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“We Are Free to Be Who We Choose:” Black Girlhood, Freedom-Making, & the Aesthetics
of Refusal

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Feminist Studies

by

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June 2019

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May 2019

“We Are Free to Be Who We Choose:” Black Girlhood, Freedom-Making, & the Aesthetics
of Refusal

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by

Amoni Thompson-Jones

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I would like to thank my partner, Casey, for his continuous love and support.

This is for Black girls everywhere.

ABSTRACT

“We Are Free to Be Who We Choose.” Black Girlhood, Freedom-Making, & the Aesthetics of Refusal

by

Amoni Thompson-Jones

This MA thesis uses ethnographic interviews and visual analysis to explore how Black girls make use of movement, language, and art in their efforts to position a subjectivity of their own making. I analyze interviews and visual/performance art made by girls in the after-school program of a nonprofit center in Atlanta, GA, to demonstrate how Black girls contend with narratives of respectability and logics of surveillance imposed inside the program, and in the girls’ lives outside of it. I examine the meanings associated with the term ‘ratchet’ and how Black girls mobilize the term as an aesthetic of refusal through nail art, dance, and altar art. Black girls use these art forms to consider self-representation and the makings of freedom. I conclude that Black girls’ aesthetic practices of girlhood generate ontologies and aesthetics of refusal.

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Introduction

“That’s my teeeeeeam. That’s my team. We keep it tiiiiiiiiight like denim jeans.”¹ I walk into a Black girl chorus on a Friday afternoon. Faces filled with excitement and unadulterated joy, anxious to collaborate with each other on a dance routine to the sounds of a Supa Peach² jam. “Miss Moni, we’ll come get you when we done so you can see.” Fridays meant no homework, longer snack breaks, special treats, and more time to coordinate dance routines. Dance routines that allow them to really feel the music and turn up with each other. In recognizing the *creative potential of Black girlhood* (Brown 2013, 4) as an organizing framework that centers Black girls’ creative expression as a source of knowledge and idea-making, I argue that quotidian modes of leisure and creative expression amongst Black girls can tell us how Black girls are responding to racialized gender normativity and their precarious status as partial citizens.³ The moments I highlight in this thesis demonstrate Black girl ontologies of refusal.

The experiences of Black girls are often excluded from mainstream discourse. This is critical in a moment in which an enduring narrative of upward and social mobility for Black communities is still articulated through the experiences of Black men and boys and the rhetoric of failed Black masculinity (Cox, 2015; White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2014; Chetty et al, 2018). As a growing multidisciplinary field, Black girlhood studies continues to uncover the lives of Black girls in places where many academic fields have

¹A lyric from the song “Run It” by Supa Peach, an Atlanta-based teen Black girl rapper.

² See footnote above.

³ For further scholarship on the idea of partial citizenship and structural violence see Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

rendered their bodies nonexistent.⁴ Grounded in a Black feminist praxis, Black girlhood studies is, according to Aria Halliday, a “scholarly home for Black girls’ perspectives, sensibilities, and experiences, in the US and abroad” (2017, 66). It has become the central field to parse out the unique experiences Black girls encounter with state-sanctioned violence. Contemporary Black freedom struggles, such as the Movement for Black Lives, have garnered a movement around confronting iterations of anti-Blackness and state violence enacted against Black people within the US (Lindsey 2016). Organizations such as Black Lives Matter and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement has called upon the US to confront and divest from its anti-Black practices and to understand the conditions in which any Black person can be “killed by police or vigilante every 24 hrs.” (Lindsey 2016). However, the perspectives of Black men and boys seem to be the only way in which the realities of this violence are made legible. The narratives and experiences of Black women and girls are largely invisibilized within mainstream discourses. Movements such as #SayHerName have mobilized to address such erasure of Black women and girls and to articulate their distinct encounters with racial and gender terror (African American Policy Forum 2015, Lindsey 2016, Williams, 2016). However, Black girls and women continue to be excluded from narratives around race and policing.

This invisibility within media discourse of racial justice is also tied to the erasure of Black women and girls in scholarship. (Lewis et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2002) There have

⁴ In “The Poetry of Vesta Stephens: In Search of Black Girls’ Gardens” by LaKisha Simmons, Simmons queries, “how do we trace the intellectual and artistic explorations of Black women and girls whose lives have been disregarded in their own time and then again by record-keepers and archivists?” Additionally, studies researching the effects of racism on Black children still regard Black girls as an afterthought to the experiences of Black boys. See: Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R Jones, and Sonya Porter. “Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective,” 2018.

been a growing number of scholars who have pushed us to consider the dynamics of race, gender, and age as they pertain to the unique conditions of Black girlhood. School has been identified by these scholars as a site that produces and perpetuates violence against Black girls. (Annamma et al., 2016, Brown, 2008, 2013; Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011, Evans-Winters 2005, Morris, 2016, Shange 2019) In February of 2019, videos surfaced of a Black girl in Pennsylvania named Dazmin Muriel who was violently restrained by security officers in Hazelton High School. Footage circulated the internet of four resource officers punching her in the legs, kicking her repeatedly, and grabbing her ponytail. In 2015, a South Carolina deputy grabbed a Black girl at Spring Valley High by her neck, dragged her by her flailing arms and legs, and proceeded to place her handcuffs in front of the class. Her offense: cell phone use in class. Black girls are constantly criminalized within school spaces for miniscule infractions in ways that are deeply disproportionate to their peers (African American Policy Forum 2015, Girls for Gender Equity 2017). Treva Lindsey names these moments as evidence of “anti-Black girlness” in which “the consequences of being a “typical” school-age child or teenager can have lifelong or even deathly consequences for Black girls.” (Lindsey 2016, 179) These modalities of surveillance and punitive disciplinary practices has rendered school as a site of unfreedom for Black girls.

Along with anti-Black girl violence, Black girls are having to navigate the violence of imposed gender standards generated by widespread moral panic⁵ surrounding their bodies.

⁵ I utilize the understanding of “moral panic” mobilized by Stanley Cohen (1971) in which a “condition, episode, person, or group of person emerges to becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interest” (1). However, I play close attention to the investigation of the moral panic dynamics that follow conversations of Black girl pleasure within contemporary Hip-Hop culture through the work of Christina Carney, Jillian Hernandez, and Anya M. Wallace, “Sexual Knowledge and Practiced Feminisms: On Moral Panic, Black Girlhoods, and Hip Hop,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28, no. 4 (December 2016): 412–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12191>.

(Carney et. al 2015, French 2013, Lindsey 2013, Richardson 2013, Simmons 2013, 2015; Weekes 2010) This looks like reproduced narratives that chastise Black girls for any behavior that falls out of the norms of respectability.⁶ Higginbotham's influential work has become crucial in understanding the moral sanctions imposed on Black women and girls. Her formulation of "respectability politics" (1993, 185-230) stems from her documentation of Black Baptist women of the late 19th century who were working to fight against racist ideology that contended Black women cannot be raped as they are already deemed lascivious and sexualized beings (1993, 186). Black women attempted to protect themselves by replicating the behaviors that were upheld within white middle-class values (Higginbotham, 1993). This was their way of responding to racialized gender terror and to reclaim bodily autonomy. Black feminist theorists like Darlene Clark Hine have explained how the threat of sexual violence prompted black women to collectively create alternative and empowering self-images (1989). Through my research, I find that contrived notions of respectable Black girlhood that seek to dictate Black girls' bodily autonomy in a similar mechanism are upheld in school spaces and used as measures of policing. Any behavior that does not meet standards of propriety becomes labelled as "deviant," "other," or what I explore in this thesis, "ratchet."

Given these conditions of anti-Black violence and moral respectability, this thesis examines how Black girls are navigating racialized gender and logics of surveillance within schools and education-based program. I argue that such a focus informs the fields of Girlhood Studies, Feminist Studies, and educators of Black girls about the choices Black girls are making to work towards a more expansive framework of gender. I especially look at

⁶ Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920*. 7. print. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.

the dichotomy between ratchet and “actin a lady”⁷ as it shows up for my participants who point to how moralizing narratives about their behavior impact how they are viewed as deviant or respectable. The logics of moralizing Black girlhood and surveillance operate constitutively as the two are both concerned with the policing of Black girls’ bodies.

I suggest that the realm of art and creative expression presents a way for Black girls to imagine a freedom outside the bounds of policing and regulation. The conditions of enduring anti-Black girl violence in our contemporary world attempts to remove Black girl ways of knowing. Art has a way of recovering such organic epistemologies and bringing one back to themselves. Art returns us to the knowledge we already hold. Additionally, as someone who has worked with the girls in this study for a number of years, art was a way in which we built community. Through my observations as an afterschool teacher, art is an integral practice through which Black girls make meaning of space, self, and the world. Or as Carney et. al states, “Art is the dialogue that occurs in response to the happenings of the space... Ultimately, art is what we make—in the space, of the space, in remembering the space. Art is the present, and art is also memory.” (2015, 423) Through art, the girls in this study are able to rely on their memories as frameworks for freedom building.

Much of my work is driven by my own memories of girlhood. I spent much of my early years scouring local library shelves, magazine columns, music albums, and any other resource I could find that captured the essence of being a Black girl. Black Girlhood Studies has been crucial in creating a language that considers Black girl longings for freedom. I propose that a closer look at the ways Black girls are navigating gendered binaries intent on demonizing displays of Black girlhood that do not adhere to white middle class sensibilities

⁷ This phrase was referred to by my participants as a way to describe modest, respectable behavioral standards of which Black girls are expected to adhere.

informs us of the choices Black girls are making to negotiate their own visions of freedom. For my work on exhuming an understanding of freedom led by Black girls, I am interested in thinking through formations of girlhood that refuse standards of **white normativity**, whether actively or unknowingly.

The following project uses ethnographic interviews and visual analysis to explore how Black girls make use of movement, language, and art in efforts to position a subjectivity of their own making. This thesis explores: What are the enclosures that Black girls name as pertinent to their navigation of racialized gender? How are they strategizing in and against these spaces of confinement? How do their narratives of self-making embody freedom in ways that complicate logics of surveillance inherent within the operation of education-based programs and mandates of gender normativity that surround contemporary and historical narratives of Black girlhood? By analyzing interviews and visual/performance art made by girls of a nonprofit center in Atlanta, GA, I demonstrate how Black girls contend and negotiate with respectable narratives of Black girlhood and logics of surveillance. I examine how Black girls' produce alternate knowledge through their engagement of art-based practices. I argue that Black girls mobilize what I term an *aesthetic of refusal* as a way to negotiate moral sanctions placed upon their bodies. In my research, I come to identify an "aesthetic of refusal" as performances of Black girlhood that undermine policing, control, and remain indifferent towards acquiescing to a white middle-class subjectivity. Such performances are not simplistic or monolithic in how they appear. They are complex performances that demonstrate Black girls' intricate negotiations with the double bind of white supremacist violence and Black moral codes.⁸ Through these aesthetics of refusal,

⁸ LaKisha Simmons examines the double bind of white supremacy and respectability as it impacts the lives of Black girls during segregated New Orleans in *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black*

Black girls come to make meaning and knowledge that I argue is crucial for a deepened understanding of the worlds Black girls forge outside the bounds of regulation. I examine dance performances, nail art, and altar art as creative methods Black girls utilize to construct representations of their identity in ways that divest from notions of childhood rooted in whiteness and lean towards a different future for Black girls that must exist.

Using a small data sample gathered from ethnographic interviews and focus groups, this thesis 1) begins with my positionality as an “outsider within” the Albert Brown Center. 2) I provide an overview of how Black girlhood scholars have intervened within the field of Childhood Studies to generate an analysis of how Black girls’ experiences of injustice has been absent from the realm of scholarship. 3) In “Black Girl Geographies: Mapping Freedom Dreams,” I locate my method of **freedom mapping** amongst a genealogy of educational mapping utilized within Education studies. Through this method, the tropes of “ladylike” and “ratchet” were identified amongst my participants as an inhibitor of freedom, which leads to a deeper conversation on how ratchet has been mobilized in their lives. 4) In “The Ratchet Imaginary as a Self-Making Tool,” I use the space of “ratchet” to examine how Black girls negotiate practices of self-making through the deployment of both respectability as protection and ratchet as refusal. Here, I introduce “aesthetic of refusal” as a way to describe Black girls’ sartorial practices in response to racial gender hierarchy. 5) In “Confronting Logics of Surveillance,” I discuss the modes of surveillance that education-based programs like the Albert Brown Center perpetuate. I examine dance performances and altar art as a practice that reorients geographies of domination as postulated with the Center. 6) Lastly, I

Women in Segregated New Orleans. Gender and American Culture. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2015.

examine how art is utilized as a strategy for Black girl refusal and the ways it makes tenable a different imagining of freedom.

A. Background

Love labor that manifests material realities where Black girls can be not only synonymous with magic, fly, swag, and the wielding of revolutionary light; but also create freedom landscapes where we are the leaders of the justice movements that threaten our ability to love and live and essentially be free (McGuire 2017, 34-35).

As Mekhantansh McGuire points out, I find it important to examine the ways Black girls are strategizing to create their own landscape of freedom. These freedom landscapes prioritize Black girls' wants, needs, and visions in organizing for their future. In the summer of 2017, I traveled to my research site to lead what the girls and I called "Black Girl Freedom Week" (BGFW). We were wrapping up a generative day of conversation and art-making when I asked the few girls remaining to prepare for our trip to the gym for our free play period. We stood in the hallway as we waited for a few of the girls to make a stop at the restroom. In spending time with Black girls, I've noticed that the "in-between" moments can be the most life-changing moments. During this "in-between" time of waiting, Raven and I stood with the girls as we talked about our day and as they asked more questions about my study. Raven helped with the facilitation of BGFW. We worked as afterschool teachers at Albert Brown together. She was crucial to the organizing and planning of Black Girl Freedom Week.

Tanya: "What's all this for again?"

ATJ: "It's for the big paper that I talked to y'all about; my Master's thesis. Students can work with different communities or write on different topics. I wanted to come back and work with you all."

Tanya: "Why did you want to come and talk with us?"

At this point, Raven, co-organizer of Black Girl Freedom Week, entered the conversation.

Raven: “Well, remember when we were doing our self-designed biographies and we talked about how important it is to name ourselves so that others don’t get the chance to do it for us. Some people write about Black girls without ever talking to them. Ms. Moni came back so she could write about Black girls in a way that honors how Black girls see themselves. You get it?”

Tanya: “Yeah, that makes sense. Cause can’t nobody tell the truth ‘bout you like you.”

Raven: I hear that!

The conversation Raven and I had with Tanya⁹ illustrates the central facet of my thesis. This work makes space for Black girls’ truths, however they see them. This work extends the traditions of historians such as Darlene Clark Hine and LaKisha Simmons in that it prioritizes the “inner lives” (1989, 2015) of Black girls that are often concealed and/or disregarded. By taking heed of Tanya’s words, I recognize that *can’t nobody tell the truth ‘bout Black girls like Black girls*. Therefore, this work seeks to pay close attention to the techniques Black girls use to narrate their identities and visions of freedom. This paper builds upon the traditions of Black feminist theory, Black Studies, and Girlhood (particularly Black girlhood) Studies to frame a conversation on how Black girls’ aesthetic and creative practices of girlhood divest from notions of childhood rooted in whiteness. In doing so, I argue that this encourages Black girlhood scholars to consider how these practices construct a language for Black girl refusal in a moment in which threats against Black girls’ lives and bodily autonomy are inescapable.

In order to do this work, I traveled to Atlanta, GA to work with the Albert Brown afterschool program. Located on the “other side of the tracks” opposite the historically Black North End¹⁰ neighborhood of Atlanta GA, lies the community of Bledville. Parkway serves

⁹All participants under the age of 18 years old will be referred to through pseudonyms. Some girls chose their name and others gave me permission to create a pseudonym for them.

¹⁰ All locations are concealed under pseudonyms.

as the main road and bloodline of the historic district as it trails through the heart of the neighborhood.

Albert Brown's Board of Directors includes seven members. All of whom are white with the exception of two members. Those two members are both Black women with one holding the position as secretary and the other with no known position. The Executive Director, Chair of the Board, Managing Director, and Advisory Council are held by white members. However, 100% of the students within the afterschool and youth program identify as Black/African-American. The initiatives that the program heads often cater to the elite business owners of Atlanta, GA with fundraisers such as the annual Atlanta Golf Classic which seeks to provide their corporate partners with networking opportunities while raising funds for the afterschool program. Initiatives such as these serve members of the Atlanta community that are often quite removed from the lives of the youth they intend to serve.

Prior to the Summer of 2017, my field site was once located at the corner of Parkway and Avenue. Due to recent education legislation in the Atlanta Public School system, public schools considered "under performing" have fallen under the auspices of large charter groups. In 2016, Governor Nathan Deal proposed the Opportunity School District (OSD) plan which would seize control of failing and low performing schools for the following 5-10 years. The Atlanta superintendent, Meria Carstarphen, introduced a turnaround strategy in hopes of addressing the issues before the possible approval of Governor Deal's OSD plan. Despite fervent outcry from community residents, APS made a unanimous decision and voted in favor of the superintendent turnaround strategy. This turnaround strategy foregrounded the closure of several schools in South and West Atlanta, which is inhabited by majority working-class Black communities. Along these closures, many school districts

experienced re-zoning and merging of several institutions. Ultimately, families and children have been forced to relocate to schools in other districts.

Under this strategy, the students who once attended Meridians Elementary school now attend Kindezi School at Meridians. Kindezi is a charter organization that normally creates standalone charter schools. However, APS created a merger school with Meridians Elementary. Kindezi Schools function as a nonprofit public charter company with the Gideons location being the only one that does not regulate enrollment through waitlists or lottery. The afterschool program at which I worked is housed in this newly public charter school.

B. Methods

I received the approval of the Albert Brown Student Center to use the center as a field site for my MA thesis. They work with a small group of girls between the ages of 8 and 17, who serve as my pool of research participants. All of the participants identified as Black or African/American. I distributed letters describing my study to all parents and students and those interested responded to my call. This project emerges from deep connections and intentional relationships that were cultivated over the course of 4 years. As someone who worked at this location prior to conducting research, I constantly negotiated my position as an “outsider within” (Collins 1986). Patricia Hill Collins constructed the concept of “outsider within” as a way to describe Black women’s unique position as insiders who have the ability to draw upon their lived experiences to anchor particular epistemological claims while navigating the exclusionary practices of a racist, patriarchal structure within the academy as outsiders. My identity as a 20-something Black woman and recent college graduate impacted the conversations the girls felt comfortable to have with me. For many of them, I was akin to

an older sister which created a sense of familiarity. My experience with my participants echoed Nadia Brown's (2018) assertion of how Black women academics' unique standpoint allow them "to uncover some aspects of reality and truth that are concealed, unnoticed, and masked by conventional methodological and epistemological frameworks" (21). However, for others, my status as a researcher who now lives in California raised questions about my commitment to their lives in Atlanta. I was often met with questions such as, "Are you gonna remember us when you leave?" or "Why aren't you here every day?" In Black girl spaces, commitment and honesty are crucial (Brown 2013). Therefore, addressing these questions were equally important to the process of doing this work as any formal method.

Through my work as an after school teacher in Atlanta, GA, I am drawn to the work of Black girlhood and what it means to hold critical and liberating spaces for Black girls. "Black Girl Freedom Week" (BGFW) consisted of two focus groups and 9 one-on-one interviews. At the end of BGFW, we held our Black Girl Freedom art show where the girls displayed the pieces they created along with our altar that the co-facilitator, Raven Powers, helped organize. We planned to present our altar and performance at the end of the week. The girls decided that our altar to freedom needed to include lots of flowers and treats. The Black Girl Freedom art show and altar serves as a way of honoring Black girls' visions of freedom and allowing them the chance to speak with their peers, friends, and family about what these visions mean. Each participant walked their friends, siblings, fathers, mothers, cousins, etc along the gym wall to talk to them about the drawings they made.

The curriculum was designed to construct a creative space for Black girls that allowed them to think collectively about conditions of freedom, as well as their visions and dreams of liberation. The first segment utilized LaKisha Simmons' framework of "pleasure

cultures” (2015, 178) to examine how Black girls define and negotiate understandings of freedom and embodiment through art-making. LaKisha Simmons discusses “pleasure cultures” as sites of joy that Black girls could enjoy with other Black girls in New Orleans between 1930 and 1954 (2015, 178). Pleasure cultures were “imaginative make-believe worlds” and “girls delighted in sharing these worlds with their friends” (2015, 178). This becomes useful as I begin to demonstrate how community is central to Black girl visions of freedom. To explore this further, BGFW activities consisted of “Mapping Freedom Dreams” where we identified the moments and memories of our lives in which we felt most free. We asked ourselves, “What were we doing?” “Where were we?” “What dreams of freedom do we have for ourselves...for our community?” “What resources do we need to make these dreams real?” This activity focuses on a methodology of mapping that locates the liminal spaces in which Black girls seek to challenge oppressive structures. The girls’ understanding of freedom diverges from the scholarship in mainstream Childhood Studies that does not attend to the particularities of race, class, and gender as it impacts the formation of racialized childhoods. Over the past decade, Black Girlhood Studies has emerged as a formalized field of study that attends to such needs.

C. Black Girlhood Studies

In “Childhoods and Time: Rethinking Notions of Temporality in Early Childhood Education (2016),” Tesar et al. posit that modern philosophy rests on the notion of linearity and progress when conceptualizing stages of human development. They note that, “Childhood is a temporal encounter – an encounter with an idea that speaks to the experience of time” (359). The idea of linear time and development stems from the Cartesian logic of sequential development (Tesar et al. 2015, 362). This western construction of life stages privileged the rational over the emotional in regard to development. Concurrently,

philosophies of Plato implicate that children develop innovative capabilities around the ages of 5-7 (Tesar et al. 2015, 362). Much later in 1983, Neil Postman exclaimed that the distinction between the social category of the child and the adult is disappearing. In his seminal text, “The Disappearance of Childhood,” he cites the 15th century invention of the printing press as a vessel that created a new conception of adulthood. This new understanding of the adult world would need to create a separate sphere for children to occupy as they needed to “learn how to read and write, and how to be the sort of people a print culture required” (Postman 1983, 669). Postman sees this management of information come to a head with the development of the television (1995). For him, the television’s reliance on the visual makes it much more accessible. Therefore, it does not require any complete distinctions between the child and the adult (1995). Essentially, Postman argues that forms of electronic media, specifically television, remove the traditional and hierarchical barriers that separate the category of children from adults (1995). There are many points throughout this dated text in which my own analysis is starkly different. However, I start off this section with a glimpse at a few of the childhood studies key arguments regarding development and the construction of innocence to demonstrate how the image and figure of the child within this field is often non-racialized. For example, Postman fails to illustrate how race plays a pivotal role in who gets to be considered a child in the first place. It was not until twelve years later that we see scholars begin to interrogate notions of childhood and development through an incisive lens of race, particularly Blackness.

Wilma King’s groundbreaking text, *Stolen Childhood* (1995), becomes the first full-length text that examines the lives of enslaved youth during the 19th century. King argues that given the brutally violent conditions of enslavement, the social category of ‘the child’

had already excluded Black children. From unrelenting work responsibilities to being estranged from families, the experiences of Black enslaved youth in the 19th century made childhood as a social category inaccessible. Enslaved youth were not relegated personhood as they were seen as property owned by the state. Robin Bernstein (2011) examines books, toys, theatrical props to argue how childhood innocence has been crucial to U.S. racial formations since the mid 19th century. Bernstein posits that “angelic childhood innocence” is racialized under the unmarked status of whiteness. Thereby, excluding Black girls “out of innocence and therefore out of childhood itself” (2011, 16). This exclusion of Black girls from childhood, positions Black girlhood to the periphery of the category of girlhood. Through a closer look at how the idea of “actin like a lady” and “ratchet” function in the everyday lives of Black girls, this thesis demonstrates how Black girls’ understanding of gender unmake the category of girlhood as project of whiteness.

The coded whiteness implicit in childhood innocence not only separates the adult from the child but it separates the child from the impact of state violence and oppression. Yet, the supposed protection implicated within the construction of childhood innocence does not extend to Black girls in the sense that they are never protected against white supremacist violence. For example, Nia Wilson, an 18-year-old Black girl of Oakland, CA was murdered while traveling from a party at her aunt’s house. Her murderer, John Cowell, was seen by her cousin, Lahtifa, wiping his knife after having stabbed both of them in the neck. Though injured, Lahtifa, attempted to soothe Nia by telling her, “We’re gonna get through this. I got you, you’re my baby sister.” Lahtifa suffered less severe injuries while Nia Wilson died at the scene. The murder of Nia Wilson further illustrates how Black girls remain unprotected

while navigating the very real threat of racist violence. For Nia Wilson, and other Black girls, childhood cannot disappear if one was never afforded to them in the beginning.

The historical construction of innocence explains the precarious nexus of race, gender, and age that Black girls of the contemporary world occupy today. They are continuously written out of innocence through the process of “adultification” (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017) and “written into preexisting narratives, such as being unruly and disruptive before they are even born (Adomako 13).” My thesis looks at how Black girls turn these prescriptive notions on their head through practices of self-making and creative expression and bring “wreck” (Pough 2004) to traditional notions of girlhood by creating alternate ontologies. By paying attention to the ways Black girls produce an aesthetic of refusal through their navigation of racialized gender subjectivity, Black girlhood scholars and educators of Black girls are able to develop a reading practice that captures Black girls’ imaginings of freedom beyond traditional racial, gender, and sexual norms.

There have been a number of scholars who have examined Black girls’ practices of self-making and their negotiation of identity amidst shifting landscapes of citizenship and injustice (Belgrave 2009, Brown 2008, 2013, Carroll 1997, Chatelain 2015, Cox 2015, Collins 2015, Crenshaw 2015, Gaunt 2006, Halliday 2017, 2018, LaBennett 2011, Lindsey 2013, Love 2012, Morris 2016, Muhammad & Haddix 2016, Muhammad & McArthur 2015, Richardson 2013, 2019, Shange 2019, Simmons 2015, Tonnesen 2013, Townsend 2010). Joyce Ladner’s groundbreaking text *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman* by Joyce (1971) was one of the first full-length texts in which the experiences of Black girls specifically received scholarly attention.

This pioneering work challenged psychopathological discourses of the Black family that often-painted Black girls as “deviant” and “illegitimate.” Ladner examines the sociohistorical factors that compound Black girls’ navigation of oppression. In doing so, she also shows how Black girls interpreted the struggles they faced and the strategies they utilized to navigate structures of inequity. Ladner contends that the struggles Black girls face in their youth impact their journey into adulthood. This work recognizes the importance of consulting the lived realities of Black girls to investigate a broader system of oppression and the precarious position of Black lives within it. She states, “Thus by understanding the nature and process of her [black girls’] development, we can also comprehend the more quotidian elements that characterize the day-to-day lives of the Black masses” (Ladner 1971, 14). Here, Ladner positions Black girlhood as a framework for understanding the intimate, political lives of the Black community. She argues for a theory of quotidian Black girlhood as a way of understanding of how they are navigating the everyday nature of their lives. This has led to various historical studies concerning the policing of Black girls’ bodies and quotidian expressions.

An understanding of how Black women and girls’ gender expressivity has been policed can be situated within a history of Black uplift politics in the 18th and 19th centuries. Marcia Chatelain (2015) and Nazera Wright (2016) document the ways Black writers, political leaders, and social organizations sought to establish an archetype of the “good Black girl citizen” (Chatelain 2015, 131) as emblems of Black mobility and racial uplift during the 19th century with conduct books such as *Don’t! A Book for Girls* (1891) written by Robert Charles O’Hara Benjamin. O’Hara Benjamin lists instructions on how he felt Black girls should behave in order to portray positive public perceptions. Black girls were instructed to

avoid “idleness, flirting, dancing, vindictiveness, backbiting, gossip, and slangy speech” (Wright 2016, 152). Wright illustrates how the containment of Black girl sexuality, particularly that of poor and working-class Black girls, has been central to the narrative of Black progress often perpetuated by middle class subjectivities. Ultimately highlighting how

The emphasis on traditional notions of virtue and dignity in the black middle-class and striving-class communities reminded young black women that their acceptance and belonging within the middle-class black community, and their value in the fight for racial justice, hinged on their respectability. (Simmons 2015, 5)

Other works in Black girlhood studies has taught us how to read performances of Black girlhood that do not conform to sexual and gender norms as necessary disruptions to a “contrived notion of ‘respectable’ Black girlhood.” (Carney et. al, 2016) In their essay, “Sexual knowledge and practiced feminisms,” Carney et. al examine texts like *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls* and how it employs a narrative of crisis to garner a public response of protection and willingness to restore a perceived stolen girlchild innocence. This assumption is based upon a white girl subjectivity (Brown 2003). Such text within girlhood studies often relegate the experiences of Black girls to the periphery or disengages them altogether (Brown 2003). Searching for a framework of Black girlhood that centers the expressive culture of Black girlhood, Brown theorizes the “creative potential of Black girlhood.”

In *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (2013), Ruth Nicole Brown theorizes Black girlhood as an educational practice through the work of a radical youth community called Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT) based in Champaign- Urbana, Illinois. Brown situates the creative work and expressions enacted by Black girls as models of possibility capable of shifting the discourse around knowledge

production. She identifies creative work and expressions as the art they create with each other in the space of SOLHOT, which can take the form of music, dance, poetry, or theatre. Brown privileges Black girls' artistic creation as text and theory. Furthermore, Black girls are treated as expert readers of their world and producers of culture. Brown's ethnographic study creates several interventions within traditional feminist methodology and girlhood studies. By combining theory with creativity, *Hear Our Truths* is an example of performance ethnography which is a method used to explore "the expressive elements of a culture, focus on embodiment as a crucial component of analysis and as a tool for representing scholarly engagement... (Brown 2013, 31)." As a methodology, Black girlhood recognizes the political importance of Black girls' creative ability. Through the initiation of SOLHOT, Brown curated a space known as Black Girl Genius Week (BGGW)¹¹ in which she gathered youth, scholars, educators, poets, artists, and healers to convene in a celebration and mobilization of Black girlhood. With its focus on art, ritual, creative expression, and community, Black Girl Genius Week queers the traditional and regimented space of a conference setting with its rejection of institutionalization. Inspired by such creative pedagogies, I conjured Black Girl Freedom Week as a space for girls of Albert Brown to join each other in the name of healing to engage a conversation concerning the freedom dreams¹² they held for and with each other. Place becomes a significant aspect of how the processes of making freedom and making the self occurs in the lives of Black girls.

¹¹ For more on "Black Girl Genius Week" see "SOLHOT's Black Girl Genius Week," *Feministing*, accessed April 14, 2019, <http://feministing.com/2014/11/14/96490/>.

¹² Robin D. G Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2008).

D. Black Girl Geographies: Mapping Freedom Dreams

BGFW focuses on a methodology of mapping that locates the liminal spaces in which Black girls seek to challenge oppressive structures. I respond to Tamara Butler's call to a focus on Black Girl Cartography as a way of studying Black girls' movement and navigation through space (2018). She defines such space as "formally uncharted locations that are still inhabited, used, and created" (Butler 2018, 31). She argues that the work of Black women educators demonstrates how an analysis of geographical location illustrates Black girls' negotiations of epistemological and physical spaces (Butler 2018). Thereby, underscoring their encounters with power and social control. Black Girl Cartography recognizes that an analysis of social geography informs Black girl practices of self-making. Butler (2018) presents a textual analysis of the work of Black women educators to examine how they attend to the object of place in the lives of Black girls. For example, in her analysis of Valerie Kinloch's *Crossing Boundaries: Teaching and Learning with Urban Youth* she examines how gentrification, race, and place impact the experiences Black girls have in and out school (Butler 2018). She points out a particular interview Kinloch facilitated with an interviewee named Samantha. In the interview, Samantha references developers and government officials when she asserts "they'd rather for us to struggle" (Kinloch, 2010, p. 52). Butler uses such an example to demonstrate how place is intricately tied to race, class, and gender and connect to Black girls' experiences within classroom spaces. Butler develops Black Girl Cartography as a praxis-oriented framework that studies the "how and where Black girls are physically and socio-politically mapped in education" (Butler 2018, 29). Most importantly, Black Girl Cartography allows us to explore Black girls' narratives in a manner that moves us away from "sterile and exploitative research practices and instead begin to call into question our

research motives and how they may or may not align with the girls' practices, ways of knowing, and being" (Butler 2018, 32). As a qualitative methodology, mapping allows Black girlhood scholars space to explore how Black girls shift and resist moralizing narratives that are often placed on their bodies. This requires a theoretical lens that moves "beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (Madison 2005, 24). Black Girl Cartography provides a useful framework to consider a study of Black girlhood that is grounded within a politics of spatiality

In *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between* (Bettis and Adams 2005), Bettis and Adams think through the ways girls navigate their identity across place. Focusing on sites of girlhood in which identity construction becomes significant, they divided the text into three time-space fields: before school, at school, and after school. With this text, we see that landscape and geography are very crucial to the way girls negotiate identity politics. Bettis and Adams contend that the participants of their ethnography longed for private, liminal spaces in which they could form their own understandings of power and independence. Yet, a noticeable gap in the theoretical framework provided by Bettis and Adams is that they fail to discuss how place and landscape is racialized. There was no inclusion of an intersectional analysis that considered how space is navigated across boundaries of race and gender. McKittrick and Simmons foreground a racialized, gendered analysis of space that attends to the matters of my Black girl participants. I use Simmons and McKittrick's theoretical framework of place and geography as a way to think about how Black girls' understandings of gender and identity is negotiated amongst landscapes of regulation.

Lakisha Simmons turns to the historical context of a segregated New Orleans to discuss how Black girls navigate the racialized order of space in *Crescent City Girls: The*

Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans (2015). She asserts that spatial politics dictated how Black girls came to know themselves as well as the city of New Orleans. Simmons argues that Black living in Jim Crow New Orleans created mental maps, which provided “imaginative order” to Black girls’ worlds, helping them form a growing “awareness of racialized space” (Simmons 2015, 27). McKittrick focuses on moments during and after Transatlantic Slavery to convey how spaces of domination can be altered and transformed through Black women’s embodiment. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), McKittrick states, “However, if we pursue the links between practices of domination and Black women's experiences in place, we see that Black women's geographies are lived, possible, and imaginable” (2006, xii). McKittrick’s work allows a conceptual understanding of how alternate geographies are made possible despite social orders of dominance and oppression. I would like to extend McKittrick and Simmons understanding of spatial matters to consider how the Black girls of the Albert Brown Center re-imagine space amongst narratives of comportment and regulation. Through their art practices they generate an aesthetic of refusal that allows them to produce their own geographical knowledge. This knowledge disavows regimes of dominance in favor of the imaginative, yet it is aware of the systems of violence and oppression that exist.

Labor of Negotiating “Ratchet” & “Ladylike”

During our conversations over the course of BGFW, the dichotomy between ladylike and ratchet was mentioned several times when discussing social issues that the girls felt were significant. They expressed their displeasure in having to navigate the racialized class assumptions embodied in the social discourse of ratchet. Given that the term “ratchet” came up more than just a few times in our conversations, I will specifically examine ratchet as an

analytical tool for excavating a language of Black girl refusal; a language that would help shatter the bounds of gender and sexual normativity in the lives of Black girls. I choose to examine “ratchet” given its presence and circulation in the lives of the Black girls I worked with in Atlanta, GA to name a set of actions that function outside standards of propriety and seek to dictate Black girls’ bodies.

In that same vein, I recognize that ‘ratchet,’ as a description and label, is not something with which many of my participants, and many other Black girls, identify. And I do not wish for this thesis to place words in their mouths. By my observations, the issue has less to do with the labelling and more to do with the context of how and why particular bodies are labelled. What does the labelling of ratchet say about the transgressions of white middle-class ideals of morality and virtue? I explore points within several interviews that convey how Black girls are thinking through concepts of gender and performances of ratchet.

The insistence upon gendered demarcations and boundaries are often assumed by people who insist on the ratchet and respectable binary. For example, Michaela Angela Davis embarked on an HBCU tour to launch her “Bury the Ratchet” campaign in 2012 that specifically targeted Black women in Atlanta in response to reality television shows such as the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Dia 2012). She stated, “The goal is to get the spotlight off the ratchetness and on the successful women in Atlanta” (Dia 2012). Black feminist scholars such as Brittney Cooper and Heidi Lewis have pushed back on such binary notions of Black womanhood. In “(Un)Clutching My Mother’s Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability,” Cooper thinks through ratchetness as a form of disrespectability politics and as a mode to experience celebration and joy in ways that are limited through respectability practices (Cooper 2012). Lewis warns that the compulsive binary separation between ratchet

and respectability creates more harm as it furthers the policing of Black women's bodies (Lewis 2013). Continuing Cooper and Lewis' analysis of the ratchet and respectability binary, Montinique McEachern defines ratchet as "a cultural knowledge, performance, and awareness of an anti-respectability that can be shared across Black communities and is not bound by geography, social class, or level of traditional education" (McEachern 2017, 79). She identifies ratchet as a formation of anti-respectability in which normative ideologies of racialized gender are rendered untenable for visions of freedom. Examining ratchet as a "Black feminist liberatory consciousness" (81) that allows Black girls to create liberation for themselves, McEachern defines this consciousness as a system of politics that "undermines misogynistic, heteronormative, and anti-Black societal messages that challenge and prevent our wellbeing," (McEachern 2017,88). McEachern's indictment of ratchet as a politic that undermines systems of (un)freedom speaks to the way L.H. Stallings positions ratchet as an imaginative practice that interrupts the imperialist project of modernity (Stallings 2013, 135-39). Stallings speculates on ratchet through a queer theoretical lens in "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination." She notes that ratchet has been defined in popular culture as "foolish, ignorant, ho'ishness, ghetto, and a dance" (Stallings 2013, 136) and recognizes its value in its failure "to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race" (Stallings 2013, 136). This thesis specifically draws on the ways that McEachern and Stallings' interpretations of ratchet presents a framework of knowledge that unmakes the project of gender normativity while forging new understandings of freedom. I specifically think through Black girls' use and understanding of ratchet as a way to unearth alternate ontologies of Black girlhood that are often relegated to the margins. Therí Pickens recuperates the word

ratchet as a performative strategy that Black women deploy to challenge structures of power and oppression. She argues for a definition of ratchet that understands it as

a performance of excess that makes and unmakes both performer and audience. The ratchet imaginary has no desire to participate in narratives of racial progression or social uplift; instead, it articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective. It functions as a tertiary space in which one can perform a racialized and gendered identity without adhering to the prescriptive demands of either (Pickens 2015, 44).

The ratchet imaginary's desire to live unbound to narratives of progress or uplift makes a fitting framework for the practices of Black girlhood that my participants display. By examining how ratchet is enacted in the lives of Black girls, I argue that we can have a greater understanding of the quotidian practices of freedom and self-making wielded by Black girls.

This section explores the question: what do Black girls do as an attempt to create liberating spaces outside of limiting categories? Black girls who are labelled "loud" "ghetto" or "ratchet" are seemingly thought of as aggressive and in need of correction. As the term "ratchet" has traveled, its particularity to the Black working class in the South gets lost in translation. Given that there are various meanings to the word "ratchet" in Black language and culture, this section specifically looks at how it has traveled to spaces Black girls occupy in Atlanta and how they interact with the term given their specific locality.

I approach the interview responses of my participants discursively. I highlight specific points in various conversations to share perspectives of consensus or divergence among the participants. The responses from my interview participants point to the ways southern working-class Black girls are navigating, interpreting, and embodying forms of ratchet as an aesthetic for refusal. When asked "What is ratchet?" some of the girls responded with:

just not being ladylike
just being nasty
opening ya legs while you got a dress on
lookin like hoochie mamas
being ghetto
being loud in public places
doing the wrong thing in the wrong places
an odd person
disrespectful

Most stated that they encountered the word through school and public discourse. All of the participants described how ratchet classifies “bad” or “ghetto” behavior and specified that only girls could be ratchet. However, when asked if boys could also be ratchet two respondents gave the following responses:

Alana: I don’t know. I ain’t never heard no girl or nobody call no boy ratchet. I only hear childish or you play too much.

Cara: But if they gay. If a boy gay and he act like a girl. Like that boy last year...[Cara looks toward Alana]

Though I do not know who “that boy” is or what exactly happened to him the year before, Cara and Alana point to the ways that ratchet has also become synonymous with nonheteronormativity. Cara and Alana are sisters. When I arrived to interview them, they decided they wanted to be interviewed together. Alana is the oldest of the two and is a 17-year-old senior in high school. Cara is a 12-year-old in middle school. Alana is unable to recall if she has ever heard boys her age also be labelled ratchet. Cara chimes in with an observation of how boys in her school who identity as queer or gay are considered ratchet. Alana’s observations make the connection of how queer sexuality that diverges from the vantage point of heteronormativity is considered abnormal or deviant among her peers. Perhaps, this is where my analysis of ratchet is not totally extensive. Cara’s use of ratchet as

a way to denote displays of sexuality that reject heterosexuality requires further investigation. As Bettina Love shows, a Black ratchet analytic can be further utilized by scholars of Black gender and sexuality as a way to examine how Black queer youth challenge compulsory heteronormative and white middle-class sensibilities (2016, 539-546) through Bounce music. Love examines ratchet as a methodological perspective useful in exploring how Black queer youth of New Orleans use bounce music to complicate fixed notions of gender (2016, 539-546). This resistance to heteronormative binaries prompts Love to call for methodological frameworks that facilitate “messy research” and consider the complex and fluid identities of Black queer youth (2016, 539-546). In turn, Cara and Alana’s conversations not only reveals the way ratchet operates across race and gender, it names how ratchet gets attached to nonheteronormative expressions of sexuality. This thesis contributes to the vast scholarship on Black girlhood using a ratchet analytic to examine the strategies of self-making and negotiation that Black girls engage to make and remake their own visions of freedom. Given the frequency with which many of the girls spoke to me about this dichotomy of ratchet and ladylike, I wondered how they navigated such standards of propriety and what are the risks in living outside of them? When asked: “What happens to Black girls who are not acting like a lady?” Some of the responses were:

You get called a ho and a thot.
The guys want to see if they can “hop down.”¹³
Don’t nobody like you.
People don’t wanna know you.

Expressions of girlhood that do not fit within restrictive notions of what is deemed a “proper girlhood” are consistently demonized. Though, this may not come as much of a surprise to

¹³ “Hop down” is a colloquial phrase that connotes sexual availability.

many, investigating the social consequences Black girls face when they choose to resist comportment and socially constructed standards of appropriateness helps to further understand how Black girls are making particular choices concerning their performance of girlhood. Narratives of *ladylike modesty*¹⁴ have been used in social discourse to police and discipline the bodies of Black girls and women. It was in my interview with a participant named Anna in which this notion was discussed more extensively.

A. *Respectability as Navigational Practice for Self-Making*

Anna is a 15-year-old Black girl from the South Heights community in Atlanta. I met Anna when I worked as an afterschool teacher at the Albert Brown Center. She was older than the girls I worked with daily. I would often stay on nights when the program hosted high school youth and I met Anna during one of those events. We would strike up a conversation about the latest music, particularly any new song release by Fetty Wap¹⁵, as he was one of her favorite artists. Along with her deep interest in music and hip-hop culture, Anna also held such deep concern for the other children at the program. In my time with Anna, I've been able to witness her love and empathy for the Black people of South Heights and beyond. She outwardly expressed such a deep concern for the people around her. Due to her compassionate expressivity, the younger students in my class loved having her around. Whenever I would ask some of the high school students to assist me during homework help, my 2nd and 3rd graders always wanted Ms. Anna to come to our class. Her care and concern for the other children was very apparent to everyone around her. Anna navigated the space

¹⁴ I use this term as Sesali Bowen refers to it as a set of sexist social standards that police the bodies and behaviors of Black women and girls. See "Bitches Be Like...: Memes as Black Girl Counter and Disidentification Tools." *Thesis* (2016). Retrieved from ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University.

¹⁵ A US-based hip-hop artist.

with such a deep love for her community. When I returned to Atlanta in the Summer of 2017 to discuss my work with the girls, we were both excited to have the chance to think deeply about what freedom looks and feels like to Black girls.

In my initial interview with Anna, she spoke quite a bit about the criminalization and Black girls face due to racist assumptions. For Anna, embodying notions of ladylike modesty can be used as protection from instances such as racial profiling.

Amoni: What are the issues that you find most significant?

Anna: Mmmmm...I don't know. Ummm...like stereotypes and stuff and how "they" want us to live up to them but we're not living up to it how they want us to. So, that's one of my #1 issues.

Amoni: So, how do you think society wants you to live?

Anna: They think an average Black girl can be like hood or ratchet. When they meet a Black girl that's not they just get surprised. Like this Sephora thing that happened. She [Sephora clerk] just automatically assumed they was from the hood and stuff because they were Black.

Amoni: You said at Sephora? What happened?

Anna: She racially profiled them, so she followed them going out of the store and stuff.

And then out of nowhere she's like I'm from the hood. I have Black friends and stuff like that. But they were really calm with her. So, I guess she wasn't expecting them to be quiet and stuff and handle it politely.

Here, Anna is discussing a video clip that went viral in the summer of 2017 that showed a white woman employee at Sephora being called out for racial profiling by two Black girls.¹⁶No individual in the clip is identified by name. However, we do see the white employee respond to the Black girls in the video and "apologize" for the discomfort the girls felt by stating that she couldn't be racist because "she is from the hood and has Black friends too." In our conversation, Anna expressed her offense with the employee stating she was

¹⁶ Desus & Mero, "Sephora Employee Accused of Racial Profiling," filmed August 2017 at VICELAND, Brooklyn, NYC, video, 2:12, https://www.viceland.com/en_us/video/sephora-employee-accused-of-racial-profiling/5988d4c7aa375e467b66984e

from the hood as if it was a way to find common ground with the two Black girl shoppers. Anna's reading of the situation seemed to be that the "politeness" and calm nature exhibited by the Black girls in the video surprised the Sephora clerk which prompted her to apologize for the incident.

I assert that replicating the notion of "acting like a lady" and embodying the polite, calm nature Anna identifies is seen as a form of protection for Black girls against the constant realities of punishment and regulation. From the work of Education scholar, Edward W. Morris, we know that Black girls perceived as "loudies" and "unlady-like" are subject to harsher treatment than white and Latina girls as well as Black and Latino boys (2007, 490-515). For Anna, rejecting notions of appropriateness can result in dire social consequences. She makes deliberate choices with the resources around her to protect herself the best way she can. In a world that attempts to strip Black girls of any agency, it is important to acknowledge the acute awareness with which Black girls navigate the public sphere. Through the investigation of ladylike and ratchet, Black girlhood scholars are able to read the political choices Black girls make as it relates to their performance of femininity. Though, it was not Anna in the video, she was able to use such medium to draw her own conclusions about safety and how to respond to anti-Black practices of criminalization.

In a separate interview, Jessica, a 16-year-old participant in the youth program, echoed Anna's language of ladylike-ness being critical to Black girls' livelihoods.

ATJ: What are you, as a Black girl, concerned about?

Jessica: What I'm concerned about?

ATJ: Yes, what are you concerned about?

Jessica: As Black girls, [I feel] they need to learn how to respect themselves more. You know...and do what young ladies supposed to do.

ATJ: What's a "young lady" supposed to do?

Jessica: Act like young ladies. Don't act like nothing that you not. Like feel comfortable about yourself. Don't let nobody bring you down or nothing like that

because that's a lot of stuff to deal with...like I know it's a lot of stuff to deal with...if you don't feel comfortable about yourself. But you gotta learn how to deal with it sometimes.

Jessica empathizes with other Black girls and recognizes that they have “a lot of stuff to deal with,” including navigating their own self-confidence. For her, “actin like a lady” guarantees survival in a world that does not wish to see Black girls survive. As I sat across from her watching the language in her movements, I observed how her last sentence was less of a directive and more of a plea. “Like, I know it's a lot of stuff to deal with...I know. We just gotta learn how to deal with it. We've *got* to...” My conversation with both Jessica and Anna uncovers the *how* and *why* of their survival strategies and accounts for the complexities of their self-making practices.

Both girls acknowledge the difficulty of navigating the world as a Black girl. Yet, “learning how to deal with it” becomes an attempt towards survival amidst the various sorts of bodily violence. This finding affirms what Nazera Wright reveals about African American women writers of the 19th century and how they sought to contest prevailing attitudes on southern plantations that perceived Black girls as valuable “solely for their future fecundity and economic potential” (Wright 2016, 60). This occurred through their distinction between “youthful girlhood” and “knowing girlhood.” Youthful girlhood was usually represented as a girl who was 12 years or less “with the capacity to undergo transformation through intellectual agency and achievement” (Wright 2016, 61). Wright continues with an explication of “prematurely knowing” girlhood which is characterized through experiences of hardship and anger. In this stage of Black girlhood, Black girls come into a fuller awareness of their precarious social positions and begin to strategize methods for their survival. Wright notes, “These methods involve strategies for protecting themselves when faced with threats

and actual danger (Wright 2016, 61).” As “multiply situated knowledges,” (Friedman 1998, 19) subjectivity occurs in the “spaces of dynamic encounter” (Friedman 1998, 5) and in response to particular geographies and histories. For Anna and Jessica, the work of constructing their subjectivities becomes a process; a negotiation between their own desires and a wish to sustain themselves as whole beings.

B. Anna’s Hands: Ratchet as Sartorial Labor of Refusal

Performative and aesthetic practices of girlhood help us to rethink what a liberatory Black girlhood might look like. In my early conversations with Anna, she described how it was important for her to create a subjectivity in opposition to the figure of the “ratchet” Black girl. In my first interview with her, she talked about not being the girl dominant society expected her to be. She wanted to defy narratives that regarded Black girls in terms of deficiency. However, in our last interview, Anna’s narrative begins to shift. She expressed how the labor of constructing a subjectivity entangled with resisting the ratchet girl narrative became exhausting.

Amoni: What are the dreams you have for yourself?

Anna: Just to...be balanced. Cause I don’t balance myself. I always wanna do the most in school and then go and do all these other commitments and I’m worn out. I just wanna be balanced to find time to commit to this, don’t commit to this if I don’t have to. Focus on school mostly and stuff like that.

The dreams Anna had for herself included balance and wellness. She explains how she has been concerned with making sure she excelled in every class and joining every extracurricular so much so that she began to feel burned out. Over the three years of getting to know Anna, I learned that she was quite the artist. She once showed me her drawing book during after school once and I was blown away. When I asked if she continued to use her drawing as a creative outlet, she held up her hands and talked about how she had not drawn much lately, but that she does her nails.



Figure 1: Anna's Hands, September 2018

ATJ: Did you do that? *points towards her hands*

Anna: Yes! I did these last night.

ATJ: Oh my gosh! These are so nice! Are those acrylic too?

Anna: It's polygel.

ATJ: Polygel...Ok, you gotta tell me a little bit about that because I know nothing about

polygel. *laughter*

Anna: Ok, so it's like an acrylic and gel hybrid..

ATJ: Uh Huh

Anna: And I use dual form so dual forms you have to find the shape of your finger, put the polygel inside. You either shape it with monomer or alcohol and file it to dual form. Then, put it on top of your fingernail and cure it under LED light or UV light for like 60 seconds...boom!

ATJ: How do you feel when doing your nails?

Anna: I feel like I can be me and enjoy... 'cause I know I'm doing this for me not for anyone else, just for myself. I know why I'm doing it and when I'm doing it.

'Cause I used to not want to make my nails longer than the short average square nails 'cause I didn't want to think, "What are people gonna think about this?" But

then I started getting more comfortable with it and doing it and accepting it and that's mostly what I've been doing is longer nails. I don't really do short nails anymore.

Anna talked about how she usually wore her nails short because long nails are associated with girls considered ratchet. Now, she turns to nail art as a creative outlet to rethink the boundaries of respectability that have been placed upon her. Anna's nail art signified the daily choices she makes to negotiate moral binaries that seek to envelope the lives of Black girls. Anna's nail art is not just an aesthetic choice. For her, it marks a sense of freedom; an act of joy that rejects standards of propriety that she once felt bound by. She demonstrates how the space of ratchet in Black girlhood catalyzes a space to imagine and re-imagine freedom. Anna's hands are symbolic of the ways in which Black girls are thinking through the possibilities of refusal to dominant modes of gender. Pritchard calls this an example of "critical black sartoriality" (2017, 36). He defines it as "a constellation of Black sartorial performances that . . . disrupt rigid [notions] and representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Pritchard 2017, 36)." "In "Black Girls Queer (Re)Dress: Fashion as Literacy Performance in *Pariah*," Pritchard bridges literacy theory, fashion theory, Black feminism, and Black queer theory to examine how Alike Freeman, the queer Black girl protagonist of Dee Rees' film *Pariah*, employs sartorial practices as a way to negotiate her sense of self and make sense of the world around her. Pritchard demonstrates how fashion and style, among other practices of literacy such as reading and writing, functions as a "culturally situated practice in which meaning is made and understood." (2017, 135) This echoes the work of Tanisha Ford who asserts that the sartorial practices of 20th century Black women were utilized as a way to project their sense of freedom, self-making, and gender nonconformity (2015, 7).

Ford and Pritchard highlight the “corporeal, emotional, and spiritual labor” (Pritchard 2017, 129). Black women and girls (particular Black queer girls) engage when negotiating sartorial choices. Anna’s nails demonstrate the embodied creative labor of Black girlhood. From the intricate science of applying dual form polygel to the work of curating joy and self-satisfaction, Anna shows how the Black girl aesthetics of refusal are also a negotiation of various forms of labor. Through her nail art, ratchet becomes an aesthetic practice that signifies a politic of joy and desire that rejects assimilation to a white middle-class subjectivity that also upholds Victorian ideals of respectability. In our last conversation, she no longer viewed her subjectivity in opposition to girls labelled ratchet due to their performance of femininity. She begins to implicate herself in the conception of the Black Ratchet Imagination.

Anna: Acting like a lady is acting how you think the world would like to see you. Like how you’re supposed to be in probably job interviews. It’s like changing who you are to impress society...not necessarily always being yourself. Like if you’re somebody that talks loud, just talk loud. It’s just who you are. It’s been made negative to society.

Amoni: Why do Black girls get labelled ratchet?

Anna: Because we don’t act like the proper girl, I guess...I don’t know. Our hair is different. We wear different clothes. We live in different areas and stuff like that.

Anna’s use of “we,” whether proverbial or otherwise, disrupts this alienating and moralizing binary that categorizes performances of Black girlhood as “good” or “bad” based on standards of white femininity. The notion of ladylike modesty no longer seems useful in her understanding of a liberatory Black girlhood. Through Anna, we can see how performances of Black girlhood that divest from colonial notions of gender become labelled ratchet and therefore “negative.” Anna shows us how Black girls are finding traditional notions of gender

as untenable for their visions of freedom. In other words, Anna's deployment of ratchet renders her body "audible and visible while it unmakes notions of acceptable black behavior" (Pickens 2015, 44).

Confronting Logics of Surveillance

The lack of racial diversity within the leadership of Albert Brown has an impact on not only the initiatives but the institutional structure of the program. For instance, afterschool classroom leaders at the Albert Brown Center were tasked with evaluating students' character building skills, particularly a skill identified as "grit." Twice during the academic year, each classroom leader was given a clipboard, pen, and a form. The form listed the seven traits within the character-education model created and used by the founder of KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) charter school network, Dave Levin. This character-education model uses positive psychology to focus on grit, zest, self-control, optimism, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity. Angela Duckworth founded a nonprofit organization called The Character Lab that provides resource for parents and educators on how to build character within children. Duckworth popularized the term "grit" with her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*.

Duckworth defines grit as "passion and sustained persistence applied toward long-term achievement, with no particular concern for rewards or recognition along the way" (Snyder 2014). In other words, grit quantitative scales are supposed to measure how well students deal with hardship and failure. By evaluating students' level of grit and monitoring character development, educators are supposed to determine academic success. The Albert Brown Center have adopted these measures within their programming to evaluate student performance. However, such measurements do not address systemic racism and anti-

Blackness that are at the root of violence and inequity that directly impact students' academic success. Instead, character-based models like the one proposed by Duckworth and Levin place the responsibility of shifting the landscape of education on the shoulders of students. Students are expected to believe that their individual character creates monumental shift in the landscape of education while legislators continue to ignore the barriers of inequity that need to be addressed at the level of policy.

On a more intimate level, I have often watched these tactics of surveillance occur in more blatant ways. Following Black Girl Freedom Week in 2017, I contacted the Managing Director to let the center know I was interested in conducting follow-up interviews to help fill in some gaps in my interviews. I planned to conduct the follow up interviews via Skype. So, I coordinated with the director to schedule a date and time for me to speak with the girls.

On the day of the interview, I was so excited to catch up, reconnect, and continue the conversations we started over the summer. To my surprise, the director let me know that she would sit with the students during my interview process since the students would be using her computer to speak with me over Skype and she wanted to monitor their use of the laptop. We went from sharing an exciting, unfiltered conversation during the Black Girl Freedom Week to one that was challenging for the students as they worked to edit their responses in the presence of the director. Each question I asked the girls was met with a one-word response and side glances at the white woman director to see how closely she was listening to us. I could tell they felt vulnerable and uncomfortable during this interview. After quite a few tries, I decided to cut my Skype follow-ups short and just planned a trip for the next Summer to conduct my follow-up interviews in person. This experience revealed how schools and education-based institutions quickly become a space of surveillance for Black girls.

Savannah Shange reminds us that surveillance of Black sociality, a Reconstruction-era technology, has been historically used to inspect performances of Blackness that model ideas of normative behavior, or as she names, “The Search for the Well-Behaved Negro” (2019, 6). This logic of surveillance reads Black girls as already untrustworthy and threatening to other persons and objects. This logic of surveillance relies on strategies of management of containment. It asks the question that an Albert Brown counselor asked me, “How do you keep them under *control*?” This language of how to keep Black girls “controlled” signify the ways many education-based programs and school officials perceive Black girls’ bodies as excessive. As Lindsey contends, “Whether silent or screaming, unlawful defiance is mapped onto both Black girls. They represent harm and disorder—threats to be neutralized” (2016, 164). The over privileging of behavior management perpetuated the idea that Black girls were problems that needed to learn how to self-manage so that the organization could function “properly.” Connie Wun carefully articulates how behavioral management and disciplinary mechanisms present in public school system and education-based programs are informed by anti-Black racism. Wun understands anti-Black racism “as an enduring social order that affects policies, policy outcomes and organizes the relationship between non-Black and Black bodies (737, 2016).” Anti-Blackness as a mechanism looks to impede the choreography of movement.

It revealed itself when school officials sought to dictate where and when we could hold Black Girl Freedom Week, their anxieties about the girls getting “out of hand” and “uncontrollable,” their attempts regulate our movement by relegating us to particular spaces within the school: the library (on the condition that we did not touch any of the books or any other items on the shelves) and the gym (which was already crowded with the school’s

excess furniture and supplies). This was also underscored in the focus group when Nae shared how she was disciplined earlier that day for asking a classmate for a pencil. Scholars who work with Black girls in school illustrate how Black girls are often targeted with punitive discipline strategies (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2015, Morris 2012, 2016, Wun 2016).

The frustration of having to navigate the school's boundaries of confinement lead many of my participants to identify school as the geographical location in which they felt less free. This became evident when I had the chance to speak with Kiyah. During one of the focus groups, Kiyah shared that being at home or at a friend's house made her feel like she was "broken in *space*." Her use of the phrase "broken in space" struck me because it evoked imaginative language to describe affective connections to alternate geographies outside of school. These spaces were familial and familiar. In her neighborhood, whether in her home or that of her homegirl's, she experienced moments of joy in being able to move throughout space without feelings of constraint and restriction that seemed impossible in a school setting. Her use of "space" works as an invocation of an alternate geography that Black girls construct outside the logics of school confinement and discipline. It also demonstrates how place is crucial to Black girls' understanding of freedom.

A. "Broken In Space:" Art as a Strategy for Refusal & Remapping Geographies

*"Free is a meaning like for itself.
So like it's hard to explain because there's really no other word for free."*

-Nae

Similar to youth projects led by Black girlhood academics such as Ruth Nicole Brown, Jillian Hernandez, and Anya Wallace, BGFW workshops were designed to generate connectivity and self-expression (Hernandez 2015). In these workshops, art becomes a tool

of memory and performance. A performance “of excess that makes and unmakes both performer and audience” (Pickens 2014, 44). In BGFW, Black girls did not have to worry about having the right answer or being too loud, too much, or not quite enough. There was no blueprint or model for them to strive towards. Their vision of freedom was theirs to hold and share as they saw fit.

1. Dance

When asked, “What do you hear when you think about freedom?” TayTay and The Three Stars heard, “*You could be a sweet dream or a beautiful nightmare. Somebody pinch me, your love’s too good to be true.*”¹⁷ So, they choreographed a dance to “Sweet Dreams” by Beyoncé that they hoped would leave viewers feeling happy. But most importantly, they wanted Black girls to know “that they can do anything.” They begin the dance with their backs turned against the audience as Beyoncé sang about a love she sees in her dreams. Arms circling atop their heads, they swirl their torsos until they’re facing stage center. From there, they take turns in sharing the spotlight. Each one leading after another. First TayTay, then Jayna, then TayTay’s little sister, Ria.



¹⁷ Lyric from “Sweet Dreams” by Beyoncé



Figure 2 & 3: "The Three Stars" Performance at Albert Brown, Sept. 2017

TayTay, Ria, and Jayna and other participants identified that the alternate spaces of freedom they longed for were with their friends, community, and family. Nae could recuperate from the hyper disciplinary environment of school with her family at her auntie's house. BGFW functioned as a resistant geography in which Black girls could embody freedom in the very space that seeks to discipline and comport their bodies. The space was provided to mediate their visions of freedom and community. The choreography organized by The Three Stars was about transforming the school auditorium's stage into their auntie's house. For them, freedom was the feeling they experienced when they danced with each other as friends and sisters in the comfort of their home. The lens of the ratchet imaginary renders their bodies visible in a landscape that so often disappears them. It welcomes the excess, the marginal, the uncertainty. It riddles geographies of unfreedom with the dreams and memories of Black girls who insist on a livable present and future.

Through the girls' art practices, ratchet becomes a choreography of refusal. Refusal holds tightly to a truth and way of knowing in the face of anti-Black logics that attempt to erase Black life (Simpson 2016). Black girl refusal shifts narratives of respectability and otherness. In *Black Marxism*, Robinson names the African New World revolts as a total rejection of enslavement and racism. They were not concerned with transforming society or

overthrowing capitalism, because they were focused on creating maroon settlements and crafting an understanding of home despite the threat of death (Robinson 2000, xv).

Robinson’s recuperation of this history as a part of a lasting legacy of the Black Radical Tradition leads me to think about how we might consider Black girls who shift the logics of surveillance that **track their bodies** in school spaces. I examine how these logics are shifted and invisibilized through the girls’ staged performances. Through their movement on and off the stage, the Black girl participants of this thesis generate a particular language for refusal that dances past logics of surveillance.

Black girl aesthetics of refusal are mobilized by another participant named Kayla whose performance was a self-choreographed dance to “Stronger than You” by Estelle. In our interview together, she asserts that *“People have to give Black girls a chance because you can’t take our dreams away from us.”*



Kayla's choreography reveals the grammar of what *can't* happen (a world that continues to render the dreams of Black girls invisible) because of the *must* (*Black girls have to survive as themselves*) that has to occur. In our interview, Kayla was very assured that there is no other way for the future to occur. Kayla puts forth an aesthetics of refusal that is contingent upon the existence of Black girl truths. Her decision to dance to the sounds of Estelle was very deliberate. Her performance of refusal in this unfree geographical space of the school setting exclaimed that she was indeed, "made o-o-o-o-of Lo-o-o-o-ove, o-o-o-o-ove, and it's stronger than you."¹⁸ Kayla knows that the love and community that occurs within Black girl spaces unmakes prescriptive binaries.

These modes of dance and play reveal facets of Black girls' joy and pleasure that are often repressed under features of discipline and surveillance. Perhaps this is where Savannah Shange's concept of "Black girl ordinary" (2019) becomes useful. She describes the work of Black girl ordinary as a practice that "inverts the logic of the Talented Tenth—we don't need no lifting, climbing, or saving. Instead, it improvises on social and aesthetic choreographies to disrupt the inherited rhythms of captivity, progressive or otherwise" (Shange 2019, 6). She does so by examining two Black girls at a San Francisco high school who were targeted for school pushout, yet their self-making strategies produce a politics of refusal that rejects this liberal project of exclusion. Shange cites the girls "constant dancing, stomping, and booty popping in classrooms and hallways" (2019,6) as public disruptions to the "state-sanctioned slow death" (2019, 6) that Black girls encounter within and outside school spaces.

¹⁸ Lyric from "Stronger Than You" by Estelle

Given the logic of comportment that is so often reproduced within Albert Brown, this thesis is concerned with how Black girls utilize space to produce an aesthetic of refusal that combats the regulatory practices exerted against their bodies. As Simmons articulates, “...if space was an important regulatory feature of Jim Crow New Orleans, then finding spaces of freedom (even if they are small spaces) and creating respatialization were equally important for Black girls. Black girls found self-satisfaction in places where they did not need to consider others’ views of them, worry about their safety, or worry if they belonged” (Simmons 2015, 178). The place-making strategies of Black girls in which they push against the regulating orders of spatialization deployed by the Center “can disrupt and discredit normative reading practices that assess young Black women’s bodies as “undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place” (Cox 2015, 28–9). In these spaces, they are able to synthesize a sense of belonging that is unconcerned with the confining structures of ratchet or respectable. An exploration of Black girls’ spaces of freedom reveals their cartographic practices that undermine formations of power.

2. Altar Art



Figure 6: Altar to “Black Girl Freedom at Albert Brown Center, Sept. 2017

In order to understand how Black girls, imagine and think of freedom, I’ve decided to turn to unconventional sources such as drawings and doodles that are not often seen as sources of analysis or just “child’s play.” Some of the art showcased in the altar were autobiographical art in which many of them would use the letters of their name to spell out various attributes or descriptive traits about their identity.

Cute
Lit
Excited
Open Minded

Or they would draw their names in large letters accompanied by a narrated description of their identity. For instance, Jessica felt that people should know that she is “playful” and usually prefers spending time with her family and best friend, Janae. Madison, felt free at the

children's museum because she gets to laugh and play. Nae drew an image of her auntie's house. Niyah loves to dance.

This practice was initiated as a way to move away from common descriptors of Black girls that are projected by social groups and institutions who do not actually know them. Autobiographical art makes space for their own self-articulations. Such a practice explores what it means for Black girls to establish selfhood in such a way that challenges structures of dominance. The insistence upon naming presents a striking event of self-articulation that becomes particularly important in the exploration of Black girlhood. From the work of Aimee Cox (2015), we know that Black girls are constantly in the process of mediating who they are and how they are seen by the outside world. Black girls are unable to control socially reproduced logics that attempt to name them without their consent. When asked how they think about freedom, some of the participants looked toward autobiographical art as a way to demonstrate their understanding.

Other participants drew images of specific locations. Madison, felt free at the children's museum because she gets to laugh and play. Nae drew an image of her auntie's house. Niyah loves to dance, so she drew an image of her dancing with friends at her home. Their ideas of freedom located alternate geographies that circumvent argumentations of control. Their identification of family, friends, and community as integral to their understandings of freedom emphasize collectivity over individuality. Narratives of control perpetuated by school systems and education-based programs point towards the fashioning of individual bodies as a way to mold them into respectable, nice citizens. For the girls of Albert Brown, they cultivated spaces of joy and satisfaction amongst their family, friends, and community. How they saw themselves in relation to those around them was integral to the formation of

their subjectivities. Each of them demonstrated how their understanding of freedom completely upended the program's emphasis on controlled bodies who performed niceness and respectability.

Conclusion

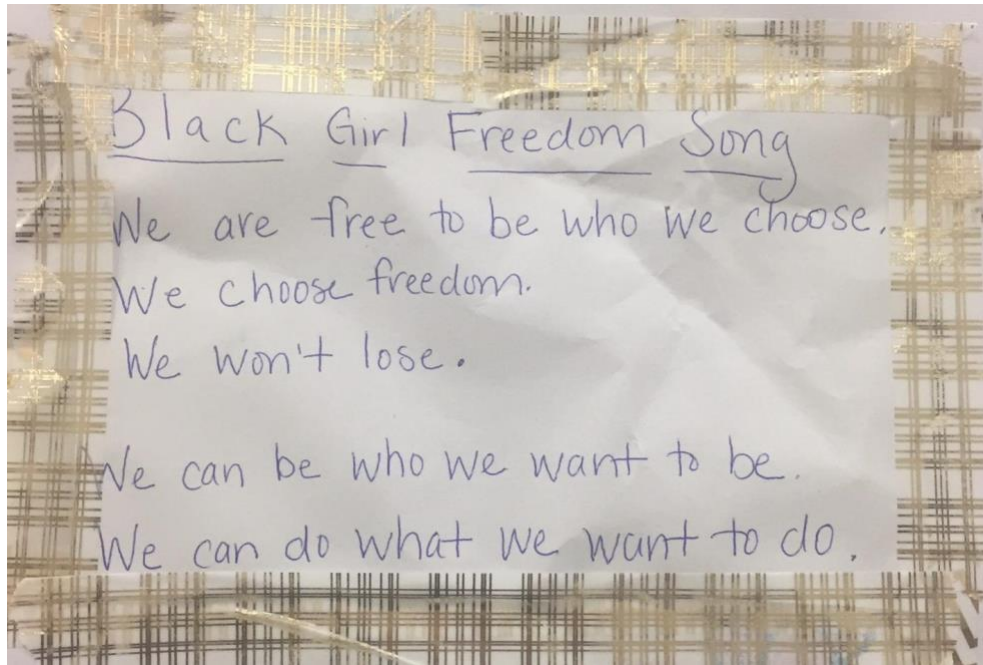


Figure 7: "Black Girl Freedom Song"
Written by Unique
Albert Brown Center, August 2017

As previously stated, I argue that an examination of the enactment of ratchet in the lives of Black girls pushes girlhood scholars and educators of Black girls to understand the quotidian practices of freedom and self-making wielded by Black girls. These quotidian practices include moments of embodiment in which Black girls are dancing with their homegirls in their auntie's living room or participating in the act of naming themselves for themselves. The narratives expressed by the participants of this work demonstrate the way narratives framed by social constructs of morality impact the strategies Black girls use to self-regulate their bodies and behaviors. These narratives reify restrictive dichotomies that

leave Black girls to choose between the social implications of being perceived as a lady vs. being perceived as ratchet. This work uncovers the untenability of moralistic narratives such as the ladylike persona using the voices of Black girls who are actively negotiating problematic binaries in their everyday lives.

By understanding the ways Black girls interrogate and interpret moralizing binaries of Black girl identity, we can begin to identify their desires as well as the bodily constraints they experience. A Black ratchet imaginary is an embodied choreography crafted by black girls to carve out spaces wherein they can visualize survival, a survival that does not rely on measuring the success or failure of their femininity upon white bourgeois stereotypes and constraints. It can lead us to examining Black girl **aesthetics of refusal** in which Black girls make knowledge and remake space as a way to contend with threats of racial violence and bodily comportment. This thesis highlights how Black girls are imagining other ways of being and are thinking through and against limiting gendered tropes to create their own landscapes of freedom. Ultimately, I demonstrate how Black girls are charting new ways of envisioning a future suitable for all Black girls. This thesis offers a reading practice of Black girlhood that ruminates upon Black girl futurity as an insistence on Black girls' survival in the past and present (Campt 2017). This theoretical lens presents itself as a useful tool to examine the cultural work Black girls perform to live the future, they envision for themselves; despite whether or not it exists in such an anti-Black girl world.

Through Anna, Nae, and the girls of Albert Brown, we can see how creative aesthetic performances of Black girlhood that have the capacity to move us toward tenable visions of Black girl freedom. This type of cultural work produces an alternate imagining of Black girlhood that holds the capacity to lead us into a future world that deserves Black girl life,

unlike the one we now occupy. In this Black Girl Future, Black girls are the center of our radical movement and not on the periphery. In this Black Girl Future, Black girls are not a vessel for destruction. In this Black Girl Future, Black girls are always enough. In this future, Black girls “can be who we want to be.”

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