THE CASE FOR BLACKGIRL JOY IN AMERICA

By

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Abstract

This project studies Black joy using auto-ethnography and narrative analysis of my personal experience, and critical media analysis to understand the cross section of vulnerability, subject position, and joy for Black women, particularly Black women in the U.S.A. My claims about Blackgirls’ experiences of joy are framed by my own standpoint(s) and background (U.S born National, working class) and not representative of all Blackgirls, for example, those who are from the Caribbean or African continent or the African diaspora in settler states. This project seeks to interrogate generally 1) How might we describe the relationship black women in U.S.A have with joy, and 2) How do our experiences inform this relationship and the expectations of Black girlhood? For the purposes of this study, joy is understood as an internal and spiritual experience that encompasses the cultivation of self-acceptance and love of self. Using narrative inquiry and endarkened Black Feminist theories, this study is set in the context of the United States and operates from the standpoint that we live in a world that frames Black women as inhuman, invulnerable, and unworthy of protection because of their perceived lack of innocence and virtue. This study examines popular culture projects like The Color Purple and Lemonade, as well as fantasy T.V, specifically The Vampire Diaries. This research argues that various media forms and communities that articulate the specific experiences of Black women’s vulnerability and insecurity allow for validation and the possibility for black women to see the potential of other subject positions. In other words, ‘we are not what they say we are.’
Lay Summary

Black girls and women are often mistreated, forgotten, and erased by society because of assumptions about their character and abilities. This study addresses and discusses how some Black girls might grow joy despite assumptions by looking at specific personal experiences and media. Specifically, this research studies joy from the perspective of Black girls in the U.S. this research seeks to contribute to literature that describes the black female human experience and understanding of freedom.
Preface:

This is the original and independent work of the author, A. Davis.
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Crowded around the bathroom door of a second-grade classroom in Framingham, Massachusetts were twenty mostly white worried students. I remember staring in confusion wondering if someone was hurt, but there were no moves to get help. I looked to our teacher, a white woman, for any indication that someone was in danger. She just looked on sadly and then went back to work. Then, I asked around and found that my classmate’s dog had died which led to her crying in the bathroom. Immediately, I dropped my shoulders and let out a sigh of disappointment. I grew up in a family not only afraid of dogs but also did not appreciate that dogs were treated better than “some” humans (My mother always notes that the same direction and music used for saving animal commercials are the same for saving unspecific African children. Are we dogs?). Still, I sat at the table aimlessly confused as to why so many cared about her crying. So, I asked my teacher, “Why is everyone standing around? No one ever does that when I cry.” Her answer: “Because you always cry.” And for the first time, I realized my tears did not matter.

Without connection or obligation, my classmates expressed sympathy and empathy of which I have never been the recipient. My pain or suffering would always be in excess of what was acceptable because my pain was illegitimate and unrecognizable. Even before my teacher uttered those words, I knew there was a difference between me and my white classmates. I always suspected the difference was race, but I tried my best to deny my parents’ warnings.

I tested the theory by crying in the bathroom about my stolen dog. A teacher from a different classroom told me that my dog situation was sad, but that I was disturbing other classes.
So, it was not about the dog, the situation, or circumstance. After long and disbelieving moments of comparison, the only difference was my blackness. This incident joined with my overall experience of being a Blackgirl in this world informed my understanding of what it means to be seen as invulnerable, unsympathetic, and unprotected.

I recognize that my claims about Blackgirls’ experiences of joy in this study are framed by my own standpoint(s) and background (U.S born National, working class) and not representative of all Blackgirls, for example, those who are from the Caribbean or African continent or the African diaspora in settler states. By using a standpoint framework as discussed by feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway and Nancy Hartsock, I also do not intend to homogenize the lived experiences of Black “American” women and of working-class backgrounds, but to instead illustrate how no single story of Blackgirl experience exists (Collins, 2000, 28).

Introduction

Beginning the project of joy was as confusing as it was heartbreaking. I began wanting to study things that I loved or at least made me smile so I could document the joys of black girlhood, but I could not avoid or ignore the moments where I laugh to keep from crying. For example, I could talk about *Lemonade* (album) by Beyoncé Knowles, and how seeing myself in the music let me know I was not alone in my insecurity, rage, and resentment. But it is hard to talk about *Lemonade (album)* without talking about the rift between “second wave” and “third wave” feminists on the misunderstood placement of joy and liberation or the fact that many white and black feminists praised Kendrick Lamar’s Grammy performance that year while they

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1 U.S National
criticized *Lemonade* as only capitalist propaganda. The unbalanced scrutiny seemed
discouraging for further Blackgirl cultural production. No doubt, it is frustrating to watch so
many Black men praise Kendrick Lamar and look past how his misogynoir is able to slip, slide,
and maneuver its way into Black consciousness without critique.

I also love Black Student Unions across the United States that make space for the voices
of marginalized Black students. I would love to study coalition building and how Black student
unions builds community. But Black Student Unions (BSU) do not exist in a vacuum. Critical
intersections of power like gender, class, and ethnicity, for example, do not disappear because
everyone is Black. Black is not a monolith. But without consensus or an agreed goal of
emancipation for all, wherever I think I find love and belonging, I am met with misogynoir,²
the hatred of Black women. I feel some sense of obligation to articulate meaning in the space of our
pain so that other Black women know they are seen and heard but... we already know. The Black
women in my life know all too well how seemingly meaningless and invisible our consciousness
is to the public. Therefore, I want to approach my work from the affirmative and study what
Black women create despite being hated by the world and living in an epidemic Black anti-love.
I want to study what heaven can we make in a world that I do not believe has the tools or
capacity to love us. And yet, I am struggling.

My cynical position regarding Black women’s condition and social location in the world
is not new. Many have addressed these ideas by focusing on the obstacles that challenge Black
voice and recognition and engender despair. But rather than focus on Black despair, I originally
wanted to examine how Black people inspire joy or inspire internal spiritual self-acceptance and

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² Misogynoir is a term coined by Moya Bailey and expanded upon by Trudy of now defunct
blog, Gradient Lair.
approach the topic from an affirmative stance. But that position seemed too narrow. At every point of trying to theorize joy, my study was met with despair, hopelessness, and the search for love or the lack thereof. At times, joy seemed arguably necessitated by despair and suffering. Because unlike happiness, joy is not inspired by independent objects. According to feminist scholar of color Sara Ahmed (2010) and classical philosopher John Locke, happiness is inspired by objects that give pleasure or diminish pain while joy is not attached to objects. The work of joy is a process and an experience. To put it differently, the joy in which I refer to is not about Blackgirl representation but rather how that varied representation creates entry points and opportunities to entertain the possibility of refusing preconceived productions of value, desire, and ultimately subjectivity. And while contemplating and grappling with those possibilities, the many ways in which Black women’s humanity was deemed debatable became the heartbreaking forefront because the representations or experiences can be narrow, limited, and uninspired. No doubt, I am looking at the moment and repetitions of passionate independent resistance inspired by love, ‘lovelessness,’ and heartbreak.

With heartbreak in mind, Danielle Poe’s (2015) analysis of Simone De Beauvoir’s (1947) work, The Ethics of Ambiguity, brings us to De Beauvoir’s linking of joy in relation to freedom and heartbreak. According to Poe, the experience of heartbreak and suffering is a sign of an “investment of ourselves” in the project of freedom (503). In other words, humans experience heartbreak as a result of failed investments in freedom, where in which the pursuit and investment in freedom are valuable parts of stretching toward new futures. No doubt, sitting in in the Black Student Union or Sisters of the Round Table, a women of color feminist collective, I stretched to understand more about oppression and learning how to love myself as
well as others wounded by erasure. Stretching toward new futures brings joy because of the possibility of freedom.

By the same token, failed investments can affect our decisions to risk heartbreak again for the possibility of joy (Poe, 2015, 503). For certain, the more I invested in either trying to help my oppressors see me or my scarred sisters hear me, the more I experienced disappointment and heartbreak. That heartbreak, without analysis and deep reflection, made it harder each time to try and stretch again. As a result, doubt consumed my journey. Poe (2015) further develops the role of joy by suggesting that those who feel that their oppression and suffering are inevitable are those that are “mystified and unaware that their freedom has been co-opted by someone else” (504). So rather than resist heartbreak, De Beauvoir suggests that the acceptance of suffering and growing awareness of the conditions of suffering have the potential to mark a path to joy (503) – a perspective that parallels Buddhist philosophy and ethics.

Consequently, those who are aware of the conditions must act. And parts of this research are the creative ways in which Black women act to reveal to each other that we are not inevitably forsaken, inhuman, and forgotten. Black women’s investment in freedom is often illustrated through the time, effort, and energy put into accessible and honest poetry, music, and literature for example, Beyoncé’s Lemonade (album) and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. Indeed, the ways in which Black women act to provide validation and cultivate fellowship for Black women are valuable. By exploring Black women’s fellowship and cultural production, the productions potentially allow Black women to briefly pivot and interrogate societal assumptions about their subjectionhood rather than doubt their own consciousness and wisdom of experience. Moreover, black women work to achieve their goals for liberation and pursue happiness despite the impossibility and presumed inevitability of failure. For this reason, I struggle(d) to craft my
vision of a work that interrogated one question: in a world that does not seem to have the 
capacity to love Black women, what heaven can Black women create for themselves?

Although the first part or premise of the question follows a tradition of pessimism and 
blackness, the second part offers possibilities of creation because, like my predecessors and 
ancestors, I am not without hope. My hope lies in Black women. This question led me to 
focusing this work on the discussions of Black women’s creations and the marking of space and 
breath for Black women because ‘no one loves Black women more than Black women.’

Research Questions and Purpose

In this study, I aim to understand how my personal experiences with being denied 
vulnerability, innocence, and protection in the public sphere are political toward conceptualizing 
Blackgirl and Black women’s joy in the U.S.A. I connect my personal experience with analysis 
of popular media projects, particularly The Color Purple, Lemonade and Vampire Diaries, and 
the productive value they hold for the cultivation of joy among Blackgirls and women when 
viewed strategically through a critical feminist lens. Inspired by Dominique Hill (2016), I chose 
to condense Blackgirl into one word to assert that Blackness is not separate from girlhood. I kept 
the original phrase “Black girl” within cited quotes from other authors and in the bibliography 
where it appeared as part of the book or journal article title.

The research questions that guided this study include:

1. How do we describe the relationship between Blackgirls and joy?

2. How do our experiences inform this relationship and the expectations of black girlhood?

The first purpose is to examine personal narratives and link them to larger ongoing 
political discourse surrounding innocence, vulnerability, and stereotypes. Specifically, this
research draws from the examinations and discussions regarding the theoretical effects of “Strong Black Woman,” “Sapphire,” and “Jezebel” stereotypes attributed to Black women. Next, this research articulates how the experience of loneliness, the fear of not being enough for ourselves and a sense of loss, produced by isolation, create obstacles to Blackgirl joy. Further, this study illustrates how some forms of media, coupled with conversations with other black women, help to understand how black women’s discriminatory experiences are not individual but systemic and in need of acknowledgment. The last objective is to discuss the question and pursuit of joy as ongoing and intergenerational topic by joining different generational articulations of insecurity and self-love.

Methods and Theoretical Frameworks

This research is informed by feminist research epistemology, particularly black feminist standpoint theory, and feminist methodological frameworks, particularly the use of the following methods:

*Narrative Inquiry and Auto-Ethnographic Research*

Little research has directly addressed the relationship between Blackgirls and joy, particularly from Blackgirls’ and women’s standpoint and lived experience. Allen and Piercy (2005) contend that reflection upon one’s personal experience or critical feminist ethnography as method allows researchers to ‘break outside the conventional circle of social science and confront, court, and coax that aching pain or haunting memory that one does not understand about one’s experiences’ (159). Therefore, I want to use my experiences and ‘bump-ins’, and ‘(re)memberings to contemplate how I came to understand my positionality and joy. Likewise,
this project emerges from my own deep questions about self-acceptance and strategic resistance. Audre Lorde (1984) suggests, rather than cast these experiences aside, my work will remain steady in its belief that the examination of one’s own stories is and can be meaningful to producing harder questions and identifying key problems (37). Additionally, Cynthia Dillard (2003) encourages researchers of color to use narrative inquiry to turn away from our desire to belong to a particular paradigm, or an acceptable way of analyzing, formatting, and articulating meaning. Instead, we must nurture and aid in the growth of paradigms that demonstrate our cultural and spiritual understandings of memories and histories that shape our ways of knowing and ways of being and perhaps inform our interactions (84).

This study seeks to take a deeper look into Blackgirls and their perceived invulnerability. For this reason, this research requires that I be vulnerable with my writing as a method of healing but also as a means of being reflexive. By bringing my personal stories into public discourse as a method of narrative inquiry, I as well as my reader will be able to see the threads between ideas, feeling, and theory. Andrews, Squire, and Tambouku (2008) suggests that we frame our research in terms of narrative inquiry because by doing so, we are able to see contradictory layers of meaning (1). Also, Andrews, Squire, and Tambouku (2008) contend that narrative inquiry offers researchers in this field an adequate way to analyze social patterns and functioning of stories, whether the ‘stories’ are “short, disjointed or extensive representations that exemplify broad cultural narratives” (5). Subsequently, I am concerned with how narratives are built through internal conversations exposed through personal diaries or journals as a means to extract the negotiations and performances of my social identity that are in a common space of meaning (6).

*Standpoint Theory*
Nancy Hartsock in Quest in 1975 wrote: “At bottom feminism is mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics, rather than a set of political conclusions about the oppression of women” (1981, 35). Hartsock asserts that feminist standpoint theory is about truth claims and how we justify them. In other words, standpoint theory is mode of reading our own realities and experiences as legitimate ways of knowing because our experiences are located within a particular set of social relations and historically specific mediations (Hekman, 1997, 343; Haraway, 1988). The claims of standpoint theory came as a response and method of unmasking powerful scientific objectivity rhetoric that privileged male supremacy through artifact and facts and ignored “embodied accounts of truth” (Haraway, 1988, 578). Collins (1990) describes that by using feminist standpoint theory, I seek to make visible what is invisible to mainstream sociology and reveal “[e]veryday, unarticulated consciousnesses” (36). Indeed, a central idea of standpoint theory is that all knowledge claims are historically and socially situated. For this reason, standpoint theory rejects the sole legitimacy of the “disembodied knower” and regards all knowledge ‘bounded by the cultural position, historical place, and biography of the knower” (Parillo, 2008, 897). This body of work intends to make visible the pain and joy of coming to understand how I, a Blackgirl, came to learn webs of power that seemingly dictate my life and subject position.

Specifically, this work intends to make visible the ways in which Blackgirls are denied girlhood by having to project strength. The constant projection and imposition of strong Black woman tropes denies humanity. Likewise, Collins (2003) mobilizes standpoint theory from a black feminist perspective and contends that by speaking out, formerly victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity, but also empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experiences (48). Indeed, this method of reading reality, my reality, provides a
critical practice for “recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings
(Haraway, 1988, 579).

Therefore, to responsibly address joy and the despair of this project, I will draw on my own experiences through life and with popular media that are strategically and purposefully chosen for the value they offer in the cultivation of black joy. Analytic power lies within a body used as a blank slate for inscription of power and I intend to use those inscriptions, experiences, as constructive tools to assert myself as an agent of embodied knowledge production. By doing so, I contribute to the study of joy and knowledge production through self-formation (Haraway, 1988, 592).

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

Dillard (2016) explains that endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) is framed as research as responsibility. Additionally, EFE offers a way for Black women to (re)member our identities, lives, and work as Black women and “articulates how reality is known when based in the historical roots of global Black feminist thought” (406). Indeed, EFE is way to honor, (re)present, (re)cognize, and (re)claim knowledge wisdom and spirituality of transnational Black woman’s ways of knowing and being in inquiry (407). Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011) situate Black women’s wisdom as “distinct, useful, and relevant not simply in cross-cultural teaching and learning but for our personal healing and affirmation” (67). Regarding wisdom, Collins (2000) argues that Black women and girls, out of necessity, rely on the collective experiences of Black women that are specific to our experience. And that wisdom serves as a set of experiential lessons that emerge from the world view of Black women that should “shared and passed on” to the collective to further ground black women’s ways of knowing (67).
Grounding Black women’s ways of knowing through the centering of spirituality and wisdom in knowledge and research allows black women to confront and recognize “the truth of who we are as a community” through use and understanding of the interaction between wisdom and spirituality as valid epistemologies (3). To further explain, EFE’s use of spirituality refers to the “cosmological spirituality that holds the central notion that all life is sacred and the moral virtue of individuals and that of the community is the same” (Dillard, 2008, 3). In other words, black women’s decisions on how to behave in relation to our identity are linked to intergenerational lessons and stories.

Accordingly, this study traces my own experiences and “bump-ins” with power related to my identity to cultivate a spiritual understanding of who I could without the powerful threat of loneliness or abandonment often used against black women. With this in mind, I intend to use EFE to engage in a healing methodology that embraces this research as an intimate and meditative process rooted in the leap of faith that rather than loneliness, I will be enough for myself (Dillard, 2008, p.7). By healing methodology, Dillard refers to enacting “love, reciprocity, ritual, compassion, and gratitude” as a means to achieving deeper understanding of how to heal our bodies, minds, and spirits as African ascendant people (Dillard, 2008, 8). To privilege my experience, I will “drink from our own wells,” and explore the cultural, historical knowledge that informs this research as epistemology and methodology, which will provide a dynamic spirituality that can be applied at all times and can revision and reclaim knowledge (Dillard, 2008, 12). For this purpose, I must intentionally extend myself to ward nurturing my own growth and engage in deep listening with narratives toward transformative dialogue and inquiry.

*BlackGirls and Intersectional Girlhood Studies*
Between the cracks and under the sheet of sadness is black girlhood. “Cracks” because historically, “Black” seems to automatically refer to Black men and sheets because “girl” seems to automatically refer to white girls historically and in the present (Nunn, 2016, p. 242). According to Nia Nunn (2016), a Black girlhood scholar, current scholarship disproportionately focuses on the oppressive experiences of Black boys (242). As a result, the unique and specific feelings and experiences of Black girls, informed by race and gender, go unnoticed and are reduced to one marker of identity: “These experiences ‘cannot be reduced to a single experience of one of these identities, namely, sexism or racial discrimination’” (Nunn, 2016, 241).

Therefore, to counteract the erasure of Black girls in childhood studies, like Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), this study will employ intersectionality as a key framework to help illustrate specific facets of Black girl identity, specifically the specific intersections of racialized and gendered oppressive experiences: gendered racism.

According to Evans-Winter and Esposito (2010), Critical Race Feminism is rooted in critical race theory and embedded in narratives and stories of Black girls. These narratives serve as counter-narratives and challenges to dominant master narratives and perspectives. Subsequently, the narratives will be used to illustrate the “multidimensionality of oppression” felt by Black girls by recognizing the five key tenets presented by critical race theorists and scholars (bell 1992; Crenshaw 1989; Delgado 1989; Delgado and Stefancic 2012):

Critical race theory (CRT) has five tenets that have the potential for informing educational research, curriculum and policy formation: (1) that race and racism are central, endemic, permanent and fundamental in defining and explaining how U.S. society functions, (2) challenges dominant ideologies and claims of race neutrality,
objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness and equal opportunity, (3) is activist in nature and propagates a commitment to social justice, (4) centers the experiences and voices of the marginalized and oppressed, and (5) is necessarily interdisciplinary in scope and function (quoted from Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010, 15, citing Delgado 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Solorzano and Yosso 2002).

Controlling Images and SBW Trope

This research specifically explores the ways in which tropes like the “Strong Black Woman” are imposed and internalized. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) tells us that to understand the lives and experiences of Black women, we must “explore unspoken experiences of hurt, rejection, faith, and search for identity” (4). Part of the unspoken experience of being a Blackgirl are the images that manipulate ideas of Black womanhood and erase Black girlhood. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2004), stereotypical images serve as generalized ideologies of domination that have the authority to define how society values certain bodies (69). Stereotypes impose layers of expectations that affect human interactions and experience.

Indeed, Stereotypes about Black women often exploit assertiveness or expressions of desire to create symbols that “function as a disguise or mystification” (Collins, 2004, 69). Collins (2004) terms these images and stereotypes as “controlling images” because they are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural and inevitable” (69). By analyzing my experience and narratives across these controlling images, this research can examine the ways in which these ideas shape my understanding of subject position and my relation to popular media and images I consume on a daily basis. In other words, this
research will demonstrate how controlling images shaped how I came to understand myself and my experience as an “other.” One such controlling image is the “Strong Black Woman.”

Wallace (1978) first identified the Strong Black Woman trope and stereotype in *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*. The SBW trope is rooted in racism and sexism in addition to the negative effects of stress and negation of self-care. Furthermore, Black women’s internalization of strength results in emotional suppression. According to Watson and Hunter (2016), in a world already steeped in anti-Blackness and Misogynoir, the SBW expectation provides a “blueprint” for emotional durability and allows Black women to fulfill their responsibilities (433). This research cannot ignore the reality of compulsion that strength for Black women is often a necessity. Strength is not a choice.

The SBW trope is not only a mantlepiece set of expectations imposed on to Black women by Black communities, but also a stereotype that many Black women feel they must uphold: “The social construction of Black women’s citizenship and identity around the theme of self-sacrificial strength is a recurrent motif in Black women’s lives and politics” (Harris-Perry, 2011, 21). That sacrificial strength includes being the rock of support for family, being the wise and willing breadwinner, being unfazed by trials and tribulations, and being prepared to sacrifice one’s own desires for the sake of family and Black people (Harris-Perry, 2011, 21). And while we sacrifice for our family or Black people, we have succumbed to the pressure to conceal our tears and smiles and “mouth a myriad of subtleties” whilst we sink deeper and deeper into a lost void.

The expectations of being a SBW is to remain unbroken, no matter how much you are beaten until your last stolen breath stems from legacies of “oppression, poverty, and rejection.” Harris-Perry (2011) contends that the stereotype is also used as a “constructive role model
because Black women draw encouragement and self-assurances from an icon that overcomes great obstacles” (184). However, while maintaining complete self-reliance and projecting the mask, what may have begun as a method of self-definition becomes a debilitating emotional weapon that makes showing vulnerability shameful. As a result, this current study uses narratives and personal stories to illustrate how I learned and internalized expectations and struggled against the shame of being vulnerable. Additionally, using narrative inquiry and auto ethnographic methods informed by Black feminist theories, I address the limitations of SBW ideology. SBW ideology prioritizes the preservation of image and Black communities over the mental and emotional health of Black women, which may result in silenced divisions (Watson and Hunter, 2016, 425).

Indeed, Watson and Hunter (2016) contend that a collective feature of African American womanhood and girlhood is “the embodiment and maintenance of SBW race-gender schema, which affirms African American Women’s strength and tenacity” (425). As Watson and Hunter (2016) suggest, prominent Black female figures like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman are hailed as archetypes of SBW race-gender schema through maintaining strength for and caretaking of others. Although strength in the face of obstacles and caring for one’s community and family are admirable traits, the issue lies with the expectation that the image is what Blackgirls should maintain at all times without reciprocity as they see how their mothers, aunts and other elders in their community behave and expect their girls to behave.

And so, for this study to fully see and hear Black women, this research uses narratives that illustrate the multilayered consequences without relying on binary, good and bad, conclusions.

*Youth and Innocence in Black Feminist Frameworks*
From the time we, Black women and girls, are born we learn that we are not afforded neither innocence nor are we afforded youth. Indeed, we are not afforded vulnerability. To situate the experiences in which I learned the world’s perception of my invulnerability, I turn to Priscilla Ocen’s work in *E)racing Childhood: Examining the Racialized Construction of Childhood and Innocence in the Treatment of Sexually Exploited Minors*. Ocen’s work (2015) notes the ways in which Blackgirls are “underserved and underprotected by social constructions of childhood, innocence, sexual agency, and diminished criminal responsibility.” Ocen (2015) discusses the historical and racial genealogy of normative constructs of childhood, innocence, and agency to explain the exclusion of Blackgirls from protection. Joined with an analysis of *Vampire Diaries*, a popular American supernatural drama, and personal narratives, I explore how stolen innocence and denied childhood through problematic romantic representations suggest that Blackgirls cannot be children. As a result, they remain unprotected and neglected.

*Black Self-Love*

Black feminist scholar bell hooks (2000) in *All About Love* describes love as a mix of ingredients: “care, affection, honesty, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust” (5). This love cannot only be given and received to another person but also to ourselves. Accordingly, hooks’ definition informed my journey of self-love and helped me recognize what I deserved in relationships with others. hooks’ work with love interrogates care and feeling and the confusion that follows them both when loving ourselves and others. Most important, hooks connects love and the lack thereof to larger webs of power that “keep people in a constant state of lack and perpetual desire, which strengthens the marketplace economy” (47).

Conversely, some have characterized the last decade as the rise of the “me generation” that seeks constant validation from an unknown audience. In like fashion, unhealthy narcissism
can be masked as “self-love” to acquire self-esteem through the commodification of everything (people become brands) and a narrow focus on the individual. Often, self-love and narcissism are conflated and used as reasons for self-glorification. Christopher Lasch (1979), social critic and historian, states that “Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem” (11-12). Indeed, Lasch suggests that narcissism refers to a weak, defensive, and insecure self that is distinctly different from self-love. Although narcissism is an act of self-inflation that involves perceiving one’s self as better than others and seeking external validation to compensate for a lack of devotion and insecurity, the self-love to which I refer to in this study is not self-admiration toward the point of destroying others (Stuart, 1955, 29).

A healthy self-love cultivates what Grace Stuart (1955), a psychology scholar, suggests is an altruism in a sense of willingness to consider other people as ourselves (28). In other words, this study encourages a spiritual growth that allows one to maintain a compassionate awareness of one’s vulnerability and critically love one’s self without guilt. Indeed, people of color, specifically women of color, are often asked to offer love and understanding that is rarely reciprocated. In fact, when Blackgirls love themselves through asserting confidence, choosing themselves (even once among the many times we choose others), or talk back, Blackgirls are accused of divisive selfishness and over-confidence as if the love is undeserved. Self-love requires one to know how to love others and similarly, turn that love inward without dependence on external validation. No doubt, self-love without validation is crucial and a specific path to black joy for black women precisely because we cannot depend on the love of others. Moreover, black self-love challenges the false narrative that Blackgirls and black women are unlovable. The
self-love term used for this study is not about admiring or needing an audience but actually about critiquing or rejecting the audience as the only constitutive subject.

*Third Wave Feminism and Criticism*

Too often, the wave approach erases and obscures the diversity of feminism and the contributions of smaller movements and more radical camps led by feminists on the margins. However, this study deals directly with Beyoncé’s *Lemonade (album)*, which has received criticism on the basis that its liberal placement within third wave feminism does not adequately address issues of class. By no means does this study suggest the waves accurately document the history of feminism, but they do trace mass-appeal feminist movements. Indeed, *Lemonade* (album) sparked cross-generational debate about how its meaning set joy and liberation in opposition to each other. For this reason, it is necessary to discuss *Lemonade’s* place in third wave feminism and the criticisms of third wave feminisms.

First, early third wave feminism emerged in the 1990s as part of a popular mass movement against sexual assault and workplace sexual harassment. One of the most publicized cases was Anita Hill testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding nominee Clarence Thomas sexually harassing her at work (Grady, 2018). In fact, Hill’s testimony sparked debate regarding workplace harassment much like #Metoo. Anita Hill’s case remains a primary case of looking at how the intersections of race, gender, status, and class resulted in Anita Hill being called a traitor and Clarence Thomas being publicly questioned about his “sexual deviance” before ultimately taking a bench seat on the highest court in the U.S. Subsequently, Rebecca Walker (daughter of Alice Walker and a woman of colour) proclaimed in a *Ms. Magazine* essay after watching Thomas get sworn into the Supreme Court, “I am the Third Wave” to mark her frustration with the devaluation and violation of women as well as the
prioritized protection of ‘the race’ as if the issues of black people are exclusively those of straight black men (Grady, 2018; Walker, 1992, 1). Rebecca Walker’s rage hovers over each word in her call to action as she indict the powerful machine that enables patriarchal exploitation and progressives who erase overlapping discriminatory and prejudicial experiences.

Subsequently, borne out of criticism of the second wave and the combined influences from Combahee River Collective Statement (1976) Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill-Collins (1993, 1998, 2004), and Judith Butler (1999) among others, for whom intersectionality became a fundamental part of the third wave feminism. Indeed, the third wave first criticized the second wave for treating multiple oppressions and identities as separate and distinct (Spelman, 1988). The second major criticism was the hierarchizing of oppression by treating one form of oppression as more central than another, which added to the approach inadequately understanding multiple oppressions as connected and interlocking. The answer to this inadequacy from the third wave was the promotion of intersectional feminism, which theoretically included an analysis of political issues across race, class, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, education, nationality and so forth.

However, this criticism over-simplified the complicated and diverse history of second wave feminism (Mann and Huffman, 2005). According to second wave activist Wini Breines (2002), she argued that while many white second wave activists analyzed difference by race and class, they seldom interacted socially with women of color, which was seen as necessary part of effective political action. As a result, movements across ethnic and class arrangements emerged with their own concerns and priorities. Consequently, the link between personal interaction and political action made coalitions based on difference difficult (Mann and Huffman, 2005).
This difficulty is often called identity politics, which sets one’s identity as point of political departure (Alcoff, 1988, 412). Such politics has also affected feminist theorizing by making defined types of theorizing like Africana feminist (Mann and Huffman, 2005). Perhaps to avoid lumping all women of color together, Collins moved from calling theorizing that considered “simultaneous and multiple oppressions” Black feminist thought to intersectionality theory (Andersen and Collins 1992; Collins, 1998; Mann & Huffman, 2005, p.61). Indeed, the third wave embraced intersectionality theory as a means to address exploited groups by maintaining an analysis of oppression that was relational, oppositional, and structural despite its multiplicity (Mann & Huffman, 2005). For this reason, the third wave has prided themselves on also using intersectionality to take a global perspective and consider the lives of women with different material conditions (Mambrol, 2017). Yet, the latter is not always popularly demonstrated.

A notable critique of the third wave is precisely that the use of the identifier, “intersectional feminist” is lip service. Included within third and second wave feminists are an existing camp of Marxist feminists (MF) who share a commitment to human emancipation and acknowledge difference in theory can enhance political movements. However, MF also argue that the third wave has been too “passé” about the presence of materialism within the movement and have downplayed class differences between women. Additionally, MF recognizes that “structural inequalities enable some people to shape reality more easily than others” (Mann & Huffmann, 2005, 75). In other words, MF recognize that some have the access and capability to use material and capital gains to make reality appear more equal, equitable and perhaps meritocratic. Although MF acknowledges the tension between individual freedom and collective
politics, it rejects the notion that the individual should take priority over the collective, which includes the advocacy of materialism to change one’s individual reality.

Furthermore, MF argues that a more anti-capitalist politics should be included in intersectionality theory and feminist politics. In contrast, some have criticized MF as hierarchizing class over other oppression (Mann & Huffmann, 2005, 77). Despite shared emancipatory politics, similar criticism was made about radical feminism and has been made about feminism that centers gender oppression since the 1960s and 1970s. Although some goals may overlap, the joining of Marxist and feminist ideology often results in arguing for class rather than gender (or vice versa) as the ontological primary (Hartmann, 1987; Bryson, 2004, 14; Fricker, 2008). Indeed, a commitment to class-based politics can take over a discussion and erase the connections of race, gender, or sexuality. However, understanding these oppressions as deeply entangled rather than separate in addition to joining the essential historical insight of Marxism and the recognition that multiple oppressions necessitate each other is a helpful but complicated treatment (Sargent 1981; Hartmann, 1987). Therefore, to understand the tension among joy, power, and classism we must look at one of the main critiques that brought this work into existence.

Informed by the above critiques of third wave feminism, what is a curious and a point of contention for third and second wave feminism is how joy and power analysis fit into emerging third, and possibly fourth, wave politics. To reiterate, the joy I refer to is not material happiness but an internal spiritual process. And within the third wave is a project for intersectional visibility, recognition, and speech that has expanded how we think about knowledge production. With expansion of knowledge production in mind, this study can discuss the many ways in
which joy and power are connected. However, what is in contention is whether or not joy is an individual goal or a collective priority.

Days after the premiere, I wondered what bell hooks would think of Beyoncé’s second engagement with feminism, especially, following hooks’ comment that Beyoncé is a “terrorist” because of Beyoncé’s capitalistic feminism. Without fail, bell hooks remained consistent and argued that *Lemonade* (album) is a prime example of how the third wave seems easily seduced by the intent of Black artistry rather than power and effect of the imagery:

Her vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination. It’s all about insisting on equal rights for men and women. In the world of fantasy feminism, there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality. In such a simplified worldview, women gaining the freedom to be like men can be seen as powerful (hooks, 2016, 2).

To bell hooks, *Lemonade(film)* is not only the work of capitalistic feminism, but the manifestation of how power is able to masquerade as progression when it is in fact a method of neoliberal seduction. *Lemonade(film)* uses African cultural aesthetics and knowledge to wear the mask of black feminism, but potentially harms those it intended to empower by asserting that money is the solution and best revenge in a loveless world: “best revenge is your paper.” And for this reason, it is understandable that Beyoncé and *Lemonade* stir complicated feelings.

Admittedly, I remember emailing my advisor say, “I don’t want to be bell hooks anymore,” because I was confused and disappointed that any type of planned and curated
aesthetic would be construed capitalistic and a threat to the integrity of Black feminist theorizing. Brittany Cooper of the Crunk feminist collective stated that she too was disappointed that hooks had conflated Beyoncé’s brand with her as a person. Indeed, I agreed that the “terrorist” analysis was made without considering the humanity of the subject. As a result, I feared that there is no place a black girl who publicly claims to be a feminist to think, grow, and produce. And I must say, prior to Lemonade, I am and still not a fan Beyoncé the person, but I see something fragile and vulnerable in Lemonade that is being especially publicly scrutinized by other black women in a way that white women and black men are not.

On one hand, Lemonade (Film) offers a beautiful visual narrative of her pain and frustration about being a disrespected black woman tricked into believing she is unlovable. On the other hand, Beyoncé’s uses patriarchal tools to commodify the Black female body: “What makes this commodification different in Lemonade is intent; its purpose is to seduce, celebrate, and delight—to challenge the ongoing present-day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body” (hooks, 2016). Indeed, I lingered on the well-choreographed representations of black womanhood as a I watched the film. But after reading critiques, I became confused as to how a Blackgirl can find joy in such a deeply entangled world. For this reason, I wanted to use this study to meditate on how an intentional spiritual pursuit of joy can emerge as a different understanding of empowerment without a focus on materialism by exploring powers’ seduction, fibs, and half-truths while holding black girl humanity in the center. I am here to seek intentional spiritual and intellectual growth. That is love.
Chapter 1

Innocence and Black Women:

Intersectional Webs of Power Shaping Blackgirl’s Vulnerability

One day, my mother dropped me off at the largest children’s library in Charlotte, NC, Imaginon. Imaginon often held events, workshops and performances catered toward audiences under eighteen and were adamant about making it a space where kids could be creative and independent. During my first visit, I was surprised and amused that adults were not allowed in the teen section. Why? Teenagers are constantly surveilled, especially in learning spaces. Rather than maintain that restriction, Imaginon took the risk of believing that teens are capable of minding themselves and can take responsibility for their actions if they disrespect the space. Therefore, I was always excited to walk up the winding blue ramp passing babies and their guardians playing on the life size train set.

That day when I looked for seating, I was glad to see a comfy green chair in the Teen section, where parents are NOT allowed. I was in a safe, child-friendly space. I plopped down with my hoard of books that I had no intention of putting back. In the middle of a bored skim, a white woman approached me. I was a little scared of her library name tag. Authority. To disarm,
I smiled. She smiled... and said, “Parents actually have to wait downstairs.” And my smile disappeared. My mind lingered on the word “parent” as my neck tensed. I didn’t hear her say adult but “parent.” Nervous, I told her “I am 12-years old.” She apologized, but it didn’t matter; the damage was already done. Embarrassed, I tried to braid my hair into plaits to look younger. I looked myself up and down. ‘Something is wrong with me,’ I thought. Perhaps I should have felt mature, but I didn’t. Maybe I should have taken it as a compliment of my good home training. But I didn’t feel like it was a good thing that I, a 12-year-old Blackgirl desperate to protect my innocence, was told that I looked like a person with a child. I couldn’t figure why all the folks at my black church kept saying I looked 8, and yet this lady thought I was old enough to have a child. The sting of the “young, unruly, and unwed Blackgirl” stereotype made me want to get up and leave the one place I thought I could be a kid.

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The Social Construction of Blackgirlhood

Seeded on the margins are Blackgirls unsurprised yet hurt by our lack of protection. With every raised hand or foul word thrown our way in the media and in reality, we are reminded of our perceived criminality, fraudulence, and impurity. My experience in the library is no different. Despite being in the teen section, I was seen as a parent. I was upset about being perceived as an adult, but also being perceived as a mother, a negligent sexual being at the age of 12! Without hearing it directly, I learned that I would never be seen as someone who needed protection. Innocence, purity, and fragility were not mine to claim. No matter how innocent or small I tried to look, no aesthetic helped me achieved the fragile recognition I desired. To further clarify, my upset was being labeled not just an adult but a parent. A common stereotype is that Blackgirls are
more sexually active and have several children before 25. Behaviour aside, the librarian did not *ask* if I was a parent. She stated and decided I must be a parent.

With that in mind, my goal became to prove society wrong about Blackgirl sexuality, promiscuity, and respectability, which eventually became to numbing and pointless. Already I felt the pressure and consequences of respectability. Over time, I became obsessed with performing idyllic girlhood by trying my best to appear pleasant and cute. I tried not to talk back but frustrated by not being able to move and speak, I always did. Subsequently, when I was also trying my best to fit the “ideal” girlhood mold, the librarian’s actions communicated that my actions, aesthetic, and self-evaluation were seemingly inconsequential. In this world, I cannot control my story...at least not in silence. Indeed, Meenakshi Durham (2015) notes,

> The idealization of childhood-- and girlhood in particular-- through tropes of innocence and purity contrasted sharply with representations of Blackgirls, thus reasserting racist stereotypes and upholding racial hierarchies” (508).

Constructions of whiteness, white purity, and girlhood are entangled. In other words, my reaching for innocence and purity, particularly purveyed through the media, was essentially reaching for whiteness and control. With that in mind, I was constantly following white imagery in the media and structuring my life, actions, and decisions around preconceived notions and subject positions for Blackgirls. As a result of trying to adhere to respectability, I was always in a state of trying to reinvent myself in accordance with rules made to contain and foreclose my joy. However, what I did not know was trying to appear innocent and respectable would also always be a losing battle.
For instance, a Georgetown study (Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez 2017), sought to determine if adults perceived Blackgirls as less innocent or less childlike than white girls. And indeed they found that “Black girls were more likely to be viewed as behaving and seeming older than their stated age, they also find that this dynamic is in place for girls as young as 5 years old” (Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez, 2017, 8). Perceived childhood and innocence, or the lack thereof, have lasting and deeply felt impacts on the social marginalization of Blackgirls.

Priscilla Ocen (2015) notes that “the liminal status as children effects, including stereotypes about sexuality, maturity, and culpability, make it more likely that that law enforcement and administrators will suspect Blackgirls as delinquents rather than protected victims” (1594). Additionally, without the protective construction of childhood, childhood becomes a burden for Blackgirls because they are simultaneously viewed as dependents with limited rights yet are “imbued with adult characteristics such as sexual maturity, individual agency and criminal responsibility” (1594). As a result, Blackgirls are increasingly sexually assaulted and funneled into juvenile justice systems.

In fact, the same teacher that implied that my abundance of tears did not matter was the same teacher who labeled me a troubled child after a misunderstanding regarding my friend being pushed out between two tight round tables. When I was told to report to the Principal’s office, it was revealed that my teacher told the Principal that I pushed him. Shocked and not understanding the situation or my rights, I accepted responsibility and that I would have to receive daily behavior progress reports for the remainder of the year, which would no doubt lead to increased surveillance of my body and privacy. Without a chance to defend myself, I had

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3 My friend and I were playing in the classroom and to get to our seats we tried to go through two round tables that were essentially touching. Of course, we were too big to comfortably fit through, but we did anyway. Laughing, my friend went through and I went in directly behind him. He jutted out first. Any physics professional could tell why that type of pressure would result in someone jutting out. But after he came out, my teacher pulled me back and
been criminalized. Blaming myself, I internalized the event pondering why I kept making mistakes. I was too young to understand that despite being only 7-years-old, I was always/already culpable. The consequence of presumed culpability is that although adults usually take children’s social and psychological development into consideration when granting leniency and determining consequences for behaviour, Blackgirls are not only denied leniency, but are also adultified:

Adultification is a form of dehumanization, robbing black children of the very essence of what makes childhood distinct from all other developmental periods: innocence. Adultification contributes to a false narrative that black youths’ transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision making — a key characteristic of childhood (Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez 2017, 1).

Although admittedly careless, my actions turned from play to criminal because any potentially harmful event that happened to my white peers as the result of my presence (note I did not say actions) was viewed as intentional and malicious. Without question, my surprise was the result of assuming I was like any other child learning to develop and process throughout childhood. I had no clue that the term “child” is not a biological distinction, but rather, a social construction that granted protections, leniencies, and presumed innocence to white children (Rollo, 2018, 318). I may have thought of myself as a child, but to white people, I was either an adult or an unprotected child.

angrily accused me of pushing him out. It was the first, but certainly not the last time I would be accused of harming someone. I was given no room for explaining myself or representation by parent.
Although one could argue that the incident is evidence of denied childhood, Rollo (2018) contends that my mistreatment and misrecognition are the results of layered forms of violence pertaining to anti-blackness and child criminality (309). Black people are often situated as objects of violence, and because that blackness is identified in childhood, “the child is already understood as a perennial archetype of naturalized violence, servitude, and criminality” (310). Additionally, Rollo (2018) asserts that it is not that black children are not necessarily considered children, but that they are denied the rights and preservations reserved for the concept of white children. The situation was not a matter of whether or not I was a child, but rather, that I was black in a place claimed for white innocence and control. In other words, similar incidences can be construed as an attempt to contain blackness in not only specific geographies, but also specific subject positions wherein which the librarian drew the conclusion that the only reason I could lawfully be in the space and act accordingly is that I must be a parent. My perceived “mature” behaviour, as in sitting quietly by myself reading, was outside the expectation for a black child. And unfortunately, being perceived as older not only has consequences regarding belonging in spaces, but for Blackgirls, also has safety repercussions regarding sexual activity and responsibility that can threaten bodily autonomy.

Indeed, the incident illustrated an implicit bias that views black female bodies as the mothers of capital and production. Already wounded by the incident in the library, that same day I was again misidentified and misinterpreted as an adult.

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Not even 20 minutes later, I was walking back to my mom’s office. I wanted to hurry up because I was hungry with no cash to buy food. My mom’s office was maybe a 25-minute walk, 35 minutes in the heat because time doesn’t work right when you’re tired and hot and sweating
in dry heat. Rather than look at my feet, I looked ahead trying to stay alert. As I cross the street, a middle-aged man waved and said good morning. I almost didn’t say it back because I’m from up north and northerners ain’t nice, but “Not speaking,” as they say in the south, is a quick way for somebody to accuse you of bad home training and poor parents. So, I waved and said good morning back. When I was nearing the church, I looked behind me and I caught the same man’s gaze again as he turned around and came towards me. I remember thinking that I should run but I froze.

When he got to me, I contemplated the video teachers showed us in kindergarten about saying no and running away because I knew something was wrong. He asked me where I lived. I lied and said Massachusetts. He said he was from Philadelphia emphasizing that Philadelphia wasn’t too far from Massachusetts. When he asked me if I wanted to “see him sometime,” I wanted to cry and bolt but just said, “I’m too young for that.” I drove my nails into my thighs as he tried to guess my age starting with 28. “Younger” I kept saying thinking that he had enough sense to leave me alone. Why can’t he or that stupid white lady see that I am a child. “You can’t be less than 18,” he said. I don’t remember how I got away or if he finally got that he was being a creepy predator, but I remember running across the street into traffic and walking fast to my mom’s office. Over and over, I kept asking ‘What is wrong with me?’

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Similarly, underlying the assumption that I was a parent in the library was also an assumption of sexual maturity. The incident was not a matter of looking old enough to be a parent because “old enough” implies there is a distinction for Black girls when they are children and when they are women. Lacking the skill to analyze the intersections of place, age, race, and gender, I assumed the events were within my control and that there was something I simply not
doing. Pondering what I could have done differently, I am reminded of Dominique C. Hill’s (2016) words “Blackgirls have enough folk telling them what to do, how to do it, what they could do better, how not to speak, how not dress, how not to fight, and how not be who they/we are”(3). And each time, we are told what to and what to do, we are marked and inscribed.

In Blackgirls’ search and yearning to write their own stories and control their destinies the will and desires of “others” are constantly inscribed onto their/our bodies as we embark on the futile journey of trying to “fix” ourselves to occupy positions never meant for them/us. M.W. Morris (2016), Dominique C. Hill (2016), and Evans-Winter (2005) note the many ways in which the bodies Blackgirls do not “operate” as our own. With pressure of respectability politics Blackgirl bodies become the tools and public production mechanisms (Higginbotham, 1993).

That day, I confronted what it meant to be a Blackgirl/woman when every day would be an interrogation of my belonging and an assessment my bodily autonomy. Consequently, Blackgirls are forced to negotiate their roles and belonging in spaces while considering dominant controlling images and their survival.

*History/ Theory of Blackgirl Invulnerability*

The perceived invulnerability of Blackgirls is not ahistorical. As suggested in the beginning, Blackgirls’ lives are a constant process of learning the many ways which to navigate and negotiate how the world seems to loathe and utilize our being. Although never explicitly stated, the world shows Blackgirls this hatred and misogynoir through the mistreatment, dehumanization, and containment of Blackgirls. The negotiations are influenced by a multitude of intersections like race, age, gender, class, shade, education, and so forth.

According to Black feminist scholars, three dominant paradigms or controlling images of
of Black women originated during slavery and have persisted into the present day (Collins 2004; Davis, 1983; West, 1995). These images have characterized Black women and girls as “hypersexual, boisterous, aggressive, and unscrupulous” (Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez 2017, 5). Specifically, Green (2016) states that “Dating back to slavery, Black women have been stereotyped as the “Jezebel” (naturally hypersexual), the “sapphire” (angry and emasculating), or as the “mammy” (motherlike, asexual, and nurturing).” These images were crafted to formulate what white femininity and white innocence is not. Black femininity has always been placed in opposition to white femininity. As a result, our beauty and value are placed on a scale of how close we are to whiteness. Indeed, such a scale cultivates a desire to achieve the impossible.

Sikivu Hutchinson (2014) posits that images of white innocence can be traced as far back as the self-sacrificing “Virgin Mary, pure as the driven snow,” and has been portrayed as the ultimate form of femininity (615). However, that pure femininity is created and “validated but the fallen dark whore” that is women of color whose body, according to bell hooks (1992), shows signs of sexual experience (160). Subsequently, Black women’s bodies have been “exploited as chattel and sexual commodities” under slavery and present-day sex work. Indeed, Hutchinson (2014) notes that during slave trade, Black women were “poked, prodded, and searched until every inch of their bodies were assess for potential commodity value” thus, Black women’s bodies were marked as inherently immoral (615). No doubt, that marking is what has necessitated the policing and sexualization of Blackgirls in reality and in the media.

The historical Jezebel image that persists also had a strong impact on media that further perpetuates white supremacist values. Following Durham’s observations, David Pilgrim’s (2012) analysis of “Jezebel Images,” two mid-20th century images stand out as representations of Blackgirls:
Black girls with the faces of pre-teenagers, are drawn with adult sized buttocks, which are exposed. They are naked, scantily clad, or hiding seductively behind towels, blankets, or other objects. A 1949 postcard shows a naked Black girl hiding her genitals with a paper fan. Although she has the appearance of a small child, she has noticeable breasts. The accompanying caption reads: “Honey, I’se Waiting’ Fo’ You Down South.” The sexual innuendo is obvious.

Another postcard shows a Black girl, approximately eight years old, standing in a watermelon path. She has a protruding stomach. The caption reads: “Oh-I-is-Not!...It Must Be Sumthin’ I Et!!” Her exposed right shoulder and the churlish grin suggest that the protruding stomach resulted from a sexual experience, not overeating. The portrayal of the prepubescent girl as pregnant suggest that Black females are sexually active and sexually irresponsible even as small children (Pilgrim 2012, pp 21-22).

These characterizations, dating from mid-twentieth century, Blackgirls have been marked and characterized as hypersexual. The characterizations neglect the role of slave trade and relationships between enslavers and the enslaved; yet, they have lasting effects. According to same Georgetown study that surveyed 325 participants across age, educational, racial, and ethnic backgrounds (most were white and female) Blackgirls are perceived as being more knowledgeable about sex beginning at the age of 5 years old (Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez 2017, 8). As a result, Blackgirls like myself are approached as if we are adults. We are never too young to look like parents or promiscuous dates for middle-aged men.
The consequence of being seen as fully culpable and being perceived as less innocent also leads to harsher penalties by authorities. For example, Cyntoia Brown was 16 when she was sentenced to life in prison after killing a 43-year-old white man who hired her for sex. Critics suggested that she was no more than a wild a girl, a monster, who killed the man for money. But the suggestion completely ignores how Cyntoia Brown is a victim of abuse, sex trafficking, and rape. Also, the case ignored how a grown man was paying for sex with a minor and threatened Cyntoia Brown. Before the eyes of the law, Blackgirls are unrapeable and culpable subjects incapable of innocence. Indeed, Hutchinson (2014) notes that “the rape and control of Black women’s production was not only a vital part of the American political economy, it defined white Southern manhood. Unseen and unraced, white men’s bodies were the bodies of reason, judgment, law” (Hauser, 2018). In other words, perpetrators who violate and attack Blackgirls are assumed innocent because not only does the rape of Black women not exist, but also Blackgirls are assumed to have provoked violation by virtue of their femaleness and Blackness. Without question, the ease with which Blackgirls are harshly condemned and publicly available for critique has led to grave implications where Blackgirls across the U.S are unfairly brought into contact with juvenile court system.

With that in mind, Blackgirls learn early on that they are viewed as invulnerable. It is as if people think ‘Blackgirls cannot be broken but it’s amusing to try.’ Our perceived invulnerability contributes to our perceived unworthiness of protection. Constantly, Blackgirls are told who they are and who they should be by everyone except themselves, either out of malice or survival, somewhere along the way, we forget our own desires. Some Blackgirls learn to devalue self-perception and interrupt their journeys to self-acceptance. So, throughout this process, I questioned where and when did I learn about purity? Why did I value it so much to the
point that I thought I had nothing else to offer because according to the public Blackgirls were stupid, loud, and dirty? Perhaps I thought ‘at least I can prove them wrong by maintaining purity’ or ‘at least I can prove them wrong by doing well in school.’ Respectability became the rule book. Only after studying purity did I realize that purity was not made for Blackgirls. The protections of innocence and purity would never be mine so I cast it away among many childish things.

Even as I grew older, I felt the only two choices I had were to be what men desired and continue the path of trying to earn the title of “lady.” To be clear, my encounters with being marked a mother at the age of 12 and being hit on by a middle-aged white man who could not fathom that I was under 18 made me feel like something was wrong with me. My desire to control something that was not my problem was a learned response wherein which Blackgirls are taught to believe that the ways in which people treat them are a result of their failure to meet the mark (Butler, 1999). For certain, I asked God how I could meet some ambiguous and perfectly respectable target. But we will always miss “the mark.” Although there is no way around performing or knowing our true desires, the brief moment when Blackgirls can pivot to say, ‘we are not who you say we are’ and that ‘we do not have to be your mule’ are valuable treasures and moments.
Chapter 2: “It’s not just me”:

Black Sisters’ Community Response and the Reality Behind Fantasy Television

In this section, I explore how I encountered the webs of power through community engagement and popular media. I will also discuss how that shaped my understanding of vulnerability and social location.

During meetings with the Black Student Union, Anti-Racism Coalition, and Sisters of the Round Table, I have been in the room to critically discuss intersections of race, gender, and class in pop culture with people committed to the same goals. Conversely, I have also purposefully facilitated discussions to trace threads of feeling to break barriers and bread between parties mistakenly set in opposition to each other as a result of conflicting goals. Seeking openings to create and imagine better relationships as well as deeply looking for ways to hear and see each other in our pain, I throw myself into the fire obsessively, critically, and sometimes with naiveté.

When facilitating or joining a discussion, I often bring problems and woes that both fascinated and baffled me to the group. And admittedly, at the core of many of those questions was the more fundamental question, “Why does no one love us and how can we best love ourselves out of isolation?” At times, I felt frustrated with how members would respond to me as if I was the only one in pain and losing faith. Numerous times I asked myself Was I naive for having faith? Or Has everyone else found the solution but me?’ Still, I persisted to ask questions that left me unraveled and in a state of heartache.

In like fashion, my engagement with media is akin to me engaging in a room: obsessive, passionate, vulnerable, and unyielding. Media has the ability to expand the reach of imagining
oneself outside the confines of power. And television engages and contributes to ongoing political discourse such as sexual assault, immigration, privilege, and so forth. With that in mind, media can illustrate what the most poignant messages of ongoing social justice discourse are and how that information is disseminated. So, for the purpose of this project, media can also tell us how the world sees Black women and more important, that Black women have something to say.

No doubt, during my teens, I was slowly becoming aware that Blackgirls were seen as disposable. Emerson (2002) states that media representations often perpetuate “a partial and often one-dimensional depictions and conceptions of what it means to be a Black girl” (92). Those one-dimensional plotlines and characterizations became evident when I learned that what I do not see is just as important as what I do see. In other words, I did not see many young girls like myself on television in the late 1990s and 2000s outside of sitcoms. I did not see Blackgirls exploring, being nerdy, doing magic, or falling in love without tragedy anywhere in the media. Specifically, I was not seeing Blackgirls in dramatic or fantasy roles that allow Blackgirls to reimagine reality through their perspective.

What I did see were Blackgirls in comedic roles or best-friends used for comedic relief. I saw Blackgirls sacrificing their lives to help white main leads survive. I saw Blackgirls sexually assaulted or used for sex and then disposed. No doubt, the disappearance of Black families across television like *Moesha, The Cosby Show,* and *Girlfriends* were a felt and emptying experience. The resurgence of the Black family on T.V within the last five years like Blackish, *Grownish,* and *Black Lightning* has appeased some but still leaves much to be desired since only one is from the perspective of a Blackgirl.

I watch as much television across genres as a television editor. From cartoons to drama, T.V have given me access to worlds of imagination and fantasy. I treasure the paranormal and
fantastical. I dwell in the romantic. With love and wonder, I critique every story, character development, transition, and direction. With that in mind, television, along with experience, helped me understand that because Black women are often framed as strong yet fraudulent whilst embedded in the shadows, we are also (mis)understood and regarded as invulnerable but are the centers of tragedy. As a result of that perceived invulnerability, we are forced to maintain strength out of survival.

In this section, this study will examine how I came to understand my invisibility and silence as political and that I was not alone in my experiences. By doing so, this study will continue the Black feminist tradition of letting the narrative process unfold as self-knowledge that leads to self-acceptance.

_Sista[h]ood & Community_

The diabolical brilliance of white supremacy and its theft of joy is that it makes those who are victims/survivors of its machinery feel like they are alone and crazy. Indeed, the commitment to attain respectability and appease the desires of whiteness can only be achieved through isolation. The threat of loneliness and dying alone, unloved and forgotten, is the most powerful capital weapon. Indeed, as I encountered teachers assuming that I was violent and men assuming I was inhuman (i.e., SBW), and being dismissed and invalidated at every conceivable point of awakening, I began to think ‘It’s just me.’ I was convinced that I was alone in how harshly I was treated underneath the feet of my presumptuous school authorities and classmates. However, seeing my insecurities, invisibility reflected in the voices of my college friends and media, I was able to recognize my experiences as connected and systemic. For this reason, I argue that when trying to find joy, communal reflection and media engagement can not only help
Blackgirls name and map the nexus of power that informs our interactions with world, but also offer us validation that serves as reminders of our complex personhood and humanity.

There are brief moments when Blackgirls can recognize how deeply entangled they are in the lies of subject positions crafted by the will and desire of others. Those brief moments are embedded in instances of validation that facilitate awareness and recognition of truth. bell hooks (2000) agrees that community is what sustains life (129). Indeed, “community is a group of individuals coming together to communicate honestly and whose relationships are deeper than their masks of composure” (129). Although my undergraduate institution was deeply toxic, I managed to find a loving community in Sisters of the Round Table and the Black Student Union who had the heart to carry my aches when I did not think I was strong enough or so embarrassed that I could not carry it on my own.4

Following the Black feminist tradition, The Combahee River Collective (1983) statement noted that “it’s proto intersectional politics ‘evolves from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to struggle and work’” (267). Indeed, coming to understand what love can look like through what bell hooks describes as a commitment to honesty, responsibility, intellectual growth and spiritual growth is imperative to learning how to love ourselves and affirm Blackgirl worth. Therefore, after a tumultuous first term of undergraduate university, I gave up on trying to figure life out alone. I had spent 5 months sharing and loving without sincerity and I reckoned with the consequences.

As a result, I turned to groups that were intimate and honest about topics related to Black and gendered experience that I never had the opportunity or felt safe enough to communicate or hear. I began sharing and listening to stories of racist classmates and teachers without much

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4 Both organizations consisted of mostly Black women during my tenure
analysis. For years, I had no way of processing complicated events I thought were isolated. I interpreted racist and misogynist events as isolated incidents of either hatred or my missteps. Perhaps I was just being “too sensitive.” But by being honest with people who looked like me, I was sometimes offered validation and affirmation that I was not in fact crazy. Indeed, Jameta L. Barlow (2016) states that following Black Feminist praxis, Black sisterhoods have the ability to “document representations of Black women in public and private spheres, the gaze, …, and structural policies based on stereotypes that use to justification” for our dehumanization in reality and media” (207). In other words, when Blackgirls are given the space to discuss their relationships with friends, family, and others, as well given space to articulate fears and insecurities, Blackgirls can use these spaces as sites of resistance by learning to recognize the gaze of others. Furthermore, hooks (1992) states that

The capacity of Black women to construct ourselves as subjects in daily life to the extent that Black women feel devalued, objectified, [and] dehumanized in this society...those[B]lack women who identities were constructed in resistance, by practices that oppose the dominant order, were most inclined to develop an oppositional gaze (hooks 1992, p. 127).

By learning to recognize the webs of power that construct the stage and script of Blackgirls’ daily lives, Blackgirls can reject the power, guilt, and shame attached to narrow Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire roles and subject positions that do not encompass Blackgirl complexity. In particular, Blackgirls talking honestly to each other without masks breaks down barriers that would have Blackgirls believe that they are alone in their pain and struggle to smile
th thorugh the mask. Moreover, recognizing and documenting the threads and webs of dominating scripts that craft inaccurate subject positions for Blackgirls allows Blackgirls to turn towards empathetic audiences and construct a resistance or oppositional gaze that could reject subject positions. However, the goal is not necessarily to reject the subject positions roles. In fact, the goal is to see what and how these roles were constructed so that Blackgirls may take away its power to make us, Blackgirls, believe that we are worthless. That recognition requires love and wisdom that potentially engenders self-acceptance and joy.

*Fantasy Television*

There is no single Blackgirl experience. Multiple intersections like class, education, shade, and status serve as barriers to the power of Blackgirl [self] love. But marking the path to joy, internal and spiritual self-acceptance, can be achieved by imagining the elimination of those barriers. For this reason, I, like many others, analyze fantasy television to discuss the emerging capacity of media to serve as mediums for recognizing and articulating vulnerability, love, and joy. But like Ebony E. Thomas, to watch and love fantasy literature and television is a repetitive negotiation and disappointed acceptance that we are lost in the world of fantasy: “If you are present in the story at all, you are relegated to margins. To watch a science fiction film is to learn that you have no future” (Thomas, 2018, February 8). With that in mind, to join the discussion of joy and power is to rethink and reimagine how Blackgirls take back their bodies and futures from the white imaginary.

As I practiced and learned how to recognize and identify false and flawed Blackgirl narratives in my own experiences, I gained experience analyzing and documenting my life and story. With that practice, I was also able to recognize flawed narratives in my media consumption through Tumblr, television, and music. My shifting relationship with media became
a constant, ongoing, and challenging negotiation of whether or not a piece of media added or subtracted to self-worth and understanding. Indeed, what were once my most beloved forms of entertainment became cruelly problematic and left me yearning for content that affirmed my Blackness rather than denigrated it. For example, T.V. became a minefield and critical field of exploration.

Even now, I yearn for a show about Blackgirl that is not rooted in Black suffering and marginalization. Although it may be 2018 and with more superficial diversity on screen, young adult television has yet to change. Specifically, fantasy. Fantasy ought to offer infinite creative possibilities because it is not restricted by harsh reality. And yet, even in shows that are set in fictional places with fictional elements they manage to maintain white supremacist heteropatriarchal narratives where characters of color exist to support the progress and development of the white lead characters. I should have known better than to think white productions would not find a way to deny Blackgirls even the dream of being loved and valued without being used and abused by white men. Still, my guilty pleasure, the Bosch of distraction, remains paranormal romances like *Vampire Diaries*. Young adult television continues to rely on outdated tropes and they defend their position by using race-blind casting. However, defending stereotypical narratives with race-blind casting only adds to the erasure of identity and historical negligence. And that negligence can be made clear with the story of Bonnie Bennett in *The Vampire Diaries*.

*Vampire Diaries* primarily tells the story of Elena Gilbert, a white girl, who engages in a paranormal love triangle between two vampire brothers, Stefan and Damon Salvatore.5 The

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5 *Legacies*, a spinoff vampire of *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals*, traces the story of a white girl who is the daughter of a werewolf and a vampire and granddaughter of the Original witch. The show tells the stories of her adventures at a school for supernatural teens and how she learns to control her power.
show primarily takes place in Mystic Falls, a fictional town in Virginia. From the beginning of the show, viewers are brought into the modern southern world focalized through Elena Gilbert who is portrayed as a beautiful yet sorrowful character because she tragically lost both her parents to an accident. As a result, the show establishes her as the center of reflection. And admittedly at first, I experienced the warm thrills that as a feminist killjoy I am supposed to hate, i.e, love triangles, obsessive love-interest, and helplessness. However, *Vampire Diaries* also reminds me that there will always be some things that I and Blackgirls alike seem to never have: youth and innocence.

After learning more about Black history and Black feminisms a year into college, I started to have questions about *Vampire Diaries*: *Why are most of the witches Black or of color? Why do they keep dying...and why does no one care?* U.S teen television grounds itself in coming of age reflection and delving deep into the changing consciousness of its characters by establishing an ebb and flow between love and tragedy. However, these principle characterizations that establish a character as thinking and growing and are absent from the show’s sole regular Black character, Bonnie Bennett.

Bonnie descends from a historical line of witches. As the story progresses, the audience learns through a series of flashbacks mediated through Stefan and Damon, both of whom are white, the Bennett witches have constantly been the victims of white vampire violence. Additionally, Bonnie’s great grandmother served as what they called a “handmaiden” to Katherine Pierce, one of Elena’s doppelgangers. And framed against idyllic southern proper landscape, at no point does Bonnie or her family address that “handmaiden” was a recoded reading for enslaved. Within these flashbacks the audience sees how the Bennett witches are
repeatedly killed in the past and present to protect white futures. Indeed, Bonnie and her family are excluded from decisions and community.

No doubt, I remember pausing the screen as Damon Salvatore rode through on the screen with a dazzling smile and a terrifying Confederate Army uniform. I waited for the show to address that the two main male lead characters were supporters of the confederacy, that the celebratory founder’s ball was an old racist tradition, the odd confederate flag on a teacher’s desks but the silence was deafening. Bonnie existed only to support Elena’s narrative, not subvert the surrounding historical racism and willful ignorance. As a result, Bonnie and her family are rendered abject and experience a unique and racially specific exclusion that is justified and excused by painting Bonnie as marginal and unworthy of consciousness: socially dead (Armstrong, 2015; Thomas, 2018, February 8).

We also see the multiple times the Bennett witches have been coerced or guilted into sacrificing their lives and the lives of their family to further white Vampire plots and protect Elena. For example, to gather enough energy to defeat the big bad of season one that only affects Elena, Bonnie and her grandmother are forced to exert so much spiritual energy that her grandmother dies. Later, her Grandmother contacts Bonnie from ‘the other side’ to warn Bonnie not to trust vampires. And yet again, Bonnie trades her life for on/off love interest Jeremy Gilbert, Elena’s brother. Then after spending the season as a ghost and brought back to the living world, she is forced again to expend so much power and energy to protect Stefan Salvatore, that she dies once again and is locked in another realm. Time and time again, the narrative wills for the death of Bonnie and family. In other words, we see Bonnie and people of color die so many times that the audience may begin to cultivate a sense of apathy.
The danger of speculative fiction is that the writing becomes a playground for white writers and viewers to imagine themselves as feeling alongside Black characters and wearing their skins like a costume. This fosters a disingenuous empathy that is mediated through white experience and allows the audience to distance themselves from the suffering of characters of color. As a result, viewers further grow apathetic about Black life and death.

And that growing apathy to Bonnie’s death, Black death, is not detached from political discourse because she is Black/mixed-race: “Slavery had been legitimized in part by widespread claims that African-Americans were impervious to pain…at stake in pain was not only justification for violence, but also eligibility for citizenship and humanity (Bernstein, 2011; Thomas, 2018, 6.) Just as my teacher ignored my tears and marked me unworthy of sympathy, Bonnie’s numerous deaths and the deaths of her family reinforce that image that Black bodies do not feel pain; therefore, do not deserve our tears. In fact, in this reinforcing this image, Vampire Diaries invites criticism of Blackgirls and possibly suggests that they deserve narrative, physical, emotional, and spiritual violence because without proof of pain as verified by white feelings and affectual response, we, Blackgirls are not human (Thomas, 2018).

Additionally, Abbie Bennett, Bonnie’s absent mother returns to help Bonnie perform a series a spells to defeat the evil of Season 3. However, Stefan and Damon reason that in order to keep Elena safe, Abbie is too much of a threat and must die. To add to an already insensitive life, Kristen J. Warner (2015) asserts that Stefan and Damon communicate that juxtaposed to Elena’s white innocence, Black female life is meaningless by flipping a coin to see who will kill Bonnie’s mother and tell Bonnie the bad news (111). Moreover, Bonnie is forced to accept that Elena’s safety takes priority over the life of her mother. The deaths of Black characters and characters of color increasingly become both spectacle and apathetic linkages to white
transcendence. Put simply, in order for the white characters to grow, transcend, and feel, characters of color are used and repeatedly willed to die.

Again, despite race-blind casting, what makes Bonnie’s storyline particularly tragic and problematic is precisely because the actress is Black/mixed race. Indeed, it seemed that not only was my mistake confusing white girlhood as universal, but also trusting television to be careful of what Kristen J. Warner (2015) affirms as outdated “mammy” and “tragic mulatto” tropes (107). No doubt if Bonnie were white, the story would be different, but her Blackness informs her experiences and how Blackgirl viewers read her experiences.

Without question, white vampires manipulate the power of the Bennett witches whenever the vampires need a “favor.” However, whenever the witches decide they no longer want to assist evil plots or prioritize their own lives, the consequence is death by broken neck or ending up like Bree, a witch played by Gina Torres in “Bloodlines,” who in an attempt to avenge her murdered lover, Damon rips out her heart. Consistently, the Bennett witches, along with every person of color on the show, exist to respond to white characters and endure white narrative violence as a spectacle.

Adding insult to injury, I watched as every time Bonnie has a potential romantic interest Bonnie is positioned as an asexual Mammy character; her love interests either die or leave. In fantasy teen television, one’s ability to find love determines their appeal and importance. Although relationships are not the determinants of women’s value, young adult television is often constructed around desire and love. Yet, Bonnie is left out of the story. In fact, she appears and disappears at the will and desire of white characters. Despite the narrative trying so hard to avoid Bonnie’s Blackness by never mentioning her history, Bonnie’s Blackness is how I read her character and how I came to understand there was no escape from the ways in which society
continues to render Black female sexuality and femininity invisible (Warner 2015, p.113). Never is the audience given a glimpse of Bonnie’s interiority. Likewise, by denying Bonnie love but providing a plethora of heartache by no fault of her own, she is not a teenager. Also, reciprocated love becomes expressive of white identity. Bonnie and television taught me that to white writers, Bonnie and Blackgirls like myself are just bodies absent of any innocence to be lost or explored.

Television is a cultural production that demonstrates what and where we are as society, and teen television told me that Black kids do not exist outside the gaze of whiteness. Additionally, television taught me that Black kids are mechanisms to keep the heroic plot and gears of white lives turning in advantageous directions for the sake of their supremacy and protection. And as a result of centering white youth, whiteness remains the image of eternal youth.

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Thomas argues that Black emancipatory narratives do not receive the same fandom embrace because emancipation even within fantasy is just as elusive as it is in reality. So, I contend that part of the messy work of embracing Black emancipatory narratives is rethinking and reimagining adventure, heroism, and joy. Why? What I am asking for is not a superficial insertion of Black characters in roles typically thought to be entitled to white girls. No, I don’t want white stories that play with the idea of discrimination and exclusion because that is our reality. Those narratives are already constituted by the elimination and defeat of the dark other and Black Death.

What I am asking for and what I believe will encourage self-acceptance is a complete centering and privileging of our perspectives by building a story rooted in how we, Black girls, move throughout the world. However, that requires Black girls to not only know we deserve
these unique narratives rather than adopting white narrative, we also need to rethink how our
desire written and understood. The hero’s journey must be restructured because as it stands it
always/already requires white desire, Black Death, and indigenous erasure. The hero requires
helpless victimhood and an intrinsic need to prove oneself worthy of consciousness and agency.
Indeed, what I am asking for is an entirely new fantastic landscape. Really, what I am asking for
is a show about Black sisterhood and growth with a dash of magic written by Blackgirls for
Blackgirls.

But when thinking about my initial confusion and rejection of Nnedi Okorafor and
Octavia Butler’s work, I realized I had fantasized so much within the white literary imagination,
that I had grown accustomed to stories rooted in Black and indigenous suffering. For this reason,
Okorafor and Butler’s emancipatory beats, rhythms, and narratives eluded me. And so, I ran back
to stories that played with and mocked my experiences for entertainment.

Without fail, the main characters in *Vampire Diaries* play at being uniquely excluded and
discriminated against and the projection of the “not me” that consumes the white literary
landscape. And that story always followed with finding a mentor and growing stronger or finding
out you’re actually very special and powerful to prove yourself worthy of your desires. That
familiarity, that desire to embody the white imaginary possibly made me reject imaginings of
back emancipation. That is how powers work; it makes you desire your own captivity and
destruction and convinces you that it is safer, happier, most important, attainable.

Fantasy television like *The Vampire Diaries* has the ability to reimagine Blackgirl
subjects by recoding stories that have been reserved for white girls. However, what is required is
not just recoding but a complete restructuring. The joy present in reading fantasy is not the story
itself but seeing and reading into and about the possibility of emancipation and reminding us of
our humanity. That emancipation looks like Blackgirls being afforded speech and agency that transforms us from the objective “dark” other toward a conscious and agentive subject (Thomas, 2018, February 8). Indeed, Joy is not simply subverting traditional white narratives. Instead, writers and readers must radically rethink the messy worlds of fantasy to not only include, but also embrace Black consciousness by bringing it into the center, rather remaining on the spice rack of margins where one salts to taste. We too dream of magic, love, and war as well as exploring, fighting, leading, and protecting. By doing so, fantasy television opens youth discourse on the role of race and gender in the world of the fantastic and beyond.
Chapter 3

From Self-Hate to Self-Love Possibilities in *Color Purple* and *Lemonade*

“Why do you deny yourself heaven? Why do you consider yourself undeserving? Why are you afraid of love? You think it's not possible for someone like you. But you are the love of my life. You are the love of my life. You are the love of my life” (Shire qtd. Toglia, 2016)

**Dear God,**

*How do I answer a Black man that calls me bitter? What do they expect me to say? What should I say? Every answer seems like what they call a “Lose-Lose.”*

**Answer 1:** No, but I do feel like Black women have been mistreated and dehumanized in equal but different ways by society.

**Answer 2:** Silence.

**Answer 3:** Yes. Yes, I am. Yes, I am bitter and angry. The sky is blue, and grass is green. And? I feel no sense of embarrassment or shame about resenting a society that constructs warped, inaccurate, and demonizing narratives about Black women. I feel no shame cursing a misogynist who claims he loves Black women by saying “but I love my mama.” I feel no shame spitting at a world that says Black women are unrapable flesh unworthy of protection and deserving of convenient use, abuse, and erasure. Somehow all Black women happen to be bitter and people think the problem is us.

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If you go to Youtube.com and search “why I don’t date Black women,” you will be flooded with over 2.1 million videos rejecting Black women on the basis of stereotypes that attempt to justify why we, Blackgirls, are unlovable. What is heartbreaking is that the arguments originate from Black men who consistently justify their attacks by saying that their comments are harmless expressions of “preferences” without considering the long colonial and white supremacist history. Every year, there is at least one newspaper or magazine article questioning “Why are Black women single” without considering queer relationships or women who have other goals. Zeffie Gaines (2017) asserts that American Society is in a long and ongoing crisis of love and Blackgirls (98).

However, this crisis is not something that has just emerged but is something I have always known since I was child. And as a result, I dedicated most of my childhood and teen years to distancing myself away from Blackness by consciously trying not to be a stereotype. Perhaps I thought ignoring systemic issues would offer me more control, but eventually the constant negotiations became overwhelming and never-ending. Without question, the overarching theme of Blackgirlhood is confronting and negotiating the idea of being unlovable and then trying our hardest to hide the pain which further supports the idea that we are invulnerable. No doubt because people always already assume Blackgirls are invulnerable, we are cyclically unprotected, erased, and forgotten.

Because of these unloving circumstances, so much of Black women’s literature and studies interrogates and struggles with longing and yearning for love and visibility but also refusal. Embedded in Black women’s literature is not only the representation of Blackgirl experiences but also an illustration of the epistemic manifestation of knowledge that focuses on Blackgirl pain, insecurity, vulnerability, and joy. The vulnerability we are denied in reality is
represented and challenged in literature by the imagined elimination of barriers toward collective resistance. Like Gaines (2017) describes, Alice Walker’s powerful work, *The Color Purple*, is primarily about a young girl, Celie, who is abused, assaulted, and unloved, and “who believes herself to be unlovable” (101). Indeed, Walker’s text made me reflect on how much life as a Blackgirl is a war of attrition where every day we are told that we are unlovable and continue to grow bone tired until life itself becomes an exhausting chore. Gaines (2017) asserts that Walker uses *The Color Purple* to emphasize “the need for Black women to reject narratives that construct them as inferior and unlovable” (101).

Similarly, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* album traces her journey of grief as a result of her spouse’s infidelity to refuse tragic, broken, and voiceless narratives for Black women. Beyoncé is known for maintaining her “flawless” image and privacy. However, this album possibly revealed to those who perhaps idolized Beyoncé and thought of her as perfect that she is in fact not perfect and vulnerable. Although still a highly curated image of Beyoncé, the album illustrates Beyoncé’s loneliness and emotional exposure, but also that she is not an exception to feeling void as a Blackgirl. Despite her perceived perfection, even Beyoncé sings, “And I’m not too perfect to ever feel this worthless” in “Hold Up” as expresses rage, sadness, and shame over letting a man make her feel like she was not enough (Knowles, 2016, Track 2). Similar to how many treat Blackgirls as unbreakable, she reminds us that she is a human being:

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Tell me, what did I do wrong?
Feel like that question has been posed
I'm movin' on
I'll always be committed, I been focused
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I always paid attention, been devoted
Tell me, what did I do wrong?
Oh, already asked that, my bad
But you my lifeline, think you tryna kill me?
If I wasn't me, would you still feel me?
Like on my worst day? Or am I not thirsty, enough? (Burley, Dean, & Knowles, 2016, Track 6)

Like Celie and I, Beyoncé has wondered why she is not enough. Beyoncé conveys how she felt like she followed the rules: being devoted and attentive. Indeed, over Beyoncé’s career she has written multiple songs about serving the pleasures of her husband in “Cater 2 U” and “Dangerously in Love” and worked to maintain the image of the perfect Black southern belle. But throughout this album, I heard a woman suck her teeth at the betrayal from her husband and betrayal from the embodiment of a system that told her if she followed their rules of what an “ideal” wife, mother, and woman should be, she too could escape the fear of loneliness. But as Beyoncé has demonstrated, she is not an exception. Therein lies the reminder of Blackgirl humanity. By seeing some whom some thinks is perfect and does everything right fail, Blackgirls can begin to question the rules.

However, Beyoncé’s Lemonade (album) is not without room for critique. Beyoncé’s lived experiences of insecurity and worthlessness expressed through her lyrics offer Blackgirls a means to identify with her struggle. But Beyoncé’s continue to encourage resolving one’s problems with dehumanization through hyper-capitalism:

Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, I slay
Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation

You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation

Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper. (Lee, S. & Beyoncé, 2016)

Indeed, a part of the conditioning that Beyoncé advocates is that once you achieve acceptable public femininity and gain wealth, you will be enough. Edwards, Esposito, and Evans-Winter (2017) note the meritocratic tone of formation and the classed ways in which she advises young women to let their money talk back (92). Beyoncé, an influential cultural producer, creates an entry point for a new generation of feminists while donning traditional African aesthetics and symbolic imagery; however, her method is concerning because it runs the risk of Black feminist tradition becoming co-opted and conflated with hyper-capitalist fantasies. But rather than working with systems of power, The Color Purple helps us center and address specific layers of power rooted in Blackgirl dehumanization.

The Color Purple emphasizes the rejection of narratives that assume Black women’s inferiority, invulnerability, and inhumanity by illustrating dynamic and loving relationships between Black women. Walker uses Black women’s relationship to challenge issues with patriarchy as a method to eliminate complicated barriers between women like colorism and competition over men. For example, Celie is convinced that physical abuse is natural and expected since her Father and husband have physically, sexually, and verbally abused and denigrated her all her life. As a result, Celie tells Harpo that if he wants his wife Sophia to “act right” that he should beat her. But when Harpo attempts to beat Sophia into submission, Harpo comes back with evidence that Sophia fought back. Later, Sophia confronts Celie about having told Harpo to beat her:
All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house...I loves Harpo. God Knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me” (Walker, 40).

Sofia’s directly indicts the world as an unsafe place for Blackgirls and refuses of victimhood. And yet, Harpo maintains the idea that to be a man he must subjugate the women in his life through patriarchal domination, which includes physical abuse. Indeed, two symptoms: Harpo’s yearning for control through physical abuse and Celie’s betrayal emerge from the same nexus of power undergirded by notions of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy (Edwards, Esposito, Evans-Winter, 2017). Similarly, Beyoncé challenges those notions as she refers to the Black feminist insistence that harm done to Black women is harm done to us all in her track, “When you hurt me, you hurt yourself. Don’t hurt yourself. When you love me, you love yourself” (White, Knowles, & Gordon, 2016, Track 3). Gaines (2017) contends that “Don’t Hurt Yourself” confronts the Angry Black woman “Sapphire” stereotype that embracing and recoding anger as divine love for us (108).

Additionally, because humans are deeply connected, Beyoncé and Sophia make a commentary on patriarchal domination by refusing its legitimacy and refusing the misguided idea that one must earn love without betrayal through submission. For certain, redemption of masculinity is a selfish excuse to cause irrevocable harm to loved ones. Furthermore, although Beyoncé refers to emotional wounds and Sophia refers to physical wounds, they arise from the same empty rhetoric and flawed traditions that constitute black masculinity.
Moreover, rather than accept a position that says Sophia is an object that can be manipulated and exists to serve, Sofia dismisses Harpo’s claim to power on the basis that he is a man and asserts that her life and body are worth protecting and defending. And although controlling images like Sapphire suggest that Blackgirls’ anger is why they must be controlled like wild animals, that anger is not without reason: “I’m getting tired of Harpo. All he think about since we got married is how to make me mind. He down’s want a wife, he want a dog” (Walker 64). Sophia rejects the narrative that claims she is a dog/inhuman and asserts that she is a human being. Likewise, Sophia has been told love must be earned by proving our likeness to traditional white femininity scripts where we must be mindful, sacrificial, passive, and submissive wives and caretakers. Sophia may love Harpo, but she trusts that even if she refuses those narratives, she is still loveable and worthy.

Beyoncé mirrors Sophia’s rage and refusal when she sings “Beautiful mane, I’m the lion. Beautiful man I know you’re lying. I am not broke. I’m not crying. I’m not crying. You ain’t trying hard enough. You don’t love me deep enough” (Knowles, 2016, track 3). Beyoncé refuses to solely blame herself for his infidelity and holds up a mirror to her husband to say, ‘It is you who doesn’t know how to love me.’ Sadness and anger linger as Beyoncé communicates that as much as she may love her spouse and think of him as a beautiful man, that may not always be returned but still, she too is deserving of respect.

Again, Beyoncé asserts that in her spouse’s attempt to break her into submission, he not only fails, but she is also not regretful or fearful about his departure. For example, Beyoncé follows with “Suicide before you see this tear fall down my eyes. Me and my baby gone be alright,” in her “Sorry” track (Knowles, 2016, track 4). Beyoncé refuses to hesitate or doubt her capability. Specifically, women in heterosexual relationships are often blamed for the
transgressions of their spouse. By this I refer to the historical common belief that it is woman’s fault if she doesn’t know how to ‘get and keep her man.’ These sentiments assume that men are the desiring subjects that control the conditions for their approval. Similarly, Sophia also leaves Harpo trusting that she will be just fine without his support or validation. As a mark a mark of refusal, Beyoncé and Sophia fight back of refusing those conditions and recognizing the limits of their power.

Fighting back by daring to be righteously angry and unashamedly tired asserts our humanity in a way that offers ourselves love, protection, acceptance. And there in that space of unabashed rage, shamelessness, and peace is something divine.

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Dear God,

Sometimes, I feel like hear another woman’s screams as I try to close my ears to my mother screaming at my father’s betrayal. I hear another woman and another woman and another and another...as if my grandmother and aunts are right there because they’ve been here. They’ve been there in that place where doubt steals your breath. Gasping you clutch the ground to keep from disappearing in the storm. And so, we inherit our mother’s flowers of wisdom. God help her find the garden and remember that she is will be the beautiful wise woman I love and is worthy. I pray I remember. Remember. I pray you catch me when I fall.

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Intrinsic divine love and rejection of men as the sole valid voice of and on humanity disrupts white heteropatriarchy’s process of having black women accept controlling narratives as truth. Indeed, Walker asserts that the ways in which black Women love themselves and love each other by “talking back” is purposefully folded into white hetero patriarchal scripts that
assume our inhumanity because Blackgirl love is a threat to that nexus of power. Our mouths, our voices are as dangerous as they are mysteriously powerful: magic.

Therefore, as I became more aware of harmful narratives and misogynoir, I became interested in how Blackgirls might transcend our yearning for society to love us and ask how we begin to offer ourselves the love, space, and breath we deserve. But learning to love my Blackness did not come easily. hooks (2000) suggests that self-love should be an intentional project of care, trust, honesty, responsibility, and affection. In my sophomore year, I embarked on my first journey of self-love. I dictated rules that encouraged me to confront my own obsessions with respectability and anti-Blackness. Coming face to face with my fear of rejection and search for recognition, I threw away playing the political middle or keeping off the facade of political neutrality because neither my silence nor my neutrality or political centrality protected me. Disheartened by my disillusionment with media, I wanted to assert some kind of control over what images were allowed to tell me who I am or who I could be as a human being. So, as a part of my intentional self-love journey it became necessary and required to control my consumption and engagement with various media and begin reshaping my idea of Blackness. Therefore, I took an extreme an intentional approach that carried the rules below.

Rules:

1. 80% of my Itunes library had to be Black or People of color

2. No more reading magazines like Seventeen or Teen Vogue that habitually erased or appropriated Black beauty.

3. No buying books with white women on the cover.

4. 80% of people I followed on Tumblr had to be Black or of Color.
5. **Attend BSU, Sisters of the Round Table, and Anti-Racism Coalition meetings.**

Although some of these rules seem trivial, I tirelessly combed through my music library, reflecting on every time I hid my appreciation for R&B or Hip Hop. I remembered how I felt the desperate need to convey a “cleaner” and respectable image that I foolishly thought would bring me closer to my unspoken goal of recognition. Surely, I poured over materials that promoted Black beauty, Black critical thought, and Black love. I remember dwelling in thought about how many books and magazines drove me into isolated voids. I felt a sense of loss because they continued to peddle narratives that claimed only white girls could be heroes, magical, or fantastical enough to mold their realities. They said only white girls with dead eyes who unknowingly powerful could protected and loved by mysterious knights. And every time asked, “where are we?” And every time I knew we were in the basement. We were there but unseen growing weak. So, I used these seemingly simplistic rules to grant myself momentary space to imagine differently what I could be if I turned away from the expectation and goal of ever being like my white peers, a pearl princess. I accepted that that story was not mine and that it was alright.

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We must imagine different stories that center our hard truths and our happiness. Imagine otherwise. Imagining otherwise requires moments of recognition that encourage and engender reflections of truth and sorrow. In other words, trying my best to see the tangible ways I bought into white supremacy provided an opportunity to challenge white supremacy. I became my own witness and testified. I grew to understand the wise words spoken at a Sisters of the round table meeting: “You have keep saying and believing ‘I know that I know that I know.’” No doubt, the blind trust we put in others, can we not put that trust in ourselves? As a result of coming to understand that my discomfort, pressure, and suspicion are real, I continued to witness, know, and ask questions.

I questioned countless times ‘Can’t I be beautiful? Can’t I be a hero? Aren’t I...Ain’t I a woman?’ Like Sojourner Truth (1851), I questioned why I was not offered the same care as my white women peers, and as a consequence, deny myself self-care:

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And arn’t I a woman” (Truth, 1851, p.1).

Liberatory self-evaluative processes reclaim time and space to think and shift how we prioritize ourselves as Blackgirls in relation to others. And such reclamation begins with knowing that subject positions and narratives can be interrogated rather than default and fixed facts of being. Further, I felt as if my personal rules validated my experience with Blackgirls who had similar experiences and gave me permission to feel unsatisfied and infuriated with the treatment of Blackgirls. Otherwise, I would have remained oblivious to the systemic centralizing
of whiteness and would have internalized my circumstances as my own inadequacy and failure to meet the mark of a ‘proper’ and ‘worthy’ lady.

Likewise, self-evaluative processes aid in constructing ourselves by reflecting on our desires, pleasures, and insecurities. Of course, because the rules of self-engagement were overly simplistic, they did not completely eradicate my quest for recognized Black female subjectivity. I do not mean to assert that untangling our desires from white supremacy is the goal or possible. Indeed, Blackgirls are not independent, autonomously operating self-determined subjects. We occupy subject positions that are always already entangled in the nexus of power that we seek to name. However, in that naming, we are able to see our limits and the limits of power.

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Take one pint of water, add a half pound of sugar, the juice of eight lemons, the zest of half a lemon. Pour the water from one jug then into the other several times. Strain through a clean napkin.

Grandmother, the alchemist, you spun gold out of this hard life, conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kit. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter who then passed it down to her daughter (Knowles, 2016, Redemption).

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Grappling and struggling with what it means to love and be broken and be broken together is a task and spell hidden in our ancestors’ grimoires of life. That is the spirit of wisdom. And without wisdom, we learn hard lessons is cruel ways. I learned the hard way that it is dangerous to love someone who has no interest in loving and that you cannot make someone, or the world love you. I learned that understanding and accepting one’s own brokenness is a
project and process that must be deliberate and done with others who are committed to seeing what is broken become whole. Still, what remains challenging is discerning between those who perceive the Blackgirl joy that arises from that brokenness as a threat and those who know it is necessary for collective survival. Fortunately, Black feminist tradition, articulated in *The Color Purple* offers intergenerational guidance to this path.

*The Color Purple* was written in the midst of an intense examination and critique of the precepts and assumptions of white feminism. During the decade following "A Black Feminist Statement" from the Combahee River collective (1977), many writers took up the statement's challenge to explore the "interlocking" systems of "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982, 13). Echoing love and sisterhood, Walker demonstrates divine love through Nettie’s sisterly affirmation and protection of Celie. For instance, during Nettie’s first visit to Celie’s new home, Mr._____ repeatedly neglects Celie when he ignores Celie in favor of Nettie:

That’s a real pretty dress you got on, he say to Nettie. She say, thank you. Them shoes look just right. She say Thank you. Your skin. Your hair Your teefs. Everyday it something else to make miration over. First she smile a little. Then she frown...She tell me, Your skin. Your Hair, Your teefs. He try to give her a compliment, she pass it on me. After a while I git to feeling pretty cute. Soon he stop…well us done help Nettie all we can. Now she can go (Walker, year, 17).

Nettie not only refuses to allow Mr. ____ to consume her body, but also by passing on the compliments, she shifts the gaze to Celie. Subsequently, Celie begins to feel pretty and
confident. Nettie’s character offers Celie space and visibility to say, ‘He may not see you, but I see you.’ And by offering visibility that disrupts the hegemonic process that cultivates self-doubt (Edwards, Esposito, Evans-Winter, 2017). Like Sophia, the powerful and stubborn interactions between Black women turn narratives on their head by indicting those who constructed the narratives rather than the subject of the narrative. Indeed, Celie’s growing confidence upset Mr. ____ and defies his control over Celie’s labor and autonomy. As a result, Mr. ____ tells Celie that her disruptive sister must leave.

By inserting Nettie as an affirmative voice, Walker not metaphorically positions Mr.____ as men’s construction of desirability as a violent tool of control, but Walker also contends that such a tool is not the foundation of recognition. To walk through life as a Blackgirl is akin to screaming into the void and talking to a violent wall attacking you at each and every utterance. After a while, Blackgirls begin to blame themselves. Like Audre Lorde (1984) suggests, Blackgirls swallow tyrannies every day, making them our own until we eventually sicken and die in silence. As we fight for our visibility, we become more vulnerable targets.

Likewise, in Beyoncé’s Lemonade (album), Beyoncé draws the audience into discussion on Blackgirl visibility as she whispers in the interlude, “why can’t you see me, why can’t you see me.” Indeed, the central themes of Beyoncé’s Lemonade album is the idea that as a Blackgirl, her partner cannot see her (Gaines, 2017,100). But Beyoncé uses the visual album to revision the Black female body as the celebration of African diasporic traditions and center Black women’s self-expression (hooks 2016; Esposito, Edwards, Evans-Winter, 2017, 86). To put it another way, she centers Black women’s self-image rather than the consciousness of others, albeit the two are completely detached and her methods maintain some conventional hyper-capitalist constructions deserving of critique.
*Lemonade* upholds the thesis borrowed from a 1962 Malcolm X speech: “The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.” These themes are evident as the sound played during the song, “Don’t hurt yourself.” Standing on this thesis, Edwards, Esposito, and Evans-Winter (2017) assert that *Lemonade* is a construction of powerful symbolic Black female sisterhood that “resists invisibility, and that refuses to be silent” (85). By naming invisibility as the source of sorrow, *The Color Purple* and *Lemonade* assert that it is those who cannot see us and render us invisible that are the problem. We are not the problem and we deserve more. Validating our pain is equally as important as validating our happiness, albeit the scale of the two remain imbalanced.

Equally so, Walker demonstrates how men see Black women empowering other Black women and voicing their collective interests as menaces. Power, particularly heteropatriarchy, attempts to convince Blackgirls that beauty and worth can only be acknowledged and validated by men in their attempt to cultivate emotional isolation and solidify their rule through fear and terror (Lorde, 1984). Again, heteropatriarchy manipulates visibility to terrorize Blackgirls into submission. The manipulation of visibility is accompanied by the threat of loneliness to indoctrinate Blackgirls with idea that worth, voice, and recognition must be earned and mediated through men. However, by recognizing ourselves and each other as leap of faith, Blackgirls contradict the widespread belief that Blackgirls are only as valuable and visible as what others dictate. The gaze of men does not define Blackgirl visibility or the only tool that call existences in to being. For that reason, literary and visual mediums such as *The Color Purple* and *Lemonade* that indict the invisibility of Blackgirl pain and power are radical acts, but not without limitations.
Walker’s text conveys how society views wives and women including Celie, as caretakers and sexual servants. Most often, Blackgirls are reduced to the wills of men. For survival, many Blackgirls are trained to believe that we are what others say we are, and we ought to live to please others, thereby reinforcing masters and men as subjects and maintaining Black women as objects without consciousness, lest we die alone. However, Sofia’s character not only rejects fear as a legitimate ruler, she also rejects that being a mindful servant is the only way to be a wife and partner. bell hooks (1986) states that women are often divided by “sexist attitudes, racism, and class privilege” but “sustained women bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted, and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them” (294). Indeed, Larry R. Andrews (1989) asserts that Black sisterhood can support positive identity formation, but sometimes falls prey to modern American cultural seductions that inspire jealousy and create barriers. By rejecting the stereotypical and subordinate role of wife/woman through Sofia, Walker eliminates the barrier of bonding over victimhood.

And Walker demonstrates Sofia confronting Celie about telling Harpo to beat her to acknowledge and address the ways in which women can also betray each other. Walker reimagines relationships between women and suggests that Blackgirls can bond and become stronger through the recognition of strength in each and protection of each other. By doing so, Blackgirls acknowledge Blackgirl humanity and contend that we do not have to occupy positions that assume our inhumanity. No doubt, Blackgirl relationships are not without animosity or differences; however, Walker imagines these differences can be eliminated by uniting them against sexual violence and domestic abuse through shared resistance.

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Just as self-acceptance requires accepting our sorrows, it also requires accepting our desires. But to accept those desires, we must give space to articulate desire and pleasure without shame as a method understanding our visions of peace. As previously stated, the will and desires of others are inscribed onto Blackgirl bodies through shame. To begin the work of articulating our desires, Walker marks a path to joy using Black women’s relationships as a site of validation and discovering that we can desire sexuality and intimacy without fear or shame. For example, Celie painfully confesses to Shug Avery that she has never experienced an orgasm or pleasure while having sex with Mr. ____. In fact, she describes sex with Mr. _____ as a matter of him doing “his business:” “why miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you. That what it feel like, I say.” Voicing how one is displeased and unsatisfied is just as important as voicing pleasure. Before this discussion, Celie believed that she wasn’t supposed to experience pleasure. Indeed, her body is violated for the pleasure of her father and Mr. _____ through sex and labor under the pretense that because she has had children she is spoiled, damaged goods; therefore, the men in her life claim she has no right to pleasure.

Hortense Spillers (1984) has said, “Black women are the Beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb,” to describe the lack of texts that articulate Black women’s sexuality written “by themselves and for themselves” (74). Indeed, articulations of Blackgirl sexuality and desire are often defined by silence or articulated by others (Simmons, 2015). Like many Blackgirls, Celie’s pleasure never took priority (Simmons, 2015). Silence around sexuality often stemmed from its over articulation by others and Black women’s culture of dissemblance. Simmons (2015) states that this dissemblance allowed Black women privacy and a way to shield themselves in a world where their sexuality were public secrets. Silence was encouraged to counteract narratives that constructed Blackgirls as promiscuous. But
like many negotiations, the culture of dissemblance sometimes results in Blackgirls not understanding desire and bodily autonomy.

Following Celie’s revelation that she has never experienced pleasure during sex, Shug Avery responds, “why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin” (Walker 77). Although virginity is a patriarchal tool often used to shame women, Shug Avery affords Celie the innocence denied to Blackgirls. Because Black women are eroticized, and their girlhood goes unrecognized because white supremacy not only deny Blackgirls childhood innocence, it also constructs Blackgirls as “unfeeling, noninnocent, nonchildren” (Bernstein, 2011).

Furthermore, Blackgirls have been largely “absent from public and cultural representations of rape and sexual assault” (Simmons, 2015, 84). White hetero-patriarchal narratives insist that any sex makes women’s bodies damaged flesh. Walker subverts that narrative by using Shug Avery to pronounce that sex with our reciprocal pleasure does not make women less worthy or tainted. An assertion of Celie’s innocence is disruptive by making space for Celie, and Blackgirls alike, to define their own sexualities. Furthermore, Shug Avery dismisses heteropatriarchy as the arbiters of Blackgirl subjection. And again, Walker illustrates how Black women loving Black women makes space to cultivate a sense of one’s own desires and see one’s self as a desiring subject rather than a desired object.

Further, Walker uses the character of Shug Avery to challenge the idea that articulating what you want or achieving pleasure yourself is a promiscuous act. Following Celie’s confession, Shug Avery describes to Celie how to masturbate by stimulating the clitoris. When Celie goes to the bathroom to explore her “button” for the first time, Shug Avery suggests that Celie need not be ashamed of pleasing herself (Walker 78). Walker shifts the focus on sex and
sexuality away from men and masculinity to the self. By centering the female body, Celie’s body becomes the subject rather the object of desire. Spillers (1984) reflects:

The discourse of sexuality seems another way, in its present practices, that the world divides decisively between the haves/have-nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who, by choice or accident of birth, benefit from a dominant mode and those who do not. (Spillers 1984; Simmons, 2015, 177).

Spillers describes the relationship Black women have with sex and sexuality as a struggle between who can speak about sex and who cannot. Since birth and the result of preconceived notions, Blackgirls have been labeled “cannots.” As a Blackgirl, articulating one’s own desire and controlling the conditions of one’s pleasure without fear of punishment reimagines markers of privilege and autonomy. Rather than treating desire and pleasure as a natural transgression for the Blackgirl, Walker demonstrates Black women giving themselves permission to speak about desire can aid the path to self-acceptance, because it is difficult to accept what we are not allowed to see. Similarly, Beyoncé announces her control over her desire by singing “When he fuck me good, I take his ass to red lobster” (Knowles, 2016, Track 12). She articulates that women are conscious and aware of sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

No doubt, desire and joy are not simply a matter of giving ourselves permission, but it is deciding to prioritize faith and desires in ourselves. But to do that, you have to realize and understand our bodies and spirits as legitimate and sustainable. In other words, you yourself enough. Blackgirls are positioned in a set of complex relationalities and positionalities that present complicated negotiations. However, many of the negotiations rest on the heterosexual
constructions of happiness where in which one will only achieve happiness, not joy, through consistent and “good” marriage, partnership, or citizenship. Frankly, that idea of happiness source is a lie.

Even by following the rules, conditions always apply. I want to shift Blackgirl constructions of happiness from a conditional to an unconditional and immaterial construction of joy where one is not thrown away once one ceases to be useful to the production of capital through respectable marriage, partnership, or citizenship. Although Beyoncé’s Lemonade fails to subvert the hyper-capitalist solution her music suggests that expressions of insecurity still serve as important Blackgirl artifacts.
**Conclusion**

*First, I cried feeling hopelessness, but then I asked myself who taught me to fear being alone? Who said I couldn’t be enough for myself or worthy with me, myself, and I? Who taught me, who told me, who made me feel ashamed of being me and being with me and the heaven all over buried inside…* 

*(Davis, 2016)*

Jacques Lacan (1991) explains that we are born into a circuit of discourse marking us before our birth and after our death. And from birth, the Black child/girl/woman is not afforded youth or innocence, and as a result, the Blackgirl child is not afforded vulnerability. They are born into this world always/already with preconceived ideas about who they are, who they could be, and who they should be (Edwards, et.al, 2017). Her perceived lack of vulnerability makes her not only a target but also “unworthy” of protection. I came to this understanding through my own experiences. Those experiences included teachers and administrators marking me a violent liar, a problem child, or an adult jezebel. And before college, I thought these experiences just happened to me, and not to anybody else.

Constantly dismissed and invalidated, I felt like my only choice was to exude strength and walk as an inhuman, unfeeling, invulnerable super being. But through seeing media forms like *The Vampire Diaries, The Color Purple, Lemonade*, and poetry I realized that I was in fact
not alone in my insecurity and invisibility. The feelings were connected and systemic and not individual. My experiences are racialized, gendered, and classed. When I first tried to find joy, I tried distinguishing between what were my desires and what I could achieve by fitting the standards of other people. However, I and other Blackgirls are not independent, autonomous operating self-determined subjects. We occupy subject positions that are deeply entangled in the nexus of power that we seek to name. And that naming is meaningful. Our analysis of desire cannot be apart from intersectional webs of power. However, collecting cultural artifacts that are products of Blackgirl cultural production and reflection help us map how power always/already informs how we interact with the world.

Undoubtedly, validation through forms of media serve as reminders of our humanity and opens possibilities to occupying different subject positions and not just the ones others have chosen for us. Indeed, the subject positions, wills and desires that assume our inhumanity and projected onto Blackgirls are not the only positions available. Although intersectional webs of power tell Blackgirls that we are invulnerable and incapable of innocence, our experience and recognition of each other’s vulnerability and innocence reveals the limits of those webs of power.

In reading Celie’s story, I am reminded of my obsession with purity as a young girl. At thirteen, I bought myself a purity ring not because I was interested in pledging my virginity to God, but because I was convinced that virginity was all I had to offer for love. In fact, written in one of my journals from high school is a passage where I state that if I ever let go of my morals or virtue, I will become “a nasty piece of flesh.”

Indeed, as I watched the news or heard people telling stories about Blackgirls being assaulted or getting pregnant, the girl was always blamed and accused of being stupid, “fast,” or
easy. There was no accountability for the men who would cut Blackgirls with their own insecurities. So, in high school, I explored the idea of purity and I realized purity for Blackgirls does not exist. According to society, our being and Blackness is what makes us guilty and to blame for our pain and violation. As a result, Blackgirls remain feeling unprotected and unseen.

But literature and media that speak to illustrate Blackgirl pain, sorrow, despair, and sisterhood validate our experiences and offer space to be “in our feelings.” They give us permission to feel deeply and hurt in a way the world demands we hide. If joy is self-acceptance, it is hard to accept that which one cannot even wholly acknowledge. Marked in both creative works, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, are wounded journeys of women who learned/are learning that rejecting dehumanizing narratives that speculate and impose what Black women are and what Black women should be is more important than being the “Strong Black Woman.”

But just as Black women are complicated and make a series of convoluted negotiations that are indicative of complex personhood and humanity, so too is Beyoncé and Lemonade (album). *Lemonade* is itself an artifact of Blackgirl negotiations with power. Concurrently, *Lemonade* made me feel betrayed and hopeful. I cried tears of both affirmation and surrender. It meant something that Beyoncé felt alongside us when she read Warsan Shire words aloud:

> I tried to change. Closed my mouth more, tried to be softer, prettier, less awake. Fasted for 60 days, wore white, abstained from mirrors, abstained from sex, slowly did not speak another word. In that time, my hair, I grew past my ankles. I slept on a mat on the floor. I swallowed a sword. I levitated. Went to the basement, confessed my sins, and was baptized in a river. I got on my knees and said 'amen' and said 'I mean.' (Shire, 2016, “Intuition”)
Like others I am sure, I thought Beyoncé could not feel so empty, apathetic, and lost that her would bend and break herself for love. Not because she is falsely idolized as she is no god, which she makes clear as the words “God is God, and I Am Not” flashes across the screen during “Don’t Hurt Yourself.” But perhaps we thought she was unbreakable and safe because we thought there was a way to get free in this seemingly futile game in a Blackgirl’s life and if anyone has the freedom to find it, it must be Beyoncé. But specifically, to give Warsan Shire such publicity not only because she admired her work but also because she felt her pain reflected in Shire’s words, I must say I felt relief. Because clearly, money, visibility, and presence do not buy freedom or control. The aches and heartbreak represented in Beyoncé’s several stages of grief gave me an odd sense solace and relief where I could finally breathe and understand that “it,” that feeling of not being enough or never being enough to be loved is not…my…fault.

The night Lemonade premiered, I actually forgot. I was too wrapped up in the return of seven women of color to my undergraduate institution who had a profound impact on my education and community. Sitting on stools on a low-lit stage were seven women together expressing how the men in their lives had left them wounded and told them and showed them that they would always choose themselves. And yet, these women kept a joint diary in a collective word document for over a year to reiterate that no matter what others say, you are enough. So, when I came home to the online excitement over Lemonade and watched each scene, I could not help but feel like God was saying, I hear you. I will not dismiss the joint feelings of Blackgirl rage, sadness, hurt, anger, rejection, emptiness, loss, and healing exploding on one night as an uncanny coincidence. Like reading Ntozake Shange’s for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf for the first time, it felt good to know I was not crazy and most important, it is not just me tearing apart at the fleshy seams.
Without question, *Lemonade* has shortcomings. Although Beyoncé may believe that the best revenge is accumulating more capital, the film illustrated that money, light skin, and power does not make her untouchable by the claws of betrayal. I remember discussing with Sisters of the Round Table what the album meant to us and how sad some girls were that even Beyoncé cannot escape. They exclaimed that ‘if Beyoncé can’t, what hope is there for us.’

However, it is precisely because Beyoncé cannot escape that there is hope. Beyoncé has been the “good citizen” of capitalism and still harmed by patriarchy. If following the rules and being a “good” girl does not work, then perhaps there lies an opportunity to pivot from accusing the self and to turn the scrutiny on the game itself. Why? I truly thought that if I became what society wanted me to be, I could win a losing game. But the problem is not us. Knowing and understanding the lie and phantasm is equally heartbreaking and joyous because in that heartache, there is an opportunity to move and witness one’s self as a creator and producer of consciousness and knowledge.

With every poem, song, or film that illustrates Blackgirl vulnerability in a myriad of ways including the happy and affirmative for Black women by Black women, we are able to question, reflect, pivot and see that we are not alone in our pain and frustration. Even amongst Black scrutiny, white fragility, and fear of rejection, we must express our vulnerability to learn how to trust our knowledge and reclaim our bodies in the realm of the absurd. And perhaps Blackgirls love too hard and so hard because we think love from someone else, from this absurd world, will give the absurd harshness of our lives meaning. But I refuse. I refuse that way of living and loving because all this time, searching for joy, love, and meaning in someone else has only made keeping up the fantasy of who I am harder. Indeed, I am real complex human being. I will trust that a love that requires I bend, break, and burn is not a fixed condition of my happiness, joy, or
survival. In a world with expectations I will never meet, I will take the risk of being unloved. We love too hard, too much, and too deep to be loved so little. So as a Blackgirl, I will take a leap of faith, jump into the abyss of uncertainty, and trust that even without the love of the world, we are worthy, lovable, and enough. And I am because we are wholly enough.


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