectivity, and anxieties regarding the position of pre-

Emancipation free Blacks at the turn of the 19th century. Examining a range of media

sources–advertisements, friendship albums, lithographs, and newspapers–one of the

primary objectives of this text is to assess the affective and political implications of Black

visuality within the context of social transitions. Cobb shows how the depictions (or lack

thereof) of Black corporeality within burgeoning United States media culture of the 19th

century reflect a grappling (on part of Blacks and Whites) with the concept of Black

freedom and its relation to national citizenship/belonging. Combining the fields of

feminism, history, and media studies, Cobb illustrates how Black people not only used

visuality to legitimate their freedom to white people but also as a way of understanding

themselves as (newly) free subjects, despite slavery's attempts to deny Black subjectivity.

Another example that provides some historical context to the centrality of visuality to

Black subjective and political expression comes from Shawn Smith's *Photography on the*

Color Line. In this text, Smith (2004) explores W.E.B. DuBois' *Georgia Negro Exhibit*

from the 1900 Paris Exposition in order to illuminate DuBois' strategies as an archivist.

While many authors have written about DuBois' Black literary aesthetic, Smith makes

the case that DuBois also relied on visual representation towards social justice ends.

Ultimately, Smith uses DuBois' visual archives to show "how central race has been to

visual cultural production and how visual culture has also informed the meaning of race

in the United States" (24). Smith's characterization of DuBois' photographic exhibit as a

counterarchive mirrors Nicholas Mirzoeff's theories of counterhistory put forth in "On

Visuality." Despite the imperial origins of the idea of visuality, Mirzoeff (2006) also

argues that "subcultural practice appropriated, reversed, and veiled" (55) Enlightenment thought toward emancipatory ends.

The benefits/functions of visual representation have long been contested terrain within Black studies, especially Black Feminist studies. Traditional Black Feminist approaches to visual representation often view the visual field as an inherently violent one that objectifies Black women and girls and relegates them to Other status. For example, Hortense Spillers' (1987) theorization of pornotroping describes the "pleasure that comes from the spectacle of the objectified Black body, which strips Black women of agency and power, thereby enabling the imposition of meaning onto Black women's bodies and diminishing Black women's opportunities for self-definition" (Wade 2017). Along similar lines, Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) controlling images argument describes dominant visual representations of Black women as distortions that "not only reflect cultural meanings assigned to Black women's bodies but also shape how people see and treat Black women, which has material impact on Black women's lives" (Wade 2017). Both Spillers and Collins take a non-visual, linguistic approach to countering the objectification that has often characterized mainstream visual representations of Black women (and girls), but the rise of digital media platforms that operate through user-generated content complicates the assumption that there is no room for Black women and girls' self-definition in mainstream visual representation. My project moves conversations regarding Black visuality forward by arguing Black girls' use of visual digital media applications demonstrate the visual field is not *inherently* harmful to Black girls and women and challenges a facile understanding of producer-consumer. Using frameworks of counterarchives and counterhistory to explore Black girls' media

production, my project shows how even though Black girls are participating in media production through corporate-driven applications (Instagram and SnapChat are privately owned), they are in control of how the content is produced and distributed in ways that are not true with television and film. In an age of digital (social) media, Black girls do not have to wait to be reflected in the dominant popular imaginary or unmirrored (O'Grady 1992) by a lack of (undistorted) representation. Through digital media, Black girls can facilitate an oppositional gaze (hooks 1992). These realities force us to grapple with Black girls' relationship to representational imagery.

Methodology

The first step in conducting this research involved defining "Black girlhood." For the purposes of this project, "girl" refers to a female/femme child who is under the age of 18 and/or has not yet completed high school.[6] Because the legal age of adulthood is arbitrary, I use experience (Driscoll 2002; Simmons 2015) as an additional marker. Participation in (or being of an age to participate in) elementary and secondary school remains one of the markers of childhood in the United States. While my project is United States based, I use the term "Black" instead of "African American" to acknowledge that not all African diasporic people living in the United States identify ethnically as American.

As a project that encompasses several interdisciplinary fields, this project takes a mixed-methods approach, with the main sources of examination including photographs, videos, and other visual content produced by Black girls. I focus on these specific types of media because they can be produced and accessed through mobile technologies (i.e.

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[6] This refers to girls' conditions at the start of the project. Several of the girls who are a part of this study have turned 18 and/or graduated from high school over the course of the project.

cell phones), and one of my primary research questions aims to understand how unlimited access to media impacts Black girls' subject formation and participation in cultural discourse. Additionally, as Black visuality scholars (Cobb 2015; Fleetwood 2015; Thompson 2015; Hobson 2012) have pointed out, visuality often plays a central role in African Diasporic communities. I collected the visual artifacts for this project using a combination of "traditional" (physical site) fieldwork and virtual ethnography.

I completed my field-based work (participant-observation, interviews, and focus groups) with Black girls in Richmond, Virginia. Richmond has a rich history as a site of Black cultural production and activism (Brown 1997; Randolph, Franklin, and Tate 2003). Therefore, I chose Richmond as one ethnographic site because of its historical significance to Black political activism and cultural production. Furthermore, given both the historical relevance and contemporary developments, Richmond has emerged as a Southern, urban arts hub in its own right. For instance, the largest university in the city, Virginia Commonwealth University, hosts a nationally ranked visual arts program, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts features a number of world-renowned exhibitions that have included Deborah Willis' *Posing Beauty* (2013) and Kehinde Wiley's *New Republic* (2016). Richmond's burgeoning reputation as an art city means there are a number of youth-serving organizations in the area that expose children to artistic techniques, including photography and film. Additionally, the representative studies on youth and technology in the United States do not focus much on youth in the South[7] even though, according to the most recent Census data (from 2010), the majority of Black Americans live in the South. The Census Bureau's population estimates for 2016 indicate that

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[7] Atlanta, Georgia is the exception.

Richmond is 49.4% Black and 45.4% white. Richmond's significant Black population in combination with its historical and contemporary importance to cultural production made it an apt site to conduct this research.

For the observations and focus groups, I worked with girls in a number of school settings, sometimes visiting their classrooms as a guest speaker and other times conducting classes and workshops myself. I recruited participants using connections I retained in the area from when I taught high school in Richmond. I visited organizations that served Black girls and spoke with them about my project, and those who were interested signed up to participate in focus groups and/or to let me follow them on social media.

The virtual ethnography for this project consists of two main sets of girls. The first group included celebrities: Willow Smith, Skai Jackson, Amandla Stenberg[8], and Yara Shahidi. Additionally, I included girls who might not be considered celebrities in the traditional sense but who have an increasingly public social media presence. So, these girls are also public figures or micro-celebrities (Marwick & boyd 2011; Senft 2012; Hearn & Schoehoff 2016; Duffy & Wissinger 2017). I choose these girls for the first part of the virtual ethnography because their social media profiles offer publicly accessible archives that provide a useful starting point for analyzing visual content produced by Black girls. The other part of the virtual ethnography explores visual content produced by "everyday" Black girls. Since an overwhelming majority of youth on social media have private profiles that are not searchable by people outside of their networks, I obtained

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[8] Amandla Stenberg identifies as non-binary, but acknowledges that their characters in movies are girls and often identifies as a girl for the purposes of getting movie roles and inspiring Black girls through her performances.

visual images from public accounts by using Black girls' geo-tagging references to high schools in cities with large Black populations (as determined by "The Black Population" 2010 Census report). I also included content from Black girls I already followed on Instagram and SnapChat before starting this project. These are girls I know or met through social media based on our common connections to people and institutions.

Data Analysis

There are a number of approaches to visual methodologies that my research combines. One of the most basic ways of reading an image is outlined in Roland Barthe's (1993) "Rhetoric of the Image." In this text, Barthes argues that how we read images depends on the (cultural) knowledge we bring to them. Barthes identifies three levels of meaning within an image: the linguistic, the coded iconic message (denotational) and the non-coded iconic message (connotational). The linguistic meaning has an ideological function that "directs the reader...toward a meaning chosen in advance" (156) through denotation. Using an advertisement as an example, Barthes explains how the denoted image and connoted image work together; the denoted image "naturalizes" (159) the image's connotation. Along these same lines, in *Ways of Seeing* John Berger (1990) notes that our lived experiences shape how we see and that "the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (7).

While these scholars offer some of the very foundational approaches to reading images, Black feminist theory adds nuance that allows for understanding images beyond a representational approach. In describing the rationale for *Troubling Vision*, Nicole Fleetwood (2011) describes it as one that "moves away from an analysis of the politics of representation to a concern with how black

subjectivity itself is constituted through visual discourse and performed through visual technologies" (12). Fleetwood applies this non-representational approach in order to argue "that the visible black body is always already troubling to the dominant visual field" and to "investigate the productive possibilities of this figuration through specific cultural works and practices" (6).

Employing a combination of these approaches, I interpreted the visual content using the following parameters, which I have grouped into tiers of analysis. The first tier of analysis deals with describing what the image portrays. Who or what is in the picture/video? What are the spatial configurations of the image; how are the people/objects positioned in relation to each other and in relation to their surroundings? The second tier of analysis explores the affective registers of the images. Affect is a difficult concept to measure, but at the most basic level, affect is about movement and flow, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) idea of speeds and slowness.[9] My analysis of affect for this project will draw from the premise of Sara Ahmed's (2004) *Cultural Politics of Emotion* and her theorization of affective economies; I examine what these images *do*. What are the affective registers that these images create, call upon, and/or appeal to? Finally, the third tier of analysis focuses on what Kara Keeling (via Deleuze) (2007) describes as the "out-of-field," what exists outside of the frame. Examining the out-of-field comprises a nuanced reading of the images and can reveal the significance of the image beyond/in addition to what appears in the frame.

Chapter Outline

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[9] This concept appears throughout *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

Chapter 1 provides historical contextualization for understanding Black girls' engagement with media. The chapter presents a genealogy of girl-centered media discourse and shows how Black girls stood at the peripheries of mainstream media while simultaneously shaping responses to mainstream media and carving out their own media spaces. The end of chapter one transitions into a discussion of contemporary digi-scapes where user-generated content gives Black girls a platform for self-definition. Chapter 2 looks at concrete examples of how Black girls deploy user-generated content toward political ends. This chapter explores how Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg use their celebrity status to openly express their opinions about social issues, including issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Through astute manipulation of the visual field, Jackson, Shahidi, and Stenberg appeal to particular affective registers that encompass what I call Black girl semiotics, thus demonstrating the various functions of Black visuality. Chapter 3 also focuses on visuality but in relation to localized spaces. Using the fieldwork from Richmond, Virginia as well as visual content and online interviews from girls in other Black locales, this chapter looks at mundane uses of Instagram and Snapchat among "everyday" girls in order to show how physical space overlaps with digital and conceptual space. Chapter 3 shows that even in digital space, the local matters. Chapter 4 uses Afrofuturism as a framework to provide an in-depth exploration of Willow Smith's digital productions as a template for Black girl futures. Willow Smith's digital presence demonstrates what Black girl liberation can/might look like. The conclusion explains what these

Black girls' digital productions mean for cultural studies more broadly and offers

suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 1 – MEDIA WORLDS OF BLACK GIRLS: LOCATING BLACK GIRLS
IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE (MEDIATED) GIRL SUBJECT

During the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries, the Black press served

as a cornerstone of Black social and political life in the United States. For Black

Americans, newspapers and magazines functioned as both informational resources and

philosophical spaces that engaged conversations of racial uplift. Recognizing this

important role of print media, specifically Black-owned and Black-produced

publications, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin saw the need for Black women to enter these

spaces on their own terms, and so she founded *The Woman's Era* in 1894 with the goal of

providing a platform for Black women[10] to tell their own stories.

The first three issues of *Woman's Era* included a column called "Chats with

Girls," written by Leslie Wilmot. In the inaugural chat, Wilmot (1894) opens her letter by

citing the importance of reaching girls, noting "in this woman's era…anything that tends

to widen the horizon of our girls is of inestimable benefit." Wilmot's contribution to

"widen[ing] the horizon" of Black girls in her chats comes through her recommendations

about reading. Wilmot advises girls to develop a practice of reading, not only for pleasure

and amusement but also for learning more about subjects they find interesting. Wilmot

follows up on the first chat by discussing her participation in a book group, thus

highlighting the potential for reading to facilitate community building. The third and final

"Chats with Girls" column included a letter from a twelve-year-old girl, Clara Day, who

sought more age-friendly texts. In her letter, addressed to Leslie Wilmot, Day wrote: "I

read your 'chat with girls' every month, but I don't like the books you suggest. Can't you

tell about some books for little girls? All your books are for big ones." Wilmot takes

Day's request to heart and offers suggestions for young girls by authors such as Louisa

May Alcott, Janet Rose, and Charlotte Yonge. She also encourages young girls to "read

the Arabian Nights now, for a few years hence, you will not be able to enjoy it" (Wilmot

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[10] For much of the newspaper's existence Ruffin was mostly interested in the affairs of elite women, but later tried to expand her audience in the wake of economic stress and decline. For more information about Ruffin's motivations for shifting audiences see Streitmatter, Rodger, "Economic Conditions Surrounding Nineteenth-Century African American Women Journalists: Two Case Studies," *Journalism History* 18 (January 1992).

1894b). Even though the "Chats with Girls" column did not continue beyond a third issue of *The Woman's Era*, the decision to include a column for Black girls in the first newspaper owned and published by and for Black women speaks to how discourses of Black girlhood were developing alongside Black Feminist approaches to racial uplift. Ruffin's "Chats with Girls" operated as an early example of a media platform designed with the experiences of Black girls in mind. Over time, especially with the advent of digital technologies, these types of platforms have become increasingly developed and run by Black girls themselves, but the discourses of Black girlhood that emerge in these contemporary spaces have their roots in the burgeoning Black Feminist ideals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In this chapter, I argue that examining Black girls' subjectivities and everyday experiences through their interactions with media provides more expansive understandings of girlhood that can lead to broader imaginings of how media can be appropriated for social justice. The first section draws upon the archives, broadly defined (Ruffin 2016, Morgan 2015), of Black girlhood to explore how Black girlhood has been constructed within discourses of racial uplift. Specifically, I look at the ways Black women activists and writers have discussed Black girlhood and how Black girls have portrayed their own experiences and ideas. I then use this genealogy of Black girlhood to contest the determinist understandings of contemporary media that undergird moral panics, which center an essentialized white, middle-class American girl subject that emerged during the mid-twentieth century in conjunction with wartime economic growth. As mainstream magazines for girls became more inextricably linked to capitalist conflations of demographic groups and target markets, spaces for Black girls' voices (at

least within the mainstream) became sparser. The overall lack of Black media

representation helped catalyze both an increased production of Black-owned magazines

for Black audiences and (later) youth media organizations designed to teach media

literacy and media production techniques to Black youth.[11] However, neither of these

alternatives have been more instrumental in providing platforms for expressions of Black

girlhood than the Internet. To illustrate the radical potential of the Internet, the chapter

shifts from a historical foregrounding to a contemporary exploration of three online

projects started by Black girls/nonbinary youth–The Art Hoe Collective, *The Melanin

Diary*, and the 1,000 Black Girl Books campaign. These three cases offer much needed

nuance to conversations about how Black girls engage the Internet.

Creating the Black Girl

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much of the discourse regarding

Black girlhood involved making a case that Black girls are in fact children and

advocating for protecting Black girls' enjoyment of childhood. Among public

intellectuals of the time, especially race women[12], many felt the fate of *all* Black people

depended upon how society treated Black girls (Cooper [1886] 1998; Williams [1905]

2002; Chatelain 2015). For Black women activists, particularly in the years during and

immediately following Reconstruction, one of the keys to securing bright futures for

Black girls (which they believed would translate to the Black race in general) was making

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[11] Most of these organizations do not explicitly state a mission to serve Black youth, but instead use racially coded language such as "underserved" or "low-income" to denote that the majority of their participants are people of color (and likely predominantly Black, depending on the local demographics).

[12] "Race women were the first Black women intellectuals…Pauline Hopkins declared two key tasks attached to the work of the 'true race-woman.' They were 'to study' and 'to discuss' 'all phases of the race question.' Not only were these women institution builders and activists; they declared themselves public thinkers on race questions." Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017): 11.

sure they were protected from violence, and part of this protection required normalizing

Black girls *as* girls against "the ways that slavery warped the timeline of maturity for

them" (Wright 2016, 10). In other words, the failure to distinguish Black girls from Black

women in the contexts of slavery and white supremacy more broadly forced Black girls

into early adulthood. This early adultification (Ladner 1971) of Black girls (and Black

children in general) has material consequences that puts Black girls at greater risk,

especially for sexual violence. For instance, "African American girls had to be younger

than their white counterparts to be identified in the press as the victims of rape"

(Freedman 2013, 11). The denial of Black girlhood as a distinct stage of development

stemmed from "a racial difference in cultural understandings of childhood innocence.

African American girls lost that innocence at a younger age, the press implied, making

them more vulnerable not only to assault but also to courtroom claims that they had

consented to sex." (Freedman 2013, 87). Therefore, in addition to placing girls in danger

of physical violation, the refusal to recognize Black girls also had a profound impact on

the legal system. This system created situations in which Black girls had to first prove

they were human at all, then prove they were children, and then work against both white

privilege exercised by white men and male privilege exercised by Black men.

Recognizing the discrepancies in perceptions of innocence within Black and white

girls, Black advocates for racial uplift focused on articulating stages of Black girlhood.

According to Black girlhood literary scholar Nazera Wright, nineteenth century Black

writers used "age markers [youthful and 'prematurely knowing']" to "convey that black

girls did not have much time to be youthful before they arrived at the age when they

needed to make mature decisions and take on adult roles" and to show how "Black girls

needed to find strategies to protect themselves and find a future at an early age. They had to find a way or make one" (Wright 2016, 10). In stories about and/or targeting Black girls, Black writers "tied youthfulness to moral behavior to contest negative representations of black female sexuality...Identifying black girls as youthful and therefore childlike was a strategy designed to remove any suggestion of sexual objectification" (Wright 2016, 11). These types of efforts solidified the significance of protection within early Black girlhood discourse.

The other primary way that Black women sought to elevate Black girls and Black girlhood was through education. One of the most well-known spokeswomen of racial uplift, Anna Julia Cooper, "promoted a feminist discourse that valued black girls' capabilities and protested against critical treatments of black girls that often emerged in black intellectual thought" (Wright 2016, 7). During the 1870s and 1880s, within texts that "emphasize self-governing behavior in black girls so they can achieve their goals through their own actions," "formal education figures prominently in the strategies available to black girls" (Wright 2016, 19). While many Black intellectuals saw formal education as a clear path toward racial uplift, some Black women realized that not all knowledge came from lessons learned in classrooms. This is why "African American women writers insisted on telling their own stories" and "emphasized how black girls learned to draw on their own inner resources and then gather resources from the environment and the community around them" (Wright 2016, 91). These understandings of Black girls' education speak to not only the importance of education but also to the subjective complexities of Black girls.

The conversations around establishing Black girlhood as a distinct phase aligned with broader conversations that were happening nationally and globally about childhood during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As girlhood scholar Catherine Driscoll (2002) argues, "girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge about girls" (5). Driscoll describes girlhood as a necessarily cultural construct and traces its contemporary manifestations to societal divisions that emerged during the European Renaissance and further developed into the Victorian era. Through genealogical analysis, Driscoll, in alignment with French historian Phillipe Aires, explains how "childhood as a separate identity and way of life did not exist before the 18th century" (18).

Driscoll considers girlhood primarily within a European cultural context, and while there are clear parallels between (Western) European and American social structures, the models of girlhood operating in the United States are not a direct mirror of those in Europe. In "The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions," William Kessen (1979) reflects on child psychology as a field, pointing to its evolution and future applications. In this article, Kessen argues that both the child subject and child psychology are shaped/defined within the context of cultures. While this is certainly not a new revelation, Kessen's genealogy of the invention of the American child offers insight into how the girl subject (in a United States context) has been constructed over time. The first change that Kessen identifies is "the evolving separation of the domain of work from the domain of home" (817). This shift, which is tied to both urbanization and industrialization, brought about the perception that work was something done outside of the home (in factories, offices, stores, etc.). Because men (at least in white, urban, middle-class contexts) were the ones who primarily left the home to work, housework

became more associated with women and children. Since the mother was expected to take care of the children, children also became associated with this home/private space: "Children continued to be cared for by women at home, and in consequence, they took on the coloration of mother, hearth, and heaven" (817).

Changes in perceptions about the "home domain" versus "work domain" are directly linked to "the radical separation of what a man was from what a woman was" (Kessen 1979, 817). Men became associated with public spheres while women were relegated to the private spheres. For Kessen, separations of public and private were significant to establishing gendered expectations for space. These sociopolitical realities and the "sentimentalization of children...had implications for family structure, education, and the definition of the child" (Kessen 1979, 817). Under these evolving definitions of the child and childhood, a merging of science and the ethics of child-rearing occurred in which scientific studies about raising children began to displace folk knowledge despite the significant limitations in 19th and early 20th century psychologists' methodologies. Fusing science and morality, "the scientific statement became an ethical imperative, the descriptive account became normative" (Kessen 1979, 818).

Of social scientists who studied childhood, G. Stanley Hall is often credited with having the biggest impact on changes in perceptions about childhood (particularly adolescence) and adulthood as distinct stages. However, Black women's advocating for Black girlhood as a distinct stage of development was prescient and predates the work of G. Stanley Hall. Furthermore, G. Stanley Hall's 1904 work *Adolescence* marked an important contribution to the field of child psychology because it offered an unprecedented theorization of adolescence, but it had little to say about girls'

psychological development (DeLuzio 2007). Hall's later essay, "The Budding Girl," "helped to break new intellectual ground by positing that the establishment of gender identity at adolescence gave rise to a psychological conflict that was central to the girl's development" (DeLuzio 2007, 92). But like many scientific theories of the time, Hall's theories depended on the assumption of inherent differences between boys and girls. Hall suggested that girls did not move beyond this adolescent phase characterized by emotional/psychic instability. Many social studies of girls (from the late 19th through 20th centuries) rely heavily on G. Stanley Hall's theories and Freudian[13] psychoanalyses that pathologize girls' emotions, feelings, and behaviors, and the need to "understand" girls' sexuality has often been linked to attempts to control their sexual behavior and/or highlight their perceived inherent sexual corruptibility.

While Hall, Driscoll, and Kessen make important links between societal changes and conceptualizations of childhood as a distinct life stage, their genealogies are largely informed by white, middle-to-upper class sensibilities. The public/private dichotomy that functions as the basis of Kessen's arguments does not hold when examining the dynamics of Black and/or working-class families in the United States. As historian Jessica Marie Johnson (2015) points out:

> Because black diasporic women have historically labored outside the home, do not garner the privileged protection of domesticity, and are in fact multiply vulnerable and hypervisible beyond the home's boundaries, public/private binaries fail to capture the historically intersecting demands on black diasporic women's time and struggle to maintain themselves (51).

The same racist and sexist logics that exclude Black women from the category of woman as defined by white femininity (Spillers 1987, Higganbotham 1993) also deny childhood

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[13] Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* was published in 1905, a year after Hall's *Adolescence*.

innocence to Black girls. Therefore, any historically sound genealogy of Black girlhood–

and American girlhood in general–must include the works of Black women writing and

speaking about Black girls and, when possible, center the voices of Black girls

themselves. Black women's discussions of Black girlhood offer some insight into Black

girls' lives, but hearing from Black girls themselves paints an even more accurate picture

of Black girls' experiences and the development of Black girlhood discourses.

The Brownies Book: An Early Source of Black Girls' Voices

One of the most significant elements of Black freedom struggles has been the

Black press, which includes both newspapers and magazines. Within Black newspapers

and magazines lie not only stories about the goings-on of Black communities but also

social discourses surrounding racial uplift and advancement. The discourses of racial

uplift often tried to identify solutions to social ills of racism, and one of these solutions

had to do with the homes that Black people kept - how Black people raise their children.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Black people's sense of childhood and the effects of

being robbed of that childhood had a strong impact on the kinds of activism they

engaged, and *The Brownies' Book* was born, at least in part, out of this conviction that if

Black children could have healthy childhoods, they could at least have a chance to

overcome the systems of oppression facing them.

The Brownies' Book, edited by W.E.B. DuBois and Jessie Redman Fauset, had a

two-year run from January 1920 through December 1921. Inspired by responses to "The

Children's Number" in *Crisis Magazine*, DuBois started *The Brownies' Book* with the

goal of educating and empowering Black children. Some of the main objectives for the

magazine were to "make 'colored' normalized, teach Negro history and biography…and

point out the best amusements and the worthwhile things of life" (Henderson 2008, 36).

In carrying out its mission, *The Brownies' Book* not only served as an inspirational tool

for Black children, it also provided a space for fledgling writers of the time, like

Langston Hughes, to share their work and boost their careers. In addition to offering

famous writers an opportunity, *The Brownies Book* printed submissions from children,

oftentimes girls, who read their issues. These submissions - whether letters, stories,

poems, or essays – feature Black girls' voices[14] and offer some insight into the discourses

of Black girlhood that Black girls were developing for themselves.

While *The Brownies' Book* was not an exclusively Black girl space, it did offer an

avenue for Black girls to share their experiences and conceptualizations of the world. For

instance, each magazine featured a section called "The Jury" which included letters from

young *Brownies' Book* readers. In these letters, children (girls and boys) would describe a

range of things going on in their lives. Sometimes children reflected on how much they

liked the *Brownies Book* or described their homes and schools. In many of the letters

submitted by girls, they focused on education. The first two issues both included

anonymous letters from girls seeking opportunities to receive a quality education. In one

letter, a fifteen-year-old from Seattle, Washington expressed her desire to go to boarding

school because she has "tried and tried to do something in Seattle, but the people are very

down on the Negro race. In some schools they do not want colored children" (15). This

girl also notes that part of her difficulty in getting a sponsor for her boarding school

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[14] It is important to note that the girls who could afford subscriptions to *The Brownies' Book* and/or postage to submit their work likely would have belonged primarily to middle and upper social classes. Therefore, I am not suggesting that these stories represent an overarching account of Black girlhood; rather, they give us glimpses into what life was like for Black girls in different parts of the United States.

education stems from her belief that "I am not a very pretty girl, and for that reason I have not been able to get anyone to help me in my little plan" (15).

A similar letter appears in the February 1920 issue. In this letter, a sixteen-year-old orphan from Fairmount, West Virginia describes her experiences living with white people who made her work in exchange for a place to stay. The girl sought a new home because: "Realizing that I did not always want to be a scrub girl, I have tried to educate myself, as I could not go to school" (52). She requested "a home among a good Christian colored family" (52) with no older children, but she is fine with small babies. She says, "I wouldn't mind being with elderly people. Just anywhere among good Christian people, where I could go to good public schools" (52). When she describes her looks she says, "I am a dark brown skin girl, with Negro hair, not very tall nor good to look at. But I wear my clothes nicely" (52).

The girls' modesty and self-deprecation in both of these letters tells us something about how they have come to define themselves in the context of racialized and gendered encounters. There is an underlying notion that having good looks is the most important factor in girls' advancement, and in the absence of these good looks, physical labor must be exchanged for any act of benevolence.

Not all of the letters printed in "The Jury" were as bleak as these; in fact, these are the only two letters that have any kind of charity-seeking undertone. While the *Brownies' Book* may have received more letters like those of the girls from Seattle and Fairmount, the letters published in later issues of the *Brownies' Book* had a distinctively different tone. Even the other letters about education focused more on girls' accomplishments or goals for the future. For example, in the September 1920 issue, Flora Summers wrote to

share her success for winning "first honor for giving a four-minute talk on The Third

Liberty Bond." (282) Another girl, H. Viola Lott, wrote not to center her own

accomplishments but to describe the educational opportunities in Texas in general.

According to Lott, Texas has "splendid opportunities to obtain an education" (62).

      Some of the early issues of *The Brownies Book* included stories written by Black

girls. In some cases, the girls had written letters asking to be featured in the magazine,

and a few girls such as Pocahontas Foster and Mary Effie Lee became regular

contributors to the magazine. While literature cannot necessarily be interpreted as a direct

mirror of the author's life, it does provide insight into how the author conceptualizes the

world. The first time we see *The Brownies' Book* acknowledge a child author happens in

the February 1920 issue. The first piece in the issue is a short story called "A Visit to

Fairyland" by a girl named Bertie Lee Hall.[15] The story is about Esther, a "brown girl"

with curly black hair who "was kind and loving to all she met" (35). Esther falls asleep in

the forest and dreams that she goes on an adventure with a fairy[16] and meets all kinds of

insects who are preparing for a fair. Esther approaches the creatures that she meets with

excitement and curiosity. While this story takes place in the imaginary world of Esther's

dreams, it is indicative of the real-life importance of imagination and creativity in the

lives of Black girls.

      While Hall's story depicts a fantasy world, other stories submitted by girls give

insight into some of the realities for Black girls. Stories like "Not Wanted" by fifteen-

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[15] In some cases, the editors would put the author's age in parenthesis after their name to indicate that the submission was from a child. In this case, they included Bertie Lee Hall's picture.

[16] See Fern Kory, "Once Upon a Time in Aframerica: The 'Peculiar' Significance of Fairies in the *Brownies' Book*," Children's Literature 29 (2001): 91-112 for an explanation of the role of fairies in situating the magazine within a specific genre of children's literature.

year-old Grace White and "The Wish" by eleven-year-old Alice Burnett depict realistic examples of some of the struggles Black girls faced while trying to navigate their desires for the future within and against the hardships of the present. White's "Not Wanted" tells the story of a little girl named Patsy who lives in an orphanage and believes no one wants to adopt her because she has freckles. But she gets the opportunity to be in a play, and the director of the play, Mrs. Kingsley asks Patsy to stay with her for good. In "The Wish," Burnett tells the story of a girl name Jean whose parents want to send her to school, but they can't afford it. They decide to send her anyway, but Jean doesn't want her parents to go broke, so she decides to write to her uncle to ask for the money. Her uncle only sent her $50 but shortly after he died and left all his money to her father, so she was able to go to school without worries." Stories like these demonstrate both the hardships that Black girls often endured in pursuit of their dreams and the significance of hope in dealing with those adversities.

In the June 1920 issue *The Brownies' Book* introduced Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Girl Reserves. In this piece called "Girl Reserves," Crystal Bird - the Secretary for Colored Girls, Girls Work Bureau, National Board Young Women's Christian Association - outlines the mission of the Girl Reserves. Bird notes that Girl Reserves serve "all girls between the ages of ten and eighteen whether they be grade school, high school or younger girls in business and industry." (187) She goes on to say, "The object of the [Girl Reserve] movement is to train girls for citizenship, to give them a sense of responsibility toward their community and their country; to give them strong, vigorous bodies; trained, alert minds; an appreciation of spiritual values; and a knowledge of the joy of life; thus making for a happy girlhood and useful womanhood"

(187). According to Bird, one way that the Girl Reserves facilitates the practice of training girls for citizenship is through allowing the girls to serve as and vote for officers of their local branches. While the Girl Reserves was not necessarily founded with Black girls in mind, Bird felt like this was a source of edification for Black girls:

> In addition to all the things the Girl Reserve movement aims to do for all girls, it is hoped that it will be one of the means of teaching colored girls group pride; group loyalty; of given them a desire for greater knowledge of the people of their own race and their achievements; of making them realize the value of training for leadership among their own people; and that in training for citizenship, in 'helping to make America more true to its best hopes and traditions,' they are doing it as American citizens in the fullest sense of the words. (188)

Starting in January 1921, *The Brownies' Book* began including fairly consistent reports from Girl Reserves chapters (6 reports total from 1921). The chronicles of the Girl Reserves demonstrated some of the everyday activities that Black girls participated in. For example, in the March 1921 issue, Olive Jones describes Gala Week at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in Washington, D.C. During Gala Week, the Girl Reserves participants attended a "Bazaar of Nations," during which they learned about different countries/cultures. They also watched a play performed by the Dramatic Club and learned new dances. In another issue, they discuss the Girl Reserves Conference that was held in Germantown, Pennsylvania. In one report detailing the election of Girl Reserve officers for the Washington, D.C. branch, there was a person elected as the Girl Reserve's representative to *The Brownies' Book*. Even though these reports likely operated as a recruitment tool for the Girl Reserves, they also provide a concrete example of how Black girls participated in the fight to establish girlhood as a period of playfulness and leisure.

The letters published in "The Jury" offer some insight into the everyday lives of Black girls of the time period. The ways in which girls described their homes or the interactions with friends and family illustrate what they deemed important and what they liked to do. Likewise, the short stories and reports from the Girl Reserves help us to see the ways in which Black girls were speaking to and/or about their own lives. From these three features of *The Brownies' Book*, we see how Black girls were developing a discourse of Black girlhood alongside their adult counterparts who were concerned about racial uplift. These letters and stories allow us to see Black girls as astute contributors to race and gender discourse. They show us the subjective complexities of Black girls. One of the main features that arises from these entries is hope for the future, whether that hope stems from poor or pleasant conditions in the present. As an early source of Black girls' participation in the media, it is important that *The Brownies' Book* existed some decades before the development of the teen magazine as we know it today. Because the *Brownies' Book* was founded primarily as a source of cultural pride, the magazine provided a way for Black children, particularly Black girls, to feel like they were a part of something important.

Endangered Girls: Theories and Histories of Mediated Moral Panics

During the Progressive Era, "public anxiety about the morality of young women greatly intensified and spread to all regions of the country during this period of rapid urban and industrial growth" (Odem 1995, 1). The increased attention to girls' behavior during the Progressive Era coincided with the prevalence of high schools that had increased throughout the early 20th century as the advent of compulsory education in the United States contributed to major shifts in perceptions of childhood in general and

girlhood specifically. By the start of the 20th century, "the term 'girl' extended its reach through menarche and the years of secondary school," making "school attendance a critical part of the construction of this modern version of girlhood" (Hunter 2002, 5). While race and class did factor into these "new" worries about girls' behaviors, it was only to the extent that white girls would intermingle with and become corrupted by girls of color and/or poor girls. Within the increased focus on racialized girlhoods during the Progressive Era into the 1920s, the middle-class white girl remained the "measuring stick" for "normal" American girlhood: "Far less likely to receive public punishment or be subjected to state intervention than her working-class or immigrant sister because of her privileged status, she instead became the catalyst for psychological conceptualizations of a normal modern female adolescence" (Deluzio 2007, 146). This narrow formulation of girlhood rooted in short-sighted psychological theory lay at the heart of social anxieties about girls and media.

The proliferation of teen magazines that happened during the post-war era marks a very specific turn toward defining girlhood, particularly teenage girlhood, in terms of capitalist market logics. The emergence of these teen magazines not only represented broader shifts in United States economic and marketing practices but also further invisibilized Black girls' voices and experiences through the creation of a narrowly defined target audience. Of the societal factors that impacted contemporary conceptualizations of girlhood in the United States, advertising played one of the largest roles. Since "middle-class women had become the primary consumers as well as central target for advertisers" (Schrum 1998, 14) during the early 20th century, once girls became more autonomous shoppers during the 1920s and 30s, it seemed like "natural"

progression for advertisers to focus on teenage girls. As perceptions of the teenage girl

became more closely aligned with war efforts, allowing them to secure wage-earning

jobs, the development of the teenage girl as a target consumer market became more

prevalent. Growing mass consumer culture(s) during the World War II and post-war eras

represent a turning point in the development of "the girl" as a subject because companies

needed to understand (and create) girls as a target market.

One key element that worked to solidify this relationship between markets and

female adolescent sexuality was the development of the girls' magazine: "Girls'

magazines invoke a simultaneous and equated development of gender identity and sexual

identity and produce a normative image of the girl to whom they are addressed" (Driscoll

2002, 156-7). In her essay about the development of *Seventeen*, which published its first

issue in April 1945, Kelly Schrum (1998) argues:

> *Seventeen* magazine was instrumental in developing the image of the teenage girl
> as a consumer of the magazine and the products advertised within its covers, but
> also as a member of society. It invested the teenage girl with two separate, yet
> related, identities: the image of a consumer for manufacturers, businessmen, and
> advertisers; and the image of a teenage girl for girls themselves" (134-5).

This idealized girl figure helped form and promote an essentialized girl subject – one

version of the girl–white, middle-to-upper class - that comes to stand in for all girls. The

essentialized girl subject became the standard for studies related to girlhood, leaving little

room or explanation of the unique experiences of Black girls.

Media companies both pandered to and exploited public anxieties about female

sexualities through an idealized girl figure. This idealization captured the obsession of

adults with girls' sexual development and worked to create girls' subjectivities. As the

universalized girl became an increasingly important economic figure, she also became the

center of moral panics, especially in relation to media consumption. With each new iteration of media marketed to teens (i.e. music/radio, magazines, the Internet) came anxiety about the impact that such interactions would have on white girlhood. As Shayla Thiel-Stern (2014) points out, "panic and crisis are often perpetuated by journalists, often in an attempt simply to gain a wider viewing audience or sell newspapers, and often this moral panic is at the expense of marginalized communities -the poor, women, young people, people of color, and immigrants" (18). Even though centering the "purity" of white girlhood hypervisibilizes Black girls and other girls of color as social contaminants, this obsession with white girls' media consumption also makes Black girls' engagements with media virtually invisible.

As media distribution methods became more advanced, the moral panic discourses became more extreme and also more centered on the white girl subject. While television and magazines had been a popular source of media consumption for quite some time, the development of the Internet as a household product exacerbated concerns about the impact of mass media on girls' development. Much of the discourse surrounding dangers posed by girls' inundation with media images centered on girls as a danger to themselves (i.e. developing low self-esteem and risky behavior) or as a danger to society. For example, in 1994, Mary Pipher, a practicing psychologist and writer, released a book called *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. In the opening of this text, which would go on to become a *New York Times* Bestseller, Pipher argues: "At first blush, it seems things should be better now. After all, we have the women's movement…But girls today are much more oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture" (12). This "girl-poisoning culture"

(Pipher 1994, 12) ignores girls' need for "physical and psychological safety, love and friendships, useful work/skills, and opportunities for growth and development" (Pipher 1998). Pipher (1998) claims that these needs have not changed much over time and that it is very important for girls to have self-defense and stress-coping mechanisms because "life is so stressful in the 90s for teenagers."

One of the reasons why Pipher marks the 1990s as a particularly dangerous time for girls (and teens in general) is because of what she describes as media pressures. She explains how teens look to media for guidance, and these media outlets send them innumerable and often conflicting of messages about how they should look and behave. For Pipher (1998), the Internet exacerbated these media pressures: "the information super highway's got a lot of stuff that sexualizes girls. That treats girls like trash. Soft-core pornography, advertising, and fashion have all sort of blurred together in one set of images." According to Pipher, the increased consumption of these images–images that promote thinness and that intermingle sex and violence–make girls more likely to place their value in their bodies and use sexuality as an avenue towards popularity and acceptance. While Pipher's assessment of media messages that teenagers receive is not completely inaccurate, and her concerns about the Internet's contribution to the sexualization of girls are not unfounded, Pipher's claim that girls in the 1990s were "much more oppressed" than they had ever been underscores the ways in which a universalized white girl subject often operates at the center of media-based moral panics. After all, had Black girls not faced bodily, emotional, and spiritual dangers for *centuries* at the hands of institutionalized oppression very much embedded in Western/American social structures?

For Black girls, who rarely saw their lives reflected in mainstream media, the Internet offered potential. Black girls' turning to the Internet is more than a mere intervention into a space where Black girls' voices have been limited or excluded. It is a continuation of the self-definition projects of publications like *The Brownies' Book.* While the teen magazines had become one of the most effective girl-targeted mass media products by the end of the twentieth century, there was no mainstream teen magazine specifically for Black girls. Despite the development of Black youth magazines like *Word Up! Right On!* and *Young Sisters and Brothers (YSB),* there was still no Black magazine analogous to teen magazines like *Seventeen*. Furthermore, even though magazines provided one point of entry for Blacks into mainstream media, the operational realities of these media outlets ensured that target audiences would not have a significant role in media production and distribution. This is where the Internet has demonstrated its possibilities for Black girls' engagement with and production of media.

The Emergence and Necessity of Alternative Media

The United States' alternative media movement came about during the 1960s as a response to the skewed nature of corporate-produced media and was driven by the same spirit of Marxism that influenced anti-war sentiments of the time period. While there are many definitions and interpretations of what constitutes alternative media, Chris Atton (2004) describes them as "a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing' media" (ix). In this way, alternative media are defined "as much by their capacity to generate non-standard, often infractory, methods of creation, production and distribution as…by their content" (Atton 2004, 11).

One of the key tenets of the alternative media movement involved democratizing communications processes. More than a critique of the capitalist forces behind mass communication, the alternative media movement aimed to establish a people's media in which "[media] creators…not only reflect or critique mainstream media and culture, they constitute and intervene in them" (Lievrouw 2011, 19). As Internet technologies emerged and proliferated, proponents of alternative media saw new potential for democratizing communications in digital spaces. As Lievrouw points out, "the recombinant, networked nature of new media infrastructure, and the ubiquity and interactivity that they offer users" create conditions in which "people extend their social networks and interpersonal contacts, produce and share their own 'DIY' information, and resist, 'talk back' to, or otherwise critique and intervene in prevailing social, cultural, economic, and political conditions" (19). Given these allowances of new media, part of this newfound faith in Internet communications had to do with the nature of "virtual publics spheres" (Langman 2005) that emerged within cyberspace. These "virtual public spheres…enable 'post-subcultures,' interpersonal networks of discussion, debate, and clarification that, however virtual…allow people the freedom to redefine and construct themselves on the basis of the alternative cultural and/or political forms and experiences" (Langman 2005, 57). In other words, the Internet provides spaces to convene that transcend normative boundaries, and these kinds of spaces are critical for minoritarian organizing.

The development of community media organizations has direct ties to the alternative media movement. Community media "originates, circulates and resonates from the sphere of civil society" and is "the field of media communication that exists

outside of the state and the market" (Howley 2003, 823). Focused on establishing a people's media, "the primary concern of community media practice and theory has been the redistribution of what Raymond Williams called 'the means to communication'" (Rennie et al 2010, 11). In this way community media has become associated primarily with grassroots activism that calls on members of various communities to use media as a tool to shape policy. Because community media organizations rely on voices of everyday people who may not necessarily be experts in media theory and production, media literacy has been a major focus of these organizations.

As media literacy became more of a buzzword, youth participatory media organizations began to spring up across the country. Youth media organizations have their roots in community media theories that sought to democratize media practices by providing everyday people with the tools to make media that would be counter-hegemonic to mainstream, capitalist media companies. While the histories and inner workings of youth media organizations represent a growing area of scholarship that is still underexplored, there are a number of reports from independent organizations looking to reverse the dismantling of youth media funding. These reports provide some basic characteristics of youth media organizations as well as the challenges that have caused their rapid spread during the 1990s and 2000s (McDermott et al 2015) to shift to rapid decline. According to Ingrid Dahl (2009) of the *Youth Media Reporter*, "youth media is distinct [from other types of youth development] in that it uses media as a tool and strategy for young people to examine themselves, their communities, and the world at large" (3). Despite the diversity of youth media organizations and their missions, most of them share a commitment to community engagement, democratic leadership,

collaboration, and professional training (Dahl 2009). In *Life after Youth Media*, Suniya Farooqui and Amy Terpstra (2014) identify "six dimensions of youth media: journalism skills, news and media literacy, civic engagement, youth development, career development, and youth expression" (4). Using these six dimensions of youth media, they show how youth media organizations not only give young people access to media production technologies but also cultivate skills that will be useful in their education, careers, and general civic life.

Youth media organizations have certainly made an important intervention in terms of helping minority youth use creative expression to construct counterdiscourses to mainstream narratives that fail to recognize their humanity, and "one of the greatest qualities of youth media is its potential to reach large audiences while offering young people a thoughtful, mediated process" (Dahl 2009, 3). However, the work of Black girls in digital spaces–such as The Art Hoe Collective, The Melanin Diary, and the 1,000 Black Girl Books Campaign–demonstrates that capitalistic digital platforms (such as Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat) may have greater potential reach than youth media organizations.

<div align="center">Art Hoe Collective</div>

The Art Hoe Collective was co-founded by a fifteen-year-old genderqueer teen Mars and their partner Jam in an effort to visibilize the art of people of color while simultaneously providing a space for creative and experiential expression of identity and self-acceptance. According to Mars, the art hoe movement is "an opportunity to shift paradigms and redefine blackness by challenging stereotypes about people of color" (Blay 2015). While the Collective, created by and for people of color, aims to include a

range of subjectivities, Mars sees the Collective as especially friendly to "non binary people of colour [*sic*] [who] don't really have a stable platform where they can prove and show what they're capable of without being questioned about their identity" (Sisley 2015). In addition to using visual imagery "as a weapon against cultural stereotyping" (Sisley 2015), the name of the Collective itself reclaims the word "hoe" as a subversive term. When asked about the choice to use the phrase "art hoe," Mars responded: "'Hoe' is AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and is normally a derogatory way to refer to women – especially black women – as being promiscuous, within the male gaze" (Frizzell 2015). They go on to say, "Using the term in an arbitrary way diminishes its harmful origin in light of something better" (Frizzell 2015). Another Art Hoe Collective member, Sage Adams, expressed a similar approach to reclaiming the term "hoe" arguing that "it's important that it's called art hoes because we wanted to define how we're being seen. So, we get to choose our narrative. We get to represent ourselves" (Essence 2016a).

The Art Hoe Collective's political work is manifold. Through the use of selfies, the Collective encourages self-love, which both critiques and counters the exclusion of people of color in the mainstream. While some people view selfies as a manifestation of narcissism, marginalized people's deployment of selfies can take on specific political functions. The Art Hoe Collective's use of selfies fits within both a genealogy of Black people politicizing the self-portrait and a contemporary moment in which the selfie indicates a specific form of resistance to being erased within digital spaces. In a special issue of the *International Journal of Communication* on selfies, Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) argue that, "selfies function both as a practice of everyday life and as the object of politicizing discourses about how people ought to represent, document, and

share their behaviors," and these functions of selfies have been interpreted in a variety of ways. Senft and Baym caution against pathologizing the selfie as narcissistic, but even if we did lean toward such a characterization of the selfie, for Black people to engage in what has typically been deemed narcissistic within a media culture that consistently denigrates blackness and a society that restricts Black bodies, the bombardment of Black selfies on social media reads as a subversive or, at the very least, disruptive act.

With the Art Hoe Collective, the selfies vary in form and subject: "Many of these selfies feature their subjects posing in art museums and in front of important works of arts" while "others feature the selfie-takers in front of superimposed images from pieces by Monet or Van Gogh" or "include a few well-placed Keith Haring-esque flourishes and squiggles" (Blay 2015). In all of these forms, participants in the Collective both insert themselves within works of art and/or art spaces and create new works of art that center people of color. Therefore, "the art hoe selfie…is a kind of radical and revolutionary statement of acceptance of blackness and otherness," which "recontextualiz[es] what is 'art' and what is 'beautiful' by giving people of color of all genders and expressions the ability to control their own images and identities" (Blay 2015).

One of the ways that the Art Hoe Collective has been intentional about seeking and sharing work of people of color is through an Instagram curation where artists can submit their work. As indicated in the various interviews with Mars and in journalists' analyses, many members of the Art Hoe Collective utilize selfies/self-portraits to make a range of statements about what constitutes art and who gets to make it. For example, a portrait (Figure 1) from Mimi Mutesa's "Sunlight Is My Favorite Color" series focuses on coming to terms with the multiplicity of one's identity and unapologetically

embodying all of those identities. In the photo's description, Mutesa (2017) explains her motivation for the picture as "discovering what my East African-ness means within an American context for myself on my own creative terms." In the series as a whole, Mutesa also "explor[es] the power of sisterhood." Mutesa's act of centering herself in the photo makes a significant spatial statement that signifies her importance as a subject. Furthermore, through exploration of her East African identity, Mutesa displaces African American identities' hegemonic position in conceptions of blackness. In this way, Mutesa not only critiques the tendency to characterize art as white but also the role of hegemonic blackness within the African Diaspora.

Another example of the portrait/selfie-style acceptance statement comes from Aisha Jemila Daniels' submission (Figure 2) to the Collective. For Daniels (2016), "This photograph focuses on my internal being, allowing self-revelation, which permits an understanding of my own reality, giving me options of ways to move forward...I'm reflecting on how I've been so stubborn and ended up going down the wrong path." This photo encourages an embracing of one's flaws (i.e. stubbornness) toward a journey of self-liberation. The doubling effect that Daniels uses (i.e. depicting herself speaking in her own ear) reflects not only a merging of mind and body–the figure whispering in Daniels' ear represents her conscience–but also the general complexities of Black female/femme subjectivities.

In line with the mission of the Art Hoe Collective, the curation of representative art is versatile. In addition to photography, participants in the Collective submit paintings, illustrations, and mixed media pieces. The format of these works speaks to their affective functions within the Art Hoe archive. For instance, in "Self-Indulgence" (Figure 3), Ari

Danielle Gardner uses a painting to depict the multidimensionality of blackness/Black womanhood. The warm tones of the painting create a glowing effect that suggests embodying this multiplicity is an asset. Finally, the artistic styles of Carmen's "I Am Not Lazy" (Figure 4) and Lola Ogbara's "Body Positivism" (Figure 5) use illustration and collage, respectively, to subvert harmful narratives that shape Black women's/girls'/femme's self-perception. By using cartoonish and/or abstract figures to represent the very serious practice of having to reconcile others' perception with self-perception, Carmen and Ogbara both illustrate the disconnects between how Black womem/girls/femmes are read and how they actually are as well as destabilize the boundaries between real and "imaginary.

In addition to the art itself, the Art Hoe Collective's political value lies in its mission and how it operates. Co-founder Mars describes the Collective as a place "where we give marginalized groups a platform to feel safe while also broadcasting their art" (Tate 2016). In this way, the Art Hoe Collective recognizes the importance of not only having a platform, which is crucial to the exposing artists' work, but also creating a safe haven where such communities may not exist without the work of the Art Hoe Collective. Mars goes on to say that "We don't have a voice in this society. It's usually subdued by our white counterparts, and our anger is taken for granted – having this movement gives people an insight into who we really are" (Sisley 2016). Therefore, the founders and members of the Art Hoe Collective engage in radical acts of self-definition. As Amandla Stenberg puts it, the Art Hoe Collective serves as "this space where kids felt comfortable sharing their artwork" and has become "this movement about self-acceptance and self-

love as artwork" (Tate 2016). For people who constantly have their very humanity questioned, the art of self-acceptance and self-love is deeply political.

The Art Hoe Collective allows for surpassing what Cathy Cohen and Joseph Khane (2014) describe as the gatekeepers of media/participatory culture. Even though? Cohen and Khane do not define participatory politics within a solely online context, their discussion certainly has implications for how young people engage online. One of the main findings from the study concludes: "participatory politics allow individuals and groups to operate with greater independence in the political realm, circumventing traditional gatekeepers" (3) and "mobilize informal networks, and share what they think or want to do with a sizable audience." (4) They go on to say, "the new and expanded opportunities for political engagement facilitated through new media and the culture of sharing and participation it cultivates are particularly relevant for youth, who generally are marginal players in formal institutions" (4).   This notion of circumventing gatekeepers is especially relevant to Black girls' media production because of the limited portrayals of Black girls in the mainstream. Important Point Furthermore, as Cohen and Khane note, children have little influence in the decision-making and production processes of large media corporations, but new media spaces provide a way for Black girls to create and distribute their cultural products despite their marginality within the larger corporate distributed mainstream media.

As Collective member Sage Adams states in an interview with *Essence*, "There's a need for exposure for young artists of color and young queer artists and other marginalized people. So, we were just thinking why don't we make the platform to launch other people's art" (Essence 2016b)? In this explanation of how the Art Hoe

Collective formed, Adams implies that the founders and inaugural members of the Collective did not have to wait on gatekeepers of art and media (such as adults who run corporations, youth media organizations, art galleries, etc.) to give them a platform; instead, they had the tools at their disposal to create their own platform. The Art Hoe Collective has had wide reach. As Mars puts it, "We made this movement inclusive for everyone. The reason why we made this is so everyone can participate in it and have a place to call home" (Sisley 2015). Digital platforms have enabled this sense of home in ways that are not easily replicated in youth media organizations due to their geographical limitations. In addition to providing a platform for queer people of color visibility, the work of the Art Hoe Collective also provides insight into Black girls' subjective formation. The work of Art Hoe Collective artists shows how art can be an effective tool to guide Black girls through processes of self-awareness and self-love. The artwork presented in this chapter shows how Black girl (and young women) artists understand themselves as racialized, gendered beings and how their experiences of race and gender shape their experiences in the world and the kind of art they produce.
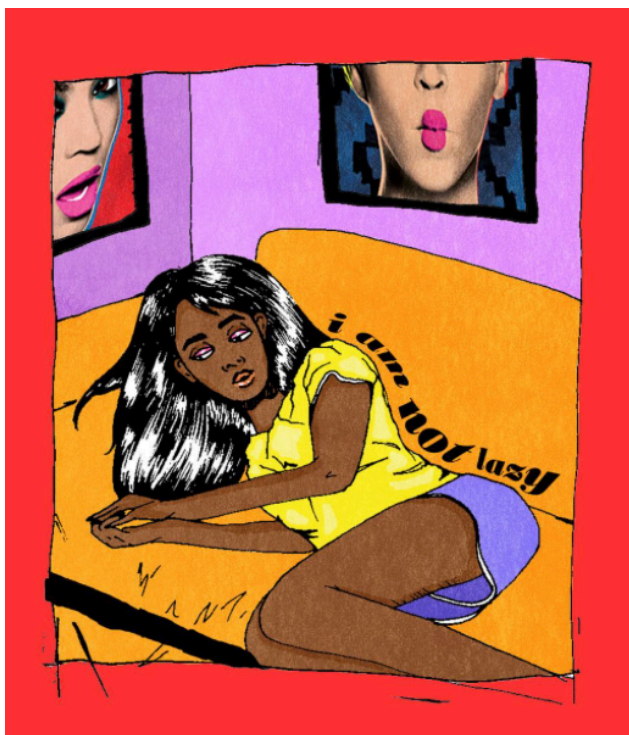
Figure 1. From the "Sunlight Is My Favorite Color" series by Mimi Mutesa. Printed with permission from the owner.

Figure 2. "If You Listen You Won't Be Misguided, Miss Aisha" by Aisha Jamila Daniels. Printed with permission from the owner.

Figure 3. "Self-Indulgence" by Ari Danielle Gardner. Printed with permission from the owner.

Figure 4. "I Am Not Lazy" by Carmen. Printed with permission from the owner.

Figure 5. "Body Positivism" by Lola Ogbara. Printed with permission from the owner. The Melanin Diary

      While many print magazines targeting teen girls have expanded into online spaces and do a better job of centering girls' voices, they still go through an editing process that constitutes a form of gatekeeping. One counter to this exclusionary practice comes in the form of blogging. *The Melanin Diary*, launched on March 4, 2017, is a blog started by Chanice Lee, who was fifteen years old at the time of the blog's debut. In her mission statement, Lee (2017) explains that she started *The Melanin Diary* "for innovative and intellectual Black Teens as a place to come to for all things social justice, history, politics, current events, and an occasional glimpse into my daily life." One of Lee's main objectives is to change narratives about the perception of Black teenagers. She argues "Black Teens are seen as 'criminals,' 'threats,' or just another statistic, and I've decided

that I'm going to make it my business to end this false narrative." In contrast to these shallow conceptualizations of Black youth, Lee presents Black children as "intelligent, creative, powerful, and capable of doing *amazing* things; the exact opposite of what society says we are supposed to be."

Through *The Melanin Diary*, Lee uses social commentary and critique to galvanize youth activists. In the first blog post entitled "Why It's Necessary For Black Teens to Be Socially Aware," Lee shares her path to being "woke" and argues that teens are not too young to engage social issues. Using this digital platform, Lee combines personal experiences, historical context, and solution-oriented arguments to shed light on issues affecting Black people. For example, in "Colorism in the Black Community," Lee (2017) contextualizes colorism within slavery and more specifically the Willie Lynch letter, offering both historical and contemporary examples of colorism.[17] She discusses the impact of colorism on Black beauty standards and calls on Black people to embrace blackness, thwart negative stereotypes about complexion, and stop making make darker skinned people the butt of jokes. In another post about Sarah Baartman, Lee writes:

> Sarah Baartman: Remember her name. Remember her struggle. Know that she is not the only Black woman who experienced such horror within her lifetime. Today in 2017, the bodies of naturally curvy Black Women continue to be sexualized and seen as objects. Throughout all of the hardships Black women all over the world face, our bodies should never be something to be ashamed of…It seems as if it's a never ending cycle of Black features being called "ugly", but the moment a non-Black person is seen appropriating Black features, it's all of a sudden "trendy"? What would America be like if Black people were loved the same way appropriating Black features and Black culture is?"

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[17] The Willie Lynch letter has been proven false; see Jelani Cobb, "Willie Lynch is Dead (1712? – 2003)" in The Devil and Dave Chappelle and Other Essays (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007); Robert L. Hawkins, "Outsider in: Race, Attraction, and Research in New Orleans," *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (2010): 249 – 261; and L. Alan Eyre, review of *Healing in the Homeland: Haitian Voduo Tradition* by Margaret Mitchell Armand, *Caribbean Quarterly*, Volume 62, no. 1 (January 2016): 133-138. Despite Lee's reference to this false document, her analysis of the impact of colorism on beauty standards has some validity.

First, Lee relates the spectacle of Baartman's body to the ongoing oversexualization of Black women. Then she argues that regardless of what our bodies look like, we should be proud of them. Lee does not condemn Baartman's body, but instead discusses the maltreatment of Baartman's body based on racist exoticism.[18] Finally, she calls out white women for making Black women feel like our bodies are obscene while spending all kinds of money to get "Black features." While Lee does not explicitly allude to Black feminism in this blog post, it is clear–from the analyses she puts forth and the critiques that she launches–that her perceptions are informed by Black feminist discourses of race, beauty, and embodiment. In this way, Black feminism has a clear place in conceptualizations of Black girlhood, and Lee's blog offers one example of how Black feminism helps Black girls make sense of their lives within the contexts of systemic forces. Lee's analyses of colorism and cultural appropriation reflect upon these concepts in a broad sense, but they also provide a lens into her experiences as a Black girl and the struggles that she faces as a dark-skinned Black girl. By breaking down the structural origins of societal norms, the Black feminist discourses that Lee invokes, however implicitly, offer Lee (and Black girls in general) the ability to find self-acceptance.

Lee uses consciousness raising as a foray into activism, but she also describes concrete ways for Black youth to become involved in activist efforts once they confront newfound knowledge of social injustice. In a later post, "The ULTIMATE Guide to Being a Successful Youth Activist" Lee (2017) identifies four key components of youth

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[18] For more historical context regarding the exploitation of Sara Baartman, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe 1815-1817" in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 66 – 98 and Janell Hobson, "Venus and the Hottentot: The Emergence of an Icon" in *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005): 19-54.

activism that have been cornerstones of her own work: passion, education, joining organizations, and utilizing social media. Lee does not limit her definition of education to formal and/or classroom education. In fact, throughout *The Melanin Diary*, Lee and her guest bloggers often criticize education systems for deliberately withholding information that would equip Black youth with adequate tools to understand and assess the world around them. Lee emphasizes the importance of engaging in both locally based organizations and digital activism. While joining local organizations and attending local events can lead to the "[establishment of] of a support system of people who have the same goals" (Lee 2017), Black youth can use social media "to create a space for [themselves]." This logic of space-making through social media is crucial to understanding *The Melanin Diary* as an alternative media platform, and it acknowledges that youth media organizations cannot do all of the work of space-making for teens. Some of that work has to be done autonomously in order for teens to feel validated. Lee recognizes that not all activism has to look the same, but she uses her own experiences as a way to encourage other Black youth to work toward social change.

Another key feature of *The Melanin Diary*, as suggested in the blog's tagline, is that Lee recognizes the significance of Black history to Black liberation. Returning to the first post, which explains why teens need to be socially aware, Lee demonstrates the inextricable link between Black youth learning Black history and Black youth pioneering social change. Lee attributes what she basically describes as a form of mental slavery to inadequate instruction (whether through formal or informal education) of Black history. She states: "Our ancestors did not have all of their cultures, customs, and traditions completely taken [away] from them while getting treated like dirt for us to prioritize

Jordans or the newest clothes over educating ourselves on Black History." The tone of

Lee's argument could certainly be characterized as judgmental and binary (either/or).

However, Lee's juxtaposition of Jordans and new clothes (which stand in for material

wealth) with history does highlight her interpretation of the inadequacies of Black

Americans have "gained" in the post-Civil Rights era in relation to what we lost as

African diasporic people during slavery. [19]

As an intervention into representation of Black youth, *The Melanin Diary* calls

out mainstream media and encourages Black youth to make their own narratives. In a

post called "White Privilege in Today's Media," fourteen-year-old guest blogger, Stacey

Bernardo, discusses the relationship between media spin and racial bias using headlines

about Brock Turner and Trayvon Martin. Bernardo argues "the headlines that they

[mainstream media outlets] use are contrary to what is actually happening." Her analysis

is worth quoting at length:

> Headlines such as "Stanford Swimmer Gets Put in Jail" makes it seem as if the
> person who committed the crime was educated and was genuinely a good man
> while he was actually a rapist. The headline "Trayvon Martin Was Suspended
> Three Times From School" makes it seem like the victim is guilty even though he
> was murdered. Can you guess which headline was for the Black person and
> which one was for the White person? In the first headline, they're making a
> Caucasian *rapist* seem like such a reasonable man by telling all of his
> achievements and accomplishments. When they speak of a teenage African
> American boy that was *murdered* they decide to bring up the negative things he
> has done.

Bernardo demonstrates how both words and imagery can be used to instill racial bias.

Lee's inclusion of Bernardo's blog in *The Melanin Diary* aligns with her belief that "It's

up to us [Black youth/Black people] to represent ourselves in a positive light." Like the

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[19] In my original reading of Lee's statement, I said that it contains underlying critique of capitalism. While
this reading would fit more neatly with the Black feminist analyses I have grown accustomed to as an
academic, I think it is important to present the most honest reflection of Lee's intellectual journey as it is
right now.

founders of the Art Hoe Collective, Lee uses the Internet to create counterdiscourses, and she encourages other Black youth to do the same.

Ultimately, *The Melanin Diary* fosters community. In addition to the educational/consciousness-raising functions of the blog, Lee invites guest bloggers to participate in the production of *The Melanin Diary*. Another way that Lee fosters community is through highlighting the work of other Black (teen) activists and entrepreneurs. Even though Lee is the founder and primary contributor to the blog, she presents it as a communal space for Black youth to get free. On the one hand the *Melanin Diary* pushes back against distorted representations of Black youth. At the same time, the blog offers insight into Black girls' subjective formation. For Chanice Lee, part of her conviction to combat the limited representations of Black youth stem from her subjective understandings of what it means to be Black.

<div align="center">1,000 Black Girl Books[20]</div>

The story of Marely Dias' #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign reflects the ways in which Internet technologies destabilize binaries (Atton 2004). Dias' impetus to start the campaign came from "old" media: the book, but she used (primarily) the power of new media technologies like Twitter to promote her campaign and collect 9,000 plus books (McGrath 2017) for schools and libraries. In founding the #1000BlackGirlBooks Campaign, Dias has probably told its origin story 1,000 times. In one interview for NPR's Morning Edition, Dias stated "I was frustrated because I was never reading books about Black girls or any other type of character...so I decided to start a campaign in

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[20] For a discussion of Marley Dias' contributions to the field of children's literature, see Andrea Adomako, "Reimagining Black Girlhood: Literary and Digital Self-Representation" *National Political Science Review* (forthcoming 2018).

which Black girls are the main character and then give those books to various schools"
(Anderson 2016). While Dias' conclusions about the books she read in school came from
a place of personal experience, her instincts about the lack of Black girls in her assigned
reading align with the data from the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the
University of Wisconsin-Madison that found "just 8.4% of 3,400 trade books published
in the U.S. in 2016 had an African American main character" (McGrath 2017). And even
though Dias comes from a family who can afford to provide her with any types of books
she wants, at 11 years old, she was already perceptive enough to realize that her
frustration resulted from a larger, systemic problem. Therefore, Dias chose to start
#1000BlackGirlBooks with the goal of influencing curriculum. In explaining her big
picture approach, Dias (2017a) notes: "Teachers assign books that you must read. If those
books are not diverse and do not show different people's experiences then kids are going
to believe that there is only one type of experience that matters." For Dias, "Black girl
books are not just for black girls; they are for all children because not all black girl stories
are the same."

When Dias first launched the campaign in November 2015, she did not see
immediate results. In one presentation for the International Society for Technology in
Education's Annual Conference, Dias talks about how she thought she was not going to
reach her goal. What sparked more interest in Dias' project was her appearance on the
"Ellen Show." Unfortunately, not all of the feedback was supportive. According to Dias'
mother Janice Dias (2017), after the appearance on Ellen, someone posted a status on
Facebook saying if Dias "wanted to see more Black people, she needed to look in
prisons, or look in the pages where people die." Black Twitter, in its famously wig-

snatching fashion responded by helping to make Dias' campaign go viral. When reflecting on how she finally reached (and exceeded) her goal, Dias (2016a) said, "Thank goodness for Black Twitter, social media, and the Ellen Show."

In addition to exceeding the goals of the 1,000 Black Girl Books Campaign, Marley Dias has catapulted her activism into a guest editorship with *Elle* magazine and a book deal with Scholastic. During her guest editorship with *Elle*, which was the first of its kind, Dias put together an online zine for *Elle's* website called *Marley Mag*. The zine features a range of content including interviews with Misty Copeland, Hillary Clinton, Ava DuVernay, and Larry Willmore. In the opening letter of the zine, Dias (2016b) notes, "My passion for books has changed my life. Between school, homework, tests, and play time with my friends, I have worked my butt off to create this space where black girls' stories are read and celebrated in schools and libraries." She goes on to say, "I have one goal: I want to change the way we imagine black girls in books and in culture and I want to create new spaces for black girls to be represented." Marley Dias' case exemplifies how the Internet facilitates a deconstruction of boundaries–both conceptual and institutional–that typically serve as a hindrance to Black girls. Both the #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign and *Marley Mag* show how online platforms open up opportunities and possibilities for Black girls to be included in both traditional and new media spaces. While part of Marley Dias' campaign stems from her understanding that Black girls should be represented in children's literature, this emphasis on representation is also tied to her understanding that of the link between representation and Black girls' subjective formation, particularly in the early stages of child development. For younger Black girls (infant through elementary school age), seeing representations of Black girls

in children's literature can have a profound impact on how they develop their own sense of self and how they place themselves in their various environments.

What Alternative Media Looks Like in Digital Spaces

The work of the Art Hoe Collective, Chanice Lee, and Marley Dias illustrates how Internet technologies disrupt rigid distinctions between roles within the communication process. In addition to its democratic potential, the Internet encompasses another characteristic of alternative media: the dissolution of binaries. Not only does the Internet disrupt the producer-consumer binary, it also troubles the alternative-mainstream binary. As Chris Atton points (2004) out in *Alternative Internet*, the "complexity of relations between radical and mainstream" cannot be captured by a simplistic alternative-mainstream binary. Atton's description of alternative Internet allows for an ambivalence and fluidity between mainstream and alternative media. Internet technologies displace rigid distinctions in the verticality of communications flow from producer to consumer (Downing 1995) and also complicate the notion that "issues that concern ordinary people" (Downing 1995, 241) cannot be recognized in the mainstream. There is still some verticality in social media spaces because these spaces are owned by corporate entities, but these sites' dependence upon user-generated content means that consumers of these sites are also producers, which means they have some power at their disposal since these sites could no longer exist if users decided to stop generating content. This power, though still imbalanced, gives social justice minded users some room to be progressive in these spaces.

This ambivalence is important to understanding the irony of how capitalist platforms like Instagram and YouTube have given Black girls a kind of access to produce

alternative media that was not necessarily provided at the same level by community/youth media organizations. While successful youth media organizations have provided invaluable training and development for young people who have been able to utilize these services, corporate-driven social media platforms offer a relatively easy solution to some of the limitations of youth media organizations. One of the main issues with youth media organizations is access. In 2009, Ingrid Dahl observed that "youth media is most visible on the coasts – New York City and San Francisco's Bay Area" (5) and that "many organizations are also located in" 16 other (mostly) urban cities. Even with the hundreds of youth media organizations that existed at that time (even fewer are operational today), these less than 20 locales illustrate the limited access to formal youth media institutions. By contrast, anyone with a smartphone can access the Internet, and the prices of smartphones have dropped significantly (at least in the United States) in recent years. As far as getting on the web, one only needs to find free wi-fi (which can be accessed at public libraries and even McDonald's), and from there, the web is at one's fingertips. Even though a large number of youth media organizations serve low-income communities, there are many factors involved in getting children who may not have resources to and from a media organization. Also, if the organization meets during times when youth have other obligations (school, sports, work, etc.), then that also compromises access. While the Internet is by no means a utopia or even necessarily the best means of social organizing, it does provide one of the easiest access points for teens with phones and wi-fi.

Another significant limitation of youth media organizations occurs when the power relations between the adults running the programs and the youth participants are

severely imbalanced. As Renee Hobbs and Jiwon Yoon (2008) point out in their case study of an urban youth media organization, "young people identified issues that mostly centered on the power relations between adults and youth" (151). Some of the manifestations of these imbalanced power relations included: "perceptions that youth are mind-numbed media consumers," pressure to used "pre-ordained themes" from "funders who assume that certain social issues are important to youth media makers," and the imposition of adults' belief that "young people need to be politically active and engaged rather than simply celebrate or play with media and technology" (151). Funding, which is tied to both access and structural dynamics of youth media organizations, also presents one of the biggest challenges to youth media organizations' ability to have widespread impact. According to the *Media in Action* report, "by the mid 2000s, much of this funding dried up" (McDermott et al 2015, 8). These changes in financial support mean that even for children who once benefitted from youth media organizations, their ability to keep producing and distributing media would depend on finding alternatives on their own.

For Black girls, engagement in alternative media is necessarily an endeavor of space-making. After being excluded from mainstream media sources for so long (especially magazines, which have functioned as one of the primary girl-targeted media outlets for some time), web technologies offer opportunities for Black girls not only to be represented in media but to make their own media and represent themselves. In this way our "media saturated culture" (Pipher 1994), specifically Internet culture, has been a tool rather than a detriment for Black girls.

Conclusion

A close look at the histories of Black girls' media engagement challenges determinist perspectives that use the potential dangers of media influence as a point of departure for understanding what it means to be a girl in the United States. Within spaces like *The Brownies' Book*–which pre-dated the market-driven conceptualizations of girlhood that characterized teen magazines after World War II–Black girls not only saw their history and lives reflected, they also had opportunities to share *their own* experiences and perspectives.

The teen magazines that emerged and rose to popularity during the Post-War era came about during a time when magazine production had become more reliant on advertising and niche marketing, and the very ways in which girlhood has been constructed as a concept in these capitalist contexts universalizes white, middle-to-upper class girlhood. This universal figure obscures and/or erases Black experiences. Even though the teen magazines that emerged during the Post-war period may have given some girls a sense of autonomy in terms of how they spent their money, these magazines served to normalize white girlhood and mark other girls as deviant based on their places outside of the norm. Moral panics that ensued surrounding girls' media engagement came directly from white girls' perceived proximity to "other" girlhoods. Therefore, the middle-to-upper class white girl became the center of media-based moral panics at the expense of Black girls.

Of course, Black-owned media did not completely disappear as mainstream teen magazines (and teen-targeted media in general) increasingly centered white girlhood. But even with the success of Black youth-oriented magazines like *YSB* and *Word Up!*, Black girls did not have a media space to call their own. While community/youth media

organizations addressed the exclusion of Black girls from mainstream media to some degree, digital platforms have been essential to Black girls' participation in media production and distribution. Digital media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have allowed Black girls the ability to share their own media productions without depending on middle-people or "gatekeepers" to relay their messages, and the work of the Art Hoe Collective, Chanice Lee, and Marley Dias illustrate what might be possible when Black girls' voices are amplified through digital media.

It is clear that the historical construction of American girlhood and its resulting moral panic discourses continue to shape contemporary attitudes about girls' media engagements. However, before we can draw any conclusions about how social media impacts girls–and whether or not we should be fearful of these impacts–we have to destabilize the genericity of white girlhood. Contextualizing techno-phobia within a history of moral panics surrounding girls' mediated behaviors allows for a more nuanced discussion of girls engagement with media. While the digital media-scape certainly poses limitations and risk of co-optation by capitalism, the ways in which digital spaces have allowed Black girls to insert themselves in the archives of girls and media cannot be ignored. Looking specifically at how Black girls have been able to appropriate digital media technologies creates a (potentially generative) tension between anti-capitalist community media frameworks and corporate digital entities, thereby expanding the definitions and functions of alternative media.

CHAPTER 2 – "A SECRET LANGUAGE BETWEEN BLACK GIRLS": A THEORY
OF BLACK GIRL SEMIOTICS

In February 2016, *Teen Vogue*[21] released the "Power Girls: The New Faces of

Feminism" issue, which featured Amandla Stenberg on the cover. Stenberg's cover photo

served in part to promote one of the feature pieces – R&B artist Solange Knowles[22]

interviewing Stenberg. In the preface to the interview, Knowles explains that she already

felt connected to Stenberg before their meeting because:

> There's a secret language between Black girls destined to move mountains and
> cross rivers when the world sometimes tells you to belong to the valleys that
> surround you. You feel it like a rhythm you can't shake if you even dared to quiet
> the sounds around you…So here we are, connecting as non conforming black
> gals. Connecting as girls who recognize the borders that have been built around
> us, but tearing them down while coloring outside every line.

In this chapter, I am naming *Black girl semiotics* as part of the "secret language" that

Knowles describes. Semiotics, as I use it in this sense, is "the theoretical accounting for

signs and what they do" (Deely 1990, 105). Black girl semiotics describes a method of

communication that invokes and generates affective material through visual cues. Black

girl semiotics encompasses the kinds of "I know it when I see it" visual rhetoric that

appeals to Black girls' ways of knowing the world and sends messages created by and

specifically for Black girl/femme subjectivities.

To carve out a theory of Black girl semiotics, I explore the Instagram content of

three celebrity girls–Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg.[23] As Hortense

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[21] Under the editorial leadership of Elaine Welteroth, *Teen Vogue* distinguished itself as a politically
engaged mainstream magazine for teens (and adults).

[22] Solange Knowles' album *A Seat at the Table* has been celebrated as a Black feminist work.

[23] Amandla Stenberg identifies as non-binary, but they acknowledge that their characters in movies are
Black girls, and they have openly expressed the need to continue identifying as a Black girl within the
contexts of acting. By including Stenberg in this discussion, my aim is not to misgender them but instead to
acknowledge the Black girl persona that remains a part of their subjectivity through acting.

Spillers (2003) argues in her thoughts on psychoanalysis and race, cultural analysis needs to grapple more with "the dimension of the contemplative" (401) in order to enable more adequate self-reflection and that "sign reading, or the field of the semiotic, is…a strategy for opening the way to[this] dimension of social engagement" (402). As an affective system, Black girl semiotics opens possibilities for both *self*-reflection and for evaluating social structures more broadly. In the case of Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg, Black girl semiotics not only provides an avenue for subjective expression but also a method to construct and critique discourses around race, gender, and sexuality. I argue that using Black girl semiotics, Jackson, Shahidi, and Stenberg leverage social media to control/produce narratives in ways that would not be possible through other mainstream platforms. Jackson, Shahidi, and Stenberg have all become famous through their roles on television shows (Jackson and Shahidi) and in film (Stenberg). However, while television and movie screens have been their avenue to fame, they also use cell phone screens to send their *own* messages beyond the visions/intentions of their script writers. To this end, these girls engage in Black feminist politics which undermine the processes of unmirroring (O'Grady 1992) that have occurred as a result of distorted representations of Black girls in mainstream media.

Frameworks for Black Girl Semiotics

I developed the phrase *Black girl semiotics* to account for a range of affective impulses I experienced while going through the Instagram content of Skai Jackson, Amandla Stenberg, and Yara Shahidi. While affect is sometimes hard to name since it can often be pre-linguistic (Seigworth and Gregg 2010) and/or falls outside the purview of traditional academic languages (Christian 1988; Garcia-Rojas 2017), I kept coming

across certain images that made me feel something that I could not quite articulate. The more I analyzed the images that inspired these feelings, I realized that I was experiencing a sense of connection brought about by a certain familiarity. It was a moment of "I see you/I feel you" where seeing and feeling are inextricable. As anthropologist John L. Jackson (2008) notes about the question "You feel me?" often asked by hip-hop artists, "to 'feel' someone is to connect to them beyond words or otherwise superficial similarities" (149), and this process of feeling "constitutes its own epistemology, its way of knowing the world" (149). Similarly, Black girl semiotics not only operates as a communication system but also as an affective epistemology of Black girlhood.

Many popular theories of affect use Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies to some extent. In this formulation, Ahmed uses an analogy of Marx's equation of capital to describe how affect accumulates. According to Ahmed's (2004) formula, "Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs…Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become" (45). In the continued circulation of these signs, some associations become "sticky" (45); that is, certain signs become attached to certain bodies/ideas. With blackness, for example, the recognition, claiming, representation, and performance of blackness depends upon these "sticky" associations. Affective blackness, or Black affectivity, is not a claim to or measure of authenticity. Instead, it is an accumulation of signs, ideas, and concepts that have become "stuck" to blackness. Black affectivity, like affect in general, is not fixed or immutable. Rather it registers at differing levels of intensity that depend upon a range of encounters.

While Ahmed's somewhat recent theory of affective economies is useful for understanding the affective valences of blackness, Black people have theorized and deployed Black affectivity long before the "affective turn" in the academy. As Brittney Cooper (2017) points out in her discussion of race women, Black women's knowledge production and activism comprise "a kind of affective archive that emerges in public Black women's works" (69) that should "inform the contemporary 'turn to affect'" (53). Cooper's analysis of the lives and works of women such as Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Mary Church Terrell, and Pauli Murray demonstrates that affective relations have a long been a presence in Black intellectual history. Black feminist scholarship demonstrates the significance of affectivity in Black people's interactions with each other and the world more broadly, and these engagements with affective blackness provide a critical backdrop for contextualizing how Black girl semiotics works.

Following in the tradition of Black women scholars and activists seeking to understand the impact of race on the Black subject, Hortense Spillers uses psychoanalysis to articulate Black affectivity in her essay "All the Things You Could Be by Now." Thinking with W. E. B. DuBois' double-consciousness, Spillers (2003) grapples with the question of whether "we look with the eyes, or with the psyche" (379). Spillers' use of DuBois' oft-cited double-consciousness as a framework for discussion has significance because double-consciousness is necessarily an attempt to account for an affective experience of blackness. On the very first page of *Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois poses the question: "How does it *feel* to be a problem?" ([1903]/1909; emphasis mine). Answering his own question, DuBois (1909) writes, "being a problem is a strange experience, - peculiar even for one who has never been anything else" (2). Throughout his discussion

of double consciousness, DuBois continues to describe it as a "peculiar sensation" (3),

ultimately noting its role in creating a "painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid

sense of personality" and a "peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and

bewilderment" (202). DuBois repetition of "peculiar" signals to the difficulty of

expressing affective knowledge because the available linguistic tools do not necessarily

capture our affective encounters/experiences.

      Referring back to DuBois throughout her essay, Hortense Spillers (2003) argues

that DuBois makes "provocative claims" which:

> cross their wires with the *specular* and the *spectacular* – the sensation of looking
> at oneself and of imagining oneself being looked at through the eyes of the
> other/another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the
> other end of the gaze…It was not enough to be seen; one was called upon to
> decide what it meant. To that degree, DuBois's idea posed a route to self-
> reflexivity. (397)

Spillers' emphasis on performativity stimulated by the "sensation" of the gaze

encapsulates affect driven by encounters with blackness. The repetition of these types of

encounters over time help to define "how communities are apprenticed and interpellated

in culture and the ways in which such lessons are transmitted" (402). This internalization

process that Spillers describes is an affective response to a range of social encounters,

therefore Spillers' interior intersubjectivity, which she defines as "the discipline of a self-

critical inquiry" (385), is a mechanism for analyzing/interpreting affective experiences.

While this essay is mostly a contemplation on how psychoanalytic practice can be used to

understand race–as both a social construct and a marker of difference with material

consequences–Spillers' theory of interior intersubjectivity and her analysis of DuBois'

double-consciousness engage Black affectivity. Black girl semiotics represents one

example of the self-inquiry that Spillers proposes because rather than facilitating the

internalization of race and racism as a source of shame, Black girl semiotics creates possibilities for critiquing racism and bonding around common experiences of racialization.

　　While Hortense Spillers uses psychoanalysis to elucidate ways that blackness registers affectively, Sylvia Wynter approaches affective blackness from a phenomenological perspective in her essay "Towards the Sociogenic Principle." Wynter (2001)[24] opens her discussion with three quotations: one from Frantz Fanon that introduces the concept of sociogeny,[25]one from Thomas Nagel that explains the relationship between consciousness and being, and one from David Chalmers that highlights what he presents as "the puzzle of conscious experience" (30). Wynter puts these thinkers together in order to challenge the idea of the purely biological definition of the human (an argument that she takes up throughout the essay). Wynter argues that Fanon's concept of sociogeny aligns with Chalmers' claims that psychophysical laws govern the human experience. However, redefining these psychophysical laws as sociogenic challenges the idea that what it is like to be human can be reduced to neurobiological or "natural" processes. Therefore, the sociogenic principle provides insight into the connection between nature/culture laws and "lived subjective experience" (32), which complicates the nature/culture binary and creates a point of departure for considering affectivity as an integral feature of what it means to be Black. According to

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[24] Wynter notes that she originally wrote this essay in 1995.
[25] In the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon points out the inadequacies of Freudian psychology to account for Black people's psychic composition. Fanon writes: "[Freud] substituted a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontology stands sociogeny" (4). In Fanon's articulation of sociogeny, the sociogenic mediates between the collective and the individual, the biological and the ontological. In other words, sociogeny accounts for race as a feature that is neither purely biological nor purely social construction. Sylvia Wynter deploys this theory as a way to theorize what it is like to be Black.

Wynter, how marginalized others experience their bodies in space and time is not based solely on physical schema (40-41). Instead, "historico-racial schema" inform their physical presence, movements, and physical sense of self. These historico-racial schema are a part of a "dialectical mediation" (42) in which the anecdotes and stories that render white people as normal render Black people as Other. In this formation, white Man[26] takes on a generic status and defines all "others" by their perceived deficiencies. This dialectic causes Black people to understand their embodied experiences as more than physical. Wynter's arguments regarding the historico-racial schema help to explain the processes by which blackness acquires its sticky associations, and Black girl semiotics operates within these historico-racial schema, relying on stories and anecdotes to project blackness in visual forms.

Equally important to the impact of affective encounters, the circulation and transmission of affect happen through relational interactions; signifying and semiotics function as key conduits of Black affectivity. Generally, signifying tends to refer to verbal language while semiotics refers to a system of signs and symbols.[27] In *The Signifying Monkey*, one of the most popular texts about signifying, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) describes it as a uniquely Black rhetorical practice that is just one of many ways in which "Black people created their own vernacular structures" (19). Relying on double-meanings and intentions, "Signifyin(g), would include marking, loud-talking, testifying,

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[26] Wynter uses Man as a proper noun to illustrate what she describes as "the overrepresentation of Man (European, middle class, Judeo-Christian, male)" as the generic form of the human. See Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being."
[27] Charles S. Peirce coined the term semiosis in 1906. For more on the origins of semiotic theory, see Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds., *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce Volumes I and II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931); John Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Robert E. Innis, *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on" (Gates 1988, 72). However, as communications scholar Andre' Brock (2009) writes, while "signifying is usually publicly understood as a game of insults (the 'dozens'), it is better understood as a celebration of invention, timeliness, and delivery in a discourse style intended to speak truth to power" (17). Therefore, even though signifying typically describes a set of verbal "rhetorical tropes" (Gates 1988), it can also be conceived more broadly as an "interactional framework" that allows its practitioners "to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experiences" (Florini 2014, 224). Black girl semiotics enables all of these actions.

Gates' theory of signifying has since been taken up by scholars of digital studies, particularly in relation to theorizing Black Twitter. Understanding the significance of Black Twitter necessitates a discussion of what makes Black Twitter Black. In her foundational study, Meredith Clark (2014) puts forth both a methodological framework for researching Black Twitter and a series of characteristics that define this group. During an interview with Donovan Ramsey of the *Atlantic*, Clark (2015) describes Black Twitter as "a temporally linked group of connectors that share culture, language and interest in specific issues and talking about specific topics with a black frame of reference." Throughout the interview, Clark explains key aspects of Black Twitter, noting that interactions on Black Twitter, especially when it comes to hashtags, require a level of "black cultural competency" (Ramsey 2015). Further elaborating on Black Twitter hashtags, Clark explains "to understand some of them…you have to understand African-American vernacular English. To understand others, you need to have historical perspective on the issue." Ultimately, the languages of Black Twitter "[rise] out of a

common experience of living as a black person, and specifically to living as a black person in the United States" (Ramsey 2015).[28] These concepts of shared culture and Black frames of reference form, in part, through affective circulations.

As a field concerned with what signs do or "the action of signs," semiotics "extends well beyond what we call 'language'" (Deely 1990, 22). One reason why I discuss semiotics and signifying together is because they are both relational. The other reason why I discuss them together is because Black girl semiotics and signifying traffic in the same economies (Ahmed 2004) of Black affectivity. While scholars like Meredith Clark and Andre Brock offer useful frameworks for thinking about Black Twitter specifically, other types of social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube require attention to how affective blackness operates in the visual field. Within visual studies, affect has provided ways to think about the work of imagery both within and beyond representational politics. For instance, Kara Keeling's (2007) theories of the cinematic expound upon visual affectivity. Even though Keeling's analyses of the cinematic focus mostly on film, "cinematic production is not confined to interactions with moving-image media such as film and television" (11). Instead, "involved in the production and reproduction of social reality itself, these perceptual and cognitive processes work to order, orchestrate, produce, and reproduce social reality and sociality" (11-12). In other words, all imagery has the potential to contribute to what Keeling describes as common sense. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci, Keeling's definition of common sense "refers simultaneously to a shared set of motor contrivances that affect subjective perception and to a collective set of memory-images that includes experiences,

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[28] Some scholars, such as Krystal Strong, Reginold Royston, and Kui Kihoro Mackay, have called for a more transnational approach to Black Twitter.

knowledges, traditions, and so on and that are available to memory during perception"

(14). Using the relationship between common sense and affect, Keeling tackles processes

of recognition and problems of representation, paying particular attention to how Gayatri

Spivak (via Karl Marx)[29] distinguishes the difference between representation (proxy) and

re-presentation (portrait). Like Spivak, Keeling points out how these two versions of

representation become collapsed, noting television and film as complicit in this

conflation. Keeling cites this inability to distinguish between representation and re-

presentation as a driving factor behind minority groups' "seeking enregistration into the

machine/mechanisms of representation" (44), which have limited emancipatory potential.

While the conflation of the two forms of representation forecloses transformation,

Keeling argues that attending to this distinction can open up possibilities for exposing

what is hidden in the image, thus unlocking its "productive potentiality" (44). Relying on

Black girls' re-presentations of themselves, Black girl semiotics is one manifestation of

this unlocked potentiality.

While no visual project is completely outside of representational politics, the

work of visuality can and oftentimes does extend beyond representation (or re-

presentation). As Evelynn Hammonds (1994) notes, "visibility in and of itself does not

erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination,

symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen." Thinking about

extra-representational possibilities in the context of Black girl semiotics, Black girls'

using visuality as a way to communicate with each other goes beyond "merely being

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[29] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, eds. Patrick Williams and Lauran Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press). Spivak uses Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte to explain this difference between representation and re-presentation.

seen" to also being heard and felt. Engaging Black girl semiotics gives these girls a chance to influence "how vision is structured, how it operates, [and] how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and speak in the world" (Hammonds 1994), thereby encapsulating the "affective power" of imagery (Fleetwood 2011, 10).

Overall, the affectivity of Black girl semiotics is deeply connected to the public nature of digital/Internet technologies. As Andre Brock (2009) states, "The Internet, as an avatar of public culture, has changed discourses on Black identity on Black-oriented websites in part because of the writers' awareness of the Web as a public space open to all" (32). Therefore, "the net affect of these discursive choices…works to increase understandings of racial identity as a constellation of knowledge, behavior, and beliefs" (32). The languages of Black girl semiotics (in the contexts of the girls discussed here) operate as an open secret in the sense that both the Internet and the images that these girls share on social media are public, but understanding and interpreting many of these images depends on being versed in these languages. In this way, Black girl semiotics as a public-private (Clark 2014) exchange illustrates the ways in which blackness has historically exposed the fallacies of privacy and how Black people have still managed to maintain coded communication even in the face of compromised privacy.

"On Instagram Straight Flexin'"[30]: Style, Posture, and Unapologetic Belonging

Style plays a critical role in both establishing and circulating symbols of Black affectivity. One critical component of Black girls' style comes in the form of hairstyles, which have become inextricably linked to Black girls' (and women's) subjectivities

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[30] A line from "All Gold Everything" by Trinidad James.

(Rooks 1996; Banks 2000; Leeds-Craig 2002). Black hair has both aesthetic and political value:

> As part of our modes of appearance in the everyday world, the ways we shape and style hair may be seen as both individual expressions of the self and as embodiments of society's norms, conventions and expectations…black peoples of the African diaspora have developed distinct, if not unique, patterns of style across a range of practices…which are politically intelligible as creative responses to the experience of oppression and dispossession. Black hair-styling may thus be evaluated as a popular art form articulating a variety of aesthetic 'solutions' to a range of 'problems' created by ideologies of race and racism. (Mercer 1987, 34)

Kobena Mercer's commentary on Black hair in the above quotation, in its focus on hairstyling as a response to societal forces, speaks to what hairstyles *do,* which points to the affective functions of Black hair. While the messages and meanings that have been assigned to Black girls' and women's hair have changed and continue to change over time, Black hair and hair care practices do have sticky associations that contribute to their affective power, making hair part of the "lexicon" (Ford 2015) of Black girls' epistemologies.

For instance, Skai Jackson's hair photos appeal to a sense of familiarity as she often posts pictures of herself in the salon getting her hair styled or immediately following a hair appointment. In these cases, both the process of getting one's hair styled and the actual location of the salon are elements of blackness that many Black girls/women/femmes find relatable.

Figure 6. Skai Jackson with flexi-rods

In this image, Jackson posts a "behind the scenes" Black hair maintenance photo, showing her hairstyle in its unfinished state. This picture relies on a familiar experience that acknowledges and empathizes with the complexities of Black hair care. Additionally, the picture looks as if it has been captured in someone's home instead of a salon. While salons play a key role in the lives of Black women and girls (Rooks 1996), at-home beauticians are also a common part of Black girls' hair care and maintenance. In her essay "Straightening Our Hair," bell hooks (1989) reminisces upon days in her childhood when she used to get her hair styled at home: "On Saturday mornings we would gather in the kitchen to get our hair fixed, that is straightened…It was connected solely with rites of initiation…Hair pressing was a ritual of black women's culture of intimacy" (1). hooks' reflection illustrates the significance of getting one's hair done (whether at home or in a salon) for Black girls, and Jackson's picture represents an experience that would be familiar to many Black girls.

In another picture that depicts Black hair care familiarity, Jackson and her mother pose wearing bonnets. Bonnets are a staple of Black hair care maintenance used to protect specific hairstyles and the overall condition of the hair. While mainstream media tend to apply problematic class implications to the bonnet (i.e. the suggestion that wearing bonnets in public or displaying one's bonnet in photos is "ghetto"), Jackson's picture works to normalize (or at least destigmatize) wearing bonnets and demonstrates the mundane nature of this accessory for Black girls.

Figure 7. Skai Jackson and her mother in bonnets.

The idea of hair as a bonding tool relates to Skai Jackson's salon and bonnet pictures because she shares these experiences with her followers in the same way that bell hooks shared the experiences of hair straightening with her sisters. While of course all of Jackson's followers are not Black, her use of these hair styling/hair salon moments–imagery recognizable to many of her Black girl followers–makes this a specifically Black gesture and therefore an example of Black girl semiotics.

In addition to posting pictures of Black hair maintenance routines, Skai Jackson often uses #lovemynaturalhair (love my natural hair).[31] In fact, most of Jackson's references to blackness come through discussions of hair. Jackson's continuous repetition of #lovemynaturalhair opposes racist/colorist perspectives that position Black girls' unstraightened hair outside of mainstream beauty standards. Jackson's act of shouting out her natural hair speaks to a uniquely Black and female/femme sense of pride, making Jackson's love for her natural hair more than a vain statement of self-admiration or self-absorption. Her statement functions to affirm Black girls' beauty in the face of dominant beauty ideals that would make Black girls ashamed of their natural hair. Skai Jackson contributes to race and gender discourse through this affirmation of Black girl beauty.

While Skai Jackson uses salon and bonnet images to connote a sense of Black girl familiarity, Amandla Stenberg uses Black people's historical relationships to particular hairstyles in the viral YouTube video "Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows."[32] In this video, Stenberg (2015) provides a brief history of how hip hop became a mainstream art form and explains how this increased popularity also contributed to white people's increased use of "clothing and accessories associated with hip hop." At the time Stenberg posted the video, they noted how "more and more celebrities could be seen wearing cornrows and braids and even grills." Stenberg describes how the fashion industry eventually appropriated these styles that had long been a part of Black people's everyday lives and claimed them as "high fashion" without giving proper acknowledgement to the origin of cornrows, braids, and locs. Stenberg emphasizes the violent irony of white people

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[31] Throughout the chapter, I leave hashtags in their original form to acknowledge the hashtag as its own linguistic category.

[32] While this chapter focuses primarily on Instagram, Stenberg does allude to this YouTube video on her Instagram account.

"[adopting] Black culture as a way of being edgy and getting attention" and being praised for doing so within the same societies that label Black people as criminals for wearing these hairstyles. Stenberg points specifically to the silence of white celebrities (and cultural appropriators) like Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry regarding Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Stenberg ends the video by posing the question "What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?" Stenberg's sophisticated critique of cultural appropriation, while certainly not new, gives Black girls language to express not only the definition of cultural appropriation but how it affects them personally.

Within Black girl semiotics, hair images also function to demonstrate how hair, and by extension the Black girl bodies attached to the hair, operates spatially. Skai Jackson, Amandla Stenberg, and Yara Shahidi all use their hair to take up space – both within the contexts of photographic frames and in terms of their bodies' positioning in geographically material space. This act of taking up space runs counter to societal expectations that Black girls shrink (or at least make noticeable attempts to shrink) in public spaces.

Figure 8. Skai Jackson takes pride in her "big hair."

In the picture above, Jackson's hair takes up the majority of the frame, and she appears

visibly happy about this fact. Jackson reflects upon the meaning of her hair in the

picture's caption:

> By wearing my hair natural, I'm being true to who I am. Growing up, I wasn't
> really the biggest fan of my hair. I love my curls, but they were so hard for me to
> deal with because I have such thick hair, and it's so big. Now, I'm not trying to be
> something that I am not…the more you practice with your hair and get used to
> doing it, the more you'll start to love it.

Jackson makes specific reference to her hair being "thick" and "big," and how these

qualities used to make her not only dislike her hair but prevented her from embracing her

full self. By coming to terms with the spatial realities of her hair, Jackson also reached a

point of accepting herself and embracing her "big hair" as part of her subjectivity. While

Jackson may be small in stature, her big hair allows her to take up more space, and she

does so unapologetically.

Jackson, Stenberg, and Shahidi use hair to relate to material, geographic space in

addition to taking up photographic space. The evidence of digital and geographic overlap

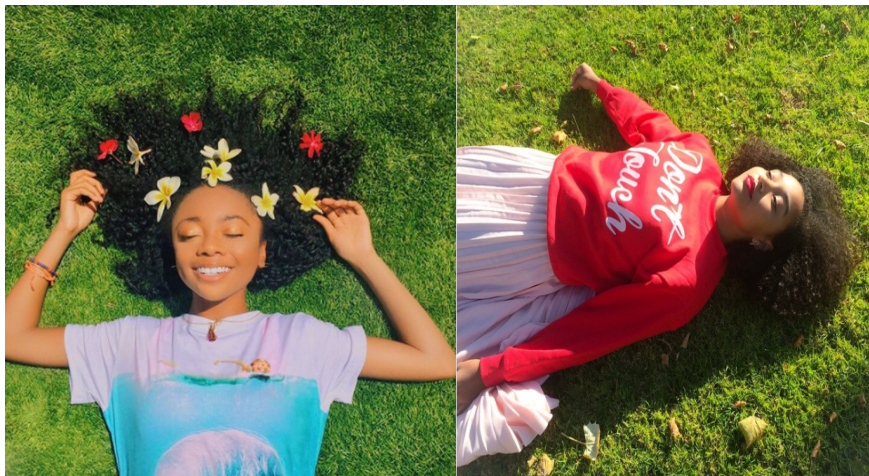often comes through in the ways that photographs are staged.

Figure 9. Skai Jackson and Amandla Stenberg claim space in the grass.

In these similar pictures, both Jackson and Stenberg lie in the grass with their hair and bodies spread in a particular way. In both cases, the hair resembles a crown, and in both cases, Jackson and Stenberg invoke a sense of carefree bliss. Both of these pictures of Jackson and Stenberg sprawled out on grass operate as a visual manifestation of Black girls claiming space. In fact, Amandla Stenberg's caption for this picture notes how a child, who looked about ten years old, came outside yelling at them saying "get off my lawn." The picture and its staging serve as an example of direct opposition to not only the child but the attitudes that undergird the child's audacity and conviction that a Black girl should not be on their lawn.

Jackson, Stenberg, and Shahidi's use of hair as space has a clear physicality but also carries affective value, especially in pictures where the girls wear afros. While "all black hair-styles are political" (Mercer 1987, 37), the afro has become particularly imbued with radical affectivity (Leeds-Craig 2002; Kelley 1997). Directly associated with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements as well as global struggles against colonization, the afro "has clearly been the most powerful symbol of Black Power style politics" (Kelley 339). Both Amandla Stenberg and Yara Shahidi post many pictures rocking afros.
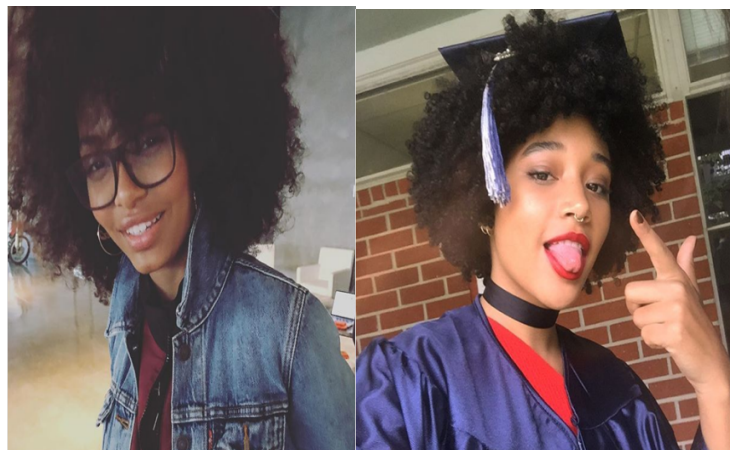
Figure 10. Yara Shahidi and Amandla Stenberg wearing afros.

Much like Skai Jackson's big hair, Shahidi's afro takes up the majority of the photo's

frame. Shahidi often makes references to her big hair, and on more than one occasion has

made the statement "my curls are an outward manifestation of my culture" (Shahidi and

Blanchard 2016). For Shahidi, hair, which is inextricably linked to her Black and Iranian

roots, is a source of pride. In Stenberg's graduation picture, her afro barely fits into her

graduation cap. In this way, the picture is both a literal representation of big, Black hair

and a metaphor for the inability to contain blackness/Black girls. Affectively, both of

these pictures work to destigmatize and celebrate Black hair.

In all of these pictures, the celebration of natural hair harkens back to the "Black

is Beautiful" era of the 1960s and 1970s during which time Black women sported natural

hair as not only an indication of their involvement with activism but also as a way to

establish "a new and more inclusive beauty standard" (Leeds-Craig 2002, 18). In addition

to using hair to expand beauty standards, "wearing a natural became a very public act of

self-acceptance that was both personal and a way of being part of what felt like a

solidifying community" (Leeds-Craig 2002, 91). This community-building aspect of

natural hair is one of its main affective qualities and has played a significant role in the

resurgence of natural hair politics among young Black girls.[33]

Deeply tied to the visual messages of hair, fashion and body posture also

constitute key elements of Black girl semiotics. One feature of Black girl semiotics is

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[33] I use the word "resurgence" here because both Robin D.G. Kelly and Maxine Leeds-Craig note how various co-optations of the afro have led women to begin straightening their hair again. And while this may have been true in the late 1990s and early 2000s when their work was published, natural hair, especially among younger Black girls seems to be returning to its status as an indicator of political awareness instead of a mere fashion trend.

what hip-hop artists call "flexin.'" Flexin' operates stylistically and connotes a sense of

showing off. This performative confidence comes through a combination of sartorial

composition and body language (Tulloch 2010; Ford 2016). In her theorization of "soul

style," Tanisha C. Ford (2016) explains how trends in Black fashion coincided with and

spoke directly to Black liberation struggles: "The battle for liberation was waged through

black people's everyday encounters with one another and with their white counterparts

and through cultural practices, making beauty and fashion a vital arena for struggle

alongside formal politics" (5). As is true of Black girl semiotics, soul style "has a

language derived from the black American lexicon" (5) Therefore, soul style, constitutes

an affective epistemology, which "provided a cultural language through which people of

African descent could speak about the horrors of slavery and colonialism while also

serving as a source of cultural pride and political solidarity" (5-6). Ford's ruminations on

soul style, as well as William van Deburg's (1992) description of soul as a "spiritual

energy," reflect the embodied ways of knowing what it means to be Black that extend

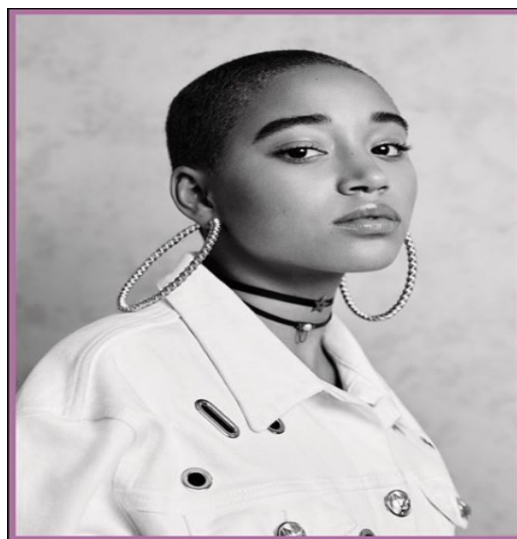beyond what people can verbalize.

Figure 11. Amandla Stenberg in hoops.

In this photo, Amandla Stenberg's big hoop earrings are a well-recognized accessory among Black girls and women. Scholar/activist Yaba Blay's web series "Professional Black Girl" attests to the significance of hoop earrings for Black girls and women. Throughout the webisodes, hoop earrings feature prominently among the interviewees who consider themselves professional Black girls. Blay (2016) frames the series by defining a professional Black girl not as someone "who is accomplished in her job, career, or profession" but instead as "someone who takes being a Black girl very seriously, like to professional levels." For Black girls and women, large hoop earrings indicate one's status as a professional Black girl and form a part of a reclamation aesthetic which takes an item that once symbolized a degrading stereotype and turns it into something affirmative. Therefore, Black girls and women who wear hoops as part of their everyday attire are challenging the validity of these standards in the first place. By wearing these hoops, Amandla Stenberg speaks to this act of challenging norms.

Along with using fashion as a mode of subjective position and declaration, these celebrity girls also make statements through their body language.
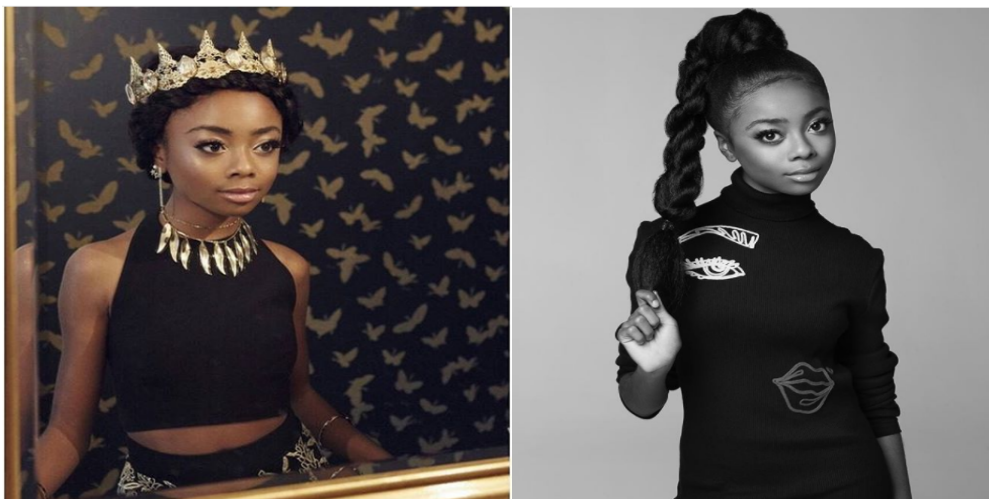

Figure 12. Confident Skai Jackson.

In photo on the left, Skai Jackson exudes confidence. She holds her shoulders back in a way that lengthens her small frame, and she looks directly into the mirror. While the braid in her hair resembles a crown, she also has an actual crown on her head. Together the crown and Jackson's stance connote Black queendom,[34] which functions as a statement against denigrating stereotypes of Black girls. In the photo on the right, Jackson does an iconic Black girl head tilt and purses her lips ever so slightly to display a sense of being both self-assured and unfazed.

Stenberg and Shahidi also use posture and gestures to show confidence and to speak to unapologetic Black girl embodiment.

Figure 13. Yara Shahidi and Amandla Stenberg using Black body language.

In these photos, both Stenberg and Shahidi appeal to familiar, performative modes of Black body language. For instance, Stenberg's pose is reminiscent of the "B-boy/B-

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[34] The rhetoric of "Black queens (and kings)" has been used in problematic, elitist ways.

girl stance," a pose that came to characterize a hip-hop aesthetic in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[35] In addition to the stance itself, Stenberg's face looks frowned. Stenberg's "thugged out" posture not only serves a visually rhetorical function but also challenges expectations of performative femininity and elitist class dynamics that define the kind of red carpet space where the picture takes place. The photo of Shahidi features another classically Black pose: holding up the Black Power fist. Shahidi does not bother to caption the post with anything other than fist emojis because she knows the gesture's meaning will be recognizable, particularly to Black people. By using these poses that have become so closely associated with/synonymous to blackness, Stenberg and Shahidi demonstrate and appeal to senses of Black pride. Invoking certain styles and postures signifies an unapologetic sense of belonging. Black girls (and women) are often demonized and caricatured for having "sass" or "attitude," but Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg invoke these very traits in a celebratory manner, which undermines these racist, sexist, and classist assumptions.

Just like hair, postures and gestures also have spatial politics. For example, in the picture below, Amandla Stenberg maximizes the amount of space they take up through their body positioning.

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[35] B-boy was originally used to refer to break-dancers; breaking was a pillar of early hip hop culture.

Figure 14. Amandla Stenberg speaking against misogynoir.

Stenberg spreads out across the backseat of a car making a "ratchet"[36] pose. The caption

reads: "How I feel knowing that Black womanhood is a radical revolution against

misogynoir." Misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey to name hatred directed at

Black women specifically, attempts to stifle expressions of Black girlhood (and

womanhood), particularly those expressions which indicate a sense of freedom and/or

empowerment. Amandla Stenberg uses a combination of visuality and text in this

Instagram post as a subversion to misogynoir. In addition to calling out misogynoir,

Stenberg also uses this post to celebrate #blackout, which is an online movement about

taking up as much space as possible on digital platforms with pictures of Black people

(preferably selfies).

Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg use affective visuality to

contribute to broader discourses about race, gender, and sexuality. While each girl may

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[36] In "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," Bettina Love discusses how the word "ratchet" emerged in mainstream popular culture. While the word is often used in opposition to "respectable," Love argues that "the word *ratchet* is messy, meaning it has no straightforward definition; it is contradictory, fluid, precarious, agentive, and oftentimes intentionally inappropriate…" (540).

focus on certain social issues more than others, their use of visual imagery to convey social messages is inherently intersectional. These girls show that Black girls deserve to be seen, heard, supported, and celebrated. Furthermore, *all* aspects of Black girls' subjectivities should be celebrated because there is no monolithic Black girl subject. Jackson, Shahidi, and Stenberg all come from differing backgrounds (ethnic, cultural, religious, socioeconomic), but despite these differences, each of these girls has experienced some kind of barriers due to their identities as Black girls, and in Amandla's case, as a Black queer girl. Not only do all of these girls celebrate their own identities, but they also believe in celebrating other Black girls as well. All of them have pictures with other Black girls, whether they are relatives, friends, or other celebrities. In this way, Jackson, Shahidi, and Stenberg are deeply invested in working to destabilize (limited) assumptions about what Black girlhood looks like and the notion that only certain Black girls are worthy of our attention, affection, and protection.

Black Girl Semiotics' Implications for Black Girl Subjectivities

One key tenet of Black feminist theory focuses on self-definition. While true autonomy might not be an entirely applicable framework in discussions of minor subjects (Lindsey 2013; Richardson 2013), it is important for Black girls to define themselves regardless of how their self-definitions might be mediated. In considering common themes across Black feminist knowledge production, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) describes self-definition as "challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood" (S17). She goes on to say that "when Black females choose to value those aspects of Afro-American womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned in academic

scholarship and the popular media, they are actually questioning some of the basic ideas used to control dominated groups" (S17), and "regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects" (S17). In digital spaces – especially on social media – Black Feminist self-definition often shows up in the form of #BlackGirlMagic, a concept whose origins have been attributed to Cashawn Thompson. Thompson developed the hashtag "Black Girl Magic" to highlight "Black women who persevere despite adversity" (Thomas 2015). Over time, "we [have] come to see Black girl magic as a technology of creation…that rebuilds and celebrates what was meant to be destroyed" (Wade 2018, 22). Even though Collins - like most Black feminists of her era – and Thompson focus mostly on the experiences of Black women (instead of girls), processes of self-definition begin long before Black women reach the point of (legal) adulthood.

Through their online presences, Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg all use visuality as a means of self-definition. And while visual imagery is often left to interpretation, these girls use text such as captions, links to interviews, and interview excerpts to signal to their own self-conceptualizations. For example, in interviews with *Teen Vogue*, Skai Jackson discusses her stance on bullying within the context of her sense of self. In addition to being a Disney actress, Skai Jackson is also well-known for her Twitter beef with Azealia Banks and the mature manner in which she called out and shut down Banks' bullying. The Twitter battle started when Azealia Banks launched a racial slur against singer Zayn Malik. Skai Jackson tweeted: "Azealia Banks needs to simmer down a little," and Banks retaliated against Jackson with all kinds of vile remarks about Jackson's physical appearance and her career. When asked why she even

bothered to address Banks' initial remarks about Malik, Jackson said: "it was totally offensive and not right to say at all. She's a bully…I'm against bullying, I hate it because I've dealt with it. I felt like I had to say something on my Twitter" (Ceron 2016). Along with her hatred for bullying, Jackson also responded to Banks out of what she perceived as a responsibility to her fans: "I felt like I had to say something back because if I didn't, how does that make me look to all these people that I said you need to stand up for yourself?" (Ceron 2016) Despite the potential to attract negative attention and remarks from those who may have thought she needed to stay out of the discussion, Jackson does not worry about "haters." In a discussion about sifting out feedback on social media, Jackson says: "If it's over social media it doesn't bother me because I'm just living for myself and I'm doing what is best for me" (Paige 2016). Jackson's assurance of doing what is best for her comes from a sense of self-definition. Jackson's security in this definition allows her to combat external messages that might have a detrimental impact on her self-conceptualization. For Jackson, it is important for people to know that she will stand up for what is right, and while her actions reflect a sense of knowing that people are watching, she ultimately stood up as a way of remaining true to her sense of self.

In a similar vein of standing up for one's values, Yara Shahidi's self-definition emphasizes activism. In fact, Shahidi views her role as Zoey on *Black-ish* as "activism through art" (Dwyer 2016). Shahidi believes that her acting practice constitutes activism because "this complex, unabashedly proud, Black teenager may seem like no big deal at first, but it is through my character and characters like her that the barriers of racism, ageism, sexism and other -isms can be broken down" partially through "showing the coexistence of multidimensionality" (Dwyer 2016). In other words, Shahidi views her

characters as expressions of subjective multiplicity, and she believes that such expression

can help to combat distorted media portrayals often rooted in stereotypes. Yara Shahidi

sees her roles on *Black-ish* (and the spinoff *Grown-ish*) as manifestations of herself

because despite Zoey being a fictional character, Shahidi prides herself on being

deliberate about the roles she accepts. For Shahidi, "That's truly something that I'm

proud to present to the world. It's more than just, 'I need my face out there.' I feel every

part is a representation of who I am even though I'm a different character" (Starling

2016). Shahidi notes the impact of external definitions, especially on young girls: "We do

feel pressure from our society and most of all from ourselves to make decisions and

become a person, even pick a career" (Starling 2016). But Shahidi works hard to define

herself despite and against these external pressures noting, "it's ok to not be perfect right

now and to not be perfect ever" (Starling 2016). Part of Yara Shahidi's self-definition

involves embracing the messiness and ambivalence of (Black) girlhood. In both her

acceptance speech for the Essence Awards and her interview about the Always #likeagirl

campaign, she discusses girlhood as a time of growth that is necessarily imperfect.

Shahidi emphasizes the importance of "messaging that allows us to really embrace failure

and get rid of the stigma around it, especially because this is a crucial time in our lives in

which we're making crucial decisions about who we want to be" (Essence 2017). In this

statement, Shahidi acknowledges the power of Black girls defining themselves.

One of the things that Amandla Stenberg is most well-known for is their

unwavering sense of self. Stenberg is unapologetically Black and queer, and views the

Internet as a platform to be, to exist in the world. As a queer, Black, non-binary teen,

Stenberg feels a social responsibility to show themselves as an example of the ranges of

blackness, gender identity, and sexuality. In an interview with Willow Smith–in which

they both discuss not fitting into stereotypical boxes of what Black girlhood/Black

teenage identity looks like–Stenberg (2016) asks: "If I can in any way impact our

communities just by being myself and posting on social media, then why not?" Stenberg

offers deliberate discussions of race, noting "I feel like my race, gender, and sexuality are

essential components of my identity and how I experience the world" (Kane 2015). The

Black feminist concept of self-definition permeates Stenberg's online presence and her

work both in film and online because she feels like the teen years comprise "the age

where people start to define themselves. It's so exciting to see so many teens of colour

[*sic*] glo'ing up by becoming comfortable with their identities at younger and younger

ages" (Kane 2015).

For Stenberg, self-definition is about being an individual while still "realizing that

minority groups are interconnected and that people are multidimensional" (Kane 2015).

Deeply tied to self-definition is self-expression, and as Stenberg claims in an interview

for *Rookie Magazine*, "I can show my individuality through my wardrobe. It doesn't have

to be so perfect and Barbie-like, you know? I've found that one of my favorite ways to

express myself is through my clothes, because I'm not conforming to some ideal"

(Wilson 2013). One of the ways in which Stenberg refuses to conform to an ideal comes

through their conceptualization of gender. In an interview with *Vogue*'s Abby Aguirre,

Stenberg says, "My sexuality's very fluid and my gender is very fluid…I don't think of

myself as statically a girl" (Aguirre 2017). Stenberg's conceptualizations of gender and

sexuality as constructs capable of being fluid not only impact how they define themselves

but also speak to their political convictions. As Stenberg said to Willow Smith, "When I

choose not to have any kind of gender attached to myself – when I choose to just be, kind of like, a blob – that's when people feel the most threatened. Because they can't control you through your sexuality" (Stenberg 2016). This statement shows Amandla Stenberg's awareness of how people impose external definitions on Black girls and women and how having a strong self-definition can combat the deleterious effects of being externally defined.

Working against such limited and distorted perspectives of Black girlhood, Black girl semiotics has the ability to illuminate Black girls' subjective liminality, demonstrating how they occupy the space between childhood and adulthood. Of the girls featured in this chapter, Skai Jackson is probably the most adept with visualizing this liminal position. On the one hand, many of Jackson's pictures invoke a sense of sophistication and maturity beyond her years. At the same time, she often presents herself as carefree and youthful and tries to give the impression that she is just like other girls. In fact, Jackson captions a "Go Best Friend"[37] video post by saying, "I'm having fun just like the average kid. I'm allowed to." One of Jackson's most significant contributions to understanding Black girl liminality is her use of #tbt, or "Throwback Thursday," pictures. Jackson's throwback Thursday photos serve two primary affective purposes: to reflect upon a possibly simpler time in her career (before the bullying and the haters) and to demonstrate that she is still a child. By doing this, Jackson pushes back against both the entertainment industry's tendency to grow children up too fast and the broader societal early adultification of Black girls. In this way, Jackson's use of throwbacks is both

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[37] The "Go Best Friend" videos were a viral social media sensation. In these videos, usually featuring two Black girls or women, one girl dances while the other girl encourages her by chanting, "Go best friend. That's my best friend. That's my best friend. You betta…"

affective and spatial. From an affective perspective, Jackson invokes an innocence often denied Black girls. From a spatial (or really spatio-temporal) perspective, she engages in an act of time travel.

Despite her astute use of throwbacks, Skai Jackson does not hold the title of time traveler by herself as both Yara Shahidi and Amandla Stenberg also engage in this act. In an interview for *ASOS Magazine*, Yara Shahidi reflects upon her relationship to fashion, noting "When I'm in heels, I love the click of the heel because it's like 'look at me taking up space and time, and look I'm here!'" (ASOS 2017). While Shahidi speaks to a physical act of moving through space-time, there are also ways in which she uses visuality to accomplish a similar sense of movement. In addition to throwback Thursday pictures, Shahidi uses historical iconography to reflect on contemporary moments. For example, when *Black-ish* aired its "Hope" episode, which dealt explicitly with police violence and the Black Lives Matter Movement, Shahidi posted a drawing of James Baldwin with one of his most famous quotes written across his head: "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." In this way, Shahidi aims to fuse the past and the present while the message of the show itself asks questions about the future.

Amandla Stenberg also uses visuality to situate themselves within a space-time spectrum that traverses the past, present, and future. As Abby Aguirre (2017) notes in her *Vogue* article entitled "Amandla Stenberg Is a Voice for the Future," "Stenberg also learned early how to be a shape-shifter, how to adapt to different worlds and move between them." Amandla Stenberg's Instagram account (and general online presence) reflects their position as a time traveler. In a photo shoot with *Dazed*, Stenberg wears a

beret reminiscent of Black Panther garb with an American flag sweater while standing in

front of a government building in Los Angeles. The black and white photography

combined with the stylistic salute to the Black Panthers gives a nostalgic feel to the photo

while her other more contemporary clothing items mark this moment as distinctly

present-day. Another way that Stenberg uses Instagram content to signal to space-time

travel comes through allusions to afro-futurism. One example of Stenberg's afro-futurism

comes from a Calvin Klein photoshoot. Stenberg actually caption the pictures "Afro

futurism." In the photos, Stenberg wears a red, bell-bottomed jumpsuit with a matching

jacket accompanied by a big afro and a silver headband. Interestingly, Stenberg's

conceptualization of Afrofuturist fashion looks somewhat like the past. By using the

present moment to wear vintage clothes that reflect a vision of the future, Stenberg

becomes a bridge between these eras.

Along with fashion and photography, Amandla Stenberg also gestures to

Afrofuturism in the speculative sense through the promotion of her comic book series

Niobe: She Is Life[38] and the forthcoming sequel series *Niobe: She Is Death*. The

protagonist of the comic, Niobe Ayutami, is a young, Black girl elf who becomes a

bounty hunter; she "hunts down human traffickers and slave traders of young girls,

rescuing the victims for the families who seek her help." (Kang) Niobe became the "first

internationally distributed comic with a black female author, artist, and central character."

(Okwodu 2017). In a video posted by Stranger Comics, which is the publishing company

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[38] Amandla Stenberg developed this comic in collaboration with Sebastian A. Jones, author of *The Untamed: A Sinner's Prayer*, which features Niobe as one of the characters. Jones originally approached Stenberg about writing a novel based on Niobe, but Stenberg decided that developing Niobe's character in a comic strip would be better-suited to her interests and busy life as an actress trying to complete high school.

that produces *Niobe*, Stenberg describes Niobe as "a symbol of peace and salvation." For Stenberg, *Niobe* operates in the vein of Black speculative fiction which deploys fantasy as a way of imagining Black futures.

Time travel (or space-time travel) comprises a crucial element of blackness. In a description of how African cultural traditions survived the Middle Passage, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) argues "The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler, through space and time" (25). Additionally, in her talk, "The Racial Politics of Time," Brittney Cooper (2016) discusses how "the racial struggles we are experiencing are struggles of time and space, and dominant culture "attempt[s] to manage and control people by managing and controlling time." The visual tactics of Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg all function as a means of self-expression and communication within and against these systemic limitations on space and time. As Amandla Stenberg notes in an interview with NPR regarding their current roles and aspirations to become a director, "But now I can see the power in–I like to use the word– infiltration. Infiltrating these larger corporations that would traditionally put out media that would just feature white people" (Guerra and Kelly, 2017). Along with Amandla Stenberg, Skai Jackson and Yara Shahidi attempt to take control of time and space through digital media production, and their contributions to an archival platform such as Instagram contribute to a body of Black girl memories.

Conclusion

In a world that conditions Black girls to shrink and be quiet (or else face the consequences of being 'unruly'), Black girl semiotics emerges as a way for Black girls to communicate beyond the (colonial) linguistic. Among African diasporic people, "the

ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-sustaining

virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems"

(Everett 2002, 126), and these embodied ways of knowing have become vital to how

Black people communicate with each other. While there is no uniform or monolithic

Black experience, Black girl semiotics relies on commonalities that contribute to

epistemologies of Black girlhood, which evince a "performance [that] facilitates self-and

cultural reflexivity- a knowing made manifest by a 'doing'" (Johnson 2006, 446).

Ultimately, Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg enact processes of

self-definition by constructing a visual discourse or aesthetic of Black girl magic that

goes beyond representational functions. These girls' use of the #blackgirlmagic speaks to

how they define and embody this concept; Black girl magic is part of their

understandings of who they are subjectively. Therefore, in addition to affective

implications, Black girl semiotics also functions as an indicator of subjective formations

of Black girlhood. Using Black girl semiotics, Jackson, Stenberg, and Shahidi

demonstrate how Black girls' subjective formation depends on space-making, having

places to *be* - as in having places to exist and having places to be oneself.

CHAPTER THREE - "YOU GOTTA SHOW YOUR LIFE": BLACK GIRLS' DIGITAL
MEDIA PRODUCTIONS AS TESTAMENTS OF EVERYDAY BLACK GIRLHOOD

> Destiny[39]: I was on Snapchat all weekend looking at friends' snaps.
>
> Ashleigh (me): Okay. Is that mostly when you use Snapchat, on the weekends?
>
> Destiny: No, I use Snapchat every day.
>
> Jennifer: Especially when you lit. You gotta show your life.

This conversation comes from a class called Digital Expression that I taught at a high school in Richmond, Virginia during the fall semester of 2016. At this point during the class session four Black girls were talking about their weekends, which became a common practice for helping us get into discussions on Mondays. While Jennifer's insistence that "you gotta show your life" reflects a compulsion driven by any number of factors (visibility, recognition, performativity, commercial participation, etc.), her exclamation speaks to the ways in which Black girls use digital media to present, interpret, and respond to their multiple social worlds. This chapter argues that Black girls' digital media productions illustrate the interconnected and multilayered spatialities – physical, digital, and conceptual – that Black girls must navigate, and their movements through these spaces both shape and are shaped by their production of digital content. Jennifer's claim in the opening dialogue reflects a sense of obligation that not only functions as an act of storytelling but also aligns with the notion that Black girls are the foremost experts of their own lives (Gaunt 2007; Brown 2013).

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[39] I use pseudonyms for the girls with whom I did participant-observation and focus groups. I also use pseudonyms for the schools and organizations where I met with them. For the virtual ethnography, since I only used public accounts, I use the names the girls list on their accounts. In cases where I communicated with girls about their accounts, I do change their names to protect their confidentiality.

The girls centered in this chapter reflect mixed methodologies and geographies, resulting from both site-specific and virtual ethnography. The site-based work involved participant-observation and focus groups with girls in Richmond, Virginia. For the participant-observation component of my research, I taught the aforementioned elective class Digital Expressions at an independent[40] high school, which I refer to as Liberty Preparatory School (or Liberty Prep). In my class, I had five girls - two ninth graders and three twelfth graders, and we met four to five days a week to talk about digital media. My original plan for the class was to have students submit photographs from their social media accounts that reflected different themes that the girls identified as important to them. For the focus groups, I met with two groups totaling eight Black girls who attend various middle and high schools throughout Richmond. During these sessions we discussed the kinds of things these girls like to post on social media, why they are drawn to certain platforms, and what they want people to know about them based on their social media posts. In addition to these formal methods, I met with a Black girl affinity group at another independent school in Richmond (which I refer to as West Academy) where I served as their guest speaker. I include parts of our informal conversation in this chapter as well. I chose Richmond as a field site for a number of reasons including its history as a site of Black cultural production and activism (Brown 1997; Tate 2003) as well as its emergence as a Southern, urban arts hub and burgeoning reputation as an art city.[41] Additionally, the representative studies on youth and technology in the United States do

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[40] An independent school is one that operates outside of the public school system. Sometimes "private school" and "independent school" are used interchangeably, but the class connotations of "private school" belie the reality that many independent schools are tuition-free.

[41] Richmond's designation as an art city means that there are several art-based nonprofit organizations devoted to serving Black youth. Through participation in these types of programs, many Black children who attend public schools and/or arts enrichment programs have at least some exposure to digital media production such as photography or film-making.

not focus much on youth in the South (with Atlanta being the exception) even though, according to the most recent Census data, the majority of Black Americans still live in the South. Finally, I worked as a teacher for four years at an all-girls high school in Richmond, and those experiences had a significant impact on my decision to conduct this research. During my time as a teacher, I served on a task force designed to integrate technology in the classroom, and I was bothered by the disconnect between the enthusiasm to jump on the Edtech bandwagon and the increased regulation and policing around our students' cell phone usage during the school day. I started to realize that the aversion to students' cell phone use was mostly driven by assumptions surrounding what students were doing on their cell phones and the unfair expectation that girls should craft their subjectivities primarily around their roles as students – as if they are not people with their own ideas and desires that may or may not have anything to do with school. This realization drove me to learn more about what girls actually *do* with their cell phones and the relationships between their cell phone interactions and their sense of self. When it came to Black girls specifically, I saw how they were often overlooked in conversations surrounding educational ownership (i.e. feeling like the school community is your own), yet over-policed when it came to behavior. I knew, from stories they told me, they did not feel like there were spaces in the school environment where they could be themselves. Since they talked to me a lot about their Snapchat activity, I was curious about how (or if) digital spaces facilitated a sense of belonging for them that they lacked in school. While the initial interest in Black girls' media practices stemmed from my local context, I have since expanded the questions of media production, subjectivity, and space to include a broader range of Black girls.

The virtual ethnography involves me analyzing the Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube content of Black girls in different locations throughout the United States. For Instagram and Snapchat, I found these girls by using their geo-tagging references to high schools in cities with large Black populations according to the Census report "The Black Population." Using only public accounts, I determined the girls' racial identities through their own identifications as Black within their social media content. For YouTube, I used a combination of sites with which I was already familiar and a YouTube tag called "The Common Black Girl"[42] to identify Black girls with YouTube channels. In total, I examined the social media content of 62 Black girls. In some cases, I was able to contact these girls directly to learn more about the motivations behind their digital productions.

Some may argue that the girls discussed in this chapter might not be posting their "true" selves online. In fact, in my interactions some girls admitted to concealing parts of their identities in their public social media material. However, even if the expressions Black girls present online are performative, this performativity does not automatically negate (though it may alter) the meanings attributed to Black girls' digital content. While we cannot claim to know these girls based on their social media posts (any more than we can claim to know someone from reading her memoir), we can use their posts to situate them within certain realities based on identity categories. In this way, their social media content does tell us something about the spaces–physical, digital, and conceptual–that

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[42] Tags on YouTube are questionnaires about different subjects. "The Common Black Girl Tag" asks a series of questions (rooted in stereotypes) about characteristics of Black girls. I originally came across this tag when looking at RockiDimplez' (a Black girl who does makeup tutorials) YouTube channel. Even though I did not analyze the tag itself within the body of the dissertation (because of its reliance on stereotypes), I found that it was useful for finding Black girls who had their own YouTube channels. As Safiya Noble points out in her chapter "Searching for Black Girls," by simply typing in "Black girls" in the YouTube search box yields very limited results (not necessarily in terms of numbers but in terms of content).

Black girls navigate. Therefore, this chapter does not aim to assess or measure an "absolute" truth about Black girls' personalities or their innermost thoughts and feelings. Instead, the goal is to uncover what Black girls' digital practices reveal about their everyday experiences and how their subjective conceptualizations of race and gender help to construct discourses and cartographies of Black girlhood.

"It's Levels to This": Defining Black Girl Geographies

Given the inextricability of Blackness and geography, grappling with Black girls' relationships to space is crucial to understanding how Black girlhood operates. In her foundational text, *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick (2006) explains that "geography is not, however, secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is**"** (xi). Within this concept of malleable geographies, McKittrick explains: "Acts of expressing and saying place are central to understanding what kinds of geographies are available to black women" (xxiii). McKittrick emphasizes Black women specifically, but her Black feminist theoretical and methodological approaches can also help illuminate the geographies available to Black girls. Building upon McKittrick's call for "more humanly workable geographies" (xxviii), LaToya Eaves' (2017) Black Geographies framework "focuses on the ways Black subjects undertake space-making practices within a specific set of circumstances and expands Black spatial possibilities, thereby enabling inquiry and resisting homogeneity" (81). Like McKittrick, Eaves insists that Black geographies should not be reduced to fixed spaces (i.e. Middle Passage, Reconstruction, prison industrial complex, etc.), and instead "acknowledge space-making practices of Black subjects and

communities as they negotiate with traditional structures" (84). Therefore, Black geographies, like Black girlhood, are fluid and multi-dimensional.

While geographers like Katherine McKittrick and LaToya Eaves bring much needed Black Feminist and/or Black queer perspectives to Black geography, theorists in Black Girlhood Studies – Ruth Nicole Brown, Aimee Meredith Cox, and LaKisha Simmons – uncover what is at stake specifically for Black girls in the discussion of expanding our conceptualizations of Black geography. Both Ruth Nicole Brown and Aimee Meredith Cox position Black girls as inherently geographic subjects. In the opening of *Hear Our Truths*, which details her work with the group SOLHOT,[43] Brown (2013) describes Black girlhood as a "spatial intervention," noting that "for those who do not know love, we create spaces to practice Black girlhood and sense love, to name it, claim it, and share it" (1). Within SOLHOT, "the space is specific enough that Black girls recognize it as theirs. The making of space is collective and creative…and revolutionary action is the goal" (Brown 2013, 1). Not only does SOLHOT exist as a space for Black girls, but it also facilitates Black girls' production and configuration of "Black girlhood as an emancipatory space" (Brown 4). As such, SOLHOT is "constructed as a free space" (42) that is "dedicated to the celebration of Black girlhood and all its complexity" (44). Operating from a similar premise as Brown and the participants of SOLHOT, Amiee Cox (2015) argues that "Black women are, out of necessity, inherently shapeshifters," and this reality necessitates "paying close and generous attention to the quotidian spaces of meaning making that Black girls enliven and invent" (26). Cox goes on to say that "Black girls' presence changes the possibilities for what can occur in public

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[43] SOLHOT stands for Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths.

and private spaces while also requiring us to see and understand these spaces differently"

(26). Black girls' "daily acts of play and protest" (Cox 2015, 142) have the ability to shift

and/or destabilize boundaries.

The spatial nature of Black girlhood not only allows Black girls to exercise their

creativity as space-makers and shapeshifters (to borrow Cox's term) but also forces them

to make critical decisions about which spaces they should or should not enter and how to

best navigate precarious, yet unavoidable spaces. In her discussion of Black children

growing up in segregated New Orleans, LaKisha Simmons (2015) notes, "they did not

encounter simple, flat lines; instead, the world around them was alive with the three-

dimensionality of space, influenced by social encounters, emotions associated with

places, and the physicality of bodies" (27). She explains that one strategy Black children,

and Black girls specifically, developed for navigating the world around them was mental

mapping. Partially drawing from Rebecca Ginsburg, Simmons describes mental maps as

"multi-layered and fragmented…conceptual scales of the city and its buildings, streets,

ecology, play areas, and people imperfectly meshed together" (28). Unlike many

"standard" geographical maps, "children's mental maps are not to scale, nor do they

correspond neatly with cartographers' mappings of the city. Instead, they reflect

children's own experiences, their cognitive development, and their growing sense of the

world around them" (Simmons 2015, 28). While Simmons discusses the specific physical

geography of New Orleans, her logic of three-dimensional space can be expanded to

consider Black girls' spatialities as multidimensional across their multiple social worlds.

Simmons theory of mental mapping falls within the context of segregation, but the

complexities of "constantly learn[ing] and relearn[ing] the proper space for and

deportment of 'colored' citizens" (28) has relevance in the contemporary lives of Black

girls. While the consequences for stepping out of one's "place" are different (in

execution) for Black girls in our contemporary moment than they would have been for

Black children growing up during segregation, the stakes for Black girls' transgressing

spatial expectations are still undergirded by racist, sexist, and classist ideas.

Brown, Cox, and Simmons all focus on the relationships between Black girls'

everyday lives and their positions as geographic subjects. They also allude to the

transformative potential of Black girls' everyday practices. Given these understandings of

geography, I discuss Black girls' navigation and creation of space at the following levels.

When I refer to physical space in the chapter, this includes cities and their topographies

(land, buildings, waterways, etc.). These are spaces that touch the physical body, spaces

where Black girls experience the physicality of their bodies. In the United States,

couplings of restrictions and over-policing often characterize Black girls' physical

worlds. While most American children are subject to restrictions on their movement in

public spaces (Crowe and Bradford 2006; Ruckenstein 2013; boyd 2014), the perceived

transgression of these restrictions have dire material consequences – such as suspension

and expulsion from school – for Black girls (Crenshaw et al 2015; Morris 2007; Morris

2016).[44] Even outside of school contexts, Black girls (and women) who are seen as

inappropriately occupying public spaces are subject to physical violence (Saar et al 2015;

Epstein et al. 2017) at rates much higher than their white counterparts.[45]

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[44] Research done by the African American Policy Forum and the Georgetown Law Center for Poverty and Inequality demonstrates how Black girls' suspension and expulsion rates not only criminalize them disproportionately but also make them more susceptible to interpersonal violence.

[45] Examples of these supposed transgressions that appeared in high-profile news stories include the Black girl from Spring Valley High School in South Carolina who was slammed to the ground by a white police officer (who faced no charges for his actions) and the Black girl from McKinney Texas, Dejerria Becton,

Digital space refers to the Internet and technological platforms (i.e. social media) whose functionality relies on Internet technologies. In my conceptualization of the digital, space is not a metaphor as the Internet contains visual content that both has its own materiality and re-presents the materiality of its subjects (Kellerman 2016). In addition to the presence of material content, how people use the digital also determines its spatiality. As youth media expert danah boyd (2014) argues, "teens are looking for a place of their own to make sense of the world beyond their bedrooms. Social media has enabled them to participate in and help create what I call networked publics" (5), and the establishment of networked publics contributes to the spatiality of the digital. Early champions of digital utopias viewed using the Internet as a disembodied experience, but digital spaces do not transcend embodiment (Crowe and Bradford 2006; Daniels 2009; Nakamura & Chow 2012; Hobson 2012); instead, embodiment registers differently in digital spaces than it does in physical spaces. Therefore, Black girls' experiences in online networked publics mirror their embodied experiences (of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) (boyd 2014). In this way, Black girls' digital worlds are not free from limitations, but digital spaces allow for different kinds of movement.

The third level of space I discuss, conceptual space, refers to Black girls' worldviews and self-perceptions. Returning to LaKisha Simmons' theorization of mental mapping, conceptual space comprises the "terrain" of the mental map. The conceptual space is a space of memory, knowledge, and meaning-making where Black girls store what they have learned and use these lessons to inform how they move through their worlds. Inevitably, Black girls' conceptual worlds overlap with all of the other worlds

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who was slammed to the ground by a white male police officer after someone called the police about Black children having a pool party.

they inhabit, including the physical and the digital. Ultimately, attending to this multi-layered nature of Black girls' spatialities is essential to positioning Black girls as theorists within discourses of Black girlhood.

Social Media as the Convergence Point of Black Girls' Physical, Digital, and Conceptual Worlds

One of the main observations I have made through various interactions with Black girls is that their digital practices help illustrate the flexible and oftentimes fictitious nature of digital-physical-conceptual borders. For example, in the Digital Expressions class during one of our conversations about Black Lives Matter, one student, Stacey, said: "They always talking about 'all lives matter.' Every time somebody says Black Lives Matter, they are saying 'all lives matter - blah, blah blah,' so if all lives matter, then why you ain't helping the Black lives?" In response, her classmate Kim said, "Exactly. It's only Black people that's dying." While it is not true that other races of people (especially those living in poverty) are not dying at the hands of the police, the girls in Digital Expressions frequently see Black death online and in their neighborhoods. Therefore, in these girls' worlds, there *are* only Black people dying. Not only does their social environment shape how they perceive campaigns such as Black Lives Matter, but it also influences their ideas about what social media can actually do materially. After watching a video clip of Michelle Obama speaking to a group on International Women's Day[46] in which she urges young girls to use social media as a tool for social change, I asked the girls in Digital Expressions how they might use social media to make changes in their communities, neighborhoods, schools or cities. Three out of four girls mentioned

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[46] Video footage of this talk can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iY4-8yS59ro

violence, and how they wanted to change that, but they did not feel optimistic about

social media's ability to galvanize people toward such change. One student wrote:

> I would change all the black killings (or I would at least try). But people already
> try to stop the black killings through social media so I don't know if that would
> really help. But I could like post about all the killings and just talk about it but I
> don't think that would do anything.

This response shows how digital-physical-conceptual spaces merge to create a concept of

violence that then shapes digital practices. Even though this student did not feel certainty

about the role digital media could play in ending violence in her community, she still sees

"post[ing] about the killings" as a potential initial step.

Another way that the overlap between digital, physical, and conceptual space

played out in my research has to do with school/educational settings. When I spoke with

Black girls at West Academy, one of the girls attending the meeting asked if I thought

there would be differences between the content they post and the content students in the

East End post.[47] The girl went on to explain that the reason why she asked about these

differences is because when she went to public school, she posted a lot more selfies, but

now that she attends a private school, she feels like she has to post "stuff that has puns or

is witty." Several other girls chimed in and said that they do feel like there is a level of

performance that goes into their Instagram posts strictly based on where they attend

school. This conversation shows how Black girls both internalize and try to fight against

stereotypes about socioeconomic status. The implications that selfies are inferior to

"witty" posts and that selfies are more "acceptable" content from Black girls attending

public schools reveal the everyday pressures that Black girls face to embody, perform,

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[47] West Academy is located in one of the most affluent zip codes in Richmond while Richmond's East End
contains some of the poorest, high-crime zip codes.

and present versions of girlhood that peers and adults in their various social circles deem

appropriate. Like the Black girls at West Academy, several of the Richmond girls I spoke

with in focus groups attend predominantly white schools, and their social media posts can

both reflect how they feel about their school environments and have consequences for

how they interact with their peers. For example, during one of the focus groups, Sidney

described a verbal altercation that she had with another student at her school who was

mad about Sidney's political views regarding Donald Trump. Recounting the incident,

Sidney said:

> So, I posted a picture of him and said "He's not my president" and put Trump in
> parentheses. And then this white girl commented. She was like - she left this long
> comment. She shouldn't have commented. That's my picture. Not hers. So, she's
> getting mad. She was the only one who commented about me not liking Trump.
> And then there was a whole argument because I have a picture with this white
> girl, and she hates Trump too. So, she was just pissed about it.

Even though this discussion took place in the digital space of Instagram, the tension

between Sidney and this classmate continued in their face-to-face interactions, and while

the tension did not lead to physical confrontation, it did exacerbate the discomfort Sidney

already felt because of her presence as a Black girl in a predominantly white

environment.

The conversations that I had with Black girls in Richmond speak to the role of

local influences in the physical-digital-conceptual overlap, but looking at online content

from Black girls in a number of different locations, as I did with the online ethnography,

further illustrates the fundamentality of this overlap to Black girl geographies. As danah

boyd (2014) argues, "technology makes it easy for young people to move quickly

between different social settings, creating the impression that they are present in multiple

places simultaneously. What unfolds is a complex dance as teens quickly shift between—

and often blur—different social contexts" (41). The following observations from the

virtual ethnography consolidate images and videos collected across three social media

platforms: Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. I focus on these visual platforms because

they have become important spaces in which Black girls produce vernacular photography

and videography, and "these expressions have created new forms of participation in black

public spheres" (Thompson 2015, 10). For Black people, vernacular photography "is an

everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility. Vernacular

photographs are banal as well as singular; they articulate both the ordinary and the

exceptional texture of black life" (Campt 2017, 7-8). Therefore, examining Black girls'

participation within this type of image production is important to understanding Black

girlhood because:

> ways of seeing and performative approaches to being seen and represented have
> become intrinsic to and constitutive of contemporary African diasporic
> communities. The circulation of photographic and videographic expressions has
> influenced how people across the African diaspora learn to see and assign value to
> being seen, to perceive and participate in viewership and spectacles, and to create
> forms of cultural production in which the camera - the video camera, the still
> camera, even the telephone camera - is central (Thompson 2015, 10).

Given this centrality of camera work to Black life, Black girls digital production across

camera-based platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube not only contribute to

discourses of Black girlhood, but they are also situated within broader Black media

ecologies.

Jean Burgess and Joshua Green published their foundational text on YouTube

before the launch of Instagram and Snapchat, but the arguments that they make about

YouTube being "a part of everyday life" as well as a complicated "'top-down' platform

for the distribution of popular culture and a 'bottom-up' platform for vernacular creativity" apply to all three of these social media platforms. This intermingling of "top-down" and "bottom-up" features reflects the hybrid producer-consumer nature of user-generated content (UGC) platforms. All three applications "illustrate the increasingly complex relations among producers and consumers in the creation of meaning, value, and agency" (Burgess and Green 2009). These relations are further complicated by the algorithms that drive social media sites. Not only do these algorithms determine which images and updates appear in followers' newsfeeds or which videos show up as the top results of a YouTube search, but they can also "reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling" (Noble 2018). As Safiya Noble points out in *Algorithms of Oppression*, racism and sexism are intrinsic to the coding practices of Internet corporations.[48] The reality of racism and sexism embedded in coding coupled with profit-driven motives means the algorithms that control social media platforms can temper the liberatory potentialities of Black girls' social media content. However, despite the limitations of social media, the value of the expressions I discuss in this chapter lies in what they illuminate about the relationships between Black girls' digital practices (broadly speaking) and their experiences of Black girlhood. Even though subjects of Black girls' content have as much diversity as Black girls themselves, there were some types of content and topics that appeared across a range of posts regardless of users' age

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[48] Noble focuses specifically on Google (which includes YouTube) in *Algorithms of Oppression*, but her assessment of the algorithms and the people behind them apply to other social media corporations like Instagram (which is owned by Facebook) and Snapchat. While Noble acknowledges that programs like Black Girls Code exist to try to alleviate some of the racist and sexist practices of Silicon Valley, she also notes how such future-oriented programs centered on "training coders of tomorrow" do not effectively mitigate *current* racism and sexism in hiring policies or coding practices within these companies.

or location. While not all of these topics showed up in all of the girls' content, the occurrences were common enough to note here.

Selfies

The selfie comprises one of the most common examples of content posted among the girls in this study. Even though posting selfies does not constitute an action that is unique to Black girls, the use of selfies among Black girls has sociopolitical significance (whether or not the girls consciously intend this to be the case). In a special issue of the *International Journal of Communication* on selfies, Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) argue that, "selfies function both as a practice of everyday life and as the object of politicizing discourses about how people ought to represent, document, and share their behaviors" (1589), and these functions of selfies have a wide variety of interpretations. In many ways, Black girls' selfies align with the quotidian nature of selfies, which have simply become part of what people see and do on the Internet. But Black girls' selfies still function in ways that are specific to their realities. Many of the selfies from this study include discussions about hair; Black girls take selfies with freshly washed hair, do length checks, and show off particular styles that make them feel good about themselves or reflect a journey to self-acceptance. While some Black girls' selfies depict messages through their mundane nature, others are meant to deliver explicit messages about Black girlhood. For example, in one picture Cherie poses in front of the mirror wearing a t-shirt that reads: "For the Love of Black Girls."[49] In the picture's caption, she writes: "for the love of Black girls…always, all ways…happy Black history month." Even though the majority of commenters pointed out the picture's "cuteness," the girl's caption implies

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[49] "For the Love of Black Girls" is a slogan of the Uniquely You Summit, which is an annual forum for Black girls that takes place in Philadelphia.

that she is not wearing the shirt just to be cute. Instead, she uses the post to not only express love for Black girls but to assert their importance within discourses and celebrations of Black History Month.

Senft and Baym (2015) caution against pathologizing the selfie as narcissistic because "in the language of sociology, pathology-based rhetoric about selfies tends to resemble what Stanley Cohen calls 'moral panic.' As Cohen points out, moral panic tends to heighten when a particular media form or practice is adopted by young people, women, or people of color" (1592). But even if we did lean toward such a characterization of the selfie, for Black people to engage in what has typically been deemed narcissistic within a media culture that consistently denigrates blackness and a society that restricts Black bodies, the bombardment of Black selfies on social media reads as, at the very least, a disruptive act. Black girls' selfies fit within both a genealogy of Black people politicizing the self-portrait and a contemporary moment in which the selfie has political significance. For Black girls, the significance of selfies lies not only in their messages but also in their role as records of Black girl geographies. Black girls' selfies tell us what types of spaces they occupy and how they relate to those spaces. Many of the selfies examined for this chapter feature school bathrooms. While lighting in public bathrooms makes them a common stage for selfies, within the context of Black girl spaces, the bathroom offers one school space where they can briefly escape the watchful eyes of adults, which is especially desirable for those who attend schools with strict, prohibitive cell phone policies. Therefore, the frequency of the school bathroom selfies and vlog entries likely have as much to do with physical spatial restrictions as lighting. Of course, the Black girls in this project do not limit their selfies to bathrooms; some feature football fields,

gyms, fairs, and sometimes simply the front or back yard. Through sharing these types of

posts among friends and/or followers, Black girls offer some entry into the physical,

digital, and conceptual spaces that are part of their everyday lives.

Friends

The everyday experiences of Black girls can illustrate their confrontations with

institutionalized oppression. One of the coping tools available to Black girls comes in the

form of the friendships they form. Despite the wide range of personalities among girls

included in this study, friendships showed up in each girl's digital content at least

occasionally, with some girls seeming to only post pictures or videos with friends.

Whether these friendships developed at school, during extracurricular activities, or

online, their centrality within Black girls' digital media production signals their

importance for how Black girls both experience and navigate their social worlds.

Many of the pictures featuring girls with their friends take on a variation of the

selfie, which is sometimes referred to as an "ussie." In these types of pictures two or

more girls stand together - sometimes posing in front of a mirror, making silly faces,

and/or showing off new clothes – and take a picture that reflects their relationship but

also the event they are attending. The content showcasing friendships is not limited to

still photography, and a large number of Snapchat and YouTube videos feature friends

playing together. In some ways, the act of creating posts for Snapchat and YouTube

constitutes play because of the tinkering involved in recording and editing videos for

these platforms. In addition to playing on Snapchat and YouTube in general, challenges

and tags also provide opportunities for Black girls to demonstrate different types of play.

The "Whisper Challenge," for example, tests best friends' knowledge of each other by

asking one girl to listen to music through headphones while trying to guess what her

friend is saying. In these types of videos, Black girls laugh with each other and show their silly sides. These displays of playfulness, particularly in the context of friendships, allow Black girls to contradict early adultification attempts and undermine stereotypes about Black girls being mean and aggressive.

Alongside the images themselves that speak to the girls' closeness with their friends, their captions tell stories about the role that friendships play in their lives. Among the many Instagram collages of Black girls and their friends, one Birmingham, Alabama girl, Ciara, posted: "This picture says so much about my relationship w/ my friends. All we do is laugh and goof around…I love my girls and wouldn't trade my babes for nothing in the world." Another friendship image from Miami-based Tiffany shows two Black girls posing in their graduation regalia for senior portraits. They are smiling and looking back at each other. According to the caption, "No one's friendship compares to ours! Daycare, elementary, middle, and high school with you and I wouldn't want this with anyone else. Thank you for being the bestest [*sic*] best friend ever." This picture speaks to the longevity of friendship and celebrating milestones together. In another image, two New York girls set up an event display together, smiling at each other as if one of them has just said something funny to the other. The caption reads: "We hang out. We help one another, we tell one another our worst fears and biggest secrets, and then just like real sisters, we listen and don't judge." For these girls, their friendship has become a kinship, and the ways they describe the friendships in terms of sharing and standing together shows the supportive nature of these relationships.

Conceptually, friendships form an integral part of Black girlhood, and so the Black girls included in this chapter reserve a great deal of digital space or their friends

and displays of friendship. Physically, in comparison to selfies, friendship pictures reflect more variation in terms of photographic surroundings. Even though school spaces still feature prominently in friendship images, Black girls also share (in person and online) moments with their friends at sporting events, debutante balls, riding in cars, and at each other's houses. Ultimately, these images show the essential role of friendships in discourses of Black girlhood.

Celebrations

Another common subject for Black girls' digital content includes celebrations. Birthdays (especially Sweet Sixteen parties), school dances like homecoming and prom, and graduations appear frequently across Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. These images all function as part of the story of individual Black girls' everyday lives, and they also have relevance to broader conceptions and representations of Black girlhood. For instance, in a series of graduation pictures and videos on Instagram, Janine, a Memphis native, posted several images in her graduation regalia holding her diploma along with the caption "grow, glow, graduate. #blackexcellence."[50] From a spatial standpoint, this picture series indicates an ability to exist and flourish in multiple environments. In a separate graduation picture, which is not included in the first series but stands alone, Janine stands in a greenspace (likely a park) holding a picture from her preschool graduation as a symbol of the time that has progressed from that graduation to high school graduation. In the caption, Janine writes:

> my real day one. the little girl who hated her skin, was bothered by her hair, disgusted by her nose, troubled by her teeth, cried because of her weight is now proud of every last feature that god has ever given her and is graduating with a

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[50]"Black excellence" is a hashtag often used to celebrate the accomplishments of Black people. Even though these displays of excellence often invoke capitalistic versions of success, their intent is to undermine pervasive imagery that denigrates and criminalizes Black people, especially Black youth.

glow she never realized before. that black girl magic glow. I am truly blessed. dear younger [me], I know it's hard but please love yourself. #myblackisbeautiful."

Janine's graduation pictures not only document a celebratory event, but they also document a Black girl's spatio-temporal journey to self-acceptance, pride, and belonging.

In addition to showing self-pride, graduation pictures and videos also function as a testament to Black girls' ability to thrive in academic settings, against mainstream stereotypes that suggest otherwise. Alongside graduation pictures and videos, several of the girls discussed here documented their experiences taking Advanced Placement classes, earning scholarships to attend college, and completing high school with a number of honors and distinctions. And while there is a valid critique around limiting portrayals of "Black Excellence" to educational attainment, the academic related images presented by these girls demonstrate the wide range of Black girl personalities, interests, and talents that we do not often see in one-dimensional mainstream depictions of Black girlhood. Ultimately, these celebratory images – whether a birthday party, prom, or graduation – create spaces for Black joy, and based on the frequency of these types of images among this group of Black girls, expressions of Black joy are essential to lived Black girlhood.

Dancing

Dancing constitutes an important part of what Kyra Gaunt (2006) describes as Black girls' "kinetic orality." Gaunt defines kinetic orality as "the transmission and appropriation of musical ideals and social memories passed on jointly by word of mouth and by embodied musical gestures and formulas" (3) which functions as "a path to learning ethnic group and gender identity and is a way of playing with a somatic consciousness that expresses such identifications" (8). Therefore, Black girls' dancing

reflects their embodied knowledge and comprises a key component of Black girlhood discourses. While the notion that all Black girls can or like to dance is rooted in stereotypes, the role of dancing in the lives of Black girls has a history. As Gaunt points out: "African Americans inhabit repertoires of kinetic orality intergenerationally and translocally: they embody and archive memories of black social dances and mix them up with various chants and songs from the past and present" (4). In this way, Black girls' collective embodied memories of dance connect them to each other. In *Shapeshifters*, Aimee Cox (2015) describes how Black girls use dance to transform public spaces. For Cherie, one of my interviewees who aspires to be a professional dancer, dance is the primary medium through which she expresses herself as a Black girl. In her videos, which she records at various dance studios and performances, she uses dance, much like the girls from Cox's *Shapeshifters*, to insert her Black, girl self into spaces as an act of visibility, and the fact that her performances are shared with both physical and digital publics only layers this visibility.

Even Black girls who are engaged in less formal types of choreographed performances–those who are on YouTube dancing with their friends–use dance in ways that speak to their physical-digital-conceptual realities. In many of the videos that girls post with their friends on Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube, girls show themselves dancing with their friends, and most often, these videos are taken at school – in classrooms, in the lunchroom, and even in the bathroom. In a video titled "A Day in 8th Grade," Dejah records her school day on her phone. Early in the video Dejah walks into the bathroom with one of her friends, who is also a Black girl. Dejah placed her phone on the bathroom sink, and without warning started dancing. When her friend joined in, they

started out doing different dances and then transitioned into doing the same move, at which they giggle. This moment illustrates a certain level of being in sync. Among the girls included in this chapter, there are a few – like Maya and Tiffany Elise – who critique stereotypical assumptions about Black girls dancing, However, the connective quality of dance is so strong that even the girls who critique stereotypes about Black girls dancing include dance as part of the material they intend to be relatable to other Black girls.

Comedy

Another popular genre of content within the images I collected from girls online is comedy. One distinct type of Black comedy involves turning trauma into satire as both coping mechanism and method of critique,[51] and several of the Black girls included in this chapter use sketches and satire to redeploy pain as comedy. "The CeCe Show" is one example. Nine-year-old CeCe started her comedic performances on the now defunct social media platform Vine at the age of four and became a viral sensation. CeCe's comedy mainly includes imitations of famous people like Beyoncé and most recently Congresswoman Maxine Waters. She also does videos of common Black girl problems like the pain of Black girl hairstyling. In one of CeCe's famous sketches called "Maybe I Like Dirt," she laments being punished for not cleaning her room. In the sketch CeCe says: "Why parents always trying to whoop you when yo' room not clean? If you don't wanna come in there, don't come in there! Maybe I like dirt!" From this sketch, CeCe made a music video of the same name that features a group of Black girls. The opening scene of the video shows five Black girls playing UNO together while one older Black

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[51] For an illustrative example of how this works, see the "If Slavery Was a Choice" hashtag that erupted on Black Twitter after Kanye West gave an interview in which he said that slavery was a choice.

girl braids another younger girl's hair. As they play, CeCe recalls an amusing story about a time when her sister lost her weave ponytail on a rollercoaster but has no shame about claiming it when the man operating the ride asked if it was hers. The girls laugh at CeCe's story and then decide to go outside, but CeCe's mother (who is actually played by CeCe) tells her she cannot go out until she cleans her room. The video switches back and forth from a few main scenes including one where all of the girls are sitting on the porch together and one where they are all dancing together.

Even though CeCe makes this commentary jokingly, her question does reflect a scenario that many Black girls (and Black children in general) may have experienced. For one, CeCe has a room, but it is not *her own* space. The conversation also highlights the power differentials between Black girls and their parents (and other adults). Like CeCe, Maya – another Black girl vlogger in high school – discusses these power struggles in her video "Growing Up Black."[52] Maya makes fun of Black (American) experiences including the range of things that lead to getting a whoopin', such as "grabbing a soda" at a cookout [instead of juice], not being able to find misplaced objects when parents want them[53], saying forbidden words[54], "when you blink, and your mama thought you rolled your eyes," and being in trouble simply because siblings were also in trouble. Towards the end of the video, Maya talks in detail about how her mother would call her father, who acted as the designated disciplinarian, in order to report behavior that happened while he was not home. Maya discusses the dread of waiting for her father to come home

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[52] "Growing Up Black" was a viral Twitter hashtag that made its way to other platforms like YouTube.
[53] In the video Maya gives a detailed explanation of this "offense": "Say your mom wanted the remote control, and she tell you to go get it. If she tell you where it is, but you can't find it, and you go upstairs and you tell her you can't find it, she gone be like, 'If I have to get up and get that, and I find it, I'ma whoop you." She then gives another example of how her dad threatened to whoop her and her siblings if they did not find his misplaced Xbox controller even though Maya notes she and her sister don't play Xbox.
[54] "Liar" was the specific example Maya cited.

because she knew what his arrival would bring: "It was no having fun. You ain't forget about it because you had to stay in your room too. You had to stay in your room and wait for him to come in there and beat you." Maya laughingly tells these stories, but her laughter belies the severity of her experiences.

Black folks making fun of the violence inflicted upon them through corporal punishment doled out by their parents/caretakers is nothing new. However, both CeCe's joke –which alludes to getting a whoopin' if the room doesn't meet her mother's satisfaction – and Maya's responses to physical discipline highlight quotidian examples of violence against Black girls/children. There is nothing inherently wrong with requiring children to keep their rooms and other spaces clean, respect others' belongings, and generally respect their elders, but the act of whooping a child for not cleaning her room or for "acting out in public" (as Maya discusses) serves as a reminder of who *owns* the spaces Black girls navigate and mirrors the violence that Black girls (and women) often experience in public spaces when people feel they are taking up space in the wrong ways.[55]

In addition to reminiscing on stories of "Growing Up Black," Maya also uses sarcasm to lament the realities of being a Black girl in a predominantly white town. She describes the shock of finding out that white friends' parents are racist and not being allowed to go to their houses, being forced to make friends with other Black children even though they have nothing in common other than their race, being accused of stealing anytime anything goes missing, and not being able to find the right hair care products.

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[55] Between April 25 and May 8, 2018, *The New York Times* alone reported at least three stories about white people calling the police on Black women for simply being in the "wrong place." An example of how this extends to digital spaces: On May 2, 2018, The Washington Post reported that hackers sabotaged three Black girls who were finalists in a NASA competition.

Some of the stories Maya shared are about her town in general, and others detail occurrences from school. Much like the girls I mentored during my time as a teacher, Maya attends a predominantly white school where her white peers subject her to all kinds of mistreatment based on her racial identity. Both CeCe and Maya's use of comedy reveal the realities of Black girls' physical-digital-conceptual spaces. Both of them turn to the digital space of YouTube in response to restrictions placed upon them in their physical spaces and revealing lessons that occupy their conceptual spaces. For Maya especially, comedy functions as a buffer; she notes that "When you stand up for Black people, and it's not really a lot of Black people at your school, white people like to bash you for it." Even though Maya may feel slightly more comfortable with expressing her views on YouTube than in the physical space of school, her digital world is not free from racist violence. Although some other Black people chime in in solidarity in the comments section, Internet trolls also make racist and sexist comments to Maya's videos. Maya anticipates white hostility by adding disclaimers to her videos that discuss racial topics in order explain how she does not aim to generalize all white people but is instead reflecting on her own experiences. In her "Black Lives Matter" video, she disabled the comments altogether. Maya's attempts to mitigate the impact of this digital bashing is indicative of strategies Black girls employ to navigate their physical-digital-conceptual worlds.

Donald Trump's 2016 Election and the Women's March of January 2017

Black girls' use of comedy, while often a critique of social issues, still puts an overall light-hearted spin on the content they present, but not all of the common posts among everyday Black girls reflect joyful affects. The presidential election of Donald Trump marked a significant political moment, and many of the girls' posts across

platforms reflected post-election frustrations and anxieties about the consequences of a Trump administration. One example of such a response comes from Janine who took to Instagram to post a picture of her passport with the caption: "packs emergency trump kit." Another Black girl in Dallas posted a map of the small number of blue states with a caption "Who's moving to Canada with me?" the day after Trump's election. She also posted a meme of Skai Jackson, which she captioned by "waiting for everyone to say donald trump's [*sic*] victory is a joke and hillary [*sic*] really won." These types of reactions illustrate how digital, physical, and conceptual spaces overlap to shape content. Embodied knowledge and experiences of racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression make these girls desire moving to another physical location. Even if Black girls refer to fleeing a Trump administration in a joking manner, this type of content reveals their conceptualizations of racism as a part of everyday American geography. Posting such things in digital space allows Black girls to address their fears despite how they may feel limited within physical spaces.

In addition to expressing worries about Trump's presidency, some girls shared pictures of resistance. One of the biggest protests, the Women's March on Washington, occurred the day after Trump's inauguration. Despite its moniker, this march was a global event with people participating in various cities. Sade, one of my interviewees, participated in the Women's March in Philadelphia, and she posted pictures of different signs carried by protesters.

Figure 15. Sade's pictures from the Women's March

During our Instagram exchange, Sade explained her motives for posting these types of

images, saying, "So right now my biggest issue is the ridiculousness that encompasses

Donald Trump, and his campaign, supporters, etc. I feel like me existing and thriving

goes against his agenda, so I try to do my best to make that obvious on my social media."

Sade feels a social and moral obligation to use digital space as a way to not only combat

Trump's presidency but also the systemic oppression that he and his administration

uphold and propagate. In Sade's words: "I care a lot about the unfair demonization that

people of color face under the hand of all institutions, so like I said earlier, existing and

being successful pushes against that in a beautiful way." Sade's comments reflect the

radical potential of Black girls' spatial configurations; she knows that just taking up

space as a Black girl can become an act of resistance.

Producing Theories of Black Girlhood

In some ways, Black girls' social media posts look like those of many other teens

regardless of identity categories. However, even the mundane types of posts like

challenges and dancing speak specifically to Black girlhood. Additionally, while the

significance of Black girls' everyday activities might be inferred or extrapolated, there are ways in which Black girls engage more directly with discourses of race and gender, thereby constructing theories and "language[s] of Black girlhood" (Brown 2012). Black feminism clearly informs many of the displays of Black girlhood that I discuss here. At the same time, as a praxis generally formed from the experiences of *adult* Black women, Black feminism can sometimes obscure the *girl*-specific elements of Black girls' lived knowledges.[56] As Elaine Richardson (2013) points out, "[Ruth Nicole] Brown reminds us applying our own standards to the actions of girls limits our understanding of what it means to celebrate Black girlhood" (339). Black girls' digital practices contribute to girl-specific theories that allow Black girls to center their own worldviews.

Returning briefly to the subtle, yet important, distinctions–that I make in the introduction –between Black feminist theory and theories that emerge from Black girlhood studies, I use this section to show how Black girls theorize their lives. Treva Lindsey (2015) explains that Black girl standpoint, which falls under the rubrics of hip-hop feminism, "acknowledge[s] a generational rupture in how Black women and girls engage feminist politics" (56). Black girl standpoint, a remix of Patricia Hill-Collins' (2008) standpoint theory, "posits Black girls as central figures from which theory arises. The specificity of 'girlhood' can be accounted for in a standpoint theory anchored in the unique, but diverse experiences of Black girls" (Lindsey 2015, 61). Along similar lines of centering Black girls as theorists, Black Girlhood Imaginary (BGI) – developed by Kenly Brown, Lashon Daley, and Derrika Hunt – builds upon intersectionality to "disrupt the

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[56] I do not mean to suggest that Black women simply throw away their childhoods when constructing Black feminist theory. Instead, I am pointing out a difference between theorizing through *reflection upon* girlhood and theorizing from *within the stage* of girlhood.

silences and illuminate the space between Black girlhood and Black womanhood," "prioritize the experiences of young Black girls," and "trace Black girlhood through the imaginary in order to deconstruct and go beyond the fixed perceptions of Black girls" (Daley 2017). Both Black girl standpoint and BGI offer fruitful frameworks for situating Black girls' digital practices within their knowledge production.

The Movement for Black Lives has helped give Black girls some language to tell their experiences, and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter occurs frequently throughout the digital content produced by the girls included in this study. Black girls' participation in these campaigns shows some of their thoughts and conceptualizations about race and Black girlhood. Among the girls that I interviewed, Janine posted a significant amount of content related to the Movement for Black Lives. For example, in an Instagram video, Janine posted one of her classmates doing spoken word performance of a poem called "Black Lives Matter" in which the poet states:

> Just 'cause my skin's darker/don't mean my life gotta be harder/Just 'cause I'm four shades darker doesn't mean I can't get a 4.0 GPA/doesn't mean I can't succeed/doesn't mean I can't be great/doesn't mean my whole life has to be a disaster/you want our Black kids to stop dying?/Tell them their lives matter.

The poet, who is also a Black girl, implores her audience to tell Black kids "their lives matter" in order to combat racist and restrictive expectations about what Black people do and how Black people live. By sharing this video with the caption "truly inspiring," Janine not only brings attention to how these expectations operate but also celebrates the poet's message. In another example of Janine's engagement with racial issues, she posted a split-screen protest image. The top picture depicts a Black Lives Matter protest in Memphis, and the bottom picture shows a protest from the Civil Rights Movement with people holding up "I AM A MAN" signs. Janine's merging of these two moments

creates a cross-generational message that both pays homage to the Civil Rights

Movement protests and undermines the illusions of racial progress in the United States.

While #BlackLivesMatter offers one lens through which Black girls explore race,

their experiences (and analyses) of race extend beyond their involvement with the

Movement for Black Lives. For instance, Janine, who has Ghanaian heritage, posted a

meme that says, "Where is African America?" Her post serves as a critique of the term

African American, and she is not the only Black girl in this study who holds such a view.

In a video called "Black Girl Struggles," Maya says that one thing that frustrates her

about being a Black girl is "when people are afraid to call you Black." She goes on to say

that she doesn't want to be called African American:

> Why are you afraid to call me my race? I'm Black. I'm proud to be...don't ever call me African American again. I'm Black. I don't call you European American; I don't call you Mexican American; I don't call you Indian American. You will not call me African American...I'm like why y'all say African American? Who thought this was better? This is just way too different from everyone else. It's just like calling you out.

While Janine's critique is a locational one, Maya's is more sociolinguistic. Janine

questions the use of "African American" from the standpoint of ethnicity. Since there is

no place called "African America," Janine feels the term African American is a

misnomer. From Maya's perspective, she argues that no other group of Americans has an

ethnic qualifier in front of it (even though that's not always true), and so she feels like

saying African American is a way to exclude Black people from claims to "full"

American identity. By highlighting their specific experiences and interpretations of racial

identity, Janine's and Maya's views of race fit within Black girl standpoint and BGI

frameworks.

Along with perceptions of race, among the Black girls included in this chapter, their subjective conceptualizations of gender also reflect Black girl standpoint and BGI. For one of my interviewees, Bella, unapologetic Black girl celebration lies at the heart of her online content. One of Bella's posts includes a black and white image of five Black girls wearing t-shirts that read #FortheLoveofBlackGirls. They all hold up signs which read: "1) YOUNG. BLACK. WOKE. 2) ALL BLACK. ALL GOD. NO APOLOGIES. 3) BLACK WITHOUT SHAME. 4) MY FEMINISM DOESN'T EXIST WITHOUT MY BLACKNESS. 5) KNOW JUSTICE KNOW PEACE. 6) BLACK GIRLS RISING." In addition to the pictures harkening to the style of visuality deployed by the Black Panthers,[57] the girls' unwillingness to separate their ideas of Blackness from their ideas of girlhood exemplifies intersectionality, as the sign "my feminism does not exist without my Blackness," most explicitly suggests. This political expression shows the relationship between Black feminism and the girl-centered Black girl standpoint and BGI. Due to the growing presence of Black feminists in digital spaces, today's Black girls are growing up with the language of Black feminism. At the same time, they engage Black feminism through their own experiences as Black *girls*.

In addition to photography, Black girls also use drawings (whether their own or someone else's) to convey their experiences of gendered identity and girlhood.

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[57] For an in-depth description of the Black Panthers' visuality, see Amy Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for the Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

Figure 16. Janine's depiction of Black girl importance.

One of Janine's drawings features a Black girl sitting in the grass. The girl is bigger than the trees and mountains and waterfalls, and she appears to be looking down at these tiny people standing in the forest. The picture conveys a sense of Black girls' importance since she is the biggest, central image in the piece.
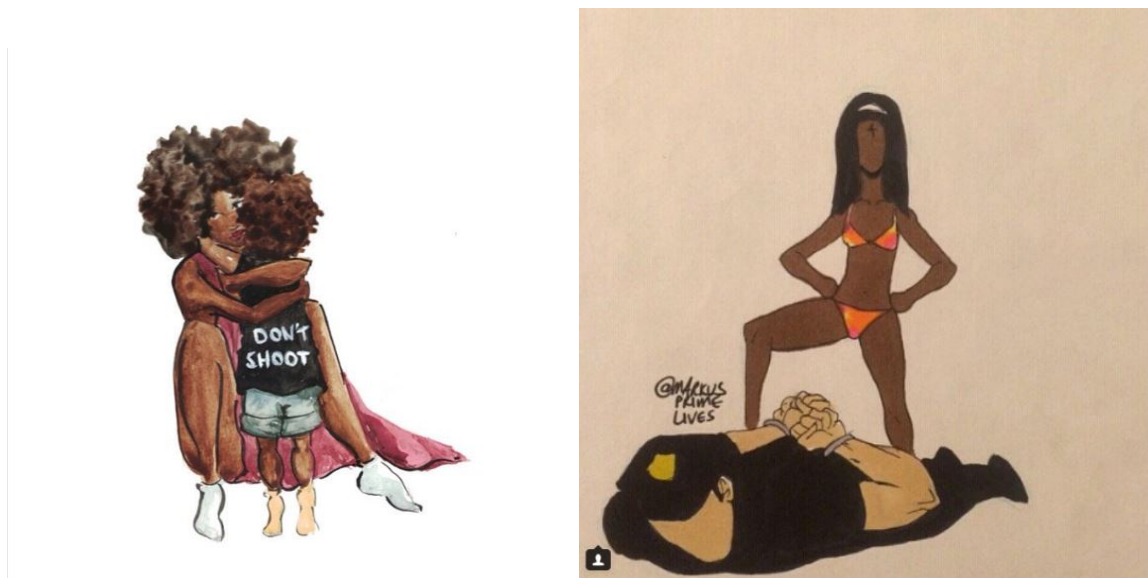

Figure 17. Additional drawing from Janine's Instagram.

Janine also shares drawings from others to deal specifically with violence against Black bodies. In one post (left image of Figure 17), she shows a Black woman sitting on the ground hugging a small child. The back of the child's shirt says: "don't shoot." This

picture speaks to the potentially lethal consequences of perceived lack of innocence in Black children. The second image in Figure 1 features an illustration by artist Markus Prime, which depicts Dejerria Becton, the Black girl white police officer Eric Casebolt slammed to the ground at a pool party in McKinney Texas. Instead of showing Becton on the ground in the drawing, the police officer lies on the ground handcuffed while Becton stands with her hands on her hips and one foot on the officer's back. Each of these drawings deals with how Black girls relate to their spaces. In the case of the image of a Black woman hugging a child wearing a "don't shoot" t-shirt, the image depicts the everyday anxieties of living in environments where state-sanctioned violence against Black people has become the norm (or at least people are no longer blinded/turning a blind eye to a norm that has persisted despite some legislative gains). In the other drawings, Black girls take up space in ways that contradict fear. In this way, these pictures invoke Black girl standpoint and BGI through their portrayal of Black girls imagining and creating spaces where they have power.

Along with assertions of Black girls' desires for empowerment, some of Black girls' content demonstrates consequences of patriarchy and misogynoir. For example, Victoria, who advocates against human trafficking, posted a statistic about adult men fathering children with teenage girls: The text reads: "Did you know that men between the ages of 20-29.7 father 39% of children born to teen moms, age 15? That means grown men father a larger percentage of children born to teens but teen mothers are presented as the problem." Victoria's sense of urgency stems from her recognition of how villainizing Black girls for being teenage mothers deflects attention from the adult Black male perpetrators of sexual violence. While there is not necessarily any indication that Victoria

has been subjected to this type of violence firsthand, she speaks from a place of Black

girl specificity, bringing attention to the realities that many Black girls face regarding

sexual violence (Saar et al. 2015).

Overall, Black girls' social media content provides a record of how Black girls

theorize their own lives. Their contributions to Black girl standpoint and Black girl

imaginaries reflect the knowledge they hold and produce, knowledge that helps them

navigate their physical, digital, and conceptual spaces. These different levels of spatial

orientation can expand Black girls' agency by helping them to recognize the ways in

which they are restricted and providing them with ways to combat these restrictions. As

Bella says in her picture documenting two awards she received from the YWCA: "To all

my girls of color, when you get labeled as 'loud' and 'angry' and too 'emotional' just

know that your words have value, and your bodies hold value. Don't let these people dim

ur light."

Hyper-surveillance and Digital Dissemblance[58]

Given the overlap between digital, physical, and conceptual worlds, surveillance

plays a huge role in Black girls' digital practices. As Simone Browne argues in her

monograph *Dark Matters*: "Where public spaces are shaped for and by whiteness, some

acts in public are abnormalized by way of racializing surveillance and then coded for

disciplinary measures that are punitive in their effects" (17). Therefore "racializing

surveillance[59] is also a part of the digital sphere with material consequences within and

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[58] I use "digital dissemblance" to illustrate how Black girls deploy Darlene Clark Hine's concept of Black women's cultural dissemblance in online spaces. Thank you to Jack Bratich for the suggestion to apply Hine's theory to Black girls' modes of subverting surveillance and striving to protect their privacy in the face of digital panopticism.

[59] Browne defines racializing surveillance in the following way: "Racializing surveillance is a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms

outside of it." (Browne 2015, 17) Among the Black girls I encountered, the impact of

surveillance manifested in girls' behavior regarding their digital profiles. For example,

the girls I taught at Liberty Prep were very guarded about their accounts. When we first

started using phones in the classroom, and they had permission to go on Instagram or

Snapchat to get content to use in classroom exercises, they would pretend they forgot

their screennames. Once they realized that I was not going to try to look at their accounts,

they gave up on that strategy, but they were still very careful not to say their screennames

(or even their friends' screennames) out loud. In contrast, the girls that I spoke to at West

Academy and the girls in the focus groups were eager to share their accounts with me,

and several of them invited me to follow them on social media almost immediately. On

the one hand, I knew many of the girls at West Academy, but I did not know all of them.

Additionally, the girls in the focus groups did not know me at all, and still showed great

enthusiasm with sharing their content. What likely played a larger role in the difference

between these girls' responses is the awareness of surveillance. The girls at Liberty Prep

attended school in a hyper-surveillance environment, and the administrative approach

was quite invasive. In addition to the school being a highly disciplinary environment, the

students at Liberty Prep, by virtue of where they live, probably have a much different

experience with surveillance (by law enforcement), and so they have seen the

consequences of people invading their spaces. Students at West Academy seem to get

along better with adults than students at Liberty Prep because their relationships to adults

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pertaining to race and exercise a 'power to define what is in or out of place'…my use of the term 'racializing surveillance' signals those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance" (16).

in their school and home environments, while not completely devoid of power imbalances, operate under different conditions.

According to danah boyd (2014), who has done extensive ethnographic research on teenagers' digital practices, "the most creative teens often respond to the limitations they face by experimenting with more innovative approaches to achieving privacy in order to control the social situation" (61). For the Black girls included in this study, girls keenly aware of issues of surveillance, employing tactics of digital dissemblance functions as a way of mitigating hyper-surveillance and controlling the situation as boyd suggests. Contrary to technophobic narratives that describe teen media users as naive and ignorant to how things that they post may travel, the Black girls in this study expressed a sense of deliberation about their content, evidenced by what they post where. These girls "choose to share in order to be a part of the public, but how much they share is shaped by how public they want to be" (boyd 2014, 203). Across all of the groups I worked with, girls said they post different kinds of stuff on Facebook (if they even have Facebook), Instagram, and Snapchat. For the most part, the girls who have Facebook see it as a way to connect with their older family members (aunts, uncles, older cousins, etc.). Some girls said they would post pictures or updates on Facebook related to milestones (birthdays, graduations) or use Facebook to stay in the know about upcoming family gatherings. The girls who use Facebook said they are careful not to post language that might offend their elders and that they do not get too personal on Facebook. With Instagram and Snapchat, the main differences that girls discussed between these two platforms involve the ephemeral nature of Snapchat; they like how snaps "disappear"[60] after a certain point.

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[60] I use quotation marks here because nothing truly disappears from the Internet, but the Snapchat interface only allows users to see stories and updates for 24 hours.

The girls noted that they post more silly content or inside jokes on Snapchat because they see this as a space where they can be more candid. In contrast to Snapchat, Instagram's archival nature forces the girls to be more selective about what they post as they do not want jokes or playful content to be misread by someone outside of their friends or peer groups. One surveillance circumvention strategy that some girls discussed involved creating a "Finsta." Finsta means "Fake Instagram," so girls post certain things on their Finsta, which they reserve for their closest friends, that they do not share on their public accounts.

This modicum of control afforded by digital dissemblance is one example of how digital spaces can be "loophole[s] of retreat" (McKittrick 2006, 37) for Black girls. McKittrick uses Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl to theorize garreting and loopholes of retreat. The concept of garreting comes from the place where Brent hid from her slave owner for two years. Drawing from Brent's description of hiding in the garret, McKittrick notes: "the garret is both a site of self-captivity and a loophole of retreat" (40) which "can be conceptualized as usable paradoxical space" (43). On the one hand, it seems like Black girls put themselves out there completely just by virtue of being on social media, but at the same time, they are selective about their content, so we still do not necessarily know about their "inner lives" (Hine 1989) based on what they post on social media. Event though these tactics of digital dissemblance do not function to shield Black girls (or any social media user) from surveillance completely, they do show how Black girls attempt to control their environments.

Building Support Networks

The practices among girls included in this chapter demonstrate that Black girls can and do make authentic connections to others through their digital media content. Like other spaces where Black girls congregate, "virtual environments are irrevocably social spaces, to some extent 'imagined communities' and perhaps the potential setting for a range of important social and cultural interactions of vitality and belonging" (Crowe and Bradford 2006, 343). According to communications scholar Nancy K. Baym (2010), members of specific online communities share a sense of place, practice, and identities. Shared practices include "common sensibilities" (Baym 77) and norms established within these communities.

Within all of the groups of girls I talked to, girls mentioned how they felt supported by other people, especially other Black girls and women, through social media. Sometimes these connections come through large-scale campaigns/movements such as Black Lives Matter and Blackout Day, but more often they occur within smaller groups of friends and followers. During a conversation about sources of emotional support, I asked the girls in my Digital Expressions class: "Where do you feel supported by other girls?" Almost immediately, Destiny answered, "Instagram." When I asked Destiny to elaborate on her response she said, "Like if someone posts something like they're upset, some people comment, and they're like "Are you okay?" Jennifer chimed in to agree with Destiny, adding, "And it's people you don't even know." For both Destiny and Jennifer, these concerns from people within their online communities function to supplement a perceived lack of concern from people they encounter in their face-to-face interactions. As Janine pointed out in our conversation through Instagram, "On social media, black women and girls are interacting and encouraging each other more which I really love!!

Lately, I've been creating friendships with other girls of my race that go through what I go through and can relate to the things that I do." She went on to say, "For example, if I post something about how I used to use the hot comb on my hair every Sunday night, girls like and comment their own black experiences and I think that this type of black, friendly community online is so great." For girls who may be among the only Black students at their schools, these online support systems help them to feel less isolated. In addition to sharing common experiences, Black girls expressed how online networks allow them to connect around common interests. In focus groups, middle and high school girls noted that online spaces gave them opportunities to find like-minded people. For Sade, online platforms are essential to her development as an artist because: "I frequently meet people through Instagram because of their interest in my work, interest in general, or whatever. I think there's a lot of representation and meaningful dialog currently. I think people are feeling more comfortable with themselves and others which is incredible." The availability of these online communities has tremendous significance for Black girls who continuously struggle against invisibility and erasure. These communities provide spaces in which Black girls can tell their own stories.

Conclusion

In an interview with *The Guardian*, author Jesmyn Ward explains her commitment to writing about Black girls, saying, "Black girls [are] silenced, misunderstood, and underestimated" (Ward 2018). Ward's statement and battle against Black girl erasure signal the urgency for Black girls embedded in Jennifer's declaration at the chapter's opening: "you gotta show your life." Black girls show their lives in a number of ways including through the content they post on social media. While Black

girls' social media content reveals some of their everyday activities, it also shows how they place themselves within various social contexts, thereby illuminating their subjective conceptualization of identity categories (like race and gender) as well as their geographic configurations of physical, digital, and conceptual spaces. Despite the restrictions that Black girls face within each of these spatial layers, Black girls position themselves as creators and experts of Black girlhood discourses through media production. Black girls know that digital spaces are not utopian playgrounds where they can be themselves without surveillance or judgment, but they also know that other people will erase and/or misrepresent their experiences if they do not tell their *own* stories, show their *own* lives. Black girls "[work] around technical affordances, reclaiming agency, and using novel strategies to reconfigure the social situation" (boyd 2014, 61). Drawing from bell hooks, Simone Browne argues that "talking back, then, is one way of challenging surveillance and its imposition of norms" (62). For Black girls, showing their lives through digital media production is an act of talking back.

CHAPTER FOUR - BLUEPRINTS FOR BLACK GIRL FUTURES: WILLOW SMITH'S VISUAL AND SONIC EXPRESSION AS AFROFUTURIST PRAXIS

In 2014, Willow Smith and her brother Jaden did an interview with the *New York Times* that generated a great deal of buzz throughout the digital sphere. During this interview, Willow and Jaden Smith discussed a range of topics including some of the defining characteristics of their music and why they find traditional school inadequate for their intellectual capacities and desires. In one of the more memorable moments from the interview, Willow and Jaden Smith talked about Prana[61] energy, noting that this force allows babies to remember their time in the womb. While these are admittedly atypical talking points coming from a fourteen and sixteen-year-old, the Internet seemed to explode with commentary regarding what the interview revealed about Willow and Jaden Smith's personalities, producing a bit of a media frenzy. Even companies like *Billboard* and MTV called the interaction "bonkers" and "bizarre," respectively.[62] Despite the mixture of people who thought the interview was philosophically deep and those who thought it was odd, the overall response painted the Smith siblings as just plain weird. But what if their "weirdness" is really a manifestation of embodied/lived Afrofuturist knowledge?

This chapter analyzes the artistic works of Willow Smith in order to situate her within Afrofuturist aesthetics and philosophies. I argue that Willow Smith's visual and sonic expressions are manifestations of free Black girlhood that function as a points of

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[61] Prana comes from Hindu yogic philosophy and describes "internal energy." For more about the role of prana in yoga and Hindu philosophy, see Eric C. Mullis, "The Pragmatist Yogi: Ancient and Contemporary Yogic Somaesthetics," *Pluralist* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 205-219.
[62] The full articles can be found at https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6319902/willow-smith-jaden-smith-new-york-times-interview and http://www.mtv.com.au/willow-smith/news/what-we-learnt-from-willow-and-jaden-smiths-bizarre-new-york-times-interview

departure for imagining and constructing Black girl futures. This approach to Willow

Smith's Afrofuturism as one of many potential blueprints for Black girl futures operates

under the premise of what Tina Campt (2017) describes as "the grammar of Black

feminist futurity," which

> moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense as *what will be* in the future.
> It moves beyond the future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to
> a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that
> grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or *that which will have had to
> happen*. The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that
> hasn't yet happened but must (17).

Through her music, visual art, and overall philosophies, Willow Smith gives us clues

about what *must* happen for Black girls to have free futures. As Shatema Threadcraft

(2016) points out in her chapter "What Free Could Possibly Mean," obstacles to freedom

for Black women are simultaneously embodied, psychic, internal, external, systemic, and

epistemological. Threadcraft focuses specifically on Black women, but the "constraints of

a racist and sexist social context" (44) also shape the lives of Black girls. As is the case

for Black women, in order for Black girls to experience freedom, these constraints have

to be removed. While Black girls' freedom cannot be achieved through individual

expression alone, Willow Smith's artistic practices show one version of what Black

girlhood could look like if Black girls had the freedom to move through the world and

make meaning(s) of it without "internal barriers to liberty" (Threadcraft 2016, 63).

Some may point to Willow Smith's class status to suggest that the kinds of

freedoms she experiences are unavailable to most Black girls, and it is true that her

upbringing as a child of two celebrity parents has afforded her many opportunities that

have undoubtedly shaped her worldview. Smith's wealth certainly plays a role in how she

moves through the world, but as her music and art illustrate, money is not the sole (or

even primary) source of her freedom. Furthermore, Smith's wealth does not shield her from the hatred and hostilities of people who genuinely do not want Black girls to imagine, build, or exist in time-spaces outside of imperialism and capitalism. People express these anti-Black girl sentiments in comments on Smith's pictures and videos - especially the ones that suggest a sense of otherworldliness – by calling her derogatory names, accusing her of being in the Illuminati, and assuming that she abuses drugs. These types of responses show the resistance to Black girls trying to think critically and/or expand their territories and possibilities. Therefore, I am not using this chapter to present Willow Smith as a *representative* Black girl. Instead, I invoke her brand of Afrofuturism to spark conversations about what imagining and constructing liberated Black girlhoods might require.

Afrofuturism's Place in Black Girl Futures

Even though the 2018 release of Marvel's *Black Panther* has sparked renewed conversations about Afrofuturism in popular culture, scholars have been theorizing this term for decades. Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism in his 1993 "Black to the Future" interviews with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. According to Dery (1994), Afrofuturism includes "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture" and "African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Although coined in a primarily literary context, the term Afrofuturism has become applicable to a range of cultural forms including visual art, film, and music. Shortly after the publication of Dery's interview, Alondra Nelson founded the Afrofuturism listserv, an online "community of thinkers, artists, and writers"

(Nelson 2002, 9). Within this group, members defined Afrofuturism as "African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come" (Nelson 2002, 9). The listserv provided fertile ground for theorizing and practicing Afrofuturism as we know it today.

Conceptually, Afrofuturism encompasses a number of expressions, philosophies, and aesthetics, making it resistant to fixed definitions and parameters. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack (2013) describes Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" that "combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs," noting "in some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques" (9). Given these characteristics, this fluid philosophy both captures Willow Smith's artistic expression specifically and applies broadly to conceiving Black girl futures. One of Afrofuturism's key features lies in its practices of speculation. As a speculative framework, Afrofuturism "is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional" (Eshun 2003, 293). Within this understanding of Afrofuturism, speculation plays a crucial role in combatting injustices by facilitating different ways of being in the world. For Black girls, then, speculation provides avenues for imagining and building worlds in which they can thrive.

Another key characteristic of Afrofuturism is the centrality of Black conceptions of time. In some ways, the term Afrofuturism – by nature of its invocation of the word "future" – obscures its approaches to time. As Kinitra Brooks (2016) and her co-authors

point out "a central notion of Afrofuturism [is] that the Western construct of time as linear is a fallacy" (238). Instead of assuming time's linear progression, many ancient African cultures viewed time as mythic or cyclical (Barthold 1981). In *Black Time*, Bonnie Barthold argues that "the uncertain contingencies of time…lie at the center of black history" (8). She goes on to explain these temporal contingencies by noting how Black people "have been simultaneously deprived of time and fixed in it by the color of their skin" resulting in "the lack of both a past and a freely determined future" (16). This type of temporal restriction attempts to (and oftentimes succeeds in) forcing Black people into "an eternal now over which [they have] no control, cut off and dispossessed from both the mythic cycle of Africa and the linear flow of Western time" (Barthold 1981, 16). Given the ways in which Black people have been dispossessed of time, Afrofuturism subverts this deprivation by not only looking toward and planning for the future, but by reclaiming African conceptions of cyclical time. In fact, "one of Afrofuturism's foremost guiding tenets is the centrality of African diasporic histories and practices in sustaining progressive visions of the future" (Morris 2012, 153). In this way, Afrofuturism fuses past, present, and future. One of the reasons why Afrofuturism is so important to Black girls and Black girlhood is because of its construction of and relation to time. Acts of reclamation – especially in the temporal sense - are critical to Black girls who have time taken away from them through early adultification, disproportionate school suspensions, high susceptibility to violence, and higher instances of incarceration (Epstein et al 2017). Therefore, securing Black girl futures will require approaches to time that counter the ways in which time has been used against Black girls (and Black people in general). A

sustainable future for Black girls will be one in which they are allowed to be claimers and keepers of time.

In addition to being a force of speculation and temporal power, Afrofuturism provides a useful framework for thinking through Black girl futures because of its compatibility with Black feminism. Even though – as stated in the introduction – the relationship between Black girlhood and Black feminism cannot be assumed, Black feminism does allow at least a starting point for theorizing Black girlhood. In "Black Girls Are from the Future," Susana M. Morris (2012) illustrates how Afrofuturism and Black feminism operate together. According to Morris, "it is critical to understand these epistemologies [Afrofuturism and Black feminist thought] not only as related but as, in fact, in conversation with one another and potentially even symbiotic" (153). Given this relationship, Morris deploys the term "Afrofuturist feminism" to describe the "shared central tenets of Afrofuturism and black feminist thought" (154). Morris uses Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* to outline these key tenets, which include critiquing and destabilizing our present power structures, "futurist solutions based on cooperation and egalitarian ethics" (155), and waging an "ongoing struggle for peace and justice" (155). As Morris points out, Octavia Butler's Afrofuturist feminism does not uncritically strive toward a utopian society, but instead embraces the ambivalence of maintaining peace and equity. Ultimately, the priorities of Afrofuturist feminism coincide with the requirements for constructing and maintaining free Black girl futures. Willow Smith's musical and visual works engage in speculation, time manipulation, and Afrofuturist feminism toward the goal of creating new worlds. The rest of this chapter will explore how Willow Smith fits into an Afrofuturist paradigm and how her expressions signal to Black girl futures.

"An Underlying Feeling of Mystery and Magic"[63]: Willow Smith's Afrofuturist Art

Despite its somewhat nebulous nature, Afrofuturism simultaneously incorporates a broad range of speculative, Black techno-cultural practices and very specific themes and tropes. These Afrofuturist motifs show up consistently in the work of Willow Smith in both her visual practices (through Instagram and music videos) and her songs. "The most popular trope of the genre" involves "exploring the very nature of being alien" (Brooks 2017, 68). The alien/extraterrestrial motif appears in Willow Smith's work, not only in her visual and sonic creations but also in the very ways that she identifies, often describing herself as an indigo and admonishing us: "remember your cosmic roots" (Smith 2015, "Marceline").

One of the most common ways that Willow Smith invokes alien-ness is through the images that she shares on Instagram. In many of the animations/drawings Willow Smith shares on Instagram, she appears as a mixture of human and non-human forms/parts, and she often portrays herself as a cartoon, avatar, or alien. Among the plots that Smith "draws" herself into, *Avatar* occurs frequently. Smith's self-insertion into this film holds significance beyond attesting to its commercial popularity. For Smith, *Avatar*, despite the criticisms it has received for relying on an exoticized Other narrative, functions as a commentary on indigeneity and environmental justice. As a believer in gaia[64], Willow Smith often uses themes and even the Na'vi language from *Avatar* to

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[63]This quote comes from an interview that Willow and Jaden Smith did with Pharrell Williams for *Interview Magazine*. The full text of the interview can be found here: https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/willow-and-jaden-smith#_

[64] The Gaia hypothesis or Gaia theory was developed by Dr. James Lovelock and "suggests that the Earth and its natural cycles can be thought of like a living organism. When one natural cycle starts to go out of kilter, other cycles work to bring it back, continually optimising [sic] the conditions for life on Earth." Kate Ravillious, "Perfect Harmony," The Guardian, April 27, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2008/apr/28/scienceofclimatechange.biodiversity.

express love for the Earth and concern about its future. Willow Smith views the Na'vi as the embodiment of the interconnectedness of all matter/beings in the universe. Smith's depiction of herself as Na'vi and a number of human-alien hybrids shows that her subjective multiplicity and complexity extends beyond personhood. By turning herself into fictional characters, Smith engages in "performing objecthood" in the ways that Uri McMillan (2015) describes in *Embodied Avatars*[65]. McMillan defines objecthood as "a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of subjectivity" (9). McMillan's claim that "the borders between subjectivity and objecthood are not nearly as distinct as we pretend they are...and never have been" (10) clearly applies to how Willow Smith expresses her hybridized identity. Smith's interpretation of herself as a cartoon, alien, or avatar reflects a practice of imagining new/different ways of existing in the world as a Black girl. Therefore, Willow's insertion of herself into these plots is a speculative practice.

Willow Smith also presents extraterrestrial concepts in her song lyrics. For example, in the song "8," Smith says "Let's go back home. This Earth is hard," implying that she comes from another planet. Another track on that same extended play (EP) called "Flowers" provides an even more detailed description of Smith's extraterrestrial identity. In the song's hook, Smith repeats, "We were walking on clouds, but the greys came down and they wiped us all out." "The greys" refers to a species of extraterrestrial beings most commonly depicted in mainstream media – the ones with the grey skin and very large

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[65] In this book, McMillan presents four case studies of Black women who have relied on avatars of themselves in acts of performance. McMillan uses the word avatar to refer to a state in which a person has converted herself from a subject to an agential object. Using this definition, his analysis of avatar embodiment is relevant to Willow Smith's presentation of herself as an avatar, especially since the main character in the movie inhabits an avatar body as an object.

heads and eyes. According to the cosmic genealogy Smith constructs in this song, the greys forced Earthlings from our original homes in space. In the second verse of "Flowers," Smith expresses her desire to be an Atlantean [from Atlantis]. While technically, Atlantis would not be considered extraterrestrial since the myth of Atlantis places the sunken island on Earth, Smith's proclamation still invokes a process of becoming-alien since Atlanteans are mythical creatures. As the song comes to a close, Smith laments the presence of chemtrails[66] noting:

> The government tryna tryna sell them, not help them.
> But the indigos are here; we remembered,
> Remembered how we can all shift the weather
> Because love is the air we breathe, the people we see.
> The realization that we're all in unity.
> So you and me and I and I
> We're the flower.

In this verse, Willow Smith creates distinction between "them" and "the indigos," with "them" referring to humans and the indigos being human-like in physical form but different from humans in terms of emotional and psychic memory. The indigos' elevated intelligence makes them unsusceptible to the government's capitalist schemes. Despite these differences, Smith still believes in the effectiveness (and necessity) of unity and love in the fight against oppression. Overall, these lyrics not only point to Smith's alien origins, but they also espouse similar ideas of disillusionment with Earth that can be seen in the lyrics of other Afrofuturist musicians. For example, J. Griffith Rollefson (2008) notes that Afrofuturist music pioneer Sun Ra held "distrust of the next great ideas of Western progress" because "for Ra, Enlightenment rationality, Western progress, and

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[66] Chemtrail conspiracy theorists believe that the United States government uses aircraft to put toxic chemicals in the atmosphere for purposes of weather control and/or some eventual method of population control.

white supremacy are inseparable" (96). More contemporary artists such as Erykah Badu,

Janelle Monae, and even Andre 3000 (Rambsy 2013) also invoke themes of other-

worldliness as a tool of social commentary and critique. Like her Afrofuturist

predecessors and contemporaries, Willow Smith uses her lyrics to ponder the possibilities

of embracing alien-ness.

Tied to the idea of blackness as an alienating feature, many Afrofuturist works

incorporate dystopia as a primary motif. While mainstream science-fiction works often

conflate dystopia with post-apocalyptic environments, Afrofuturism sees our current

white supremacist world as dystopian. Therefore, Afrofuturist work often functions as a

response to white supremacy. Willow Smith's debut video "Whip My Hair" begins with a

dystopian scene - reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron" - of

children wearing uniforms eating in a school cafeteria. Smith, who does not have on the

white uniform but instead has on bright orange pants and a blue shirt dips her hair in

paint and begins adding color to the room by whipping her hair, and she walks

throughout the school repeating his action until she has painted the whole school. As

Treva B. Lindsey (2013) points out in her analysis of the video, "Through whipping her

hair, [Willow Smith] literally paints the room and its occupants in an array of colors. Her

disruption of the space allows for the cafeteria occupants to become enlivened" (30). In

this way, "the hair whipping becomes a metaphor and a weapon for challenging

conformity and established conventions" (Lindsey 2013, 30). One of the implications

here is that color – both in terms of the scientific color spectrum and in terms of skin

color – changes the landscape of dystopia. While the aspiration to whiteness creates a

stifled environment of suffering, the embrace of color allows for freedom of movement

and expression. This metaphor illustrates Afrofuturist critiques of hegemonic, whitewashed science-fiction and the notion that "Afrofuturism insists that blacks fundamentally *are* the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society" (Morris 2012, 153). Additionally, the "Whip My Hair" video further solidifies Willow Smith's other-worldliness as she does not fit in with the crowd but uses that as her strength.

Given the significance of time in Afrofuturist discourse – as explained earlier in this chapter, the "collapse of the mythic past and future" (Rollefson 2008, 97) is another motif of Afrofuturism. Willow Smith uses visuality to engage in time travel – inserting herself into both past and future contexts. Of all the Afrofuturist themes Willow Smith uses, this one appears most frequently in her photos, music videos, and songs. "Whip My Hair" certainly experiments with themes of time and space, but Smith's second video "21st Century Girl" has more explicit Afrofuturist temporality. In "21st Century Girl," the time travel element manifests as connections between young and old as well as past-present-future and the emergence of new life in a post-apocalyptic setting. The video takes place in a desert and opens with an elderly Black woman (played by Cicely Tyson) talking to herself and stumbling upon a bone in the sand. Thrilled by her discovery, Tyson's character picks the bone up and holds it to her heart; she then places it back in the sand, making a charm from the bone and other crystals and beads she carries with her. Tyson says a prayer and then watches intently as the charm sinks into the sand, creating an earthquake and a hole in the ground. Willow Smith emerges from the hole, and Tyson whispers something in her ear, which is meant to be inaudible to the audience. Then the camera cuts to Willow standing alone in the desert looking around. She grabs a handful

of sand, which turns into a butterfly, and then starts running, presumably to build a new world. Even though the video begins with Willow running through a wasteland by herself, she finds friends – girls of different racial and ethnic backgrounds – and together they raise buildings that were covered by the sand. By the end of the video, they have rebuilt an urban landscape that looks very similar to most metropolises in the present. At the end, Smith whispers into a baby girl's ear (just like the elderly woman whispered into hers), and that baby girl releases a butterfly. This ending signals the cyclical nature of time characteristic of Afrofuturism. Additionally, the video's inclusion of only girls implies that girls will be vital to re-shaping the world for sustainable futures.

Admittedly, the early years of Willow Smith's artistic career were shaped a great deal by her record label. Even though she did have some input in the conceptualization of her music videos, the decisions ultimately came from the record label executives who were trying to brand and market her.[67] Since then, Smith's style (musical, visual, and even philosophical) has changed in such a way that *her own* Afrofuturist expression emerges from her creative practices. For instance, Willow Smith's more recent depictions of Afrofuturist temporality can be seen on her Instagram account. One example is the "Gwee Series," which features two images of Smith standing in front of the Pyramids of Giza and another in front of a waterfall. In all of the pictures, Smith experiments with color, using green and purple tints which give the images a futuristic tone. At the same time, the pyramids connote antiquity while the waterfall depicts an unknown "Enchanted Forest" as Smith indicates in the picture's caption.

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[67] Willow Smith has opened up about the deleterious effects of this pressure and molding. In an episode of "Red Table Talk," a show in which she, Jada Pinkett Smith (her mother), and Adrienne Bandfield-Jones (her grandmother) discuss different topics together, Willow shared that she felt trapped in other people's perceptions and expectations for her after the release of the "Whip My Hair" video.

Figure 18. "Gwee" Series

Willow Smith's "Stay Spaced" series uses a similar visual format as the "Gwee Series" with the main difference being one of them depicts Smith on Earth and the other depicts her among stars and planets, seemingly floating through the universe.

Figure 19. "Stay Spaced" Series

By superimposing her own image onto these backgrounds of the pyramids, the forest, and space, Smith engages in speculative revision of time. Even though the Pyramids of Giza still exist in the present, they represent ancient times and cultures. Furthermore, Smith's caption of the first pyramid picture - "Wilough [*sic*] comes down in her sphere to tell the fallen children her story" – indicates travel through time and space. In many of her songs, which I discuss in more depth later in this chapter, Smith claims cosmic origins and chronicles her experiences of traveling through different dimensions. The notion that she has come to tell "fallen children her story" not only suggests that she is from a different place but also a different time.

In anticipation of her first album *Ardipithecus*,[68] Willow Smith released a series of videos between August and October 2015. While only one of the videos, "Why Don't You Cry," featured a song from the upcoming album, all of them functioned as a preview of Willow's evolution since "Whip My Hair." The first of these videos, "Wit A Indigo," opens with a scene that depicts a group of teenagers hanging out in a public area. When the beat drops, Willow and a few of her friends start dancing as she repeats the hook: "You don't wanna mess with an indigo like that...gettin' all in my face like that." In the first verse, Smith describes her experiences confronting people who don't understand her. Recalling these interactions, Smith (2015) sings:

You walk to me like saying, "What is in your hand right there?"

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[68] In an interview with *The Fader* about her debut album, Willow Smith explains: "Ardipithecus Ramidus is the scientific name of the first hominid bones found on earth. I wanted to name my musical compilation after it because, while I was making these songs I was in such a transitional state. Digging deep in the soil of my heart and finding bits and pieces of my ancient self that tell stories, which end up being the lyrics to the songs. *Ardipithecus* is my first album in my entire career and it makes me feel so blessed to be able to share my evolution with the LightEaters as I continue excavating my inner worlds." Owen Myers, "Willow Smith Releases Surprise Debut Album Ardipithecus," *The Fader*, December 11, 2015, https://www.thefader.com/2015/12/11/willow-smith-releases-surprise-debut-album-iardipithecusi.

> I say. I say. I say they're good vibe generators.
> I'm like why are you judging me with your scrunched up nose?

Even though Smith never explicitly explains what these "good vibe generators" are, she provides enough context to illustrate that non-indigos find them weird. Brushing off the judgement, Smith warns "you don't wanna mess with an indigo like that." Along with references to other dimensions, Willow Smith invokes Afrofuturist visuality in this video by manipulating the colors to create a psychedelic and somewhat cartoonish vibe and filter. While the video takes place in Los Angeles, the colors and camera work distort the scenery, resulting in a setting that is simultaneously familiar and unrecognizable, making "Wit A Indigo" a speculative vision of what Los Angeles – and by extension other present day locales – *could* be.

Figure 20. Still shots from "Wit A Indigo"

Willow Smith's two other pre-album music videos continue her style of Afrofuturist visuality. In both the videos for "Why Don't You Cry" and "F-Q-C #7," Smith uses a technique of visual overlapping that indicates a manipulation of space and time. The plot for "Why Don't You Cry" has three main contexts: Willow Smith at home before a performance, Smith backstage before and after the performance, and the actual performance. The performance scenes have been edited to show the layers of Smith's

movement as she dances on stage. Additionally, the backstage scenes feature two versions of Smith. One version wears a NASA suit and sits on a stool looking in a mirror; she appears distressed. The other Willow Smith is like a ghost who comforts the sad version of herself. This apparition – whether from the past or the future – through her interactions with present-tense Willow Smith shows a merging of time.

Figure 21. Layered motion in "Why Don't You Cry."

Figure 22. "Ghost" Willow and live Willow.

A similar spatio-temporal layering happens in "F-Q-C #7." As the video opens, Smith runs through a meadow, and then the camera flashes to her sitting cross-legged on a river

bank. The video continuously switches back and forth between these nature scenes and scenes with Willow standing, multiplied against a white background. In both of these videos Smith visualizes the concept of parallel universes.

Figure 23. Still shots from "F-Q-C #7."

Even though Smith's music videos and Instagram photos provide a visual element to her song lyrics, her songs can also stand on their own as Afrofuturist musings. Most of Willow Smith's lyrics make references to outer space and the inherent divinity of nature, but her experimentation with sound itself places her within an Afrofuturist sonic paradigm since "sound and sonic have been an inherent part of Afrofuturism" (Steinskog 2018, 3), and "many of the diaspora's most interesting musical acts…exemplify the range and multiplicities of Afrofuturism's existence as 'a much more varied and complex set of relationships between domination and subordination, whiteness and color, ideology and reality, technology and race.'" (Brooks 2017, 69). Much of the literature on Afrofuturist music focuses on a few key artists including Sun Ra, George Clinton, and more recently, Janelle Monae. These analyses focus on the electric vibes of the music, specifically noting how Sun Ra's innovations in jazz laid the foundation for George Clinton's funk,

and Janelle Monae's android aesthetic. As much as Afrofuturist musical styles are about

developing a distinct sound, they are also about using sound experientially (Womack

2013). Therefore, Willow Smith's particular style of Afrofuturist music is characterized

by both the other-worldly themes she covers in her lyrics and the ways that she plays

around with sound. One of the most notable ways that Smith experiments with sound is

through her use of cacophony. Returning to the song "8," Smith ends the track by singing

over what sounds like a conversation she is having with herself. These types of

cacophonous sounds are even more prominent on her debut album *Ardipithecus*. The

album's opening song, "Organization and Classification," combines electric guitar

sounds with a machine-like pulsating beat.[69] As the song progresses, both the volume of

the music and Smith's voice become more intense. This intensity peaks during the last

hook of the song when Smith switches from saying "I said it" to "We said it." At this

point in the song, not only is Smith's voice louder, but multiple voices are audible. Smith

uses a similar multitude of voices in the next track, "Natives of the Windy Forest." The

song starts out with the sounds of an acoustic guitar. In the opening of the song, Willow

chants in Na'vi, and there are multiple voices chanting at once. Some of them are

incomprehensible. During the second hook, Willow sings in Na'vi, but there are at least

two other voice tracks layered under the hook: screaming and what sounds like another

chant.

 Willow Smith's use of cacophony is a form of sonic rebellion, which has been

particularly important to defining herself as an artist. Musical harmony requires different

instruments and voices to come together in a way that flows and soothes. Musical

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[69] It's very similar to the sound used in "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails.

harmony invokes pleasure. As anyone who has ever been part of a band or orchestra can verify, creating harmony not only requires working together, but it also requires that some instruments or voices be more prominent than others. In other words, harmony requires compromise. Cacophony on the other hand, especially the way that Willow Smith deploys it in her music, reflects a refusal of compromise. Rather than letting one instrument shine above the others, Smith layers sounds and voices in such a way that we hear all of the sounds at once. In these cases, it is less important that we find the sounds pleasing than that they are transmitted with equal force. Smith's use of cacophony functions as a resistance to (genre) conformity. Generally, cacophonous sounds are unsettling, which make them hard (if not impossible) to ignore or downplay. In this way, cacophony forces people to stop and take notice, and this is especially true of how Willow uses this feature in her songs. Not only do the competing sounds force listeners to pay attention, but they demand a certain level of concentration in order to decipher the lyrics and messages. Therefore, Smith's use of cacophony inspires thought, which fits into her broader ambition of "elevat[ing] the consciousness of the people" (Williams 2016) through her music.

Smith's experimentation with cacophonous musical layers defines her first album, but the evolution of her musical style over time is also indicative of her placement within an Afrofuturist mold. While evolution tends to imply a linear progression, Willow Smith's approach to her music is cyclical; she describes her second album as a return to instrumental music.[70] In the time between her first and second albums, Smith released an

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[70] In an interview for *The Fader*, Willow Smith says: "I'm just trying to get my music theory game up. My parents told me when I was younger, "You need to be taking a guitar class or a piano class," and I never did it but as I'm growing and realizing that I enjoy real music, I have to learn the science of it in order to really know it. That's what I'm on — just trying to learn the science of my art…Anyone can go on their computer

EP on Soundcloud[71] called *Mellifluous* (2016). As the name implies, *Mellifluous* creates a stark contrast to the sonic rebellion of *Ardipithecus*; Smith tags the EP as a "transcendental lullaby." All three of the songs have slow melodies powered by the soft, yet forceful sounds of an electric-acoustic guitar. Smith's very use of this hybrid instrument mirrors her overall approach to self-definition and expression.   In some ways *Mellifluous* transitions Willow Smith's listeners to the sound of her next album, titled *The 1st* as the guitar-centric melodies of *Mellifluous* resemble many of songs on the new album. At the same time, *The 1st* does not have one distinct style or genre but instead operates as an amalgam of Willow's experimentations with learning how to play various instruments. For instance, the album's first track, "A Boy," uses classical string instruments such as the violin and cello while the second track, "An Awkward Life of an Awkward Girl," is a one-minute piano overture. Another song on the album titled "Oh No!!!" begins with acapella singing followed by heavy percussion. Eventually, other instruments become audible, but the percussion carries the song.

Throughout *The 1st*, Willow Smith deploys a different sonic style than *Ardipithecus,* which has more computer/synthesizer sounds that are readily recognized as Afrofuturist. However, Willow's dependence on live instruments instead of the computer-generated sounds that dominated *Ardipithecus* represents a redirection rather than an abandonment of sonic Afrofuturism. This redirection happens in two primary ways. First, Smith still uses electricity (i.e. electric guitars), which is a key component of

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and bring up a drum kit and make a beat. But it takes so much more time and concentration to sit down and play an instrument. To feel the pain in your fingers and the vibration on your chest. To hold your music and make it. It's so different to feel the vibrations of those strings, there's nothing like it and that's real music."

[71] Soundcloud is a social media platform that allows artists to share their music, and people can listen for free.

Afrofuturist sound. Second, in many songs on *The 1ˢᵗ*, Smith creates a New Age[72] sound

that invokes a "historical futurism," which seems paradoxical initially but reflects the

aspirations of New Age music, which rose to popularity during the 1970s. Ultimately, in

addition to sound, Smith holds on to the extraterrestrial themes/tropes in her lyrics, noting

how she "come[s] from a cluster of super bright stars" ("Boy") and wants "to go where

the E.T.s are phoning home" ("Ho'ihi Interlude"). By combining speculative futuristic

lyrics with simplistic instrumental sounds that could represent the past, Willow Smith

still fits squarely within an Afrofuturist aesthetic.

Ultimately, Willow Smith uses visuality and music to explore alternate realities.

Her visual and musical styles simultaneously resist categorization and invoke Afrofuturist

tropes. While Willow Smith's Afrofuturist expressions contribute to the overall creativity

and uniqueness of her art, these expressions have significance beyond Smith as an

individual artist.

Willow's Afrofuturism and Its Implication for Black Girl Futures

In a TED Talk on Afrofuturism, artist and activist Ingrid LeFleur (2011) says: "I

see Afrofuturism as a way to encourage experimentation, reimagine identities, and

activate liberation." With such potentiality, the importance of Willow Smith's

Afrofuturism extends far beyond naming her artistic style. Through speculation and

revisionism, Willow Smith's visual and musical expressions help elucidate the things that

must happen to ensure Black girl futures.

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[72] In his online guide, "Survey of American Popular Music," professor and former music critic Frank Hoffman describes New Age Music as an umbrella term encompasses a number of subgenres including folk and instrumental music, which Willow Smith experiments with on *The 1ˢᵗ*. The full text can be found at: http://www.shsu.edu/~lis_fwh/book/index.htm#other.

Willow Smith uses her art to construct her own Afrofuturist biomythography. Audre Lorde coined the term biomythography to describe her book *Zami* because there was "no genre that will accommodate all [she] wants to put into language" (Pearl 311). More than autobiography or memoir, biomythography incorporates the term "myth" because "myths provide language for what is unknown, frightening or threatening, or otherwise inarticulable and unexplainable" (Pearl 315). Therefore, biomythography is not only a descriptor but an act of creation. Like Audre Lorde, Willow Smith uses artistic expression as a way of embracing her multiple identities; she is an indigo, time-traveler, and shapeshifter who is both human and not of this world. Smith (2015) constructs a cosmic origin in which "[her] soul sits tidy in [her] being/[She's] all-seeing, all-feeling, all-creating" ("RANDOMSONG"), and she has the power to "[make] stars and galaxies and planets" (Smith 2015, "Heart"). By situating her origins in the cosmos, Smith frees herself to think in ways that are discouraged by the oppressive systems that characterize Earth. While some might dismiss Willow Smith's self-proclamations and definitions as fantasy, her imaginative and creative dexterity will be required to make room for free(er) Black girl futures because "the imagination is a tool of resistance" (Womack 2013, 24) that leads to creation.

One of the key features of Willow Smith's cosmic identity involves traveling through space-time dimensions. In "F-Q-C #8," Smith sings, "Oh, they say how I was gone for a long time/But for me it was five minutes/Aye, that's relativity for you." In both music and images, Smith expresses her love for physics and science in general. Aside from showing evidence of her interest in physics and the import of STEM training in girls' education, Smith's assertions about space-time manipulation are significant to

Black girl futures because her understanding of space-time, while informed by traditional

physics, integrates other ways of knowing that do not necessarily conform to textbook

knowledge. For example, in "Cave Wall," when Smith says "Paint me in black on your

cave wall...paint me in ash on your cave wall," this reference to hieroglyphics signals a

reverence for communication systems that do not necessarily depend on written or

spoken words but symbology instead. In the song "Cycles," Willow says, "We're the

indigo. We're the indigos/and we're all going to another place/not tryna find another

name/not tryna get in another body/I'm going to ascension baby/you cannot stop me."

Like Willow Smith's other references to being an indigo, this song lyric confirms that

indigos utilize alternate epistemologies. At the end of the song, Willow says, "But I fall

with some Atlanteans, Nephilims[73], the Martians and some Anunnaki[74]/we all fall." By

fusing together ancient, mythical, divine, and extraterrestrial beings, Willow collapses

past-present-future and shows how time repeats itself, hence the title of the song.

Therefore, Smith's relation to time fits within the Afrofuturist conception of time as

cyclical. In the last song on her sophomore album, "Romance," Smith says:

> I'm imagining a different history.
> Where men and women stay equal
> In the eyes of society
> Where we don't condemn different people
> For exercising their freedom
> Where sex stays sacred
> An act of divine love
> And not perverted into violence and lust
> Where we still honor our mother
> In all of her burgeoning light
> Where we do not kill our brothers
> Or rape our sisters
> Or enslave any life.

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[73] This word is often interpreted as "fallen angels."
[74] Mesopotamian deities.

These lyrics illustrate the revisionist goals of Willow Smith's art. One of the reasons why Smith's approach to time is so powerful is because of its refusal to accept linear progression as the best and only way to move through space-time. This refusal "provides a counter to the dispossession from time and a stay against time's acceleration" (Barthold 1981, 22). Smith's use of the present progressive tense ("I am imagining") functions as a practice of both speculation and revision. In the sense of grammatical structure, the present progressive tense can describe what is happening right now *and* what will happen in the future. Smith's act of imagining in this instance harkens back to Tina Campt's (2017) Black feminist futurity, which "is the power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be. It's a politics of pre-figuration that involves living the future now—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present" (17). Through these lyrics, Smith shows us part of what *must* happen for Black girls to be free.

In addition to using lyrics to construct origin stories and revise (future) history, Smith uses sound itself as a liberatory force. As mentioned in the previous section, Smith's use of cacophony has a generative quality. By layering sounds and voices, she both amplifies and multiplies her voice. Processes of amplification and multiplication will be critical to creating and sustaining Black girl futures for the following reasons. First, in order to combat attempts at erasure, Black girls will need avenues through which their voices can be heard. Not only will Black girls need to vocalize (and otherwise document) their experiences, but their stories will need to be shared. Ultimately, these processes will contribute to Black girls' making their own demands on their own terms.

Through both lyrics and sounds, Willow Smith's music, while typically classified as alternative, is fluid and ever-evolving, required characteristics for sustaining Black girl futures. Returning to Susana Morris' (2012) theorization, Afrofuturist feminism is a project that critiques and destabilizes. In order to build a new world in which Black girls are free, we have to first name the obstacles to their liberation. Once we have named those obstacles, we must figure out what kinds of damage they cause (critiquing) and then eradicate them (destabilizing). Instead of renovating the "master's house" (Lorde 1984), we have to tear it down altogether and build something anew.[75] Willow Smith's music exemplifies continuous destabilization by refusing to embody one specific genre or style. Black girl futures will depend on this type of destabilization not only for dismantling current systems of oppression but also for adapting future social structures to be the most ethical and just for whatever conditions we create.

Along with dissolving categories in terms of musical genre, Willow Smith's sonics and visuality highlight queer sensibilities that will be integral to Black girl futures. In addition to the movie *Avatar*, Willow Smith likes to present herself as part of Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe*, which have become known as queer cartoons (Jane 2015, Dunn 2016). *Adventure Time*, which debuted in 2010, centers Jake (a dog) and Finn (a human) and their adventures in the Land of Ooo. In addition to its quirky animation style, the show has become famous in part because of its approach to gender and sexuality representation. *Adventure Time*'s protagonists Jake and Finn "are part of an expansive ensemble cast of characters who are anything but stereotypical and who populate a program which subverts many traditional gender-related paradigms"

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[75] Thank you to Lydia Kelow-Bennett for pointing out that world-breaking is a key first step in world-making.

(Jane 2015, 235). As media scholar Emma Jane notes, "there is good evidence to support 'queer' as a descriptor for *Adventure Time*" (241). One of the show's most obvious portrayals of queer relationships and identity comes from the "lesbian relationship hinted at between Bubblegum and Marceline—a bond celebrated by queer activists as providing an accurate, relatable and sensitive representation of female friendship and romance, as well as an 'understated, un-tokenized' representation of a homosexual partnership" (Jane 2015, 240).

Like *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, created by Rebecca Sugar, has been celebrated for its "unapologetically queer" (Pladek 503) subject matter. The show revolves around main character, Steven, who is "half-human and half-Gem" and whose family consists mostly of "alien guardians" (Pladek 501). *Steven Universe* addresses genderqueer identities in a number of ways; "one major character is the literal and metaphorical embodiment of a lesbian relationship, and almost no one in its central family is related by blood" (Thurm 2017). In addition to the "safer" portrayal of lesbian relationships, *Steven Universe* shows "other, less often represented queer identities" and "provides us with a framework to investigate how trans (and more precisely, agender and genderqueer) identities and experiences cannot only function but also thrive within the genre boundaries of the fantasy cartoon" (Dunn 2016, 44). One example of how *Steven Universe* deals with gender fluidity happens in an episode where Steven and his friend Connie fuse into one form called Stevonnie who uses they/them pronouns. The show also uses the concepts of gem-fusion to show polyamorous relationships. In a *Rolling Stones* article about the vast fan base that *Steven Universe* has acquired, Eric Thurm (2017) states that the show "has become a lifeline for many LGBTQ teens and young adults." By

using queer cartoons as the lens for "animating" herself, Smith challenges normative restrictions on identity formation, especially in relation to Black girlhood, and any truly liberatory future for Black girls will have to be queer because normativity is inherently restrictive.

Overall, Willow Smith's sonic and visual expression prioritize the interconnectedness of human beings and matter, signifying the importance of coalition building and environmental justice. The electricity that she often invokes corresponds to the need for continuous galvanization in the service of creating a better world for Black girls.

Conclusion

In her own right, Willow Smith has blossomed from a vibrant preteen whipping her hair into a philosopher of Afrofuturism. Using both visuality and music, Smith deploys Afrofuturist tropes and ideas to imagine and create new worlds. The Afrofuturist themes in Willow Smith's visual art and music speak for themselves, but her transition as an artist in and of itself has implications for Black girl futures. As Willow Smith has gained more control over her image and creative expression, she has also been able to grow as a cultural producer and theorist. This evolution is significant to Black girl futures because it demonstrates the balance that we must achieve between advocating for Black girls and letting them create what they want and need. Ultimately, Willow Smith lays a foundation for Black feminist futurity, showing us that the things which will have had to happen to ensure Black girl futures will have to be constructed with Black girls at the helm.

CONCLUSION: THE URGENCY OF BLACK GIRLHOOD STUDIES

This project started with the questions: How do Black girls use digital technologies to contribute to and intervene in conversations about race, gender, and sexuality? What do these contributions show us about Black girls' lives and how they construct discourses of Black girlhood? To answer these questions, I employed a mixed methodology using a combination of historical analysis, case studies, virtual ethnography, interviews, and focus groups in order to discuss a wide range of Black girl identities and cultural production. The project's main argument is that Black girls' digital media productions reveal their conceptualizations of race, gender, and sexuality, speak to how they navigate and create spaces through cultural production, and offer important insight into broader conversations about Black liberation.

The first chapter traces a genealogy of Black girls' participation in media by putting three case studies of contemporary media activism in conversation with the historical development of Black girlhood and Black women's advocacy around Black girlhood. Discourses of Black girlhood evolved alongside the development of childhood psychology as a field, a field that did not center the needs/ideas of girls in general and Black girls especially. Therefore, a robust understanding of how the concept of childhood has been constructed in the United States has to include the advocacy of Black women for the safety and protection of Black girls. Even though Black women played a vital role in organizing on behalf of Black girls, Black girls have historically used the media available to them at the time to share their own ideas. Printed as a magazine geared toward uplifting Black children, *The Brownies' Book* was one early Black publication (in the timeline of print newspapers and magazines) that created a space for Black girls to

participate in media. Offering glimpses into their lives and worldviews, Black girls

submitted letters, literature, and news articles to *The Brownies' Book*. Given Black girls'

historical media participation, it makes sense that the increased access offered by digital

technologies would shape Black girls' media engagement, giving them slightly more

control over the production and distribution of their content. Even though publications

such as *The Brownies' Book* gave Black girls a platform to share their experiences, the

reach of these print media forms does not compare to that of the Internet. Using case

studies – The Art Hoe Collective, The Melanin Diary, and the #1000BlackGirlBooks

Campaign – the chapter shows how Black girls appropriate the Internet toward self-

expression and activism. Exploring these case studies in conjunction with a history of

Black girls' media shows how Black girls' participation in new forms of media is rooted

in a genealogy of Black girl advocacy. In fact, Black girls' participation in Internet media

could be seen as an extension of early media-based self-definition projects such as *The*

Brownies' Book. Therefore, the Internet – while not a panacea by any means – offers an

avenue of access for Black girls (and youth in general) to share their thoughts, ideas, and

experiences. Black girls' everyday lives as expressed through their social media content

can offer insight into how the Internet can be used toward social justice aims.

Moving from the histories and case studies presented in the first chapter, the

second chapter shows how Black girls have their own ways of communicating that fall

into what I call Black girl semiotics. Using the social media profiles of celebrity Black

girls, the chapter explains Black girl semiotics as an affective system of communication

that highlights key components of everyday Black girlhood. In the chapter's opening, I

contextualize Black girl semiotics within Black affective theories, noting how Black

scholars had been grappling with affect long before the "affective turn" in mainstream academic discourse. Through analysis of the aesthetic and affective valences of Skai Jackson, Yara Shahidi, and Amandla Stenberg's social media content, I identify key characteristics of Black girl semiotics in terms of style and posturing, showing the spatial components of Black girl semiotics. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the deployment of Black girl semiotics allows Black girls to control and produce narratives, particularly within digital media platforms in ways that undermine processes of unmirroring. Furthermore, Black girl semiotics aids in processes of self-definition and elucidates Black girls' subjective liminality. Ultimately, Black girl semiotics has implications for how Black girls control space and time in insurgent ways.

Shifting gears from the deliberate activism of the first chapter and the oftentimes staged visuality of the celebrity girls in the second chapter, Chapter 3 focuses on the mundane digital productions of everyday girls. This chapter details and analyzes my interactions with middle and high school aged Black girls through both site-specific and virtual ethnography. The site-based work involved participant-observation and focus groups with girls in Richmond, Virginia (the title of this chapter comes from one of these conversations) while the virtual ethnography involves me analyzing the Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube content of Black girls in different locations throughout the United States. I use these interactions to uncover what Black girls' digital practices reveal about their everyday experiences and how their subjective conceptualizations of race and gender help to construct discourses and cartographies of Black girlhood. In the first section of the chapter, I describe the multi-layered (physical, digital, and conceptual) nature of Black girls' geographies, noting that any discourse of Black girlhood must

consider Black girls' relations to space. The chapter then goes on to explain how social media provides apt ground for exploring how these spatial layers overlap. What emerges from the everyday social media posts of the Black girls I discuss in this chapter are (oftentimes fairly sophisticated) observations and critiques of the social worlds they navigate.

Despite the restrictions that Black girls face within each of these spatial layers, Black girls position themselves as creators and experts of Black girlhood discourses through media production. While Black girls use digital media to share their stories, they are not unaware of surveillance, and they use digital dissemblance to counter the hyper-surveillance of online environments. In addition to providing details of their lives, Black girls use digital media platforms to build support networks. The chapter concludes that while Black girls' social media content reveals some of their everyday activities, it also shows how they place themselves within various social contexts and illuminates their geographic configurations of physical, digital, and conceptual spaces, hence the urgency of Black girls documenting and telling their own stories.

The final chapter combines interpretations of the past with expressions of the present to discuss Black girl futures. More specifically, Chapter 4 situates the music and visual art of Willow Smith within an Afrofuturist framework to show how her creative work functions as a departure point for thinking about Black girl futures. I begin the discussion by identifying some of the key themes/tropes of Afrofuturism, how Willow Smith utilizes these tropes, and what Willow Smith's Afrofuturism shows us about the possibilities for Black girl futures more broadly. Through both music and visual media, Willow Smith demonstrates her Afrofuturist philosophy, embracing alien-ness, traveling

through space-time, and generally exploding limitations. Afrofuturism provides fruitful ground for thinking about Black girl futures, and Willow Smith's Afrofuturist visual and musical styles exemplify of the kinds of work that will be required for creating and sustaining Black girl futures. For instance, the way she experiments with sound and color reflect a spirit of tinkering that will be necessary for carving out Black girl futures. Other characteristics of Willow Smith's work that speak to the "grammar of Black feminist futurity" (Campt 2017) include creation, revisionism/recovery, as well as amplification and multiplication of Black girl voices. Willow Smith's evolution as an artist not only shows the adaptability and flexibility of Afrofuturism but also that we must allow Black girls to take the lead on deciding what they want and need their futures to be.

Implications of the Study

The observations and analyses presented throughout this dissertation have broader theoretical and methodological implications for Black girlhood studies. As a theory of communication, Black girl semiotics intervenes in media studies and Black girlhood studies, prompting new conversations about the impact of digital technologies in the lives of youth and methods of intragroup coding communicating among marginalized populations. Tied to the implications of Black girls' communication, digital dissemblance also presents fertile theoretical ground, especially in relation to issues of race and digital surveillance. The theoretical implications of both Black girl semiotics and digital dissemblance are significant because they speak to insurgent and/or fugitive communications. As digital platforms become more co-opted as surveillance instruments for the State, groups that are more susceptible to dangerous material consequences of this surveillance will need ways to communicate within these systems that do not raise

suspicion since opting out is not feasible for everyone, especially people in marginalized populations who often depend on digital support systems to supplement (or replace) the lack of support they may encounter in their offline interactions.

The project also outlines a complex understanding of Black girl spatialities, especially noting how Black girls' engagements with digital technologies highlight the multi-layered nature of their geographies. The societal restrictions placed upon Black girls forces them to be creative with their approaches to space. In order to better understand the significance of their space-making practices, we have to have a deeper understanding of what constitutes Black girl spaces. Even though Black girls' space-making practices are specific to their experiences as Black girls, they have broader implications for Black people in general. Looking at how Black girls make spaces in which they thrive can offer insight into ways of making space in environments where Black people are increasingly pushed out due to forces such as gentrification, school expulsion, and white folks calling the police on Black people for merely existing in spaces where they appear not to "belong."

Finally, the project ventures into theorizing Black girl futures. In many ways race women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were prescient in their arguments that protecting Black girls was the key to racial uplift. They knew that the fate of Black people as a whole would be tied up with that of Black girls specifically. Of course, some of these early visions of Black girl importance were rooted in limited understandings of gender roles (i.e. Black girls would grow up to become Black women in charge of child-rearing), but the ways in which Black girls have continued to make their voices heard and engage with their communities demonstrate Black girls' role in liberation projects way

beyond their assumed futures as mothers/caretakers. Therefore, conversations of sustainability – whether in terms of the environment, education, or laws – are incomplete without discussions of Black girl futures.

In addition to expanding to the theoretical breadth within gender and media studies, this project also has methodological implications for humanities and social science fields. First, the project demonstrates how the concept of archival data must be considered broadly. While the project certainly relied on some "traditional" archival material such as old magazines and meeting notes preserved in microfilm, it also makes use of the archival nature of social media applications such as Instagram and YouTube. At the same time, reliance on Internet archives also brings up the limitations of working with "ephemeral" media. For instance, even though Instagram and YouTube provide platforms for people to archive their media, people also have the freedom to erase these archives at any time they wish. Additionally, platforms like Snapchat only make content available for twenty-four hours. As these types of social media become more a part of our research in communications, it will be important to come up with efficient methods of data collection. While a number of software programs exist to collect data from Twitter (e.g. Documenting the Now and The Wayback Machine), we need more tools that are designed specifically for visual platforms.

Figuring out how to collect and store digital data also leads to discussions of ethics, especially when doing research with marginalized populations. It is important for marginalized groups to have minoritarian spaces where they do not have to worry about the gaze of dominant culture. Therefore, doing research about and within these kinds of spaces requires a balance between being informative and not compromising the nature of

the space as an escape. Finding this balance is especially important when researching

with Black girls (and children in general to some extent) who already have so many

spaces which are either unavailable to them or pre-defined for them.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While overall, the research methodologies employed helped to answer the

questions about Black girls' digital media productions, there were a few limitations. The

most significant limitation in terms of collecting data stemmed from the volatile nature of

social media. In this regard, Snapchat proved to be the most challenging platform for

collecting information. There are two main reasons for this. First, information disappears

from Snapchat after twenty-four hours. So whatever videos or pictures someone posted as

a part of a Snapchat story disappears to that person's followers after twenty-four ours.

The other reason is because Snapchat sends the user messages about when a person

watches their stories more than once and if someone takes a screenshot of images. While

I was only accessing publicly available account information, I still avoided taking

screenshots of images or re-watching videos more than once because I did not want girls

to block me based on what they might view as suspicious activity. While Snapchat

presents the biggest challenge in this regard, Instagram and YouTube can be similarly

tricky. Even though Instagram and YouTube are more archival, when a user decides to

delete content, that presents a challenge for collecting data. With Instagram, I maintained

screenshots of images that I wanted to use in support of my research. However, with

YouTube, unless videos are available for download (which many of them are not), if a

person deletes their videos, the record is lost or at the very least difficult for the average

researcher to access (which raises questions of ethics if a researcher has to use hacker techniques to find the scrubbed material).

Another limitation of this study has to do with the nature of social media itself. Even though the platforms that I studied here potentially extend the reach of Black girls' creative expression, they are still corporate platforms. Therefore, once these applications no longer exist, neither will the girls' content – unless they have it stored in other places where their content belongs to them exclusively. While this reality does not present a conflict in terms of data collection in the short term, it does present a number of questions about sustainable platforms for documenting and archiving Black girls' lives. Finally, the project does not include an optimal amount of geographic representation. The site-based ethnography only included girls living in Richmond, Virginia. While their specific neighborhoods were diverse, talking to girls in other regions would have given more nuance to the spatial analysis. Given more time and funding, the focus groups could be expanded to include girls from a wider range of geographic regions (though still within the United States).

Based on the outcomes of the project, there are several recommendations for future research. First, the field of Black girlhood studies could benefit from historiographies of Black girls' media production. In addition to looking at Black girls' contributions to print media, this might also include an oral history of Black girls who have participated in youth media programs and how they perceive those programs in relation to current digital technologies that depend on user-generated content. Along these lines, another direction for future research involves creating more conversations between alternative media discourse and Black feminism. The work of Art Hoe

Collective, Chanice Lee, and Marley Dias show how Black feminist and Black girlhood studies frameworks can inform the field of alternative media studies and vice versa. More work can be done to highlight the intersections of these fields of study and their importance to Cultural Studies broadly.

Given the serious material consequences of increased surveillance, more research needs to be conducted on digital surveillance and strategies of redirecting/circumventing surveillance, especially among Black youth. We have seen how people have been targeted for participation in Black Lives Matter, so as social justice movements become increasingly engaged in digital means of communication, it will be important to track how this increased surveillance affects Black activists. Tied to conversations of surveillance and the corporate nature of social media platforms, future research on Black girls' digital media productions might explore the role of branding in Black girls' social media content in more depth. To some extent, we all engage in a form of branding through participation on social media, whether we want to be seen as "keeping it real" or "woke" or "professional." Future research on Black girls' digital media production might seek to explain how self-realization of their social media branding efforts and discuss how this concept impacts their relationship to or understanding of social issues (especially race, gender, and sexuality).

Finally, more research needs to be done into how Black girls perceive their creations/cultural products and whether/how they see themselves as intervening in dominant representations of Black girls. As is the case with every area of Black girlhood studies, we need more understandings of Black girls' cultural production from their own perspectives.

Listen to Black Girls

Black girls are the past, the present, and the future, and they have a great deal to tell us (whether implicitly or explicitly) about how to make the world better – for all of us. We can learn about perseverance from Black girls like Mari Copeny ("Little Miss Flint") who, at the age of 11, has spent the last four years reminding us that Flint, Michigan still does not have clean water. She raises money through t-shirt sales and encourages people to donate water and school supplies for children in Flint. When Marvel's *Black Panther* was released, Copeny raised over $15,000 so that Flint children could see the movie for free because she believes that Flint children still deserve to have fun and that they "are awesome and can be a hero too."[76] We can learn about self-love from eleven-year-old Kheris Rogers who stood up to children bullying her about her dark skin and created the clothing line "Flexin' in My Complexion." Since launching the line, Rogers has participated in New York Fashion Week and secured an advertising campaign with Nike. We can learn from Black girls in our families, schools, and communities about a number of qualities, activities, and philosophies that will help get us free. But we have to make room for Black girls' voices and stories, trust that they are the experts of their own lives, and listen to what they tell us.

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[76] Allie Gemmil, "Little Miss Flint Announces Her Own #BlackPantherChallenge GoFundMe," Teen Vogue, Februrary 1, 2018, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/little-miss-flint-announces-black-panther-challenge-gofundme.

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