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at every step of the way, like your name, you kept me steady, grounded, and resolute in achieving my goal. The manifestation of my great appreciation for your transference of your knowledge could be found in being the first recipient of the Professor Filomina Steady Prize to a Graduating Senior for the best essay, article, or research paper on women of Africa and the African Diaspora. The only further expression of thanks to you, is my promise to keep your legacy alive.

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Introduction

“A woman has to be a daughter before she can by any kind of a woman. If she doesn’t have that in mind, if she doesn’t know how to relate to her ancestors, to her tribe, she is not good for much.”

~ Toni Morrison (1994)

Drawing inspiration from novelist and ancestor Toni Morrison, just as the Black mother births the Black daughter, the experiences of Black girlhood birth the Black woman. Meaning, the experiences of Black girlhood significantly shape Black womanhood. My study focuses centrally on Black girlhood, its meaning and significance in the U.S. and, more crucially, its role in the development of the Black woman. I contend that the history and lived experiences of Black childhood, particularly girlhood, has been grossly marginalized, misrepresented and underrepresented within the education system, media, and North American society, at large. I argue that this phenomenon of devaluing the Black woman from birth dates back to the harrowing period of the enslavement of Africans by European enslavers across the Americas. During European colonization of the New World, African peoples were violently taken from their homelands and forced into a racist and sexist system of slavery that was predicated on the deleterious notion of white patriarchal supremacy – where the lives of Black girls and women were severely impacted, and their joys, sufferings, tears, resilience, ingenuity, and triumphs overlooked. Not only were Black girls and women made to feel unseen and unheard, but the very nature of their beings was violated and exploited.

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Until the recent ... doctrine/focus/introduction/advent/interests in of Black Girlhood studies, there had been no centralized or institutionalized study on Black girlhood and, more broadly, Black childhood. It should be noted that despite the inadequate representation of Black childhood, the lived experiences of Black children have survived in the oral and written accounts composed by Black people. Largely, Black women and girls were, and are responsible for recording the lives of Black children from early America to present through orature and literature.

Today, the study of Black girlhood offers an expansive framework for understanding the diverse experiences of Black girls through the incorporation of intersectionality, womanism, inclusive pedagogy, and epistemological thought. Understanding these concepts holds great theoretical and practical value: when we rewrite and shed light on the narratives of Black girls and women, it does not simply “add to what we know but changes what we know and how we know it.”2 Thus, in my study, I explore the conceptual underpinnings of Black Girlhood Studies, and the unique historical narratives produced by Black women such as Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and publications by scholars like Alice Walker, Layli Maparyan (formerly Phillips), Stephanie Camp, Kimberlé Crenshaw, LeConté Dill, and Rebecca Epstein, to better understand the dynamic history and lives of Black girls in shaping Black womanhood.

My paper seeks to deconstruct and then problematize the false narratives of girlhood experiences in real-life situations – within family life, institutions of learning, and the wider society. I examine Black girlhood as a developmental process, a public and private performance,
and a shaping of identity and agency through various situations, which Black girls, uniquely, manage in their lifetime.
Chapter One: Slavery and the history of Black girlhood in the U.S.

“won't you celebrate with me”
Won’t you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

~ Lucille Clifton (1993)³

The complexities, misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and maltreatment of Black girlhood and womanhood, in the U.S., undoubtedly, takes root in the vile history of slavery and white supremacy during the formation of the geopolitical West.

From the late 15th century to the late 19th century, European colonizers and enslavers engaged in an amoral triangular trade of human flesh and land theft. Roughly, 12 million Africans were violently captured from their homelands, enslaved, and forced on board ships by European enslavers destined for the New World, where an estimated 10 million survived and were subjected to back-breaking slave labor in the colonial territories. The hapless Africans were dehumanized, shackled, and commoditized for European profit and consumption. Most Africans, who were stripped from the continent comprised girls and boys ages 10 – 14. Mature men and

³ Lucille Clifton, “won't you celebrate with me” from Book of Light. Copyright © 1993 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50974/wont-you-celebrate-with-me>
women also constituted the countless lives that were transshipped to the Americas against their will. However, the cruelties and trauma endured during and after slavery were, particularly, pronounced for black girls and women. For over four hundred years, the bodies of Black girls and women were exploited to enrich the lives of white men. Black girls and women were devalued in a relentless attempt to erase their humanity and femineity, yet their bodies were used as value-producing machines for the profit and pleasure of white men. In this chapter, I reflect on the conditions of these girls and women under the institution of slavery and its lingering impact. I also focus on ways these Black girls created community and joy in such depraved conditions.

It may come as overwhelming information that female captives represented 30 percent of the people, who survived the Middle Passage, with a majority being young girls and women of childbearing age (6 to 30 years old), and who had been separated from their mothers and families, and even their mates I must add, as it falls within the natural age of cohabitation. In fact, this finding reveals that many women, who were kidnapped and sold into slavery were either married and/or had children. And it was a similar case for the men, as well. These women were not only daughters and sisters, then, but they were also wives, mothers, and matriarchs, who were being taken from families and communities. Aboard these vessels, enslaved girls and women were brutalized and denied their girlhood by rapacious white men, who sexually and physically assaulted their bodies. Moreover, it was dehumanizing the way in which their feminine and hygienic biological needs were met. It is on this premise I assert that the study of Black womanhood, in the U.S., should begin with the study of Black girlhood dating back from the terrifying conditions of slavery, and the ingenuity and resiliency Black girls and women

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embodied for their survival and survivability. It should also be noted that enslaved women were often young girls, who were forced into premature womanhood to satisfy the desires of white men, which is expanded on later in this chapter.

On February 12, 1678, English slave traders loaded three recently purchased women and the same number of men on the Arthur, a slave ship anchored in the Callabar River, at the Bight of Biafra, West Africa. The ship’s factor, George Hingston, paid the “king of New Calabar” thirty copper bars for each woman; for each man he paid thirty-six. The following day, canoes brought eighteen women and fourteen men to the ship… Assuming that the three women who boarded the ship on February 12 survived, they would watch from the cramped cargo bays with increasing despair as more and more women, men, and children joined them in the hold. It would slowly dawn on these women and men that their capture was irrevocable and that their future was in the process of complete transformation.\(^5\)

European sailors who “discovered” the land of Africa and its inhabitants became interested in the black body for its distinctive physical features: “skin color, hair texture, and unique bone structure and facial features.”\(^6\) They deemed the black body as deficient and defiant from the white body and racial ideologies, which manifested in travel journals of the sailors journals published in a narrative that “all Africans were described as people of beastly living.”\(^7\) Especially concerning women of African descent, ideologies of savage behavior and traits of barbarism, cultural inferiority, and sexual deviance became inspiration for new artwork depicting a hottentot woman breastfeeding over her shoulder\(^8\). Sketches like the aforementioned affirmed the white gaze philosophy that George Yancy, professor of Philosophy at Duquesne University


\(^{6}\) Morgan, 12.

\(^{7}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{8}\) Ibid., 34.
writes about in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Significance of Race*. The white gaze, as he defines it, is the act of perceiving the world only through the eyes of a white person, who has subtleties of, or is blatant in, their racism. The white gaze on the black female body is, intimately, linked to objectification, exoticization, and the hyper-sexualization of the black female body. The white gaze ergo places the African female enslaved body at the center of exploitation. However, the female enslaved body should not only be seen as an object, which was commodified by slave-owners but also a symbol that holds numerous meanings and sentiments from different facets of the slave experience. The violation of the black female body provokes a reminiscence of the agony and indignity that enslaved women endured: both young and old on the plantations, as mothers and laborers, and even as spectacles for display.

The racialization and sexualization of enslaved African bodies run central to the agenda of European imperialists and white supremacists when they arrived on the coast of the African continent and discovered its depth of riches. In their attempt to establish control over the land and its people, they introduced a perverted Christianity, which had been manipulated in order to persuade Africans of their inferiority first. Genesis 9:25, for instance, shows Noah in anger: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be. Blessed be Japheth and may Canaan be his servant.” The white men, who were popularly known as missionaries, exploited this biblical reference to sow a seed of inferiority in the mind of the African people. If they were sinful and descendants of Ham, they deserved to be colonized and guided to “salvation”. This myth is often referred to as the *Hamitic Curse*. Therefore, in order to justify the dehumanizing act of slavery

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10 Ibid.

and the violation of African bodies, white supremacists devised ways to primitivize the identity of African men and women. The exclusionary practices of this era through separation, slavery, humiliation, and sexualization of bodies would be the driving force that sustains the slave industry and empowers these colonial entities. Arguably, this advancement, largely, would also emerge from the exploitation, denigration, and sexualization of enslaved women, in particular. In fact, in his book *Caribbean History: From Pre-colonial Origins to Present*, Tony Martin states,

> “White planter society turned the enslaved environment into an orgy of sexual abuse. Sexual liaisons with African women actually began in Africa. White men stationed in the coastal forts gave themselves access to whichever of their newly enslaved women caught their fancy”

Further,

> “During the Middle Passage crew members were able to help themselves to harems from among their naked female captives. The Englishman T.S. St. Clair in *A Residence in the West Indies* (1894) described his visit to a newly arrived ship in Demerara. The emaciated condition of most of the new African arrivals contrasted sharply with the healthy-looking occupants of the harem that the captain and mate had put together in their cabins. These consists of “five to six young girls, as naked as they were born, who formed the seraglios of these two sultans and were kept fat and in good condition.”

Black women have been receptacles of pain and degradation because of their dual identity. They are black first, and then they are women. By virtue of this double inferiority, I argue that it correlated with the extent of their humiliation and abasement during slavery and colonialism. They were exploited a double fold relative to black men, in the U.S. Historian Stephanie Camp reasons that the female slave body represents “a site of domination, a vehicle of humiliation, pain and uncertainty and a site of pleasure” in the confined space of a plantation,

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13 Ibid.
where the slave master had all rights to his slaves, as he did other physical property. Camp posits that white slave masters claimed authority over the female slave’s body, as they raped and physically abused female slaves. Likewise, the Middle Passage signified a crucial element in slavery, since it served as the initiation to their virulent life of no return: choked with uncertainty and insecurity. Further, Dr. Nikki Taylor accents the black body, describing it as a site of trauma and a tool for resistance and violence in Driven Toward Madness. Denied her dignity as a married woman, Margaret Garner was forced into sexual relations by her slave master, who abused her severally. Her trauma was silenced but her actions and desire for justice and freedom spoke louder when she chose true liberation over slavery. On top of these violent acts, enslaved women were often used as “physical specimens,” in other words a site for experimentation for gynecological study. As it turns out, these women would be operated upon without proper medical preparation or anesthesia. The known stories of these women exemplify the multiple binds of burden they were forced to bear. The womb of the black woman is ergo, inextricably, linked not only to high economic power of the U.S., but also scientific advancement, worldwide, which persistently excludes and discredits.

Among these powerful symbolizations of the female slave body, the body as a spectacle often remains understudied as an important aspect in the experiences of women in slavery. Among other forms of maltreatment, the female slave body was also abused to satisfy lustful pleasures and provide entertainment for the white men. I bring this topic into focus because it

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deviates from quintessential discussions about the plantation slave and shifts attention to the spectacle slave with personalities like Saartjie Baartman and the Mammy figure as the central examples in this dialogue. The portraits of these female figures are so subtly communicated that we hardly notice their existence in popular culture. Baartman and Mammy are a significant pair of characters because they represent victims of exploitation: the former exploited for her supposed hyper-sexuality and the latter, exploited in servitude to validate white paternalistic behavior by playing the part of the happy and loyal maid to the white family. These characters tell a story of how the black woman’s image was continuously used for consumption in the virulent capitalist America. Moreover, the underlying idea that white slave-owners overtly display their fascination towards the same black body that is undermined for its so-called beastlike nature complicates and dismantles this phenomenon of racism itself to a large extent. The existence of this paradoxical view of the black body raises the question regarding why white slaveholders would ridicule the same black body that seems to call their attention and feeds into their pleasures. Seeing as it was the white males, who possessed primary power in the social system, we can strongly conclude that the white gaze is entirely bound by a male perspective, as George Yancy implies in his book.

The territory-building and expansion of European domination worldwide thrived on the exploitation and violation of black women’s bodies it must be reiterated. Scholar, Adrienne Davis regards the sexual economy a key dimension to understanding how the system of slavery and racism disrupted African women’s sexuality. Davis capitalizes on the productive value of female bodies but also highlights the reproductive and sexual roles that enslaved women were forced to accept in order to satisfy the “capitalistic and rapacious desires” of white
slaveholders\textsuperscript{17}. She asserts that historical texts often conceive the system of slavery as one established with only racial hierarchies and rarely consider the gender hierarchies it involved, which landed black women at the bottom end of the order. The sexual economy, specifically involving the black woman, her womb, and her femininity were critical to the advancement and expansion of the capitalist regime.

Beyond the backbreaking, soul-savagin labor that all enslaved people performed, American slavery extracted from black women another form of work that remains almost inarticulable in its horror: reproducing the slave workforce through giving birth and serving as forced [and free] labor to countless men of all races. The political economy of slavery [thus] systematically expropriated black women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity for white pleasure and profit.\textsuperscript{18}

In large numbers, enslaved women were shipped to the \textit{New World} colonies to begin an estranged path to life. They were taxed to perform arduous labor on plantations tilling the land and harvesting crops while managing the household. Their skills, knowledge, and work ethics transformed the lands they were charged to grow. Yet, they did not reap any benefits from this labor. Rather, they were constantly maltreated by the swoosh of a whip running swiftly at their backs. Further, the violation of black bodies and the reinforcement of superiority, ultimately resulted in the \textit{disorientation} of the body and spirit. Here, I draw my conclusion from Fitzpatrick’s “Sexuality through the Eyes of the Orisa: An Exploration of Ifa/Orisa and Sacred Sexualities in Trinidad and Tobago,” where she defines \textit{dis-orientation} as a sudden and often violent disruption of consciousness. Fitzpatrick says that European colonizers sought to

\textsuperscript{17} Liseli A. Fitzpatrick. “Sexuality Through the Eyes of the Orisa: An Exploration of Ifa/Orisa and Sacred Sexualities in Trinidad and Tobago.” PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2018. 3

dismember African consciousness by the demobilizing the African body, and in an attempt to disembowel the African spirit through destabilizing acts of violence.\textsuperscript{19}

Black women served a more complex ideological function in the slave economy. Historian Jennifer Morgan articulates that, the crucial intersection of heredity and racial inferiority situated in enslaved women’s reproductive ability at the core of the matter in ways not explained in slave owners’ archives.\textsuperscript{20} She contends that the narrative of a male majority in the population of slaves transported during the trans-Atlantic trade is fundamentally flawed because it undermines the consequences on the reproductive capacity of the enslaved women. Women’s immense contributions through their bodies, she says, “are inseparable from the landscape of colonial slavery” because reality of the industry simply depended on potential of African girls to give birth to as many children as possible.\textsuperscript{21} However, the demographic histories that discuss the trans-Atlantic slave trade and often omit women’s reproductive ability from their examinations, conversely, indicate that women were enslaved in large numbers between the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Particularly, the Americas received nearly equivalent ratios of men and women on the plantations for work as slave traders shifted to importing more child slaves who would serve the economy in the long term. Thus, these revelations demonstrate firstly that girls and women were main actors for the powering of the slave industry and also highlights the notion that women and girls became the main victims of the same institution. The sexual violence, humiliation, and pain they would bear cannot be weighed alongside that of enslaved

\textsuperscript{19} Fitzpatrick, 8.

\textsuperscript{20} Morgan, Jennifer L. \textit{Laboring women: Reproduction and gender in New World slavery}. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 3.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
men though they also endured much hardship. *Slavery was terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women.*

When the British declared that the Slave Trade illegal, in 1807, the quantity of labor required to work on the coffee bushes, rice, and sugar cane plantations was limited. Slave owners thus devised cost-benefit analyses to include the prospective value that reproducing the labor would generate to achieve increased profit. The enslaved Africans became forced actors in procreation for multiplying the wealth of slave merchants and holders through breeding. In Jamaica, Guyana, and Brazil, for instance, the slave death rate was so high and the birth rate so low that they could not sustain their population. With the rate of natural increase being as low as 5 percent a year, the system would collapse without the importation of more slaves from Africa to buffer the loss.

Interestingly, while the death rate of U.S. slaves was estimated close to that of Jamaican slaves, the birth rate was more than a striking 80 percent higher in the United States. These statistics suggest an extremely high natural increase for the U.S side of the slave economy maintained for more than a century. By 1850, most US slave populations had graduated over third, fourth, and fifth-generation American slaves. Ultimately, the aggrandization of the slave population reflects how severely women’s reproductive abilities were being exploited but, also, the life that was being drained cold from their bodies.

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The inclusion of slave children in the scope of this discussion matters because of their inextricable link to the hardship of enslaved women. Uncommon accounts submit that the instances where slave women allowed rest from field work for extended periods during slavery was during their pregnancy. Even so, they might be tasked to work during their last week before childbirth; pregnant women on average picked three-quarters or more of the amount normal expected from women. Overworking mothers to this degree amidst harsh weather conditions and malnourishment augmented the mortality rate of slave infants. Many children died before reaching their first year of life, and those who survived were weaned off breastfeeding after four months when the average age for weaning in the early eighteenth century was eight months, recommended by physicians. Notwithstanding these conditions set aside for black babies, white children were expected to receive optimum care for which enslaved mothers were tasked. They would serve as nannies and even wet nurses, while their own children died of malnutrition daily.

Mommy’s baby, daddy’s maybe was a sub-structure designed to relieve white slave masters of their responsibilities as fathers to enslaved children. In addition, it would eliminate any possibilities of inheritance by that child in relation to their white father. Thus, black mothers became the sole parents to their children, acting as both mother and father. What we fail to realize in this circumstance which happened very often was that already faced with these predicaments, fear and anxiety would overcome mothers, gnashing their teeth at the thought of being separated from their children. To be “sold down the river” was one of the most dreaded prospects of the enslaved population. For the children auctioned away, it meant they might never see their mother or siblings again. Again, they would have to endure the entrapping cycle of

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growing up too prematurely. For the mother, it remained with her a loss that she would never be able to heal from.

In Laboring Women, historian Jennifer Morgan presents that: “Planters sacrificed the relationship between mother and child to the economics of legacies.” For many enslaved women, however, they would have chosen death over slavery but for the sake of their children they could not bring themselves to make that decision. Seeing their children being sold to distant plantations withal made death all the more worthwhile in their minds. In this book, Dr. Taylor recounts the story of a slave named Margaret Garner, who escaped Kentucky with her children to Ohio, in 1850. She attempted to murder all her children before their recapture. Garner was vindicated from her charges because the Law stipulated that they would be considered free people in Ohio, while accusers and other critics argued that it was a horrific case of mental instability and demonic possession. This was an act of love that bonded a mother to her helpless child, contrary to what was believed. Some destinations, particularly the Louisiana sugar plantations, had especially grim reputations. But it was the destruction of family units that made the domestic slave trade so terrifying.

The impact of slavery adversely disrupted the physical and emotional wellbeing of girls and women. It also further compromised and hindered their African culture, spirituality and sexuality. It is believed that the institution of this system forced sons and brothers into incestuous relationships with mothers and sisters, and some experiences heinously designed by the slave master to punish them. These atrocious occurrences led to the popularization of the derogatory

26 Morgan, 96.

term *mother f*cker* coined by white slave owners to further degrade black people exaggerate their seeming inferiority especially as aliens, or rather *others* in the New World they had had to settle in. In the words of the renowned author and philosopher, Frantz Fanon: “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. In other words, the disruption of the cognitive well-being of the slave was necessary to ensure the obedience of each slave and ultimately the sustenance of power at the apex of the racial hierarchy.

Many slave owners in their diaries, manuals and newspaper writings and correspondence, readily admitted the punishments and violations they exacted on black people on the cane fields and in their homes. Take, for example, the unapologetic recollections of violence and predation that comprise the diary of Thomas Thistlewood, a British slave owner in Jamaica in the mid-1700s. Thistlewood recorded 3,852 acts of sexual intercourse with 136 enslaved women in his 37 years in Jamaica.28

Centering this study around Black girlhood, the elements of sex and reproduction deserve thorough investigation as they crucially concern black women. The trauma that afflicted women due to a horrific sexual encounter would extend to her daughter and granddaughter among other generations. Considering these savage acts of violence, Fitzpatrick propounded that “the pure functionality of ensuring the continuity of labor on the plantations, and life, by extension...disrupted African sexualities.29 These acts of violence manifested in the form of hyper-sexualization and multiple rape counts of black women. Additionally, various forms of punishment involved the mutilation of her breasts or genitalia, as a deterrent to other slaves who resisted oppression. But the hypocrisy, greed, and entitlement that plagued the white colonizers

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28 Kris Manjapra. "When will Britain face up to its crimes against humanity." *The Guardian* 29, no. 03 (2018).

29 Fitzpatrick, 97.
would not allow them to admit their own pedophilic and vulgar lifestyle on the plantation. For one slave owner to have 3,852 sexual encounters with 136 women, speaks of the kind of barbaric culture that existed on the plantations. It carries even deeper paradoxical meaning when we consider that Africans had long been described and demoralized as uncivilized savages.

With these thoughts in mind, I assert African women were perceived as hypersexual (Jezebel), beastly, and deviant, but also virile all at once. And though victims, they would be accused, punished, or subjected to harsh labor, as if they were the perpetrators of their own misfortune. The phenomenal artist, Kara Walker captures the essence of this argument in her work titled: “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby.” This installation illustrates the often sexualized but also corrupted and sardonic interpretations of the black female body in the antebellum South, America. The reality and subtleties in the interactions between the white slave owners and the black slaves are blended into form and texture and literally sugar-coated with powerful metaphors and paradoxes of domination and resistance. As one of my favorite sculptures in the world, this artwork speaks volumes of the complex nature of oppression that black women borne inside their wombs through time. In the words of art critic, Roberta Smith, the work communicates a “great gift of caricature [which] demonstrates unequivocally that America’s “peculiar institution” was degrading for all concerned [black women].”

The following sculptures by Walker congruously depict the intricate web of perceptions that have shaped the reality of a black woman till present. Foregrounded in the center of the Domino Sugar factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn is a woman-sphinx with undeniably Black/African features wearing only earrings and a headkerchief, like the popularized Aunt

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31 Ibid.
Jemima figure. The woman is beautiful and bold; her stature exudes power, counteracting the domination and oppression she has defied.

Figure 1.1 & Figure 1.2: A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby. The sphinx, reminiscent of the Egyptian sphinx and coated with sugar, is emblematic of the back-breaking work done by slaves on plantations. The sculpture also features blackamoors ensconced northward of the main attraction of the exhibition, symbolizing the 19th century domino warehouse which was used as storage for raw sugar cultivated by African slaves. (c. 2014)
As previously stated, according to the false patriarchal belief of white colonists and enslavers, the black woman’s body did not belong to her. This meant that it could be consumed, economically, sexually, comically and immorally to the sole benefit of white men. Her involuntary nakedness only served to fulfil these purposes: trading her body of sugar and sugar for her body, recycling her body at maximum rate to produce more slaves and assaulting her multiple times for pleasure. These acts reinforced the notion that black women were different or other. They heightened the social and political differentiation of black women since their bodies were deemed unworthy of protection: she was expendable and dispensable. Yet the white female, viewed as pure, was fragile and required protection and preservation by all means.
Acknowledging that black women have been long oppressed and discriminated against due to their dual identity is only the first step to addressing the critical issue of womanhood and how it is viewed in the American/Western society. Furthermore, their bodies are significant because they represent the main site of pain, humiliation and domination that shapes their everyday life and existence. Recognizing the body as valuable in this examination will affirm how black girlhood is threatened by historical and cultural representations and reactions to black femininity. Factors explored from here on inform black girls’ choices, thoughts and philosophies as well as their relationships and actions every day. Thirdly, dialoguing in this way will help to inform our understanding of black girlhood as it centers the childhood as an important developmental stage in any black woman’s life. As we open up the conversation to not only include but spotlight black girlhood experiences, we are able to better document and implement strategies to support black girls in their specific needs.

I stand with scholars like Sarah Lightfoot to call for the need to document and understand the socio-cultural realities and conditions that influence and shape black girls. We can begin to imagine the possible transformations that are possible in shifting this society to a more womanist (all-inclusive) paradigm and consciousness when we include black girlhood as a prime topic of discussion. As we consider recurring themes such as “adultification”, hyper-sexualization, hair, beauty, intelligence and the respectability politics of being a young black girl/woman, we become more aware of how we can appraise and appreciate black girls such that their continued development and success in society is established and preserved.

Following the abolition of slavery in the U.S. the lives of Black girls and women continued to be threatened by white racists. One prime example of this among numerous is the Birmingham bombing of not to mention the wonton killings at the hands of law enforcement that
led to the #sayhername movement. Yet, despite such horrifying conditions Black girls and women have found joy and forge community around hair braiding, hand clapping games, double-dutch, midwifery, storytelling, food, artistic expressions, and intellectual thought. This is why the Black Girlhood Studies is warranted as a field to counteract the imbalance and false narratives and lack of representation around Black girlhood and development significance.
Chapter Two: Representation and Black Girlhood Studies

My mother is one of the most courageous people I have ever known, with an uncanny will to survive. When she was a young woman, the white folks were much further in the lead than they are now, and their racist rules gave her every disadvantage; yet, she proved herself a queen among women, any women, and as a result will always be one of the great legends for me.

~Abbey Lincoln

The lives, experiences, needs and challenges of Black girls and the study of black girlhood have been widely marginalized and underrepresented across and throughout the U.S. in mainstream literature, education and media. Conversations that directly affect black girls and women often silence their contributions and concerns, and exclude or ignore their presence, especially, when these issues address race and gender. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the silencing and overlooking of Black girls and women is endemic to the U.S. linked to its abhorrent history of slavery. The institutionalization of Black girlhood studies now provides a critical space to examine and explore the complex lives of Black girls and their maturation to adulthood. Moreover, it provides a wide range of resources and theoretical frameworks and tools to address the lack of representation and Western imposed issues that plague the lives of Black girls. Stewart Coles, a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan’s Department of Communication and Media rightly stated that “the intersectional invisibility means that the [social justice movements] that are supposed to help Black women [often rather] contribute to

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their marginalization.” Moreover, in the spaces where they are represented, they are unduly misrepresented. Questions as simple as: (1) How does the everyday media portray the black girl or woman? (2) What negative stereotypes run the society we live in, today, and influence its institutions? (3) More practically perhaps, how has a teacher, judge, police officer or employer responded to a black girl’s pain or reach for help. More often than not, her pain is diminished, sidelined or used as a vehicle of humiliation towards her, just by virtue of her race and gender.

Time may heal wounds but memories of pain that lasted for over four hundred years of spiritual and psychological distress seldom simply fade away into the distant past. More importantly, a black girl lives her trauma every day when she steps outside into the world. Having borne the burden of abuse and dehumanization, her body still carries scars and wounds that reflect the loss and suffering of her mother and grandmothers. In her lifetime, her body and identity would also bring forth new challenges that she/they have to navigate alone. Again, when we contemplate the interplay of womanhood in the matters of discrimination, it is critical to remember that the dichotomy of white womanhood versus black womanhood remains pressing though not emphasized enough in academic texts and discussions. In the same vein, when we ponder girlhood, we must recognize the differences between white girlhood and black girlhood because there are truly contrarieties worth noting.

When I meditate on the question: what makes one racist? I am reminded that it is not so much the prejudice but the reliance on a power structure that was created to promote one group over another. As a consequence, many white women today attempt to distinguish themselves from the workings of slavery and colonialism on other races. Even though white women did not typically own slaves and they were also victims of violence from men, racism still insists and

ensures that they benefit from their whiteness. Admittedly, women in the West have to
constantly define themselves in relation to men. For instance, the titles *Mrs* and *Miss* being
perfect everyday illustrations in our society. But I contend that white women and girls are placed
on a false higher pedestal of purity and virtuousness than black women and girls. With this
argument, in mind, I assert it is crucial to discuss black girlhood within the context and culture of
black women and girls. It is through their interpretations of the world around that we are able to
truly understand and appreciate their reality, their value and their power.

In the dominant American culture, Black women and girls are not typically eulogized as
*ladies* because they were brutally stripped of their dignity when they became enslaved and even
later when they became free people. All rooted in white supremacist notions, the metalanguage
of the black women was created to enforce their inferior status in society though she was no
longer a slave. The *metalanguage of race*, as defined by Judge Evelyn Higginbotham,
contributes as part of a heritage of black feminist theorizing that acknowledges the role of race in
determining the meanings of gender.34,35 Higginbotham and other black feminist ideologists like
Alice Walker, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Pauli Murray have helped to pioneer a new framework
for philosophizing black feminist and womanist practice. In her analyses, scholar Sherie
Randolph explains that the practice pays due attention to the multifariousness of connections and
conundrums between race and other relations of power and difference. She emphasizes that: “the
consideration of the contradictions and connections in the courts’ understanding of race and
gender brings us some of our most prominent and pronounced theorizing of black feminism,

Metalanguage of Race.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17(2): 255.

35 Sherie M. Randolph. "Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the Metalanguage of Race, and the
Genealogy of Black Feminist Legal Theory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 3
(2017): 621.
especially the concepts of Jane Crow, intersectionality, and metalanguage of race."\textsuperscript{36} From this, we can understand why blackness and girlhood merge to produce a new reality for all those associated.

Evidently, black women’s history is key to understanding how racism and sexism have shaped black women’s lives in America to date. In fact, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass was unyieldingly declared that: “when the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, woman will occupy a large space in its pages; for the cause of the slavery has been peculiarly woman’s cause.”\textsuperscript{37} He was alluding to the fact that black women bore the brunt of violence through slavery and although their stories exist, they can hardly be found let alone given attention. I dare to extend this even more to state that when their stories are found, they are belittled thus do not receive the needed spotlight and energy for advocacy they deserve. Black women longed to receive appreciation for their work ability, modesty and beauty, much like the regard that was due any white woman in the patriarchal society. With standards of femininity popularized in the societal structure, black girls aspired to reach those same standards. They craved to be seen in their womanhood as respectable to the extent that some female slaves would rather wear dresses for work on the plantations in place of their typical rugged, shapeless overalls. Many acts of resistance like the aforementioned marked black girls desire and determination to demand respect from the society in which they lived in even though it always seemed almost impossible.

\textsuperscript{36} Randolph, 625.

\textsuperscript{37} Frederick Douglass, Autobiographies Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom ; Life and times of Frederick Douglass (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 907.
Black Women Adorned in the Fashion of the Victorian Era

It is important to appreciate the efforts that have contributed to Black Girlhood Studies. This field owes its depth to the serial publications and advocacies of various black women activists who persevered through racism and sexism against them. The experiences and identity of black girls and women sprouted and flourished during the era of post-emancipation in the 1920s. If you recall, writers like Harriet Jacobs, Martha Stewart and Alice Walker among other women scholars and activists had begun actively documenting the experiences of black women, embracing elements of their childhood within their narratives and plots. While reading some of these phenomenal texts, I observed a common thread of solidarity and love amongst the black women and girls they permitted to run, express and speak freely as characters in their novels. It was not just the solidarity but the womanist agenda these authors hoped to push forth. Associate Professor of English at the University of Kentucky, Nazera Sadiq Wright articulates that “To emphasize a black girl’s age and childhood as a textual marker recognizes that, similar to all women, black women in the antebellum period experience a youthful period and undergo distinct stages of growth and maturity into womanhood.”39 For this reason, and the issue that black women’s childhood has been undermined and overlooked, black girlhood studies needed to materialize out of its own roots, its underestimation and denunciation.

In my examination, I delve deeper into some chief texts that encapsulate some coming-of-age stories of some black, beginning from the nineteenth century. The honorable historian and African American writer, Maria W. Stewart penned a six-page short story entitled The First Stage of Life (1861) which successfully critiqued the society for its dismissal of black girlhood.

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The publication serialized in three parts in the *Repository of Religion and Literature, and of Science and Art* in April, July and October 1861.\(^{40}\) Between 1858 and 1863, the black magazine was run by black men and targeted towards a black audience. The magazine reached more readers and households with better economic standing and an increasing amount of time to engage in leisure. Though the *Repository*--based in Indianapolis-- is presently neither in circulation nor digitized, Stewarts texts among other significant publications remain preserved and serve as literary and historical monuments for the emerging field of Black Girlhood Studies. Moreover, knowing that the nineteenth century print-culture in the country made way for publishing such unique perspectives on black women broadens our understanding of the contributions of black women to the field as worthy of being centered by way of its pathos, ethos and logos.

Stewart’s short story spotlights black girlhood both as a *stage* as well as a *period*. This way we become aware of various events and situations which shape the canon of girlhood within the African American context amid its surrounding backdrop of racism and the promotion of white supremacy over black bodies. Their girlhood, it appeared, was peak period of maturation, however, it was knotted with a myriad of challenges, expectations and decisions. “To define black girlhood, nineteenth-century African American women writers distinguish between youthful and knowing girlhood, a dichotomy that is represented by a black girl's age”\(^{41}\).

Identifying black girls as youthful and therefore *childlike* elevates them from the sexual suggestion and impression of their bodies which was heavily pressed unto their skin and psyche especially during slavery. The growth from youthful to prematurely knowing girlhood occurs

\(^{40}\) Wright, 150.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
because black girls gain a deepened awareness of their precarious positions as society views them, and they seek methods to thrive within the hostile world.

Theorizing girlhood in African American literature and culture studies--poetry, song, speeches, diction and novels--makes age a central catechistic in the familiar terrains of race, class, and gender. “Age offers an interesting corrective as a way of approaching cultural analysis,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler explains, “because unlike gender, or race, or even class, age is inherently transitional.”

Thus, reading texts through the lens of age “unveils specific developmental stages for black girls and the ways that slavery and white supremacy [adversely] altered the timeline of maturity for them.”

In essence, black girls were forced into *premature knowing* and coming of age since they were robbed of their childhood. Apart from the traumatic experience of losing one’s virginity and agency, for instance, through constant rape and abuse, black girls at the time were plunged into a precarious existence to self-protect, self-direct and self-provide due to, but not only because of this, being abandoned most of the time.

Stewart deliberately unveils truths about her own girlhood journey where age markers successfully differentiate the stages of her own girlhood while growing up in Connecticut in the early antebellum period:

*I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1803; was left an orphan at five years of age; was bound out in a clergyman's family; had the seeds of piety and virtue early sown in my mind; but was deprived of the advantages of education, though my soul thirst for knowledge. Left them*

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43 Wright, 156.

44 Ibid.
at 15 years of age; attended Sabbath Schools until I was 20; in 1826, was married to James W. Stewart; was left a widow in 1829. (Productions 3-4)

In early African American writing, the age markers that distinguish episodes in black girls' lives are remarkably similar. Black writers often introduce black girl characters at the age of six, which is a period that I call "youthful" girlhood. The age of fifteen or sixteen, what Jacobs in Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl also called “prematurely knowing” girlhood, identifies a common transitional shift when black girls are forced to become aware of adult concerns in relation to their own lives. These age markers communicate that black girls did not have as much time to be youthful before they arrived at the age when they needed to make mature decisions and take on the actions of an adult. Indeed, black girls needed to find ways to protect themselves and survive: “They had to find a way or make one.” As raced, gendered, and youthful figures, black girls occupy a mental space of in-betweenness, like the figures Hortense J. Spillers labels “not-yet” subjects: meaning that they are not yet American citizens but also not yet women. In this way, black girls function as rhetorical symbols for African American writers to express this idea or feeling of restrictedness and ultimately the foreboding of being labelled inadequate.

An awareness of in-betweenness is truly critical to understanding the experience of black girls. It exposes the uncomfortable nature of their reality, struggling to fit within different spaces which inherently exclude them. Black girls possess little social authority and effectively “no


47 Wright, 156.

property, insignia, rank, or [significant societal] role." Yet, their invisibility grants them an ability to fashion themselves anew; that is, they navigate between positions of their victimized subjectivity and opt to view themselves as capable and committed to surviving their circumstances. Their ability to negotiate these circumstantial ambiguities informs their cleverness and awareness to be able dismantle negative social norms that seek to confine them, and redefine preconceived values that justified their latent power. For many African American writers, black girls represent a “cultural shorthand for political change in the nineteenth century,” as Wright expressly states. The characters, which I choose to call heroines in their right, are malleable and they become strategic narrative tools that continually evolve despite their limitations throughout African American literary history.

Author, Maria Stewart is patently very concerned with how black girls are perceived and treated in her environment. As with many stereotyped black female characters, Letitia's self-reliance in the face of adversity is a familiar tenet in antebellum African American women's literature. In “The First Stage of Life,” Stewart dissects the interior, internal life of her black girl character. By revealing the girl’s thoughts, reasoning, and decision-making processes--even those made in haste-- Stewart shows readers how the girl weighs intricate moral questions and considers the impact of her actions on numerous others. This trope of the self-reliant black girl in the face of adversity is entrenched in early African American print culture as with literary publications by Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, Alice Walker among other ingenious black women littératrices.

49 Wright, 157.
50 Ibid., 158.
These texts are telling moments of the way that Americans viewed black girls and their struggle to maintain their childhood. Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and other texts like Alice Walker’s “The Flowers”\(^51\) are indicative of a larger issue, that “black girls are deprived of their childhoods due to traumatic events that are specific to a black girl’s experience”.\(^52\) Black girls are constantly faced with experiences that involve death and premature sexualization that their white peers never have to encounter. In particular, Harriet Jacobs’s childhood is disrupted by her master whose sexual desire for her becomes the curse of her life. Although Jacobs does not experience trauma through death experiences, she is consistently reminded about the consequences of trying to escape slavery—one of which is death.\(^53\)

Throughout the novel, she expresses an unequivocal tone of perpetual entrapment which also marks her sudden transition into an adult’s mind. In “The Flowers”, Myop’s childhood comes to an abrupt end when she discovers a man’s corpse after he had been lynched. It is not her initial experience with the dead body that traumatizes her but how the man dies: he dies by hanging and this moment forcibly plunges her into the reality of black womanhood at the young age of 10. She no longer has the “myopic”\(^54\) innocence of a child.

African American women writers constructed their black girl figures to allegorize their own real-life experiences and pursuits. First published in 1937, the legendary Zora Neale Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God: narrates the *becoming* story of Janie Crawford, a beautiful, *fair*, independent black woman as she evolves in her individuality through three


\(^{53}\) Gilbert, 1.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 1.
separate marriages. Janie is one black woman who initially lives lost in the fantasy of love but becomes disillusioned after three unsuccessful love matches, one which ends in a dreadful homicide. Nonetheless, she rises from the loss and bitterness when Janie avows that she has done: “two things everbody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves.”55 Hurston’s passionate story, layered with compelling sympathy and prompting immediacy, inspired Alice Walker so much that she affirmed: “There is no book more important to me than this one.”56 In my view, Janie’s experience reflects a personal agenda by Hurston to write in such a way as to allow black girls to feel and express their thoughts. Likewise, the character of Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, reveals key gems about the experience and recollections of black women slaves at the time-- as she laments about their unfulfilled dreams as well as their daily practices. Unlike several male African American writers who usually portrayed black women in two dimensions--timid and submissive homemakers--writers like Hurston and Stewart sought to expand the personhood of any Black girl protagonist they featured in their novels.

To take control over and address fully the circumstances that hampered their lives, black women writers endowed their fictional girl characters with room to maneuver, make decisions, and create paths for improvements. Black girls were represented with physical endurance and demonstrated resilience and determination in the face of the most extreme circumstances.57 Stewart joined black women writers who presented black girls who engaged in indecorous

56 Walker, v.
57 Wright, 154
conduct and unvirtuous behavior as strategies for survival. These characterizations exposed how society “sanctioned their victimization, precluded their protection, and violated their virtue.”

Phillis Wheatley's girlhood in the eighteenth century initiates a trajectory of a girlhood trope in African American literature that extends over one hundred years, a pattern we find in many of Stewart’s works as well. In a letter to Wheatley's publisher, her owner, John Wheatley, connects Phillis's youthfulness to her intellectual prowess when he describes her as a slave girl “between seven and eight years of age” who gains intellectual achievement within “in fifteen months time from her arrival [from Africa], attained the English language, to which she was an utter stranger before, to such a degree, as to read any, the most difficult parts of the sacred writings…” With the materialization of their resilience and innovative practices, these protagonists claim agency over their own lives. Moreover, they also claim agency over their narrative which includes imperfect aspects that need improvement as well as breakthroughs.

Having to constantly navigate spaces of in-betweenness, the victimized virtue of black girls was not their sole value. Black girls also possessed a civic and political power that was always undermined. Fostering and nurturing black girls' characters in novels, as Stewart sought to achieve, developed “amiable qualities of soul”—a way of knowing and understanding the black girl in her goodness, not just her trauma. The facets that Stewart identifies in black girls mark them as paradoxical nineteenth-century figures. One end of the spectrum foregrounds black girls' ongoing victimization and reinforces the systemic, national violence and unlawful acts that African Americans suffered. On the other end, black girls' resilience, love for humanity and

58 Wright, 155.
59 John, Wheatley. “The Following is a Copy of a Letter sent by the Author's Master to the Publisher.” P. Wheatly, Collected Works 6. Vi.
60 Wright, 252.
modesty communicates certain behavioral codes of respectability—tactics and practices that, if followed, will place African Americans at a better chance of achieving full citizenship rights and respect in all aspects of the American dream.

“Rhetoric that attached the value of black girlhood to African Americans’ civil rights pursuits in the antebellum period was a foundational cornerstone of African American literary history in the nineteenth century. Stewart's rhetoric is similar to other black activists who incorporate the paradoxical trope of black girlhood into their speeches, essays, and fiction, and who link black girls’ persecution to the injustices and denial of rights that threatened the future progress of the black race. Black girls must gain a perceptive wit and learn discerning habits to remain resilient in the face of adversity. To protect black girls, Stewart encourages their refinement through measured instruction in domestic and formal education, self-sufficiency, and morality. These calculated methods to end society's view of black girls as dishonorable and base may have led to incremental political gains for African Americans, but the flexible figuration of black girls in black intellectual activism also contributed to the evolving perceptions of this group as exultant and triumphant, on the one hand, or immoral and inadequate, on the other hand.” 61

Womanist culture provided a strong support system for all black women and girls. According to womanist scholar Layli Maparyan (Phillips), womanism seeks to “restore the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconcile human life with the spiritual dimension.” 62 Renowned author and womanist, Alice Walker coined the term womanist in a

61 Wright, 153.

short story, *Coming Apart* in 1979. She later serialized womanist culture in her other publication. Being my most favorite novel by Walker, *The Color Purple*, justly illustrates the elements and successes of womanism by centering female black characters in the story. The integrands of this culture embody love, community, spirituality, nature, self-expression and ultimately. Absorbing the gems in the plot of the novel opened me up to the universe, its beauty and wonder. I understood, an African/black girl, that I too was a part of something so grand and marvelous, contrary to a myth of my inferiority and deficiency perpetuated by Western society. I hereby honor women like Alice Walker, Layli Maparyan and all other womanist and feminist scholars who have worked diligently to document the experiences of black women. The study of Black girlhood and womanhood undeniably offers an expansive framework for understanding the diverse experiences of Black girls, through the incorporation of intersectionality, womanism, inclusive pedagogy and epistemological thought. As a timeless African American piece, we are able to connect the novel and its characterization with female relationships and bonds we can hold onto today.

Walker restores the pride of womanhood by placing female characters and their lives in the spotlight. In her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983) she defines a womanist as a feminist of color... she appreciates women’s culture, emotional flexibility, and strength… is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people: men, women and children. A womanist also cherishes music, dance, the Spirit, the moon, and she loves herself regardless of society’s pressures. In *The Color Purple*, we are able to trace these attributes to various

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characters like Sofia, Celie, Shug, Nettie, the *Olinka* women and even little Tashi and Olivia as these women support each other to resist the repressive, patriarchal and racist society in which they reside. For example, Celie's selfless heart manifests effortlessly when she meets Shug and is eager to love and nurture her back to health.\(^{66}\) In fact, she inspires Shug when she “scratched the *Miss Celie* song” out of her head.\(^{67}\) Sofia, Shug and Nettie also reinforce Celie’s confidence and hope throughout the challenges she faces in her journey. Lastly, Reverend Samuel remarks that “the *Olinka* women are friends and will do anything for one another...[even] nurse each other’s children.”\(^{68}\) These relationships welcome all women and their children, but they mostly exclude the men because wherever there is man in the scene, there is trouble. By fostering these close-knit friendships, the women teach, encourage and support each other to take control of destinies in spite of the societal restrictions imposed on them. Fundamentally, they find strength in their kinship and sense of belongingness which mirrors two womanish concepts namely family and sisterhood.

As a primarily womanist novel, *The Color Purple* deviates from the folkloric *Walt Disney* pattern of storytelling. It replaces the quintessentially “meek, submissive, and often witless fairytale heroine” with a protagonist who becomes the architect her own success without a *Prince Charming* or romanticized heterosexual relation (Lamber 2009). In fact, the novel reaches its climax when Celie finally stands up to Mister and demands respect. She confronts him saying:

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https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/014833319904900104?casa_token=oYPwJuXo2QQAAAAA
nlvyX7NdohZhjGlkL-Bp3ZOVk3P_lqSmVviVVlspswRgiQ_UMGKOHTmcjQO9rHy2AMVFpWw3kMZ1g. 56.

\(^{67}\)Walker, 113.

\(^{68}\)Walker, 228.
“You a lowdown dog… It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation”. When Mister condescendingly suggests Celie’s low status on the white, patriarchal hierarchy stating that she is “black”, “pore”, “ugly and a woman,” it is the nature-God that literally strengthens her to fight back. She feels that the strength “seems to come to [her] from the trees,” as she curses Mister. Spurred on by the wind, she establishes her defiance of the so-called hierarchy, declaring that:

"I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook .... But I'm here!" Celie ultimately affirms that although she does not meet the standards set by the male-dominated society in which she lives, her existence still matters.

One could argue that Shug, Sofia, Nettie and others serve as Celie’s fairy god-mothers along her voyage. After all, she moves to Memphis with Shug and thereafter follows her passion for fashion, building a lucrative business while making pants for people from all walks of life. With the exception of Eleanor-Jane the mayor’s wife, the women defend and protect each other’s interest which again highlights womanist ideals of love and community. By making pants Celie also literally exudes the nature of God as she creates beautiful designs: “Since us started making pants down home, I ain’t been able to stop…I change the cloth, the print, the waist…” The “pants” motif announces Celie’s becoming anew where she showcases her creativity and thinking prowess. With a better appreciation of the world around her, Celie is also able to live a more fulfilling and purpose-driven life. She can finally live every day feeling youthful and happy, and loving openly whilst being loved in return. Men such as Harpo and Mister also become reformed which makes them more tolerable. Perhaps, this womanist narrative mirrors

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69 Ibid., 273.
60 Ibid., 283.
71 Ibid., 290.
elements of a social utopia as Lambert\textsuperscript{72} proposes, in which African American women--past, present, and future--can envision a more ideal and fair world they can thrive in.

In \textit{The Color Purple}, Alice Walker explores sexuality, racism, and ultimately seeking freedom and recognition of oneself as a woman. The novel presents a unique theological perspective of God as it originally plunges the reader into the innermost thoughts of Celie, the protagonist, who struggles with knowing God. Walker reveals in the preface that her religious development was the motivation for this novel, and she believes that religion and spirituality are a major theme to be considered. It remains for her “a theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual that [she] spent much of [time]... seeking to avoid,” contrary to what some critics believe.\textsuperscript{73} It is no coincidence then that Celie turns to God for a listening ear as she wrestles with abuse, neglect and shame from the men in her life. I therefore challenge critic Diane Scholl who perceives the novel as having a “radically Christian nature.”\textsuperscript{74} Celie only truly achieved liberation from the oppressive patriarchy and the male-God figure when she emerged with a non-Christian (non-rigid) discovery of God. The novel is radically humane and womanist in its essence. In the story, Walker presents an alternative viewpoint about “God” versus “the Christian God image,” that is, what is religious versus what is spiritual and free. Thus, Walker juxtaposes the biblical God image of Christianity with a pantheistic philosophy that Celie realizes in the end—the doctrine which identifies God with everything in the universe. Moreover, she incorporates womanist ideologies into this pantheistic world where women can truly achieve freedom and self-determination.

\textsuperscript{72} Lambert, 45.
\textsuperscript{73} Walker, 14.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 255.
From early puberty into adulthood Celie associates the biblical God with the abusive men in her life. As early as age thirteen, the man Celie believes is her “Pa” rapes her multiple times. He inflicts more emotional trauma when he forcibly takes away her two children and renders her barren as well. The heartache from these gory experiences remains entrenched in Celie's psyche, causing her to mourn even in her adulthood: “Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug's arms. How it hurt…How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he don’t never look at me straight after that.”

This horrible experience develops into an inexorable judgement of men for Celie, especially men as father figures. Consequently, Celie also associates God, the Father, with the murder of her children when her mother asks about her first baby. She responds: “God took it...Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can.”

Thus, Celie's idea of a monotheistic, biblical God becomes strongly linked to fear and violence as he resembles her father, and later her husband, Mister.

Celie's shift from a monotheistic view of God to a more pantheistic outlook reflects her movement from a stir of constant abuse and disregard by men into a space of self-acceptance and connectedness with the universe. She addresses her first letter to God at which point she really has nobody to turn to for solace. By communicating with God through letters, she is able to maintain a certain level of sanity through her pain. However, Celie later confesses that she had always viewed God as “an old, tall, white, gray-bearded man,” indicating her fear of God was

75 Walker, 159.


77 Ibid., 24.

78 Ibid., 22.
associated with her life as a black woman living at the mercy of men.\textsuperscript{79} Since God was the “[father] who art in Heaven” and who did not abide in sin (Matthew 6:9-13)\textsuperscript{80}, she naturally felt uneasy knowing that she was not pure and that she bore evil according to Pa.\textsuperscript{81} In her mind, the Christian God she believed in would probably see her in the same loathsome light. Thus, under these circumstances she could only live in silent acquiescence of her abuse in order to remain alive. With Mister, the cycle continued: “[I] couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, “Honor father and mother no matter what.... sometime Mister git on me pretty hard... But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life [will] soon be over.... Heaven last always.”\textsuperscript{82} But the relationships that emerge from meeting characters like Sofia, a strong and assertive woman, and Shug Avery who somehow becomes Celie’s protector and spiritual guide spring a dramatic chain of transformations in Celie’s life. She eventually gains a better understanding of God and recognizes herself as part of the Creation—part of God and the universe.

The novel reaches a radical turning point when Celie retrieves all the letters from Nettie that Mister has kept hidden for a long time. She learns that her real father was a wealthy farmer who was lynched, and her mother was crazy, after which she vents to God saying: "You must be sleep."\textsuperscript{83} Indeed, this statement marks Celie’s first attempt at resisting the big, old, white, gray-bearded God where she is not afraid to express her disappointment in him.\textsuperscript{84} Resultantly, even

\textsuperscript{79} Walker, 265.


\textsuperscript{81} Walker, 23.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 183.

\textsuperscript{84} Hankinson, 320.
her narrative voice changes from this point onwards as she addresses her letters to Nettie now that they could communicate more easily. So, the letters which were once “cast with a fearful hue” are replaced with letters addressed to a real person—someone who cares deeply for Celie. This evidence highlights the newly emerging theme of love, belongingness and restoration that Celie's bond with Nettie represents. With Nettie, Celie can articulate every detail of her emotions like when she tells her that she no longer writes to God: “the God I been praying to...act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown”. At this point, Celie has initiated a gradual release from fear as she begins to dismantle those ideas of a totalitarian God that muzzled her into a life of pain and agony. This desire for emancipation would become more visible as the story progresses.

Connecting with Shug indeed guides Celie to self-awareness. Their initial sexual tension causes such an internal awakening where Celie even realizes that she was always a virgin prior to their moments together. In these conversations, Shug also explains that God created sexual desire and all the feelings associated. Thus, It made fertility, growth and abundances as part of the universe. As a result, Celie becomes more aroused by the idea of God representing many different things: spontaneity, nature, love and freedom. What’s more, understanding that this new God accepts alternative lifestyles allows Celie to explore her sexuality and intimate friendship with Shug. Evidently, Shug plays a pivotal role in this story of becoming as she provides Celie with the love, security and spiritual enlightenment needed to find herself. Furthermore, the hope

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85 Ibid., 321.
86 Walker, 262.
87 Ibid., 157.
88 Ibid., 268.
and courage Celie draws from other female characters whom she wholeheartedly accepts as family like Sofia, Mary Agnes and Nettie strengthens her resolve in this journey. Celie moves with assurance, knowing that she is not alone in her quest to find liberation and reclaim her dignity.

As discussed extensively in this portion, Celie who represents many black girls at the time diverges from a monotheistic view to a pantheistic consciousness of God. Her final entry reads: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything.” 89 The novel's closure in this way underscores Celie’s rediscovery that God is in everything, conferring holiness unto everything that exists in the universe including herself. This concept defies any sense of a hierarchy and restores a balance that is never felt in the novel prior to Celie’s self-realization. In addition, the inner spiritual resolution that Celie secures parallels her ascendance into self-recognition and liberation as she sees herself as part of a bigger and more powerful force in nature. It revamps her with an extraordinary confidence and faith which sustains her even until she finally reconnects with Nettie and her children. Her life rises to such heights that she professes her joy: “I am so happy. I got love, work, money...I’ve got friends and time. And you are alive and will be home soon with our children.” 90 With this newfound optimism, she can experience God in Its true form and they can co-exist, establishing trust in their now comfortable relationship. This marks Celie’s true becoming—a fresh perspective that gives room for possibility and not despair. Such a deduction from life lessons culminates the experiences of black girls that were hardly illustrated or discussed in mainstream media at the time.

89 Ibid., 391.

90 Ibid., 295.
The characters in these texts demonstrate altruism and steadfastness during adversity and moral attitudes marked by selfless acts of love toward others in their community. But we should remember that these acts are performed even in spite of the emotional wounds they have incurred from racism and sexism. Often illustrated with vivid descriptions, these texts contain pious plots that feature black girls who are orphaned or whose mothers are unavailable due to early death, poverty or extreme working conditions. “Although community members through acts of goodwill nurture these young black protagonists, the children often suffer.”

There are rarely scenes of play, and if so, they are short-lived and this perhaps for a reason. The majority of these narratives focus on grave life events, such as the loss of one or both parents or the eventual death of the black girl herself but also the moment she rises from the dusts of her oppression end or from a long depression of her spirit.

I emphasize again that these profound works by black scholars like Wheatley, Stewart, Hurston and Walker were not just for entertainment purposes. They served, and still serve, as strategically political tools to liberate the black girl from the leash of oppression and invisibility. Each word painted on the canvas illustrating a black girl’s journey, I believe, gave her a platform. It gave her community. It gave her safety. It gave her voice. It gave her an opportunity to imagine a better life for herself, even in the least sense. Black Girlhood Studies thus highlights Black women’s “pencil for reaching solutions that promote communal balance, affirm one’s humanity and attend to the spiritual dimension.” Directed towards women and girls of color and fostering womanist values like inclusivity and intersectionality, this field offers a framework for theorizing embodied girlhood and sense of self. As a corollary, this field also presses toward

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91 Wright, 156.
92 Phillips.
a conjugal and harmonic pedagogy that recommends and fosters different guiding principles for developing authentic black girlhood ideologies.

With the insight into the roots and metamorphosis of this academic field, it becomes more apparent and more pertinent to my argument that as a new field, Black Girlhood Studies should be taken more seriously and thus expanded. It is a dynamic field which implies that its principles are evolving continually with new ways of exploring girlhood especially in this age. From history, it is established that black girlhood literature in its quintessence has always been first, one oriented towards self-love and second, towards placing all disciplines within a cultural-historical context. In the former, there is potential for nothing less than “suspending the symbolic and ontological violence to one's sense of belonging in academia.”

In the second principle, such an understanding can also position scholars of color to actively re-narrate, redefine and reshape their fields to include black studies.

As illustrations, I focus on three academic fields of education, psychology in higher education, and criminal justice. Primary institutions of education ought to address race and gender issues in schools with utmost seriousness because trauma at early stages of development can be very detrimental to a growing child. Psychology departments in tertiary educational institutions would reach a significant milestone when they begin to include concepts relating to black psychology such as trauma, black childhood experiences, violence and mental health issues prevalent within the black populace, especially, black women and girls. This knowledge is worth teaching students as it changes how we inherently perceive reality: some realities apply to all people regardless of race, gender or class but some realities directly and distinctly affect a certain

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demographic based on particular identity markers. These discrepancies, even those that may occur by nature, must be acknowledged. Similarly, courses on criminal justice must truly recognize the influence and impact of race and gender discrimination on black girls and their psyches.
Chapter Three: Next Generations of Black Girlhood Epistemologies

Only the Black woman can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole [human] race enters with me.”

~ Anna Julia Cooper (1893)

Today, this statement made by the singular Anna Julia Cooper still resonates with us as we attempt to reimagine a more progressive society, ideally racism-free. Ultimately, the mission around protecting Black girls is to insist and ensure that Black girls develop and mature in a nurturing environment, not one that condemns their mere existence. Corinne Field’s *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood* appeared as crucial to these change-inducing conversations though focused on the 20th century matters in America. As Field’s text implores readers to follow, we must consider fundamentally flawed societal behaviors that have become mainstream in our society:

“why did maturity differ for white men, Black men and [White women and Black women]?”

“Why did law and public opinion assume that white boys would outgrow their childish dependence to become independent citizens while their sisters and enslaved peers would remain dependent throughout their lives?”

Why do these questions remain in the backlog of thoughts even though they are so persistent and pervasive in our social systems today? The adultification of Black children automatically, without a conscience, misplaces their innocence and need for guidance and nurturing.

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Associated with harsher punishment and higher standards for Black girls, adultification leads to expulsion in school, detention in juvenile justice systems, or the worst, death by manslaughter. According to Jamila Blake, new research confirmed the hypothesis that adultification bias contributes greatly to these disciplinary disparities. Black girls are suspended at least five times as often as white girls, and Black girls are 2.7 times more likely to be referred to the juvenile detention centers than their white peers. This predicament emerges consequential to the negative stereotypes of Black women as angry, aggressive and hypersexualized are projected onto Black girls. As a result, adults including principals, teachers, and the police attempt to subdue Black girls to make them controllable or more “manageable”. Adultification bias can lead educators, mentors and other authorities to treat Black girls in developmentally inappropriate and hostile ways yet pardon their white peers who may commit worse offenses. As we can attest, cases involving Black girls’ maltreatment surface the internet daily.

The past year, 2020, being a pandemic year is indeed a metaphor for many different interpretations--mist being shocking, devastating interpretations. Not only did this dark year underscore the virulent racist nature of the health system in America, it also manifested more reckless, inhumane acts that affected Black lives and Black bodies. Two months before George Floyd was murdered by the police in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black emergency medical technician, a Black woman, was in her home in Louisville, Kentucky, when policemen, undifferentiated from ordinary civilians, burst into her residence. Her partner, thinking these policemen, as they were intruding, fired a shot which initiated a heated exchange of fire which led to the untimely demise of Breonna Taylor. May her soul rest in perfect peace.

Like Breonna Taylor, 89 women, since 2015, have reportedly been killed at homes or residences where they sometimes lived.

Oluwatoyin Ruth “Toyin” Salau, 19, was an American woman activist who suddenly disappeared on Saturday, June 6, 2020, shortly after tweeting about being sexually assaulted. As an active Blacklivesmatter activist she was very vocal and actively sought for justice against sexual abuse. Shockingly, Salau was found dead in Tallahassee, Florida, on Saturday, June 13, 2020 after which her death was confirmed. Even after more than 100 days of constant protests, we still hope for the day justice will be served in honor of these women who represent two of many Black women whose lives have been stolen from them and their families. However, the fact that few police officers are ever charged of their unpardonable manslaughter is telling of how flawed and biased the justice system is. A mapping database on police violence reported that: “Since 2013, law enforcement officers across the country have killed about 1,000 people a year and Black people are about three times more likely to be killed by the police than White people.” Yet, since 2015, only 2 police officers have been convicted with many cases still pending.

Black girl victims are often lost in the sea of all women and Black men who are killed or assaulted on a weekly basis in America. Their issues are typically set aside after some weeks of investigation even the law is meant to speak for all. The gap between theory and praxis begs the question that Field raised: “Why does maturity differ for White men, Black men and [White

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women and Black women]?” For many white people, this is an uncomfortable conversation that typically becomes relegated to a lower priority, a behavior that Dr. Robin DiAngelo conceptualizes as *white fragility* in his best-selling book: *White fragility: Why it's so hard for White People to talk about Racism.* 101 White fragility functions as a means to control and protect white advantage by not wrestling with the discomfort or guilt that accompanies whiteness in relation to other races. So, white fragility does not indicate weakness as many often consider it to be, but rather a power tool to preserve white advantage, and in some cases, patriarchal dominance. By confronting fragility, itself, in regard to any person regardless of race, we are able to change the conversations of what we know: to unlearn old traditions and embrace new perspectives which are pertinent to remedying the toxic racial climate in this country.

As we dismantle the walls built white fragility, I solicit for the inclusion of black girlhood in discussion across the spectrum. Fundamentally, we must care to understand the nature, philosophies and paradigms that shape and support black girlhood as a theoretical field of knowledge in order to engage in productive discourse surrounding this field. Studying the history of Black girlhood builds “a language for talking” 102 about Black girlhood in the first place. The images and tropes used by nineteenth century writers to carve Black girls have had a long-lasting power. Today, the image of Black girls is often tainted in the media, usually in disconcerting ways that seek to attack them. Black Girlhood Studies creates the needed vocabulary to name and call out these vicious acts and look beyond them to consider what Black girls are doing,

100 Field, 256.


thinking and dreaming about, and how they are launching into various social spheres at each stage in their lives.

_The initiation or rites of passage of the young girl is not one of the darlings of American literature. The coming of age for the young boy is certainly much more the classic case. I wonder if it all means that we don’t put a value on our process of womanhood._

~Toni Cade Bambara (1972). 103

Black Girlhood studies recognizes girlhood, youth and adolescence as important development stages of development for Black girls. Their puberty stage engages many complicated steps of identity formation within which race, and gender are inextricably woven. The scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualized “intersectionality”104 as the experience of subordination across multiple, coinciding categories such that it is greater than the sum of racism and sexism [alone].”105 This phenomenon postulates that a Black woman or girl faces a compendium of oppression from racial and gender discrimination in such a way that produces an entirely different experience that a Black man or White woman could never relate to. Furthermore, understanding intersectionality and how it affects marginalized groups not only shapes our awareness of an individual’s experience but also the unique fusion of complex systems of power, oppression and caste in society. In the end, to cultivate and achieve a


heightened awareness of society to strive for placing high value on black girls in relation to all children, it is a responsibility that must be shared by everybody as it takes a village to raise a child.

We must turn our attention to the school systems which certainly function as a developmental ecosystem for children and adolescents. Generally, girls and women outperform boys and men academically in various fronts. Many scholars in education have described this as the *female advantage* at various levels of education.\(^{106,107}\) What remains unmentioned is that most studies typically control for race rather than examining the intersection of student race and gender.\(^{108}\) Therefore, while findings about “the female advantage” in education have been valuable, they often neglect to consider the racial disparities within the demographic of girls.\(^{109}\) Controlling for race is particularly limiting as research suggests that teachers' perceptions of Black girls' social behaviors differ dramatically from White girls.\(^{110,111}\) Thus, it is evident that the experiences of Black girls in school challenge the notion that there is a universal female advantage in education.

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\(^{109}\) Zimmermann, 154.


Be it schools, recreation camps, pageants and even within the household, Black girls are reminded of their “other” status among their contemporaries. An expansive psychological study: “I Can Only Me” engages a group of African American, Caribbean-American and West-African high school girls from Brooklyn, New York in critical discourse about identity. Princess, seventeen years old, was mislabeled by the school administrator as “rough around the edges,” Dill recalled. Meanwhile, Princess knew herself as “nice, funny and talented.”

Black girls are very often forced into a paradoxical dichotomy of invisibility or hypervisibility when it favors or justifies people’s prejudice. Resultantly, they are unable to share their identity with the world for fear of being wrongly judged. What’s more, Princess represents a myriad of young women, including myself, who navigate their world by having to carve out various strategies to negotiate and define their relationships, their identities which includes their phenotype, and their behaviors in order to appear respectable.

...I am smarter than my mom gives me credit for.

~Jay, Caribbean-American young woman.

Black girls recognize the politics of decorum--rules governing speech, education, sexuality and appearance. More profoundly, they know that the intensity with which these rules are enforced varies by race and gender. This is why Princess would remark that her mother allowed her brothers to have tattoos while she was forbidden to do the same. Rihanna, a


113 Dill, 70.

114 Ibid., 67.

115 Dill, 68.
college freshman, takes up the bread-winner role in her family to relieve her sick mother of some financial burden and provides for her younger siblings. She remarks: “She’ll [my mom] get better...she just needs to learn how to take care of herself [for a change].”\textsuperscript{116} So, in order to sustain the family, Rihanna works on the side and pays her own bills. Such negotiated roles are magnified in Black immigrant families who emigrate their countries to seek greener pastures: they often negotiate \textit{gendered diasporas}.\textsuperscript{117}

In addition, Black girls of Caribbean and African descent also navigate their Afro-Caribbean and African culture by bridging this identity with their American background. Dr. Christine Pinnock frames it as embracing their \textit{diasporic Blackness}\textsuperscript{118} which highlights the uniqueness of their Black identity, and for that matter, their struggle in this vein. Jay, for instance, is an American girl of Grenadian and Jamaican heritage. She shares thoughts about how Caribbean-American daughters confront a lack of trust from their mothers. She expresses: “And when she found out I was having sex, she was like...I don’t want you having children young. She gave me that little speech [but] I am smarter than my mom gives me credit for.”\textsuperscript{119} Like Jay, many of the participants agreed that their family experiences contribute to their identities, but they are also a main source of constraint in their lives.

The mother-daughter relationship especially emerges as a point of consideration in the Black Girlhood Studies pedagogy. With mothers and their daughters, hair is one mutually held

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 69.


\textsuperscript{119} Dill, 69.
asset that bonds them. The symbolism of hair and hairstyles characterizes a major part of a Black girl’s identity which is often taken for granted. Hair not only signifies femininity, but it also forms an integral part of developing self-esteem as a girl. Fundamentally, hair is something real and precious that a girl feels proud to own all by herself. Accordingly, the art of hair combing, and styling is a daily ritual that Black mothers practice with their children. Furthermore, it is a symbol of neglect in the African American community when a child is seen in public without well-kept hair.\textsuperscript{120} This everyday tradition would occur irrespective of the stress a mother may be experiencing which suggests its intrinsic high value. Thus, when a Black girl is chastised for styling her in a certain way, her self-esteem, her identity, her innocence and self-recognition are threatened immediately. Furthermore, it undermines a core element that holds the relationship and intimate bond she has with her mother, especially. Faith, an eleven-year-old girl was seen crying after being suspended from school because her braided hair extensions did not conform to the school regulations. As a society, Black hair henceforth needs to be taken more seriously in the same way the U.S. economy benefits from the thriving 2.5-billion-dollar Black hair care industry.

For those who encounter oppression through the body, the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also...resistance.\textsuperscript{121}

~ Stephanie H. Camp (2005)

The body of a Black girl is symbolic of her identity, her sense of being. When the body is violated or threatened, parts of her identity formation are disrupted, and she can feel a breach in

\textsuperscript{120} Denise Davis-Maye, Annice Dale Yarber, and Tonya E. Perry, eds. \textit{What the Village Gave Me: Conceptualizations of Womanhood}. (University Press of America, 2013).

\textsuperscript{121} Camp.
her sense of security. Therefore, as Black girl’s hair is glorious so is her body precious. I hereby unequivocally state that physical and/or sexual abuse must be dealt with using the needed austerity measures: especially a child, this criminal act must not go unscrutinized. The #MeToo movement has functioned to break the silencing stigma surrounding sexual abuse especially in black communities and encourages women—young and old—to begin their healing by acknowledging their worth. In the past decade, the triumphs of this movement have served to dismantle the idea that black women can be subjugated without the expectation of legal action; many women still suffer injustices from the law. Undoubtedly, the #MeToo movement has benefitted women of other racial backgrounds including white women. In its efforts to insist on accountability and justice, it has brought down over 200 men, including those of high political standing and wealth guilty of sexual harassment.122 Burke powerfully vocalizes that: “There is inherent strength in agency. #MeToo, in [many] ways, is about agency. It’s not about giving up your agency”.123 The determination of the #MeToo movement in the face of dismissal and criticism has struck recognition onto Black women’s voices whilst providing, again, a language that has catapulted a global reckoning of rape and sexual assault of any kind.

Black Girlhood Studies also creates an organization and a network of consciousness that drives socio-political change. The socio-political change is spearheaded, produced and celebrated by Black girls and for Black girls. The collective, Saving our Lives, Hearing Our Truths


(SOLHOT), pioneered by Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies Ruth Nicole Brown, speaks to this mission. SOLHOT is a group of girls of color who mainly identify as Black and share a common ideology that they each carry a unique and radical perspective that is powerful enough to cause revolution as long as their determination fuels them. In SOLHOT, art is a staple practice: they create through song, rap, poetry, acting, writing. *Hear Our Truth*, which chronicles the sojourn of this SOLHOT, “documents the creative potential of Black girls and women working together to advance original theories, practices, and performances of Black girlhood that affirm complexity, interrogate power, and produce humanizing representations of Black girls’ lives.”124 For a black girl the personal is truly political, especially when she/they are constantly made to feel less of themselves by external, false perceptions, expectations and standards. Since they constantly have to resist the negative stereotypes that seek to minimize their worth or in turn aggrandize their mistakes, they are nurtured to claim their unique narratives even if some narratives may include certain stereotypes.

\[\text{124 Brown, 1.}\]
The visual arts in the West form an oppressive repository of stereotypical representations of black female subjects that the subjects themselves were forced to consume daily as they saw themselves imaged and imagined through white eyes and white social perceptions, in public and private spaces through elite and populist art practices alike. Vision itself then must be questioned and questionable, and not taken up as a necessarily objective sensory logic of the body, but rather a mechanism for social experience and perception that it is biased by the viewer’s identity, location and subjectivity.

Charmaine Nelson (2010)\textsuperscript{125}

When I explored SOLHOT more deeply, I was surprised to learn that it was a space that provided Black girls a way to become comfortable with the uncomfortable. The chapter, entitled *Endangered Black Girls*, describes the girls’ process of creating through performance arts. “It takes creative means of expression to fully capture the complexities of Black girlhood and that attending to the complexities of Black girlhood is necessary for affirming Black girls’ daily lives.”\textsuperscript{126} The girls were tasked with the intricate undertaking of presenting one another’s stories based on the ethnographic experiences of five Black girls. Dr. Brown recalled how the creativity moved by the transfer of energy through their bodies, their presence and their imaginative thinking.\textsuperscript{127} In this play, they assumed new roles in life-- as, ”people who were marked youthful, Black, feminine, queer…not disposable or marginalized…alive [and] valued as prodigies of

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[Black girlhood] knowledge.” Thus, although they followed the scripted sequence of events, each girl had sole rights and autonomy to be original and to control her interpretation and expression of her assigned character. The kind of reinforced learning and positive education involved in this pedagogy drives the girls to an extraordinary authenticity: a state of mindfulness where they are able to connect their bodily sensations, thoughts, triggers and traumas into revelation.

In regard to rape culture, every woman walks with a heightened awareness, and more likely fear, of her surrounding and they people they encounter. However, the tensional relationship between Black women and White women ultimately exists as a result of a seeming absence of solidarity between the two feminist coalitions. While Black women, through the *Mute R. Kelly Movement* and *Bill Cosby Watch* for instance, mobilized and demonstrated in support of the sexual assault survivors and accountability by the justice system from the accused, White women remained silent about these cases even though dozens of White women testified about their exploitative experiences with Cosby. Little to no outrage was displayed by feminist scholars when Oklahoma police officer Daniel Holtzclaw was indicted for assaulting more than eight black women. Black feminist scholars like Brittney Cooper criticize white feminist ideals because of their exclusionary practices. Attitudes which disregard the reputation and value of Black women, if not addressed, will continue to stifle the feminist movement. When white women “fail to recognize [others] as faces of themselves,” they participate not only in other’s

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128 Brown, 36.


oppression but also in their own oppression. There is therefore a need to resolve the discordance in feminist ideologies—to build solidarity and to create a real, unified feminist front which will be instrumental in dismantling white supremacist patriarchy.

_They had learned to with standard endure rather than to conquer and destroy. Their precarious position had taught them to weigh and to deliberate, and the sorrows of their enslavement had filled them with mercy instead of vengeance. Theirs was more often a wisdom of the spirit than books, and their natural instinct was to share rather than withhold._

~Murray (1978); Stevens (2002)

For Black girls, there are many reasons to be angry at this world which unleashes unfair judgement on them. The racist American society robs them of their agency, recognition, rights, and respect. However, their lives are deeply linked to their ancestral heritage as Black women’s history chronicles a cultural legacy of both resistive protest, nurturing and caretaking. From the proverbial “Ain’t I A Woman” by Sojourner Truth to Rosa Parks’ symbolic gesture on the Montgomery bus, Black women have continued to persevere and demand justice, and assert their human right. As Black women show resilience, so do Black girls muster courage daily against the manifestations of discrimination against them. Black female adolescents demonstrate boldness, courage, fortitude and assertiveness in confronting circumstances in regular social life. For example, as friends Black girls often practice certain womanist principles of loyalty, community and sisterhood. Fleeky shares, “Because it was, like, I don’t know, I would stick up

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for my friends. Like, my loyalty is so—is so real.”¹³² Indeed, Black girls would intensely protect their loyalty links.

Generally, young Black people believe that they are obligated to defend and protect their friends in conflict.¹³³ They would warn their friends of imminent danger or deter them from entering peer fights as is typical of the high school environment. Sharing personal details such as passwords to social media accounts is also another way in which Black girls demonstrate their loyalty to each other. This way, they can easily chat with other peers on behalf of their friends who may have crushes but are too shy to approach them on their own. It is a real sisterhood network of trust that these girls build around their friendships which supports their development as adolescents.

Black girls also rely on emotional and communal support as a coping strategy. They are likely to open up to friends, siblings and school mentors about their growing curiosity. Tayla, a twenty-one-year-old college sophomore, shares: “And I feel like in KAVI [Kings Against Violence Initiative], I did start that transformation. Like, it really did [through] talking with [KAVI facilitator].¹³⁴ I feel like she saw the bigger picture for me. Even though I would be sitting there talking about weed…she never judged me because she could see that I could grow out of it.” Thus, as Black girls work out their own survival mechanisms, they also rely on more seasoned and upright people they can trust to navigate their lives. They are very self-reflective of their relationships—both good and toxic ones—and also their past experiences, familial

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¹³² Dill, 70.


¹³⁴ Dill, 72.
interactions and their future goals and aspirations. Through these contemplations, they are able to create and redefine their own philosophies for living their lives.

“Doing me” is ultimately the primary self-care strategy that every Black girl holds onto because she/they understand the importance of recognizing themselves and their unique identities. Alexandra, a seventeen-year-old high school senior proclaimed:

I can only smile.
I can only love.
I can only give back.
I can only care.
I can only cry.
I can only hurt.
I can only take enough.
I can never give up. I can only do me!135

Such engagement in inward healing creates a sense of hopefulness and self-acceptance that provides them with necessary emotional support to succeed. It is not just a proclamation, but a lifestyle and mindset that Black girls--little girls, teenagers and young adults--are inculcating into their lives as part of their growth and coming of age. It involves discerning that their reality will involve moments and periods of laughter and tears, periods of receiving love whilst giving back love, times of stepping back to reflect and times to assert their agency. Living by this method, they are able to form healthier and trusting relationships among themselves and people from dissimilar backgrounds where they even feel more confident to express their views or educate their peers who may not know much about their experiences.

135 Dill, 73.
The exploration of Black Girlhood Studies from a perspective of a deep contemporary dive has really transformed my understanding of Black girlhood. The epistemological thoughts these studies highlight demonstrate how Black girls navigate and articulate their own complex identities which involve race, gender, family and female friendships. On one hand, the reflections of these girls, in many ways, rhyme similarly to strategies and methods adopted by their seasoned and model Black women from nineteenth and twentieth century America like those honored in previous chapters. On the other hand, Black girls in the twenty-first century offer new and fresh interpretations to their experiences and they navigate their present as they envision their futures. The girl power that Black women strove to promote in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has accelerated with hashtags, memes, videos, Instagram reels and tweets that commemorate Black women’s style, grace, and brilliance.

Black Girl Magic as visual self-affirmation in a setting of a white-dominated and white supremacy-infused society invokes praises of beauty, and the resilience of every black woman and Black girl whether in her formative years as a baby or her mature state as an adult. Black girls have to negotiate this sphere every day, and this relentless drill takes immense courage and tenacity to overcome. Furthermore, the movement seeks to promote an idea of continuity—not liminality as was once used in describing black women—as a way to liberate Black girls. The Dill study concludes that: “[the] reliance on their own personal power amidst trials and triumph, while being in community with their family members and building sisterhood with other Black girls, is their activation of #BlackGirlMagic." The young women practice #BlackGirlMagic

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137 Dill, 74.
using four key strategies that I have previously discussed. First, they work to disrupt respectability politics in their family and among peers. Secondly, Caribbean-American and West African girls also “shapeshift”\textsuperscript{138} through their diasporic Blackness\textsuperscript{139} by creating transnational identities. Thirdly, Black girls maintain true-hearted commitment to their family, with friends where they establish a social code of sisterhood. Lastly, they ultimately draw upon their own internal resources and experiences as they redefine their identities, and imagine future opportunities, and experiences. In these ways, Black girls are contributing actively to the Black feminist movement to uplift each other even in the midst of their struggles.


\textsuperscript{139} Pinnock.
Conclusion

The study of Black girlhood, indeed, offers an expansive framework for understanding the diverse experiences of Black girls through the incorporation of intersectionality, womanism, inclusive pedagogy, and epistemological thought. Harmonizing these concepts holds great theoretical and practical value as we attempt to rationalize the intricacies of Black girlhood and revolutionize its centrality to many social problems plaguing America today. I, therefore, underscore that this study has explored the conceptual foundations of Black Girlhood Studies, including the unique historical annals produced by Black women, such as Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and the literature published by scholars like Alice Walker, Layli Maparyan, Stephanie Camp, Kimberlé Crenshaw, LeConté Dill, and Rebecca Epstein, in order to truly understand and advance the dynamic and interconnected histories and realities of Black girls and Black women in the U.S. Examining these texts have shed light on the often overshadowed period of childhood by enslaved Black women that was forcefully violated during the period chattel slavery and its harrowing aftermath. Upon captivity, African girls and women had their innocence, bodies, and autonomy taken from them under the exploitative and capitalist motives of slave-owners. As young girls, they would have to quickly grow up where the early “adultification” of Black girls is still prevalent in the U.S.

My study, therefore, examined Black girlhood as a developmental process in shaping and informing the lives of Black women, and their various identities. The importance of adequate and accurate representation of Black girlhood and the elusive racist stigma around blackness, in general, is the main topic of discussion in this thesis. Broadly, every child deserves to live out their childhood in its fullness without precarious transitions that deprive them of this stage of development. Unfortunately, the experiences of Black children, particularly Black girls, are most
often short lived, interrupted or misrepresented. Their dual identity as Black and girls situates in them within a different category from other social spheres. This categorization, in turn, brings forth a completely distinct reality that they consistently have to wrestle with in the West. We often take for granted the factors that play a significant role in shaping the journey of Black girls on becoming adults. Daily, they are challenged in society based on their skin color, gender, heritage, hair texture, familial and friendly relationships, and the negative stereotypes of premature “adultification”, defiance, and delinquency.

Literature surrounding Black girlhood is evolving. Black Girlhood Studies is transforming, by merging its identity as a social science with its significance in the humanities. This is because studying the social sciences often relies on the study of humanity within the reality/realities of a people in order to gain a full perspective, although it is hardly expressed this way in the world of academia, particularly as it relates/pertains to the study of Black girls. In the last two decades, more research as evidenced in my thesis has positioned black girls, not only as participants, but also principal producers of knowledge in the studies concerning their cultures and experiences. The Dill study, for instance, featured Black girls of adolescent age, where they were equally articulate in their feedback, as having demonstrated a high self-esteem and self-acceptance that women in the twentieth century, and before, struggled to find because of their invisibility and marginalization in their segregated communities. One could say the apple did not fall too far from the tree, as their poise, tenacity, and grace reflect their ancestral roots, as well as the culture they were nurtured in. Accordingly, they strive to demonstrate strength in all terrains, after having understood the socio-political dilemmas in which they are involuntarily placed.

Contemporary studies of black girlhood affirm that African American girls continually face disbarment from ideas of childhood and girlhood. However, Black girls actively resist. From
the late twentieth century to today, studies of black girlhood highlight their particularly marginalized status in the United States. Due to their apparent third-class status on the Western power structure, they must learn how to cope, while burdened with white standards of beauty, intelligence, success, and virtue, and fighting internal battles against the negative and dehumanizing stereotypes that seek to deprive them of their originality and autonomy. They continue to break through these glass ceilings that are meant to undermine them by using impressive social tactics. These survival strategies include forming long-lasting loyalty links with peers, various forms of self-expression through performance arts, as in the groundbreaking SOLHOT. They also involve collective and shapeshifting tactics between their multiple identity markers, which are not limited to their race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. As we have seen in previous chapters, these characteristics closely resemble and celebrate womanist ideals of love, sisterhood, support, and freedom that Black women would have continued to promote over generations, while remaining steadfast in their struggle.

As a fast-growing field, Black Girlhood studies has broken ground in many ways by providing a theoretical and literary framework for exploring Black girlhood and the issues pertaining to representation and development. Nonetheless, there are more narratives that are yet to be considered, closely, as well as social conditions that remain elusive in the discourse. As the field steers toward a more individualized but holistic approach to deducing solutions for resolving key problems and critical questions, it is important to seriously contemplate the possible setbacks that categorizations even within the field itself generate. If you recall, some participants in this work commented on the issue of their being and sexuality that influenced their childhood experience. From the observation, it was a matter of dissonance between how they view themselves versus how society views and categorizes them. When I asked Tyler about
what girlhood meant to her, she eloquently expressed: “Girlhood to me meant struggling to feel wanted by people...girlhood for me was very traumatizing but it helped me realize very early on that people's opinions of me will never dictate my worth… I wasn't able to escape this until I got to experience boyhood...With my boy cousins, it didn't matter what my hair looked like, how brown I was, or how “big” I was. I was just a person.”

Even though Black Girlhood Studies is a relatively new and emerging field in academia, the childhood experiences documented by Black girls and women, as far back as the nineteenth century, help us to unearth and contextualize the unique experiences of Black girls. These narratives are recorded and passed on through song, poetry, stories, and folktales – a tradition rooted in African cosmological way of life. African ancestors primarily used the oral tradition to transmit information across generations. Quite evolutionary, Phillis Wheatley’s girlhood experience, in the eighteenth century, has initiated the revolutionary trajectory of a girlhood trope in African American literature that extends over one hundred years, a pattern we find familiar in various Black girl narratives in the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Bambara. The experiences of these Black girls were beginning to be seen and heard. The presence of Black girlhood Studies now affords us the opportunity to trace and examine the lives of black girlhood on our terms.
It is my trust that my study inspires other studies in the field in reclaiming the innocent and dynamic lives of Black girls, who become women or, however, they identify in adulthood.

“in my world little, black girls are born. born to be seen and heard to defy docility and look up and see themselves in the face of the Moon in the mystery, magic and mysticism of night. to climb trees and break glass ceilings. to open doors and walk in light and not shadows because little black girls are light little black girls are light black girls are light girls are light
are light light”

~ Liseli A. Fitzpatrick (2020)\textsuperscript{140}

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