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When Black Girls Fly: An Exploration Of Black Girls' Multimedia Fantasy Narratives As Sites Of Legacy, Lineage And Creative Freedom

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When Black Girls Fly: An Exploration of Black Girls' Multimedia Fantasy
Narratives as Sites of Legacy, Lineage and Creative Freedom

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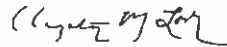
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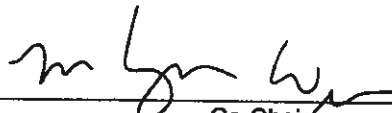
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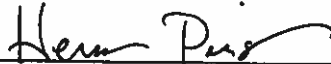
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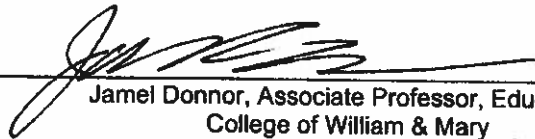
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ABSTRACT

The fantasy genre, which can apply to narratives in literature and in other media, provides unique opportunities to engage with liberation, in particular creative freedom and the ability to engineer new futures. Black girls, as protagonists and creators of fantasy narratives, who have formerly been all but absent in the field with the exception of a few prominent examples, have suddenly begun to saturate the field. This explosion of activity prompted this investigation on why and how Black girls are flocking to fantasy, futuristic and digital narratives. In this dissertation, I use a series of case studies from a variety of media that were created by Black women and which center Black girls as protagonists to explore these questions and more.

This project is a quintessential American Studies project in that it depends on a melange of methods and theories to adequately investigate these problems. It takes an autoethnographic approach, as I center my own experiences as a Black girl fan of these fantasy narratives and how it shaped my understanding of self, as well as tools from literary scholarship, such as close readings paired with historical context. In addition, it draws strength from Black feminist theory, Black girls' literacy scholarship, Afrofuturism, and my own conceptualization of the intersections of fantasy and technology: technomagic girlhood. Chapter 1 explores the landscape of trade publishing's young adult fantasy narratives for Black girls in the last five years. It charts a lineage of Black women in speculative fiction up to the recent explosion, with close readings of two books which make a case for self-definition and Black girls' agency using legends, myths and retellings. Chapter 2 argues for a term which specifically characterizes Black girls' creative self-expression and self-definition in a contemporary moment defined by digital media: *technomagic girlhood*. This chapter uses Eve Ewing's *Riri Williams: Ironheart* comic books as a case study for how modern Black girls use both technology and fantasy to chart their own conceptions of their girlhoods. Chapter 3 argues for a poetics of technomagic girlhood that we see often in our media, built around three key themes: glitches (the digital), ghosts (memory and generational ties) and gulfs (water). The visual albums *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monáe and *Lemonade* by Beyoncé provide this chapter's case study. Chapter 4 underscores how the digital provides fertile ground for experimentation, self-definition and relational group identity by locating Micah Ariel Watson's *Black Enough* as a genre-defying piece of art which relies on multiple media forms. I argue that Micah Ariel Watson's *Black Enough* webseries uses a combination of digital and analogue technologies and alchemies to produce a rich, multifaceted narrative about Black girls' selfhood that is reflected on the screen and behind the scenes. The fifth chapter on pedagogy argues that technomagic enables educators to acknowledge the contemporary digital landscape in which Black girls find themselves and encourage the alchemic creation they produce.

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Introduction

Thesis and Overview

Black girls are self-making and engaging in creative expression against the backdrop of an increasingly digital contemporary moment. The work of Black girlhood scholars such as Ruth Nicole Brown, Aria S. Halliday and Kyra D. Gaunt makes it clear that Black girls have unique modes of individual and communally crafted self-expressions, using hip-hop and childhood games, often accompanied by clapping and songs, as vehicles to explore this (*Black Girlhood Celebration & Hear Our Truths*; Halliday; Gaunt). Communications scholar Catherine Knight Steele argues that the defining characteristics of our contemporary moment inform how we understand concepts like feminism and Black women’s intellectual thought, showing the evolutionary line from hip-hop feminism to what she calls Digital Black Feminism (Steele 1). Historian and Black girlhood scholar, Ashleigh Greene Wade, has shown how Black girls specifically use digital spaces to self-make and form community in her scholarship (“When Social Media”). Together, these scholars help us understand how Black girls develop expressions, how the digital defines them, and how Black girls use them to form relationships with self and others. This dissertation pushes forward from this juncture to investigate how Black women and girls use fantasy new media narratives to develop notions of self, kinship relations, and legacy bonds in a world that is increasingly digital.

I argue that Black girls use the creative potential of fantasy for imagination freedoms and futures, and the tools of digital media to craft a sort of *technomagic*. The term *technomagic* that I use throughout the dissertation is inspired by digital humanist scholar Moya Z. Bailey's *digital alchemy*, which she uses to describe the way Black women turn every day digital production into valuable social justice media magic (“#transformingDH Writing and Research”). I use the term to center Black girls in order to characterize the intersections of magic and technology in our girlhoods with a slant towards self-expression and joy, rather than oriented towards the often instructive and corrective work done in relationship to digital alchemy.¹ It is time-specific and responsive to the world in which we live. It is an acknowledgement of using digital tools to access an often digital-born Black Girl Magic.

The phrase Black Girl Magic, which was popularized as a hashtag originally phrased as “Black girls are magic” but shortened to #BlackGirlMagic, was coined by CaShawn Thompson in June 2013 (Jones 89). Communications scholar Tara L. Conley writes that Black feminist hashtags, though she does not include #BlackGirlMagic in her list, are “tools of strategy for storytelling, organizing, and resisting; that is, [...] sites of becoming” (30). In *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists Are Changing the World From the Tweets to the Streets*, feminist writer and Internet dynamo, Feminista Jones, does the restorative work necessary to center

¹ In her 2021 book, *Transforming Misogynoir: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, Moya Bailey defines two types of digital alchemy: generative and defensive. I would argue much of the work around defensive digital alchemy until this point could be categorized as defensive—the ways we fight misogynoir in our creative work. However, as Bailey takes care to promote *generative* digital alchemy, she crafts spaces that is simply for us by us. Therefore, it would be an oversight to not acknowledge the joy work Bailey prioritizes her new work on digital alchemy.

Thompson in the creation of the hashtag by providing an interview with her.

Thompson discusses coming to the phrase in current times despite having felt the essence of the phrase in her core since childhood and says, “something needed to be said about the fantastic nature of Black women, I just said it out loud one day: ‘Black girls are magic’” (Jones 86). I am less interested in a history of the hashtag here, than I am about what it has come to mean given its essence comes from lived and shared experiences. I do, though, want to recognize the work that the hashtag does and has done, while also noting that its meaning, the idea that Black girls are magic, stretches back well before there was such a thing as Twitter, or even the Internet. In fact, Ntozake Shange’s 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* begins with a poignant claim: “Where there is a woman there is magic” (3). A generation before that, Zora Neale Hurston chased zombies and Voodoo in Haiti and Jamaica (1938). And centuries before any of that, there was Tituba, Black witch of Salem (Condé 1992).² Ultimately, the phrase and hashtag provide me with popular language for the transfiguration and conjuring Black girls are doing to express themselves in this digital moment.

As a child who was equal parts defined by fantasy media as I was by my access to the Internet, it seemed to me that there was a very strong relationship between magic and technology as it pertained to Black girls’ creative expression. The digital made space for geek girls, creative girls, fan girls and everyone in between: my

² Tituba as a historical figure and as the protagonist of Maryse Condé’s novel *Moi, Tituba* have both been central to inquiries by scholars working across the African diaspora: French and Africana Studies scholar Kaiama Glover, African American literature scholar Veta Smith Tucker, and American and Postcolonial literary scholar Zubeda Jalalzai to name a few.

understanding of myself as a former fan of epic fantasies such as *Harry Potter* would not be complete without acknowledging the time I spent on fansites such as MuggleNet, reading fan fiction, and watching other spin-off fan-created media like *Harry Potter Puppet Pals* (2003-) or even *Hermione Granger and the Quarter Life Crisis* on YouTube (2017-), which centered a Black Hermione.³ I created, engaged, and forged community in digital spaces surrounding my love of fantasy, which in turn defined my girlhood. As a scholar, I came to understand that these creative communities, constructed and fostered by Black girls and women, are part of a larger intellectual legacy that has only shifted and evolved with the advent and greater use of digital media. This dissertation honors the legacies that make this unique contemporary moment possible, while showcasing what could become possible from here. Like my childhood interests, this project is equal parts creative and scholarly, as one piece is inextricable from the other.

Main Questions

This project asks: how does fantasy, for and by, Black girls, help us get free and articulate our visions for futures? American author Toni Morrison argues that we are, “Moving in the direction of freedom, and the function of freedom is to free somebody else,” and I argue that *fantasy* for Black girls is, without a doubt, moving us in the

³ <https://www.mugglenet.com/>; Neil Cicierega, Emmy Cicierega, Alora Lanzillotta (2003-) <https://www.youtube.com/user/potterpuppetpals>; Eliyannah Amirah Yisrael (2017-) https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrOqc0pD_1-bGp8HKPmMEkA; see also Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*.

direction of freedom, but the question is: *how* (*The Source of Self-Regard* 111)? How does the creation of Black girls' imaginative and fantastic narratives propel us toward freedom? My argument is that the fantastic is a useful tool in particular for Black girls to use in their pursuit and cultivation of freedom practices. This argument builds on tenets fundamental to Black feminist thought. It relies on storytelling as epistemology, which is predicated on community and coalition building to construct and disseminate information, and the wealth of generational knowledge, passed down like magic through our veins. The main intervention is not that these traits exist, but rather how we understand the affects and legacies of Black Girl Magic, and how our legacy has transformed in response to technological advances. How does fantasy, and the characteristics of the fantastic help us disrupt the notions that prevail in white fantasy narratives: the narratives that re-inscribe notions of racism and sexism among others, while simultaneously attempting to design a future that is not inclusive? In short, how does fantasy for Black girls help us disrupt the idea that there are not free Black girls in the future? This section will forefront a few of the questions at the core of this project while providing context for why they are important to consider.

Why Black Girls?

The priority of this dissertation is Black girls, with some qualifications. I chose to center Black girls out of personal interest—I was once a Black girl and still identify with that state of being, as evidence by the title of my long-standing blog about graduate school, *Black Girl Does Grad School*. My scholarly interest in Black

girlhood, fantasy and digital studies stems from my understanding of self as a child through the fantasy narratives I was exposed to, and my ability to self-make on the Internet. In an effort to uncover more about these experiences, it became plain that Black girls were underrepresented in American Studies.

The term “girl,” much like “boy,” when referring to Black youth, is a fraught signifier. It holds connotations of inferiority and servitude, which harkens back to slavery. In her book, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, literary scholar Nazera Sadiq Wright explains how Black girlhood was often defined by economic value to enslavers. Wright’s introduction goes on to explain how Black girls in literature of the nineteenth century defined themselves despite the physical, emotional, mental, and psychological limitations and confinements of slavery. She writes, “For many black women, the length of their girlhoods is expansive, limitless, infinite and capacious” (15). This aligns with the work of Black girlhood scholar, Aria Halliday, who argues in the introduction to her edited volume *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* that there may not be a definite age range for who qualifies as a Black girl due to historical imaginings and cultural rhetoric around girlhood (8). Black girlhood, and who qualifies, is fluid, as evidence by Wright, Halliday and also the imagining of Black girls by musicologist, Kyra D. Gaunt. This is, in fact, the conception of Black girlhood I am most concerned with. I am interested in contemporary Black women writers who find the furthest bounds and edges of the infiniteness of Black girlhood and push beyond, finding their own—*our* own— magic as they do so. However, in order to do so, it is important to know and understand the legacies from which these narratives derive. So, despite writing on narratives from the past ten years in this

dissertation, I will ground the work in the lineage of Black women writers who have done similar investigations.

Why Black Girl Magic?

In many ways, my personal interest in #BlackGirlMagic is buried right in the hashtag. It describes my essence: the hashtag (#) represents the digital part of me, the “Black” and “Girl” are self-explanatory, and the “magic” reminds me of all the impossible narratives I filled my head with as a child that became possible once I dreamed them. Despite this project being very invested in the digital, an investigation of the hashtag itself and its uses is an entirely different and extensive project. As Feminista Jones notes in her conversation with CaShawn Thompson, “When it is talking about Black Girl Magic as a thing, as a noun, it almost becomes a commodity, and I think there is a definitely a difference between that” (93). Jones begins to articulate a phenomenon that grates at the core of why I have chosen not to explicitly explore the hashtag. In many ways, rather than viewing Black Girl Magic as an essence, or a way of being, living and navigating through the world which encourages belief in the fantastic, it has become a label to adhere to achievements and awards. My interest therefore is not simply about this desire to strive and achieve, but what it means to be, feel, and embrace magic in a world and life that would rather us be small.

My understanding of Black Girl Magic, and the way that it operates in this dissertation is a vehicle for exploring possibilities. It is a serious inquiry because it verily asserts our right to live and take up space. Jones writes, “[#BlackGirlMagic]

was not a trifle notion of whimsy but rather a truism as commonly understood as fire being hot and humans needing oxygen to breathe” (85). My common understanding of Black Girl Magic also necessarily includes technology, because it is a part of my everyday lived experience, which is why the hashtag is important. This dissertation then takes the idea that magic and technology are inherently important to Black girlhood and uses the intersection as a doorway into seeing not only what is or what was, but what could be.

Why Fantasy?

The novels, comics, webseries and visual albums I explore in this project are the sum total of all of those who have let the magic seep into their work. The creators of the projects here are predated by writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and N.K. Jemisin (the careers of many of these creators overlap in recent years). These writers’ forerunners include Octavia E. Butler and Toni Morrison. And perhaps one may not consider Alice Walker's writerly output to engage with magic; however, it is not by chance that it is Walker who writes a Black girl that finds the magic in the technology of writing in *The Color Purple* and who resurrects the work of Zora Neale Hurston (Walker; Grosvenor). The lineage is not linear. It is full of overlapping themes, tightknit kinships, and looser ties, creating more of a knotted constellation of connections that defy temporality. The landscape of Black women's literary history, as evidenced by the work of groundbreaking literary scholars such as Deborah McDowell and Barbara Christian, is woven and quilted (to think of other means of Black

women's epistemology explored by Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins). This particular investigation, with the acknowledgment that one could, and should, easily go back even further, pulls at Zora Neale Hurston's strand in the quilt as a starting point for investigating the intersection of magic and Black womanhood.

Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist, novelist, and folklorist. Her genre defying and bending work is in part what enables us to have a lively conversation about the way magic is used in coming-of-age narratives for Black girls in the twenty-first century. Her relationships with other artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance period, including poet Langston Hughes, is the stuff of legend (Levering Lewis). Hurston was, as an ethnographer, a participant observer in many communities: from her comrades in Harlem, to her family and friends in Eatonville, to the many communities she became a part of in places like Haiti and Louisiana (*Tell My Horse*). Over the course of her life and career, Hurston developed a penchant for storytelling that always had a touch of magic to it.

For instance, in her story, "High John de Conqueror," Hurston takes the Black mythic figure and spins a tale based on the various stories she has heard about him. High John evades public knowledge-- or rather the knowledge of white folks-- because, as Hurston tells us, he is a whisper (*The Complete Stories* 139). High John came to America from Africa walking on the waves of sound (*The Complete Stories* 140). He is capable of visiting both Heaven and Hell, simply because he is in the area (*The Complete Stories* 146-147). And High John's adventures and power are comparable to myths and figures such as the Greeks' Jason, of the Golden Fleece fame, and King Arthur. High John is capable of tricking "Ole Mas" and the Devil

alike, which he does quite explicitly in Virginia Hamilton's telling of "John and the Devil's Daughter" (107-115).

Hamilton's 1985 collection of recounted Black American fables, *The People Could Fly*, includes this story in which, incidentally, brings the story of Jason and Medea to mind. High John hunts for the Devil and after a witch enables him to hitch a ride on her eagle, he finds him and his daughter (107-108). The Devil sets for High John a number of tasks that he cannot possibly accomplish (110-111). The Devil's unnamed daughter uses her magic to aid High John on his various tasks, and their eventual escape from the Devil together, with the intention of getting married (113-114).

Jason and Medea's story is similar; Medea aids Jason in finding the Golden Fleece and also in their escape from her father, the king of Colchis, with the intention of being married once away from danger. In *The People Could Fly*, Hamilton notes that the motif of "the girl as helper in the hero's flight" and help from "the ogre's [or other monster's] daughter" motifs are quite common worldwide (114-115). Though Hamilton uses the word "flight" here to indicate "fleeing" or "escape," given the title of the collection, it is nearly impossible not to think of the implications of the word literally.

The Devil's daughter uses her magic to help John fly, to give him wings metaphorically. And with the support, and the collective power they gain together, it is worth imagining a world in which the girls in these stories are *not* helpers, but can, in the words of Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon*, "fly her own self" (328). The women of these stories are quite able to engineer their own ability to fly. In the eponymous

play, Medea departs skyward on a chariot drawn by dragons. The witch at the beginning of "John and the Devil's Daughter," has access to a huge eagle that presumably can carry her at a moment's notice. And in the last story in Hamilton's collection, "The People Could Fly," Sarah, a mother carrying her baby in her arms, is the first to sprout wings and fly away.

Women, specifically Black women, it would appear then, have had the ability to fly and yet the stories, regardless of how central they are to the narrative, do not seem to love them. Consider Charles W. Chesnutt's 1899 collection of stories, *The Conjure Woman*. Despite the book being named for a particular, though nameless Conjure Woman, she makes very few appearances. Uncle Julius tells hoodoo stories to white Northerners, John and his wife, Annie, usually with the intention of influencing them to do something to Julius' gain. The Conjure Woman is responsible for the many hijinks which ensue in Julius' stories, and though the book is named for her, she is treated as periphery, as if the effects of the magic, as opposed to the manifestation and vessels for the magic, are more important.

The work of Zora Neale Hurston in the first half of the twentieth century, centered Black women in narratives and experiences of magic. It can be seen in her accounts from her time in Haiti and Louisiana—*Tell My Horse* and *Mules and Men*—and beyond. These influences are prevalent in her 1934 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And as with these influences, two important features, themes, motifs are recurring, and we see the echoes of them even into the stories we tell today when we discuss the magic of Blackness and Black woman and girlhood: flight and walking on water.

Perhaps those two phenomena seem unrelated. I argue that they are. In Hamilton's version of "John and the Devil's Daughter," the witch allows John into her secret: flight. And he is able to fly by hanging onto an eagle. In Hurston's "High John de Conquer," John's abilities seem like a mix of both flying and walking on water. She writes first that John comes "walking on the waves of sound" (*The Complete Stories* 139). The next few sentences describe the sea captains hauling Black bodies over to America across the sea; it is no incident then that the imagery of High John walking on the waves of sound conjures the image of walking on water. Then Hurston writes, "John de Conquer was walking the very winds that filled the sails of the ships. He followed over them like the albatross" (*The Complete Stories* 140). Based on the information that Hurston gives us, High John both walks on air and water. There is little, if any, difference; both are manifestations of a liberative movement.

This detail is important because this dissertation takes both sky and sea very seriously. In the same breath that I discuss Black girls flying, I bring forth the long legacies of the relationships between Black women and water. There is a tradition and bodies of work such as historian Stephanie E. Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* and Jessica Marie Johnson's *Wicked Flesh*, which considers the relationship between Black people and water both as being held hostage, and as liberation. There is less, perhaps, consideration of the relationship between Black people, Black girls, and the sky. Given that we have uncovered in High John's story a relationship between walking on water and flying in the sky, we can continue to keep this connection in mind, using the language we have for the relationships Black people have with water, and turning it skyward.

Placement in Fields of Study and Literature Review

This project derives its energy from being deeply interdisciplinary. It draws from the methodologies of fields like literary studies and media studies, as the project often engages in close readings of a variety of texts. Given that this project speaks to American studies, Black women's literature and Black feminist studies, literacy and education studies, Afrofuturism and speculative literature, and digital humanities and digital media studies, the following section will lay out some foundations of arguments located within these fields that I speak to, expand on, and in some cases, move beyond in the next five chapters. The section will explore: Black girls in the bildungsroman, literary legacies of Black Girl Magic and posthuman Blackness, Afrofuturism, and Blackness in comics and media studies.

American Studies

As a project that finds its home in American Studies, it is worth briefly detailing how the questions I am pursuing are rooted in the field. For American Studies' willingness to consider all manner of American cultures, as well as how our cultures relate to the world on a larger scale, the number of American Studies projects that center Black girls and Black girlhood are lacking. My contributions in this project to American Studies as a larger field come from combining theories and methods from other disciplines which *do* center Black girls to create an interdisciplinary project that

will hopefully address the gap in literature, as well keeping the scope of this project limited to Black girls in the United States. Further, I find that despite the lack of existing literature on Black girls here, American Studies provides a fertile space for more work on Black girls and Black girlhood due to its general openness to interdisciplinary, mixed methods and creative forms of intellectual inquiry. I argue that these characteristics are critical to multidimensional studies of Black girlhoods, a point which Black girlhood scholar Aria S. Halliday underscores in *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. To draw from Black feminist theorist, Patricia Hill Collins, whose work showcases the multidimensional nature of Black women's intellectual pursuits, we can infer that this interest in generating and sharing knowledge through story, poetry, song, craft and more may begin in childhood.⁴ The introduction of Collins' work leads us to consider the ways that Black women's literature and Black feminist studies are impactful to this project.

Black Women's Literature and Black Feminist Studies

Black women's literature and Black feminist studies are two distinct but interrelated fields with which this project is deeply in conversation. It is a recognition that the interest in pursuing Black girlhood studies in many ways grows out of a commitment to studying and thinking about Black womanhood. Arguably, literature is

⁴ In fact, we can conclude that this begins in childhood as evidenced by the work of musicologist Kyra D. Gaunt, whose work on the play practices of Black girls shows us the ways that Black girls use song, dance and clapping to share communal wisdoms (*The Games Black Girls Play*).

one of the fields from which we gain a deeper understanding of Black womanhood. Black women writers from Zora Neale Hurston to Ann Petry, from Toni Morrison to Nnedi Okorafor, have a rich tradition in literature which centers the experiences of Black women (Christian; McDowell; Collins). While this project is concerned with Black women insofar as the legacies of Black women writers and artists that make it possible for us to investigate art and media for Black girls, and insofar as I primarily explore contemporary works created by Black folks who may have at one point considered themselves girls, I am still grappling with making space specifically for Black girls and girlhoods as not subsumed by Black women's studies and literatures. In the introduction to *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*, editor Halliday writes, "While Black women have worked to create spaces for Black girls in our academic discussions of feminism, education, history, literature, community work, and the future, we have mostly subsumed Black girls within Black women's theorizing" (1). Continuing on to argue that in many ways this leads us to consider Black girls as already adultified—defined as "reducing or removing the consideration of childhood in Black youths' behavior"—in the world, Halliday's position challenges me to reconsider my project (Epstein et. al). I have purported to work on Black women and girls, and have centered narratives about Black girls by Black women, but notably lack work crafted by or the voices of Black girls themselves. Later in the introduction, Halliday also notes that we often talk about Black girlhood in theory as reflective, which is what this dissertation has done in large part. While this is a valid mode of inquiry, it necessitates clarification of audience. I write this dissertation with Black girls in mind, but more specifically, for adult advocates of Black girls, Black folks

who once were Black girls, Black women who still refer to their friends as “girl” (Gaunt). As such, Black feminist theory and knowledge from Black women’s literature is relevant and useful when engaging the writers and creators who are crafting texts about Black girlhood. Knowing this distinction enables me to identify moments when Black feminist theory works for the arguments I am making in this project, and when Black girl specific theories and interventions—which I have found in literacy and education studies—are more apt.

Literacy and Education Scholars

Given that the field of Black girlhood studies is still quite nebulous, it has been important to engage with the scholars who are contributing to solidifying it. This has meant going where the Black girls are present in academic literature. As they were not as present as I would have liked in American Studies, I often found myself turning out to other disciplines for research and located a vibrant and growing body of work on Black girls in literacy and education studies. Literacy scholars such as Monique W. Morris have documented the ways in which Black girls are pushed out of schools at early ages, citing adultification as one of the primary reasons, a concept we see detailed in Epstein, Blake and González’s study, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood.” These scholars have studied the reality of living in the world as a Black girl, and given this, others have studied what they then do to make space for themselves.

The work of scholars such as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Stephanie Toliver in

particular have been instrumental in the development of this project. Thomas, whose book *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, presents a trans media approach to investigating the presence of Black girls in mainstream fantasy narratives. Toliver's body of work stretches from a number of articles on expanding what becomes possible for Black girls in fantasy narratives, focusing often on hope and futurities, to a digital project *Reading Black Futures*, which curates comprehensive reading lists on Black science fiction and fantasy ("Imagining New Hopescapes," readingblackfutures.com). Her recent monograph, *Recovering Black Storytelling in Qualitative Research: Endarkened Storywork*, uses narrative and story to engage questions of Black girlhood, literacies, futurities, and fantasies, showcasing the innovative potential of academic work. Thomas and Toliver together provide strong models for pursuing work centering Black girls in fantasy, while also prioritizing mixed and creative methodologies for exploring their questions, which is what I aim to do in this dissertation.

Afrofuturism and Speculative Literature

Afrofuturism originates with early critic of online cultures, Mark Dery, and his roundtable interview with three of the founding thinkers and creators of Afrofuturism, Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. The most useful definition of Afrofuturism for this project comes from writer, artist and independent scholar, Ytasha Womack, who writes that it is, "An intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation...Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory,

Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (9). Black women and girls in the fantasy, both future and digital, most certainly find a home within Womack’s definition.

One of the key themes that defines Afrofuturism in Dery’s understanding is that Afrofuturism is an imagining of a future. And while this incorporation of the future and technology seems freeing, in some ways it is rather constraining. Can texts which do not necessarily take place or engage with the future or futurities be categorized as Afrofuturistic? How then do we categorize something like Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) which dealt with Butler’s present and the past in the creation of a neo-slave narrative? This is why I like Ytasha Womack’s conceptualization of Afrofuturism that arises from her 2014 work of the same title, which has a similar imaging of the term but expands it. Using her definition, Afrofuturism is no longer just a speculative fiction; it is an artistic aesthetic that can be utilized and formatted for any genre or medium. In her definition, she goes on to include critical reimagining as Afrofuturist enterprises as well. I think reimaginings of the past are important, because if we are imagining Afrofuturism as something which incorporates African symbols, traditions, values, stories and general aspects of the culture, then reimaginings practice Sankofa, an Adikra symbol which means “Go back and fetch it.” You must look back in order to move forward. I believe this is what Butler’s *Kindred* attempts to do. In order to imagine a different present, or even different future, it first requires some critical reflection on the past.

Additionally, digital humanist scholar André Brock takes up a discussion of

Afrofuturism in which he points out one failing of the movement: “Afrofuturism’s futurist perspective and utopian leanings often occlude the possibilities of the present digital era for Black folk” (29). Brock goes on to discuss how Black and Africana Studies should be handling the work of analyzing Black digital practice, and yet finds that not enough is being done here— with the exception of a few researchers whom he does not include by name (29). In a similar vein, this project is interested in the present (despite having the word “future” in its title)— how ideas about the future are informed by our present moment, how we are able to construct a future based on what we have access to in any given moment... The future in this project is an imagined space where Black girls can go to create their own liberation.

Then, there is Gregory Rutledge’s conceptualization of “Futurist Fiction and Fantasy,” which never quite seemed to attract the same popularity as terms such as Afrofuturism and speculative fiction. Part of this is because of the limits of the term, even though it actively incorporates *fantasy* as a component in addition to works which center the future and technology. Rutledge seems mostly concerned with what is happening on the page, whereas terms like Afrofuturism incorporate technology not only in the content of the narratives, but as a medium for the transmission of these narratives. Someone like Reynaldo Anderson is thinking about the ways that the rise of new media, social media, and technology invigorates an already multi-faceted movement in “Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto.”

Even with this definition, Afrofuturism still feels restrictive for this project. This is perhaps why I find myself drawn to Sami Schalk’s use of the term “speculative

fiction” in her work *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018). Sami Schalk imagines speculative fiction as narratives in which the rules of reality do not fully apply. It is simple, it is effective and it almost provides a catchall term. She writes that she uses this term primarily for that reason: the books and films that she discusses in her monograph do not fit under any other genre or category, not even Afrofuturism. This leads me to believe that speculative fiction defies categorization. Perhaps in the pursuit of defining Afrofuturism and creating hard boundaries, it excludes works when, I believe in actuality, Afrofuturism is an attempt at creating an aesthetic, or even an epistemology which defies categorization. It is difficult because I think we as a society and Afrofuturists agree on what sort of content qualifies as Afrofuturism (we know it when we see it), but agreeing on a singular definition divides us.

And after all of the debate surrounding the terminology, there is the work we are trying to categorize itself. Part of the appeal of works like that from Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany and Nalo Hopkinson is that they defy categorization. Even when attempting to define a category for Butler’s work alone, her corpus was so immeasurable in reach and genre that though she was considered an innovator of the science fiction genre, “speculative” encapsulates so perfectly what she endeavors to, and succeeds in doing. With *Kindred*, for example, there is this insatiable itch to know about one’s past, the relationships forged, how families were created, especially in America, and especially for Black people, who are not so far removed from the horrors of slavery. Butler begins with a question and spins out possible answers in her works. *What do the legacies of slavery look like? What would time travel look like for*

a Black woman? (Kindred) What would the future be like for a Black woman? What if the world as we know it is no more? (The Parable series). This theorization, speculation, questioning and retreat down the rabbit hole is an essence not quite captured with Afrofuturism. Furthermore, returning to Dery's conceptualization of Afrofuturism, not all of Butler's work, by definition, would fall under the umbrella, since neither *Parable* nor *Kindred* are particularly concerned with technology, though *Parable* is set in the now not so distant future.

I take up where Schalk's inquiry leaves off. Rather than limit myself to novels where the rules of reality do not fully apply, I have found myself, and this inquiry, drawn to places where these types of narratives exist in a multitude of forms, particularly in new media. I am interested in narratives where there is a touch of magic, or a lot, and Afrofuturism does not always hold the space necessary for us to engage in conversations about magic, fantasy and The Fantastic, often more interested in science fiction, the future and space.

The expanse of literature in which the rules of reality do not apply extends beyond Afrofuturism. It is not, therefore, a catchall term we may apply for anything fantastic. Deborah Whaley describes three terms in addition to Afrofuturism that acknowledge the work that Black women artists and writers do in the speculative sphere: Afroanime ("an articulation of Black American cultural politics and Japanese visual aesthetics"), Afrophantasmagoria, ("an articulation of mélange of fantasy and dream imagery with hybrid identities that signify blackness and different more broadly"), and Afropunk, ("an articulation of Black American cultural politics with punk rock, hip-hop, trip-hop, and Afrofusion subcultural identities"). Each of these categories are of interest to her,

but she also fears they are underdeveloped theoretically (25). Ebony Thomas' *Dark Fantastic* project is deeply influenced by the work done in and around Afrofuturism and the Black Fantastic, but notes that the majority of speculative narratives consumed in the United States are written by white authors, which is one of the reasons she considers her project as different from these movements (9). This is a point of departure for me as well, as I attempt to center exclusively narratives written or created by Black women.

While I find myself more compelled to use the term "Black speculative fiction" to categorize the otherwise undefinable narratives I am interested in investigating during this dissertation, it would be unwise to end without discussing the importance of Afrofuturism as a cultural movement. In all honesty, I think the cultural resonances of Afrofuturism are becoming as important as the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement and the Black women writers' Renaissance. Black speculative fiction does capture a certain essence of questioning and that which defies the laws of reality, but it does not have the same cultural capital as Afrofuturism. While still a niche category, with the emergence (or rather resurgence) of characters like Black Panther in the recent 2018 film directed by Ryan Coogler, questions of Afrofuturism are beginning to be discussed in homes across America. Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic and a movement. It influences music, starting with influencers such as Sun Ra and George Clinton and moving up to current musicians like Solange and Janelle Monae, whose music and aesthetic encapsulate an Afrofuturistic outlook. It influences the art of the likes of Jean-Michel Basquiat. It influences the comics of Marvel and Milestone. And even today, this legacy of thought influences writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Eve

Ewing. It speaks the needs of Black people in this moment, freeing us of our chains and giving us wings to fly. We need new futures, alternative pasts, and a critical present to aid us in understanding, dealing with and ultimately seeking to dismantle the injustices of our moment.

Digital Humanities and Media Studies

New media studies provide a lens through which I might understand, at least in part, the appeal of, to paraphrase Ruth Nicole Brown, “the creative potential of Black girlhood.” But the study requires some additional perspectives: this study will engage in methodologies from literary studies, including close readings of narratives; it will draw from the personal narrative/experiential aspects of critical race theory; the complicated and frustrating reality that many things can be true at once from Black feminist and womanist theory.⁵

Communications scholar Henry Jenkins offers up incredible amounts of exploratory freedom in his initial investigations of new media (and also fan culture). His books, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* and *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, to name a couple, are integral in the development of the strand of thought which considers new media and technology to be a democratizing agent. Jenkins’ optimism about the potential of new

⁵ It may be worth asking, why use feminist or womanist theory if I am interested in girlhood: as both Wright and Brown theorize, girlhood is more of a state of mind that is only loosely correlated with specific ages. Furthermore, a number of woman(ists) were once Black girls.

media is infectious to say the least, however, I hesitate to embrace his approach for a number of reasons.

Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* takes readers through the creation of fanfiction, groups on fan sites, zines, and even music (filk), which celebrates popular culture and yet "poaches" it in order to make it our own. Jenkins' conception of "poaching" verges on appropriation. In fact, in his excitement over the democratization of media through user generated content on the internet, he skates over the fact that white consumers of media have been "poaching" from Black people for centuries, but not in a way that should inspire praise. I much prefer the term remixing, as Marisa Parham uses. Remixing gives the appropriate recognition to the original creator, while honoring the new artist that has put their stamp on the material. Poaching has the terrible connotation of white hunters going into Africa, taking what is decidedly not theirs and selling it for their own benefit.

However, Jenkins is right that fan practices bring people together over remixing in exciting new ways. McLuhan, who I've mentioned earlier, was responding to the panic about television in his seminal work *Understanding Media*. He felt that in books, it was possible to become a writer through the writing of marginalia, though the same was not true or available for viewers of television—Jenkins disagrees: the creation of fan content based on popular culture is a form of modern day marginalia and overlaying one's own stamp and process of understanding on the media one consumes.

"New media," which is inextricably tied in many ways to the digital, McLuhan wrote, "was going to change everything" (6). It had/has revolutionary potential, and

other researchers, such as Catherine Knight Steele, Moya Bailey and André Brock, have written about the spirit of innovation with which Black people approach new technologies. But before moving forward, it is useful to think of how theorists such as Stuart Hall have approached thinking about new media and technology.

I argue that at least one reason that Black scholars and theorists find compelling new ways to engage with media is due to a difference in the ways we “decode” media. In “Encoding, decoding,” Hall writes, “the lack of fit between the codes has a great deal to do with the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of ‘source’ and ‘receiver’ at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form” (94). The “codes” which Hall speaks of are and can be both metaphorical and literal. In digital media—a media (images, texts, videos, etc.) crafted to be encoded through a binary system on a machine so to be decoded on another machine—the way digital creators craft objects may not always be received with their intention in mind. Working through digital media means creators necessarily must release their artifacts which they are using to display, record and disseminate information (among other uses), knowing that this act will ensure that the way audiences receive the information will be decoded in a myriad of ways that will change the interpretation and therefore understanding. The interpretation (decoding) or connotation, which Hall uses to describe the looser understanding we derive from media, will be informed by a variety of complicated factors, as every person’s experience is a unique configuration of such markers which will impact how meaning they take from media (96).

New media offers the potential for new ways of storytelling and even new audiences, especially for traditionally marginalized readers, viewers and consumers. For example, it is difficult for Black women to find adequate representation in these digital and media spaces. In a similar manner to the way that Kimberlé Crenshaw describes antiracist movements to be geared towards Black men and antisexist movements geared towards white women, comics scholarship written about Black people tended to be geared sometimes explicitly—as in the case of Jeffrey Brown’s *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*—and sometimes implicitly—as in the case of Adilifu Nama’s *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*—towards Black men. Comics scholarship written by white women, such as Hillary Chute’s *Why Comics* and Carolyn Cocca’s *Superwomen*, often centers white heroines, creators, female readers and fans. However, since 2010, comics scholarship has gained some all stars such as Qiana Witted, Sheena Howard and Deborah Whaley, who all to some degree aid in centering multiple feminisms in their scholarship. Witted and Howard both bring Black feminist perspectives to collected volumes which seek to ensure more voices are being included, which is one way of handling the multiple layers of feminism. Deborah Whaley, in particular, successfully mixes multiple layers of feminism with comics scholarship in *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime*. She begins her book with a preface that explains how she came to comics, a move which positions her as an “aca-fan,” a term coined by Henry Jenkins which signifies that one is both researcher and scholar of the communities of which they are a fan. It tells us that she is personally invested in the narrative with which she is engaged. She moves into an introduction which

informs the reader that this is a study which centers both Black women creators and characters. In this, she addresses the fact that we not only need representation on the page, we need to incorporate different types of women as writers and artists in comics (or rather, in “sequential art.”) Black feminist work is being done at multiple levels in this particular monograph, at the level of the experience of the author, which seeps into the writing, which is informed by Black feminist content that she consumes.

Free from constraints of tradition or canon or expectation because there are not (yet) rules, guidelines or parameters for how to make, Black women and girls alike can use digital tools and media to craft narratives that prioritize their right to simply be. This line of thinking borders on “Digital Dandy” or “digital flâneur” territory. “The flâneur,” writes Presner, Shepard and Kawano, “(almost always a man of leisure, a dandy) strolled along the bustling streets, under the gas lamps, observing the metropolis as an urban spectator and occupying a liminal zone of privilege and transgression” (23). The idea of the flâneur, important to the likes of French poet Charles Baudelaire, is one of great appeal, but as the authors note, to occupy the role of flâneur is one of privilege. Black girls should be able to be digital flâneurs—wander into Twitter conversations, muse over a blog post found in an unfrequented corner of the internet, create and disseminate our thoughts without fear of repercussion as we are exercising our right to exist.

Unfortunately, as Brock points out, the ability to simply exist in the digital is not one that we are often afforded. Black people’s presences equate to resistance narratives or “magical.” We are represented as carrying burdens. As Zora Neale Hurston writes through the character of Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “De

nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (47). In doing this project, I am reminded of this heaviness. Manning Marable informs readers that the Black intellectual tradition has been “descriptive,” “corrective,” and “prescriptive” (17-18). It is a burden that is also hopeful— inherent in these claims are the thought that change can be made. I might add to Marable’s distinctions that the Black intellectual tradition has always been imaginative, creative, and visionary. To lean into the labor of this work without acknowledging the joy our scholars and artists and thinkers found in it, would be to ignore the multi-faceted and complex nature that is simply *being Black* in any space.

Inspired by their work, I have taken up my inquiry at the bounds of Marable’s Black studies descriptors and attempt to push beyond. The future is an important intellectual space for Black studies, particularly Black girlhood studies. Tomorrow, informed by the past, is inherently hopeful in all its possibility. Right now, our “tomorrows” will be digital. Our present is digital. It’s time to meet ideas about liberation where they will be. As Anna Everett writes, “The Revolution Will Be Digitized.”

Black Girls and the Bildungsroman

In American literature scholar, Sarah Graham’s, edited volume on the history of the Bildungsroman, what we often refer to as coming of age novels, she collaborates with other scholars to define the genre. First, she notes that the Bildungsroman is a form which is primarily concerned with what it means to be individual *and* “to

participate in the life of the nation” (4). Graham goes on to describe two strands of American Bildungsroman: the kind that celebrates the “promise” (emphasis my own) of the nation, and those which reveal that the nation's assumptions do not hold for many young people (6). To consider that, by Graham's definition, Bildungsromane inherently deal with what it means to participate in the life of the nation is striking, especially when examining the relationship Black girls may have to the genre. Graham does explicitly state that the bildungsroman form overlooks the lives of young African and Native Americans, for example, but this glossing over is more intentional. Later in this dissertation, I will refer to sociological research on the adultification of Black girls in more detail, but now it must be mentioned that the deliberate exclusion of Black girls from bildungsroman narratives is a pointed attempt to divorce Black children from their childhood. To refuse Black girls stories of their youth is a strand of violence. As scholar Maroula Joannou writes in her chapter on female bildungsroman in this edited collection, classical bildungsroman, which often follow young white men, simply affirms the societal status quo (215). Still, the form of the bildungsroman is a useful way to ground how I will think about the various media I will examine in the chapters to follow. My interest in stories for Black girls by Black girls and women stems ultimately a level of understanding that can only be achieved and properly represented by someone who shares a critical part of the experience. Those who were once Black girls know the struggles intimately of what it is like to move through the world and occupy a space that is constantly under attack.

In her chapter, Joannou writes that "the quest" is a critical part of the bildungsroman as a genre (202). She goes on to point out that this is not necessarily

unique to the bildungsroman, but exists in other forms and genres such as Arthuriana and epic high fantasy. The search for self in Black girls' bildungsroman takes on the quality of an epic high fantasy, whether it is or not, in that Black girls undertake these journeys under duress. Joannou points to the idea of a *flâneuse*, French for female wanderer that takes on a casual quality and implies a certain level of observation whilst doing so, do not have the same level of freedom that a *flâneur*, a male wanderer, does. When combined with the racial lens that Black girls experience the world through, we must understand that these combination of specific lived experiences result in a unique way of moving through the world.

In the introduction of *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States*, literary scholar of the Harlem Renaissance and chronicler of Zora Neale Hurston's life through letters, Carla Kaplan, writes that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a "black female bildungsroman" (Hurston, xxi). To frame *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as such positions Zora Neale Hurston firmly as a pivotal point on the constellation of narratives of Black girlhood I explore throughout this dissertation. The bildungsroman derives a great deal of its staying power from "the quest," the journey to self-discovery that is often conflated and folded in with the search for something specific other truth or treasure. From the first page of the novel, which contains imagery of travel, ships and waterways, Hurston assures us that adventure novels are no longer the sole purview of white men. Beyond the framing of one of Hurston's works a coming of age narrative, arguably one of the most celebrated Black woman's coming of age narratives, Hurston's work becomes important to this dissertation for her interest in magic, and the intersections of Black girl and womanhood with magic,

and how that relationship brings us closer to a new understanding of liberation.

Literary Legacies of Black Girl Magic and Posthuman Blackness

My study, which borrows ideas and theories from different disciplines, tends to be most rooted in literary studies. So although this dissertation will investigate narratives that I find in various media and explores new media more generally, many of the ideas can be traced from particular literary ancestors. In this way, the shape of this dissertation finds precedent in the work of scholars such as Kristen Lillvis. Lillvis coined the term "posthuman blackness," which incidentally may be used to place this project in an intellectual lineage. Lillvis argues that "*posthuman blackness* [describes] the empowered subjectivities black women and men develop through their coincident experiences in multiple temporalities" (4). She continues on later in the chapter to explain that posthuman theorizing acknowledges "the significance of the past to present and future ideas of black identity" (6). Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* provides a compelling site of exploration as Lillvis does an posthumanist reading, which includes considering the ways that the visuals, lyrics, and sounds draw from different cultural pasts to create one: African mythology, Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, footage from the Superdome during Hurricane Katrina, and sites of mourning. This all leads to scenes of rebirth, something which propels viewers into envisioning a future. But the rebirth does not happen without the understanding of the past and our present.

While this is a beautiful reading, it must also be considered that this desire to

merge Blackness with language and theorization may erase the beauty of different types of "theories," more often expressed in African diasporic cultures as folk tales or other idioms and phrases. For example, this beautiful phenomena of acknowledging the past and present before being able to move into the future already has a name and history in African culture: the Yoruba word, *Sankofa*. Christel Temple uses the translations, "'go back and fetch it,' 'return to your past,' and 'it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost,'" for *sankofa's* meaning (127).

Interestingly, Temple posits *sankofa* as much more than an idiom—she explores the term as a *practice*. Temple argues that Diasporan people have a desire for "culturally relevant philosophies" that may help Black people make sense of our lives (127). I believe that this is true, at least for the purposes of this dissertation. As much as this project draws upon literary theory and media theory to stake claims, it is my intention for it to be informed also by philosophies which underpin Black life, and in particular, Black women and girls' lives.

Nevertheless, I find Lillvis' inquiry useful and important for several reasons. The first is that it offers disciplinary guidance: it remains grounded in literature and literary theory while expanding out into different types of media, which is the approach I am to take in this dissertation. Second, her interest in temporality is one of the main themes here. She writes that "*Posthuman Blackness*...imagine[s] the future as a site of power," while also making connections to the past (8). And third, and most importantly, her analysis, unlike many others, centers the Black woman's imagination.

What Lillvis' project verges on in conception is a type of weaving or even quilting, which is how I imagine my own work. Weaving in storytelling, an act which is

reminiscent of the act of Anansi's, the trickster god in African lore, work, involves an act of sankofa: drawing on tales from the past to speak to a contemporary moment, and potentially into the future. Both weaving and quilting also have connotations of Black femininity, and in storytelling remind me that each individual piece of the story is unique, and yet still adds to a much larger picture. It is a deliberate act, that in and of itself, tells a story, not just the finished product.

This is the type of process I seek to rely on throughout this project. Black feminism, Black womanhood and girlhood relies deeply on these ways of storytelling (Collins). Lillvis's discovery highlights acts of Black women's ingenious quilting and weaving of story. Black women writers have known and practiced this for much longer than the approximately one hundred years of stories I will draw from to help propel us into the future. This is why knowing where these themes come from, despite their interest in a future unfettered, are deeply important. Many of these storytelling practices still exist, by virtue of tradition (see the discussion of Eve Ewing bringing Maya Angelou's poetry into a comic about a Black girl who can essentially be categorized as a cyborg in chapter 1). There would be no #BlackGirlMagic, or digital Black girl magic, if not for the analog, literary Black girl magic of our foremothers and their mothers. This exploration of the digital, the future, and the fantastic honors the magic that allowed us the freedom to uncover the secrets that lie within.

The Black Girls' Imagination

It would be possible to frame my intellectual inquiry about Black girls, magic, the

fantastic, the future, the digital and our imaginations as purely analytical. However, even the presence of the word ‘our’ in the previous sentence positions me as personally invested in this project. As Toni Morrison notes in the preface of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, “the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white” (xii). I, like Morrison, am interested in this assumption. I, like Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, who takes up this concern very seriously in *The Dark Fantastic*, am interested in the contemporary manifestations of this. While the readers of American fiction might still be considered primarily white, there has been a deep, meaningful shift in recognizing that Black people, and in particular, Black girls, are also consumers of all types of media, including books. And Black girls and women are taking control of our narratives and how we are presented in them.

I am interested in moments where Black women create and write for Black girls rather than investigating what whiteness does to our imaginations and how we imagine ourselves. There is not a total diversion. Morrison writes in “Black Matters,” “My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world....It [imagining] is...*becoming*” (4). And *that* is the core of my investigation. In the thirty years since the publication of “Black Matters,” our ability to imagine more with less constraints for Black girls has grown. This is not to say they are gone or even loosened, but more time and labor, as well as new words have been created to help us imagine a previously impossible becoming.

The personal stake in this project is that I am a Black girl/woman who cultivated

a rich imagination at a very young age. Like Morrison and Thomas, among others suggest, the way I imagined myself was most certainly shaped by assumption that readers of American literature were white. Today, however, we celebrate the presence of more and more Black women creators. In literature, visual artist Vashti Harrison, and authors Nic Stone and Angie Thomas continually dominate the NYT best seller lists in picture books, middle grade and young adult. In film and media, Issa Rae has gone from YouTube star to household name, and in her stead have sprung up new Black women created web series including *Adultin'*, *Juju: the web series*, and *Black Enough*. Roxane Gay, Nnedi Okorafor, NK Jemisin, and Eve Ewing have become cross-over writers, foraying from fiction, poetry and essays into comic book writing, featuring Black women and girls. While it would be dismissive to conclude that these small victories for Black women in mainstream publishing absolve publishing from the very real problems of racism and misogynoir in its industry (as evidenced by the June 2020 #PublishingPaidMe movement [“#Publishingpaidme: Authors Share Advances to Expose Racial Disparities.”]), great strides have been made recently in getting Black girls represented in books.

Methods

To write well about Black girls, I needed to go where the writing and research on Black girls is, which means this dissertation necessarily draws from history, sociology, and quite a bit of literacy scholarship, as well as digital humanities work. As a deeply interdisciplinary project in an interdisciplinary field, the dissertation

employs a *mélange* of various methodologies: close readings, autoethnography, and interviews. Close readings from literary studies are used on all of the texts; autoethnography enables me to approach the topic from a place that centers my acafan identity, or that centers my desire to study communities of which I am a part and in which I participate; and interviews are originally posted on my collaborative podcast project, *Dreaming in the Dark*. In an attempt to ensure my project had a wider audience, I, along with my cohost Bezi Yohannes, spoke with writers, scholars and artists of Black girl fantasy to engage with conversations about what these themes meant to them.

These methods also show my commitment to transparency, accountability and access. Who has access to these resources and materials outside of the academy? What is the potential for Black girls to engage the materials themselves? It also centers creative intellectual inquiry—learning by doing. This project has necessitated turning the subject around and around, trying a variety way too to engage—speaking with people, making podcasts and art, and writing fiction. Questions are often not answered using one straightforward method; experimentation provides potential and possibility of many answers. Anthropologist and novelist, Zora Neale Hurston also provides me with a framework and a methodology that supports this: “I am using the vacuum method, grabbing everything I see” (Hurston, xxi). The framework that I approach this project with therefore is decidedly and proudly Hurstonian in nature: because I draw from several different disciplines, my intervention will be genre-defying. To be a student of Zora Neale Hurston is to know, understand and push beyond the limitations and constraints of academic writing, especially when the complex lives of Black girls

are at play.

Road Map

This dissertation is, at its core, a media project, and the structure and various additional aspects I include—such as the playlist, short fiction and art—all work to demonstrate the argument I am making about Black women and girls’ art being multifaceted, dynamic, layered and interwoven with aspects from other forms. There is no other way for us to create if we want to represent the depth of our lives. This pays tribute to the various modes of storytelling Black women and girls have engaged in, from music to writing to weaving. The first two chapters focus on media with words on pages that are sometimes accompanied by images from YA books and comic books. Beginning with “Fantasy for Black Girls: Digital Networks, Literary Legacies and Agency in Twenty-First Century YA Fantasy,” chapter one explores the landscape of trade publishing’s young adult fantasy narratives for Black girls in the last five years. It charts a lineage of Black women in speculative fiction up to the recent explosion, with close readings of two books which make a case for self-definition and Black girls’ agency using legends, myths and retellings.

Chapter two, “Technomagic Girlhood,” argues for a term which specifically characterizes Black girls’ creative self-expression and self-definition in a contemporary moment defined by digital media: *technomagic girlhood*. This chapter uses Eve Ewing’s *Riri Williams: Ironheart* comic books as a case study for how modern Black girls use both technology and fantasy to chart their own conceptions of

their girlhoods. It ends with an art piece, short fiction, “Digital Dreamscapes,” and a musical interlude. This chapter, and chapter three articulates my understanding of the intersections of Black girlhood, fantasy narratives and the contemporary digital landscape.

In chapter three, “Gulfs, Glitches, and Ghosts: Guiding Metaphors of Technomagic Girlhood’s Poetics,” argues for a poetics of technomagic girlhood that we see often in our media, built around three key themes: glitches (the digital), ghosts (memory and generational ties) and gulfs (water). The visual albums *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monáe and *Lemonade* by Beyoncé provide this chapter’s case study. This chapter, and chapter four focus on explicitly digital media, moving images woven together with music and poetry: visual albums and webseries. Chapters four and five offer examples of the creative potential of technomagic for Black girls.

Chapter four, “What’s in a #BlackGirlMagicPotion?” underscores how the digital—in this case user-generated content such as the webseries—provides fertile ground for experimentation, self-definition and relational group identity by locating Micah Ariel Watson’s *Black Enough* as a genre-defying piece of art which relies on multiple media forms. I argue that Micah Ariel Watson’s *Black Enough* webseries uses a combination of digital and analogue technologies and alchemies to produce a rich, multifaceted narrative about Black girls’ selfhood that is reflected on the screen and behind the scenes.

The fifth and final chapter explores how introducing these media forms into pedagogy encourages the adoption and recognition of a Black girl specific twenty-first century literacy. Chapter five, “Building a Digital Black Feminist Classroom,” argues

that technomagic enables educators to adopt pedagogies which acknowledge the contemporary digital landscape in which Black girls find themselves and encourage the alchemic creation they produce. The project ends with a coda that reiterates the major contributions of this dissertation, offers more questioning, gesturing to the spaces which were not fully explored here, but where I hope to pick up—and where I hope others will as well—in the future. In the spirit of this dissertation, we make space to imagine where we will go from here.

Chapter 1:

Fantasy for Black Girls: Digital Networks, Literary Legacies and Agency in Twenty-First Century Black Girls' YA Fantasy

Setting the Stage

In the last five years, there has been a boom in young adult (YA) fantasy written by Black women in trade publishing, often featuring Black girls—in particular, books published in 2020.⁶ This chapter argues that unlike years past, and in spite of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the current trend has been for Black women writing fantasy for young adults to enter into trade publishing in small, self-established cohorts. I argue that the ability to form cohorts among Black women fantasy writers is made possible by a digital network of other Black women authors, book bloggers, teachers, librarians and critics, and that in creating these networks to combat the overwhelming whiteness of publishing, they are able to craft communities that are reflected in their texts. The communities that they craft and nurture are built on decades of Black women writers' legacies in the larger tradition, but also specifically on the legacies of Black women speculative fiction writers. It destroys the notion that there can only be “one at a time” and gives us an opportunity to imagine a collective vision of futures that center the *possibility* of Black girls' fantasy narratives.

Black women have dotted the fantasy landscape for the last several decades,

⁶ When discussing trade publishing, my scope is narrowed to books published by biggest companies: Penguin/Random House, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, and Hachette Book Group.

spearheaded most notably by Californian native Octavia E. Butler. In many ways Butler established the field of Black women's speculative fiction and published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976. Her last published novel, *Fledgling*, was published in 2005; however, she would continue to produce novels and short stories until just before her death in 2006. Jamaican Canadian writer, Nalo Hopkinson, who began publishing novels beginning with *Brown Girl in the Ring* in 1998, overlapped with the tail end of Butler's career. Between Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003) and *The New Moon's Arms* (2007) Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor published her young adult fantasy debut novel, *Zahrah the Windseeker* in 2005.

Butler and Hopkinson notably did/do not write much (if any, in the case of Butler) fantasy work with young people as their intended audience. On the contrary, much of Okorafor's body of work prioritizes youth audiences— it includes the YA *Akata Witch* (2011) and *Akata Warrior* (2017) books, as well as a picture book, *Long Juju Man* (2009). Hopkinson did publish *The Chaos* in 2012, well after Okorafor was beginning to establish herself as a writer of young adult fantasy with *Zahrah* and later, *The Shadow Speaker* (2007).

Though Okorafor is not centered in this dissertation, her contributions to forging ground for Black speculative fiction for young adults, particularly novels featuring girls, cannot be understated. Just as there is no Okorafor without Octavia Butler, there is no Tracy Deonn, Bethany C. Morrow, Kalynn Bayron, among others, without the work of Okorafor in the early 2000s. That said, I do not include Okorafor in this investigation for three reasons in particular: (1) I am most focused on the cohort of Black women writers who debuted with YA fantasy featuring Black girls in 2020, (2)

her work has been investigated in a number of newer Afrofuturist and Africanist projects, and (3) I am cognizant of her own self-identification as separate from Black fantasy, preferring to locate her work as “Africanjujuism” or “Africanfuturism.” Okorafor’s own description of her work is specific: on her personal website she classifies her work as “Africanfuturism” and “Africanfuturism,” not Afrofuturism. (nnedi.com, 2021). These genres center Africa as a location, the many cultures, religions and ideologies of the continent, and writers who more readily identify with nations and cultures in Africa, as opposed to the United States being an axis around which this work revolves. Just as Afrofuturism did not appropriately describe the work of this project, nor does Africanfuturism. Okorafor writes specifically with the African reader centered; I am not an Africanist, and my project, as an intervention in American Studies, focuses on Black American writers and their narratives. Because Okorafor takes care to distinguish her work from Afrofuturism, and though this project is not Afrofuturist but deeply informed by it, it does not feel appropriate to lump her in with this collection of writers. Nevertheless, it is imperative to gesture to her as someone who breaks new ground in Black speculative fiction.

Among this landscape of Black women speculative writers of the new millennia is N. K. Jemisin, whose first novel was published in 2010. Her work begins with the *Inheritance* trilogy, includes the *Dreamblood Duology*, the *Broken Earth* trilogy, and now the ongoing *Great Cities* books. It includes “Horror Noire” writer and Afrofuturist scholar, Tananarive Due, who currently teaches in the Department of African American Studies at the University of California Los Angeles. It includes writer Sheree Renée Thomas, editor of the field defining volume *Dark Matter: A*

Century of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora (2000 and 2004), who currently serves as the editor-in-chief of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, a publication with origins that date back to mid-twentieth century and is currently one of the leading science fiction and fantasy (SFF) publications.

Their groundbreaking and important work which pushes the landscape of fantasy further, also illuminates what is missing. In this overview of Black women's speculative work in the last few decades, there has been a lack of fantasy narratives for Black children and young adults. However, this is not to say that it does not exist. In fact, the work of literacy scholar, Stephanie R. Toliver, proves this wrong. Now an assistant professor of Language and Literacy education at the University of Colorado Boulder, as a graduate student Toliver began building the site "Diverse Futures," which she writes is, "dedicated to promoting science fiction, fantasy, horror and comics." (diversefutures.net) In the mission on the homepage, Toliver makes sure to note that she wants this work to be used by folks in the classroom, libraries, and amongst researchers. The site provides a range of resources, but most relevant to this project is the extensive, and growing, list of Black girl (and boy) YA and middle grade (MG) fantasy titles she collects (Toliver 2020). The field may be sparser than we might like, however it *does* exist.

Toliver's work is also relevant because it points to one of this project's interventions. Toliver is a literacy scholar with a degree in education, whose work in Black children's literacies builds upon a tradition established by education scholars such as Rudine Sims Bishop, and further expanded by literacy scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas in the last decade. Bishop's metaphor of "mirrors, windows and

sliding glass doors” to describe how children—particularly children of diverse backgrounds—search for reflections of themselves in the literary worlds they seek to enter has remained deeply influential to researchers such as Toliver who have worked with and expanded the concept in recent years (1990; 2018).⁷ As such, much of the literature surrounding YA fantasy for Black girls, and much of the literature around Black girls period, centers Black girls in education and classrooms. This means, despite my emphasis on Black American girls in the project, I have had to look outside of the field of American Studies and into others, such as education, literacy studies and sociology to ground and contextualize my investigation. It is my hope that this work will help us continue to work towards bringing Black girls and Black girlhood studies into conversation within American Studies.

Scholar-Creator-Fans

The synchronicity of this moment is notable: an increase in YA fantasy for Black girls makes way for more supporters of these books. This includes not only a slightly larger network of publishing professionals advocating for these books as well as those writing them, but the “home team,” so to speak, of book bloggers,

⁷ Bishop argues: “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (1).

critics/scholars, and fans. Many of these categories are fluid, and those who identify as one often occupy other spaces as well.

To this point, consider, as an example, bookstagrammer (“Book Instagrammer,” or someone who posts about books on Instagram), Bezi Yohannes, who reviews under the Instagram handle “@beingabookwurm.” Yohannes began studying Black fantasy as an undergraduate student at William & Mary, completing an undergraduate thesis, “Black Girl Magic: Intersectional Self-Definition in Young Adult Afrocentric Fantasy Literature,” in 2018. In July of 2018, after completing her degree, she began her Instagram account, posting a #currentlyreading (a hashtag bookstagrammers use to denote books they are reading at the moment) photo of Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), which debuted earlier that year. She would continue her work as a scholar of Black fantasy by pursuing a master’s degree in English from Georgetown with a thesis titled, “But We Dream in the Dark for the Most Part: Fantasies of Race, ‘Colorblind’ Visibility and the Narrative Marginalization of Black Female Protagonists in Mainstream Fantasy Media” (2020) while simultaneously building her public facing platform to advocate for Black fantasy. At the time of this writing, Yohannes has accumulated an audience of over 18,000 followers on Instagram.

Yohannes’ pivot into advocating for Black fantasy in public facing work has also included freelance writing (“The Trouble with ‘Non-White’”, 2020); co-production of the Black fantasy podcast, *Dreaming in the Dark*, alongside myself; and most notably beginning a trade publishing job as a digital marketing assistant for Penguin Young Readers at the end of 2020. This multi-faceted scholar profile is

typical of Black women who do work in the digital. As Jessica Marie Johnson, innovative digital humanist creator and historian at Johns Hopkins University, writes, “For those of us who are black and digital and feminist, there is no hard and firm separation between the creative work we do online, our intellectual production and our IRL (in real life) selves” (47). This describes both Yohannes and me as scholars, creatives and fans.

My unique position as a scholar, writer and fan of YA fantasy for Black girls positions me as a participant-observer in this community. Preeminent communications scholar, Henry Jenkins, whose work forms the foundation for much of contemporary fan studies, may be inclined to label me an “aca-fan,” which is to say, one who also studies a community around particular media that they are also a fan of (1992; 2011). I argue that this is simply another iteration of how Black women have been articulating themselves in relationship to what they study. Consider, as an example, writer, folklorist, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston, whose acclaim is tied in part to the celebration of her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was the original participant-observer, as is the nature of anthropology, but also the nature of her curiosity. She wrote and told stories as often as she listened to folktales and studied them as an anthropologist. Hurston was deeply immersed in various cultures, even becoming a voodoo priestess when studying that community. It was, and continues to be impossible for Black women to draw definitive boundaries between their work, study and play.

I take deep inspiration from Hurston for this project not only as an example of participant-observation, but also for her “vacuum cleaner” methodology: “I am using

the vacuum method, grabbing everything I see" (Hurstun, xxi). This dissertation is in part reflexive, enabling me to make sense of the world and work I have dedicated myself to. Therefore, my source material is varied: novels, tweets, podcast interviews, magazine articles... wherever Black women are taking up space and writing about Black girls and their magic, these are the sources from whence I have pulled information.

My position as a participant in these communities gives me access to information and intra-community conversations and the ability to identify patterns, while also being able to contribute content to it myself. As aforementioned, I co-produce the Black fantasy podcast, *Dreaming in the Dark*, with Yohannes. In our mission statement, we cite foundational American novelist, literary theorist, editor and educator, Toni Morrison and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, a literacy researcher currently working at the University of Pennsylvania, as specific influences, and name our goal as shedding light on narratives relegated to the margins of the fantastic (Stringfield and Yohannes). In addition, I write public facing essays on being inspired by this work (Stringfield 2020 & 2021), and most recently, I have successfully begun to publish my own contributions to this field in the form of short fiction: one short story, "Watercolors," was published in the independent magazine for Black women writers, *midnight & indigo's*, speculative fiction issue in October 2020, and another, "Passage," won second place in Voyage YA Journal's 2020 First Chapters Contest, judged by New York Times Bestselling author, Dhonielle Clayton.

Using Yohannes and myself as case studies, I am able to showcase how the landscape of fantasy for Black girls affords us, as Black girls ourselves, the

opportunity to define ourselves in the landscape, particularly in the digital, and decide how we want to be represented. Occupying a myriad of identities in these often-digital spaces curated around fantasy for Black girls underscores how we are able to bring all of the various sides of ourselves to the space knowing that this growing community and network of readers, writers and fans will be there to catch us.

The Turning Point: Children of Blood and Bone (2018)

Arguably, 2018 marked a turning point for the landscape of YA fantasy books by and for Black girls. That year Dhonielle Clayton, author, Chief Operating Officer of the non-profit *We Need Diverse Books* and co-founder of Cake Creative, a book packager company dedicated to producing commercial stories for people of color, debuted the YA fantasy novel, *The Belles*, starting off a new series that follows Camellia Beauregard in the fictional land of Orléans where beauty is the result of magic.⁸ Clayton's contemporary, L.L. McKinney, published *A Blade So Black* that year as well, the first book in the new Night-mare Verse series, and a remix of the classic *Alice in Wonderland*, with the story unfolding around a Black girl. While these books are absolutely critical in the formation of the field, the novel that actively exploded onto the scene in 2018 was young Nigerian-American author, Tomi Adeyemi's, debut fantasy novel, *Children of Blood and Bone* (which, coincided with

⁸ “**We Need Diverse Books™** is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and a grassroots organization of children’s book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people” (diversebooks.org, 2021).

the 2018 *Black Panther* film debut).



Figure 1, Three book covers. From left to right: *The Belles* by Dhonielle Clayton; *Blade So Black* by L. L. McKinney; *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi.

In an interview with late night television host, Jimmy Fallon, Adeyemi speaks about the story, though absolutely fantastic, is heavily influenced by the “modern Black experience.” (Adeyemi). In an interview for *Essence*, Adeyemi is described as wanting readers to come away from her stories drawing parallels to modern and historical situations: “...As the readers cry for the violence inflicted on Zélie [the protagonist of *Children of Blood and Bone*] and the other oppressed people of Orisha, Adeyemi wants them to feel for victims of police brutality like Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray...too many names to count. Adeyemi says there are also scenes in the book that mirror the Birmingham Riots, or the way that Black entertainers and athletes are exploited” (Burton, 2020). The author of this piece, Nylah Burton, goes on to write that Adeyemi knows Black readers will make the connections, in the hopes of finding solidarity and community in words.

Adeyemi’s rise to fame was due in part to the early speculation that she would be “the new J. K. Rowling,” with the implied message that she would write the magical stories Rowling supplied for white children, but for Black children. (Fequiere) The excitement which surrounded her debut was the beginning of an acknowledgment by trade publishing that there was a lack in this particular area of literature for Black children that was unnamed, or at least often ignored, until her arrival. As literacy scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas works through in *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, and again in an interview with Yohannes and me for *Dreaming in the Dark*, there simply was not the thriving community or even interest around Black fantasy when Thomas was in the process of writing *The Dark Fantastic* in the early part of the 2010s (Thomas). To put this in perspective, fantasy for Black children went from being a niche interest, to the cover story on ELLE.com in February 2020⁹ (Fequiere). As indicated by the ELLE profile, Adeyemi was often positioned (at that time) as *the* face of Black YA fantasy, despite the collective nature of the strides the field had made.

In addition to her own writing, former middle school librarian Dhonielle Clayton, who debuted alongside Adeyemi, does careful advocacy work through *We Need Diverse Books*, helping to produce workshops, mentorships, and grants for marginalized writers. L.L. McKinney has been known for her outspoken nature when it comes to injustice on Twitter, even founding the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe during the summer of 2020 amid, and following uprising around the state sanctioned murder

⁹ The *ELLE* feature notably also included Black young adult authors Elizabeth Acevedo, Angie Thomas, Nic Stone and Akwaeke Emezi.

of George Floyd, which encouraged authors to disclose how much they had made in book deals to compare the stark disparity between what white authors were making versus their Black, Asian, Indigenous, etc. counterparts. While this first moment in 2018 indicates the shift in the tide for Black fantasy in YA, it also showcases how publishing and media tends to isolate authors from each other. It emphasizes the idea that there can only be “one at a time,” a notion that the Black women authors debuting YA fantasy in 2020 would shatter, whether they intentionally set out to do so or not.

Challenges reflected in art: Legendborn (2020) & A Song Below Water (2020)

Among the cohort of Black women writers debuting YA fantasy novels featuring Black girls in 2020 was Tracy Deonn. A North Carolina native and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill double alumna, Deonn’s young adult contemporary fantasy novel, *Legendborn*, follows sixteen-year-old Bree Matthews, as she enters Carolina as an “Early College” scholar in the aftermath of her mother, Faye’s, death.¹⁰ Once there, she quickly discovers that Carolina’s oldest secret society, The Order, are very real descendants of Arthur Pendragon and the knights of the original Round Table, and that magic exists. Because of this, the circumstances surrounding her mother’s death are now possibly more complicated than she ever imagined.

¹⁰ Contemporary fantasy is a subgenre of fantasy in which fantastic elements are added and incorporated a fictional rendering of our own reality. For example here, the landmarks Deonn incorporates from University of North Carolina Chapel Hill are real, but the secret society of magical beings she writes exist within its walls are imagined.

In a novel full of magic—the members of the Order can control “aether,” while Bree’s therapist, Patricia, is able to manipulate the same energy, which Black practitioners call “root”— it is not necessarily the hellhounds or the Merlins (sorcerers descended from the original Merlin) who surround Bree that are the most dangerous. She does find that she is able to form some level of protection from those dangers by joining up with the Scions of the Knights of the Round Table and their Pages, but she is not able to shield herself from various acts of racism that assail her throughout the novel. This is the unique positioning of contemporary fantasy as a genre: it enables readers to enjoy the magic of high fantasy, but the world building is based in our lived reality. For Bree, this means “world building race,” a concept that authors such as Deonn, L.L. McKinney and Bethany C. Morrow are fond of discussing. Deonn explains the added pressure of taking space to ground the lived experiences of one’s *Black* character in fantasy in this excerpt from an interview with *Dreaming in the Dark*:

...When you write fantasy, particularly contemporary fantasy, world building is important in fantasy as a genre anyway, and there's all sorts of...there's a gajillion websites and resources on how do you world build well? But people don't talk about world building identity. They don't talk about what it means to really world build cultural identity into the book, and you know, I talked about this with L.L. McKinney [author of *A Blade So Black*]...if you're writing contemporary fantasy and you have a main character who's a modern day Black girl, who she is and how she moves through space...because we're writing in traditional publishing, an industry that does not have primarily Black women

readers, editors, nothing, so we know that the white gaze is going to be on the book. I'm not writing for the white gaze, but I'm aware of it at all times, Justina Ireland says that.

27:04 But when you write contemporary fantasy, you have to allot for the things that are gonna matter to this character, not every reader is gonna understand right away. And so I do think that...I saw myself trying to, not front load it, though I think there's quite a lot at the beginning, but make sure consistently where it would naturally come up for me, that I looked different in that space, naturally come up that my hair would get messy, naturally come up that, you know, how you're gonna feel when you walk into a very old building in the South and you're like, "This building was built in slavery times, no one else is thinking about who built this but I'm thinking about, 'Who built this?' Okay." To build in Black awareness in the scene and have that be just as consistent as all of the fantasy and magic I built in. (Deonn)

World building race in *Legendborn*, for example, means that after a demon battle, Bree has to have “Wash Day,” a process that can take several hours— often a whole day— and one which she was not planning to have to engage in for a few days, all because she has demon goop in her hair. This pays tribute to the fact that proper care and attention to Black hair involves a multistep process—everything from detangling, sectioning of the hair to make the washing process more thorough, deep conditioning, and ensuring it dries. Bree, as a Black character, has a different set of

concerns surrounding the care of her hair than her white counterparts in the novel and Deonn takes care to acknowledge that as such, Bree's response would be different to the knowledge that her hair has been soiled.

This means acknowledging the fact that her Blackness will have a strong impact on the way that she engages with the Order. As a secret society at a Southern Predominantly White Institution (PWI), the members of the Order are primarily white, including Nick Davis, Bree's love interest. Nick spends much of the novel trying desperately to protect Bree from the trials of racism without truly understanding what he is fighting:

“And then there's the fact that no one else here looks like me.”

Nick follows my gaze, sees what I see— a room full of white kids, not a person of color in sight— and grimaces. His jaw sets in a hard line. “If someone says something to you, anything, let me know. I'll put a stop to it.”

I look at Nick's face. He is so certain that he understands what I'm facing.

(Deonn, 91-92)

In short, the form of contemporary fantasy becomes the perfect stage to work out the challenges that Black girls face in reality because they give the magical Black girls the power to decide other options for dealing with real life oppression. It becomes a matter of agency.

Deonn speaks of this agency as critical to her writing process. It was important for her as a writer to have a Black girl protagonist who made choices— often poor

ones— but she was in charge of each decision, and each led to another. In another excerpt from Deonn’s *Dreaming in the Dark* interview, she explains the importance of her Black girl protagonist having agency in her novel:

...So the way that I write fiction, one of the rules of thumb that I have adopted for myself—everyone should have their own rules of thumb, doesn't have to look like everybody else's—but I think there's some things that if I can hang on to them as my own anchor that's helpful.

One of them is: **agency matters** and that my main characters' actions must drive the plot. So if you track Bree's choices in the book, she makes good choices, bad choices, but they tend to lead to the next thing and the next thing and the next thing and the next thing. And if she made different choices then the plot wouldn't actually move anywhere. And I wanted to show that that type of agency in a story could also be given to someone who wasn't perfect and also that the engine of a story being fueled by a Black girl's 'negative feelings/emotions' is also valid. (Deonn)

This insistence on agency changes the way we think about what we, Black girl readers, critics and fans, want to see in fantasy narratives. Implicit in what Deonn states is that it is not simply enough to have a Black girl be present in the narrative—it is a question of what she *does* and is able to do in the narrative.

This question of how Black girls are inserted into predominately white YA fantasy

narratives is one which literacy scholar, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, takes up in *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. A longtime advocate of the importance of studying children's literature, and a self-proclaimed fan girl who has used the internet for community since the 90s, Thomas' monograph explores what typically happens to Black girls when they are introduced in white narratives. They often enter into what she names the Dark Fantastic cycle: spectacle, hesitation, violence, haunting and emancipation (Thomas 2019). In these instances—Thomas uses the case studies of Rue from *The Hunger Games*, BBC *Merlin's* Gwen, *The Vampire Diaries'* Bonnie Bennett, and *Harry Potter's* Hermione Granger—the Black girls are often *not* written with their agency in mind, which means that they will inevitably fall victim to this cycle. When Black girls are not written for themselves, but rather as props for other characters and plots, the result is spectacle, the idea joy at having a Black person represented; hesitation, as it becomes clear that these narratives are unsure how to proceed with this character's particular lived experience in mind; followed by violence and/or death, in which the easiest option is to push the character out of the narrative.

I would argue that falling victim to the Dark Fantastic cycle is both a result of white writers introducing Black characters into a narrative without spinning out the possible culturally specific experiences of the Black character, and of introducing Black characters individually. Part of the violence that gets inflicted on these characters is a result of not having a community of figures with a shared experience that can help them through the narrative. *Legendborn's* Bree exerts an enormous amount of agency throughout the novel, but as a consequence of infiltrating this

particular all white space with the goal of finding out the truth about her mother's death, she foregoes any potential alliances with other Black characters. *Legendborn* takes seriously the issue of legacy and ancestry, but in the present moment, Bree often faces her challenges headfirst— and alone.

This, however, is not the case across the board in 2020's YA fantasy for Black girls. Bethany C. Morrow's *A Song Below Water* also considers the importance of ancestry and legacy, but also highlights how critical sisterhood and community building amongst Black girls is in the present moment. California born author, Bethany C. Morrow's 2020 YA contemporary fantasy novel, *A Song Below Water*, compliments Deonn's *Legendborn* as Morrow's text focuses on the legacies that create and support contemporary networks of sisterhood among Black girls. The novel volleys back and forth between the voices of sister friends, Tavia and Effie—a known siren and a...*something* unknown at the beginning of the novel, respectively.

The book begins with Tavia attempting to connect with her grandmother, explaining that the way for living sirens to communicate with their dead was through water. "The story goes," Tavia narrates, "that sirens originated by the water, that once we used our calls to damn seamen, and that when we die, our voices return to the sea. If the mythos is to be believed...I should be able to hear my grandmother here" (Morrow 9). Water here, and elsewhere in Black diasporic traditions, becomes a connection to the ancestors, a connection between past lives. As Black Atlantic historian and digital humanities scholar, Jessica Marie Johnson writes, "For women and girls pushed into *la traversée* [crossing the Middle Passage], forging kingship ties and protecting the most intimate parts of their lives became perilous, desperate, and,

for many, ended only in death." (79). The bonds that Black women and girls crafted in and around water were strong, the kind of strength that only develops when lives are at stake. And though Johnson points to the heartbreaking reality that these bonds often ended in death, it was necessary work on how Black women and girls could care for each other.

It is also of particular note that given the strong relationship Black women and girls historically have with water, that this is the method of communication for sirens in Morrow's world—sirens are *only* Black women. "My problem," Tavia narrates, "is that for a long time sirens have been Black women. Not just mostly. Exclusively. Now that it's just us, the romance is dead. Instead of inspiring songs and stories, now our calls inspire defensive anger. Our power's not enchanting or endearing anymore; it offends" (Morrow 29). The power that Tavia speaks of here is voice—the siren's song, so to speak. But as Tavia notes, Black girls who dare to use their voices are often silenced. Violently. This is the dilemma that plagues Tavia throughout the book: whether or not to embrace her identity as a siren and use her voice.

Many different factors impact her relationship to her voice. Her father spends much of the book telling her to keep her head down and not to attract attention to herself. Tavia excuses his behavior away as care for her well-being. In the first chapter, Morrow establishes that the stakes are high for sirens. Sirens are viewed as dangerous and therefore must absolutely be silenced. The murder of siren Rhoda Taylor sets the events of the novel into motion as Tavia realizes viscerally that what happened to Rhoda could happen to her if she doesn't learn to make herself small. The problem of her father's "respectability politics" follows her throughout the narrative,

nagging at her any time Tavia thinks about being her truest self (Higginbotham).¹¹ But Tavia has her gospel choir, which is comprised of girls who are part of the network, "communities inside the Black community, where sirens are known and protected" (Morrow 26). It is the one place where she can be the truest expression of herself; she can use her voice: "While they sing, my call blends safely between their three-part harmony so that I don't have to live my life in silence" (Morrow 26). This is a place outside her friendship with Effie that Tavia can occupy as a very full version of herself.

Finally, there is the "relationship" she has with Black beauty YouTuber, Camilla Fox. "Relationship" in quotations because there is not a reciprocal exchange between the two girls and they don't know each other in person in the text, but Camilla's presence is deeply impactful in Tavia's life, even though she is not immediately able to pinpoint why. She develops a kinship with this girl who she knows through the digital, which only deepens when Camilla reveals her secret: she, too, is a siren. Equally impacted by the way sirens are treated, referring specifically to the murder of Rhoda

¹¹ "Respectability politics" is a phrase derived from a term coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. While Higginbotham's original scope referred to Black middle class church women's desire to be seen as respectable to white society, the phrase is often used contemporarily to explain moments when Black people diminish themselves and their ordinary habits for the sake of being deemed "proper" and "acceptable." Higginbotham's original conception of this as follows: "Duty-bound to teach the value of religion, education, and hard work, the women of the black Baptist church adhered to a politics of respectability that equated public behavior with individual self-respect and the advancement of African Americans as a group. They felt certain that 'respectable' behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals" (14).

Taylor, Camilla decides to step into her truth, knowing the dangers that potentially await her.

In these two examples, we see commonalities. We see a commitment to the agency of Deonn and Morrow's Black girl protagonists, while being firmly situated and belonging to communities that extend legacies far beyond them. They work to write with an eye on realistic experiences unique to Black folks and balancing the relationships Black people often have with white people, while developing fantastic world-systems. Their works do not use fantasy as a vehicle to escape, but to hold up a mirror to contemporary political and social issues. From the work of literacy theorists like Rudine Sims Bishop and Stephanie Toliver, we know that fantasy as genre can in fact be used as mirrors for Black children to see themselves in. It can also be used to understand the world they live in.

Conclusion

In April 2020, the website and creative hub for Black girl writers, aptly titled, "Black Girls Create," hosted a #KuumbaKickback—a pair of panels moderated by some of the site's leaders and featuring an all-star lineup of Black women who debuted, or planned to debut their young adult fantasy novels in 2020.¹² Nandi Taylor, Jordan Ifueko, Namina Forna, Roseanne A. Brown, Kalynn Bayron, Tracy Deonn, and Bethany C. Morrow virtually gathered on Black Girls Create's YouTube channel to

¹² Since the panel, Namina Forna's book, *The Gilded Ones*, release date was shifted to 2021, in part due to the Coronavirus Pandemic.

discuss their books, why fantasy in particular matters and what it means to have this contingent of Black writers and Black new protagonists leading the way into the 2020s. During the panels, Deonn called this moment and the ideas coming out of these writers, "revolutionary."¹³ On the importance of fantasy, Namina Forna, author of the forthcoming *The Gilded Ones*, said, "it's a place in which you can disappear, in which you can deal with things you might not have the wherewithal to deal with."¹⁴ Morrow ties in the diasporic element of these set of stories. She comes to her novel as a self-proclaimed, "West Coast Black Girl," and while Morrow celebrates the magical narratives based in West African and Caribbean tradition, she is insistent that we don't forget about Black Americans in this, who may not have strong ties to the larger Diaspora. "American Black people," she reminds us, "do have their own particular brand of magic."¹⁵

These seven women provide a few lessons to consider. First, despite this large (relative compared to years prior) cohort of Black women writers, this is still not the norm. We should constantly make conscious efforts to reform the publishing industry to help more writers of color break in and publish their stories. Further, support should be distributed amongst many, rather than one individual so as not to isolate creators of color coming into the industry. Second, they are a case study in going further together, which is a sentiment at the core, in some respects, of Black feminism. They build

^{NOTE_LABEL} <https://shelit.com/2020/04/08/black-fantasy-ya-authors-discuss-how-they-are-revolutionizing-the-genre/>

^{NOTE_LABEL} <http://blackgirlscreate.org/features/2020/4/kuumba-kickback-black-girls-fantasy-worlds>; <https://shelit.com/2020/04/08/black-fantasy-ya-authors-discuss-how-they-are-revolutionizing-the-genre/>

^{NOTE_LABEL} <https://shelit.com/2020/04/08/black-fantasy-ya-authors-discuss-how-they-are-revolutionizing-the-genre/>

community, offer support, and rally around each other's works. This sort of networking is not new at all, but in fact, characteristic, I would argue, of Black women writers circles. In the last three years, Black women writers have lost giants such as Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Cheryl A. Wall, and bell hooks. We often speak of *community* in the Black feminist tradition; but it has not been so conspicuous as in the wake of the deaths of some of the women who have propelled this thought forward. These authors were dedicated to supporting each other through, and to training and bringing in new generations of writers and thinkers, often working as educators or editors in addition to their publishing records. These new YA fantasy writers are moving in much the same way as their Black feminist foremothers.

And while we are moving forward in diversifying science fiction and fantasy narratives for Black children, in particular, Black girls, the authors who are trailblazing, are not forgetting the creators who made a way for this plethora of invigorating storytelling. In an anthology published in March 2020, editor Patrice Caldwell makes sure to note where the title of the book, *A Phoenix First Must Burn*, originates. In *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia E. Butler writes, "In order to rise from its own ashes, a phoenix first must burn." Caldwell tells readers that she found herself in Butler's words: "And I'm not the only one," she writes in the collection's introduction (1). Indeed, Caldwell's anthology incorporates the voice of many: Afro-Latina writers, West African storytellers, Southern Black American griots, Caribbean messengers, Indigenous voices, non-binary and queer raconteurs. And all of these authors brought to the collection stories that went to space, far away realms, the future, the distant past, to oceans and the sun. There is space, Caldwell proves, in the breadth

and quality of stories she curated for the anthology, for all of the stories we as Black women and girls, hold inside of us.

As Bethany C. Morrow said in the Black Girls Create #KuumbaKickback, "There's room for all of us."

And I believe that.

Chapter 2:

Technomagic Girlhood

Introduction

When Marvel comics introduced Riri Williams, the young Black girl from Chicago poised to become the protégée of the franchise’s billionaire technogenius Tony Stark (Iron Man) in 2015, it met a lot of resistance from fans—but not for the reason one might think. In a July 2016 article for popular culture-oriented media site, *Vulture*, comics fan Abraham Riesman wrote:

“Why should we be prioritizing white, male creators’ takes when a nonwhite, non-male character is put in the foreground? Aren’t we losing a tremendous opportunity by not having people who look like those characters tell their stories? And isn’t it frustrating that, as theblerdgirl noted, a black woman won’t pick up the paycheck for a story about a black girl, especially after Marvel has reaped so much goodwill and praise for introducing one?”
(Reisman)

The article pinpoints a tension that would remain as celebrated white comics writer, Brian Michael Bendis, is credited with the creation of the young Marvel superhero, Riri Williams, who would take on the name “Ironheart.” As Riesman argues, yes, perhaps even having Riri at all should be celebrated—but at what cost? What do we lose when our focus is visibility, and not representation?

This frustrating paradox is something that fantasy scholar Bezawit (Bezi) Yohannes tackles in her master’s thesis. She argues that the terms, “diversity,” “representation,” and “visibility,” which are often used interchangeably, are

importantly distinct (Yohannes 9). In her thesis, which explores the impact of colorblind casting of Black girls in fantasy media, she explains that “[‘colorblind’] visibility is media and art can allow those who have never seen themselves [in media] to fantasize, to dream, in what seems like new and exciting ways...” but “colorblind casting merely places Black female characters onscreen in roles created for or originated by white people, and that is not *representation*” (Yohannes 10). Here, we are not dealing with colorblind casting; but we are dealing with colorblind writing as Bendis is responsible for shaping the character of young Riri Williams, giving comics fans the visibility they desire, but not the representation.

This ongoing frustration does not begin to resolve until Marvel hired Dr. Eve L. Ewing, a Black woman sociologist, poet and Chicago native to write the new Riri Williams solo project (Frevele). Ewing would write twelve issues of *Riri Williams: Ironheart* from late 2018 to late 2019, using those issues to reorient Riri and to unchain some of the weight amassed from Bendis’ writing, which will be explored in more detail in the next section.

In May 2021, I was able to conduct an interview with Ewing, for *Catapult Magazine*. As a piece for the magazine’s “Don’t Write Alone” vertical, the interview questions for the writer were primarily focused on craft. However, given my interest in her role in reclaiming Riri’s story, and my inability to contain my excitement as a burgeoning writer about getting to talk with a literary heroine, I asked a question about the implications of getting to write Black girls who, when touched by a combination of science, technology and a dash of magic, fly.

Dr. Ewing replied:

“They fly! It’s so cool, right? I definitely want to address the first part of what you said, which is that there’s a lot of Black girl STEM content. I think that’s great, but I think that one risk that I would invite creators to attend to is that people are drawn to the idea of Black girls in STEM, which on the one hand is definitely important representation that I care about and is powerful.

On the other hand, if that becomes the only mode through which we see Black girls, that’s also a problem. Specifically, the trope of the Black girl STEM superhero. I love *Ironheart*, I love Riri, but Shuri and Riri and Moon Girl are all science geniuses, you know? How does that reinforce certain limited notions about what Black intelligence or Black genius has to look like? How does that play into capitalist-driven conversation about Black girls in coding or Black girls’ participation in science fields” (Ewing)?

Ewing here references the non-profit organization, Black Girls CODE founded by Kimberly Bryant. Black feminist communications and digital media scholar Catherine Knight Steele contextualizes the organization in the introduction to her book *Digital Black Feminism*, explaining that the group prioritizes technology literacy for Black girls while arguing that Black women have a long standing digital expertise already (2). While this conception of a Black girl science genius is in theory a more subjectively positive depiction, Ewing’s commentary underscores the importance of showcasing multiple forms of Black girlhood and Black girls’ individual creativities and genius. As Steele continues, she references a quote from sociologist, Afrofuturist thinker and now Deputy Director for Science and Society in the Biden White House Office of Science and Technology, Alondra Nelson: ““Black girls code, and then what? Do we want to send these young women into Silicon Valley to toxic work environments?”” (Nelson, 2020). As these sentiments argue, equally dangerous as the absence of Black girls or harmful representation in media, is limited representation, as well as those that may obscure the reality of what participating in these fields may be.

This chapter explores the delicate line between depictions of scientifically-

gifted-bordering-on-magical Black girls as liberatory or as stereotypical, in particular when it feeds into the trope of the Magical Negro. It uses the contemporary Marvel comics superhero, Riri Williams (a.k.a. Ironheart) with brief interludes featuring *Black Panther's* Shuri, as case studies.¹⁶ I argue that the delineation is one that is decided primarily by agency: how much control over their depiction do Black girls have? Who is the audience? What is the goal of the author in writing this story? Additionally, I argue for the creation of a term which helps Black girls self-define the parameters of their own engagement with the intersections of magic and technology: *technomagic girlhood*.

It also argues that the comic book is a form that mirrors multimodal means of Black women and girls' collective knowledge production and that Eve L. Ewing does similar reclamation work as those who try to build out the world of Afrofuturism. The comic book form is a new media narrative that draws upon the literary legacies that are detailed in the introduction and chapter one. Eve Ewing as a multimedia artist scholar is made possible by a tradition of Black women's discipline and genre defying artists who wrote our truths in all their complexity. I argue that this lineage continues to make space for multimedia artist scholars of new generations, like myself.

¹⁶ Shuri, a character whose creation is attributed to Black comics writer Reginald Hudlin in the mid-2000s, is the Wakandan Prince T'Challa's (better known as the superhero Black Panther) younger sister. Shuri becomes a staple to Black Panther comics, but reaches wider audiences with her appearance in the 2018 film *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler. She is often depicted as a science genius who runs technological development in their fictional country of Wakanda.

The Origin Story: From Bendis to Ewing and Beyond

Literary scholar Kiana T. Murphy provides context for which readers may understand the short history and significance of the Black girl superhero, Riri Williams, also known as Ironheart. In her essay for *The Black Scholar's* 2020 special issue on Black girlhood, Murphy explains how crafting a Black girl heroine was challenging for Marvel. Beginning with her introduction as a character in Marvel writer Brian Michael Bendis' *Invincible Iron Man* in 2015 as a protégée to Tony Stark (Iron Man), Riri's backstory, Murphy argues, "relies on pathological and caricatured examinations of Black life in his attempt to render an 'authentic' representation of Black girlhood and Black urban space...." (31). Here Murphy is referring to Riri's Chicago origin, which Bendis depicts as uniquely violent and traumatic, reflected in the decision to have Riri's father *and* stepfather, as well as her best friend, killed by gun violence—and she is barely a teenager.

Eve L. Ewing, who would write what Murphy argues is a corrective vision of Riri from the point of view of a native Chicagoan Black girl/woman, addresses the difficulty of portraying Chicago in her *Catapult* interview:

"But also, I think that Chicago is [chuckles] . . . it's a rough place. It's a rough place to live in a lot of ways. I think that when you come from a rough place, it's like, well what are the options? And when I say it's a rough place, I mean that in a lot of vectors, including the harm that other people do with the gaze that they imbue upon the city—the way people talk about the city who aren't from here. There's a kind of hopelessness that can come from that. But there's another possibility, which is to be compelled to think creatively about what else is possible" (Ewing).

Here, Ewing invites the reader to consider what gazes colored by perceptions of

racialized thinking can do to our imaginations. She both acknowledges that Chicago as a place can be a difficult space to inhabit because of the circumstances from within the city itself, but it can be limiting based on what stifling misconceptions others have about it. Perhaps unintentionally, Ewing argues for self-definition—letting those from a particular place or identity speak about it, because those who live it know that it is not exceptional to imagine other possibilities.

Part of the difficulty with Riri Williams is this gaze that results from a combination of different vectors: there is her hometown, her girl-ness, her Blackness and her genius. As Murphy suggests, Bendis' Riri is positioned as “exceptional”—the genius Black girl who made it out of Chicago, who made a way out of no way by attending Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) at age fifteen. This is perhaps another understanding of Black girl adultification. According to the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's report, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, adultification is the reducing or removing of the consideration of childhood as a mediating factor in Black youths' behavior (Epstein et. Al 2). The report goes on to say that adultification of Black girls can take two particular forms: either “a process of socialization, in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity, especially in low-resource community environments” or “a social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children ‘in the absence of knowledge of children's behavior and verbalizations’” (Epstein et. Al 4). I argue that Bendis' crafting of the character Riri Williams as exceptional, which relies deeply on racial stereotypes, denies her of her childhood and, as Murphy argues, adultifies her.

This is also shown not only in Riri's origin story but in her character design as well. In a close reading of the cover for the *Invincible Iron Man: Ironheart* series, Murphy notes that Riri is drawn in a way which overly sexualizes the fifteen-year-old girl. She and the authors of *Girlhood Interrupted* remind us that these images are how many people chose to see Black girls—lacking innocence from a very young age. While much has been written about the stereotypes of Black women in media from slavery to Jim Crow to present, these “controlling images,” which Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins names as such, these scholars are beginning to argue that this distorted vision of gendered Blackness begins in childhood (Collins; Murphy; Epstein et. al). From childhood historian Robin Bernstein's work on racial innocence, we know that the process of removing innocence from Black childhood but associating it with white childhood was strategic, not something that came about as natural. Innocence is an active performance of not knowing, Bernstein argues; therefore, one is able to choose whose performance of this is acknowledged as such. This then begs the question: what role, if any, does the presence of technology and its relationship to magic do to solidify Black girls' sense of self and identity?

Technomagic Girlhood: Families of Flight

I argue that the Black girls' bildungsroman of the twenty-first century borrows characteristics from the genre, but finds a particular unique definition when merged with fantastic and digital elements. I call this intersection of Black girlhood, technology and magic where the elements of the bildungsroman come out to play

technomagic girlhood.

Technomagic girlhood, as I conceptualize it, has two intertwined points of origin: #BlackGirlMagic, originally coined as #BlackGirlsAreMagic by CaShawn Thompson in 2013, and scholar Moya Bailey's term digital alchemy. As Thompson describes #BlackGirlMagic in a 2019 interview with writer and activist, Feminista Jones, the idea of Black Girl Magic derives in part from growing up and internalizing "Black is Beautiful." It designates a love of self, with no additional qualifications or justification. Black Girl Magic reaffirms the notion that we are both enough and infinite in the same breath. Add the hashtag, and one begins to ask questions about what it means to be enough and infinite in the digital.

Digital alchemy comes from Moya Bailey's 2015 article, "#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics." The article, in which Bailey describes the process of conducting ethical digital research, considers, "the ways that women of color, Black women in particular, transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic that recodes failed dominant scripts." The idea that Black women— or in this case, Black girls— can use digital media in a way that has a magical essence, begins to answer the question I posed a paragraph above: what does it mean to be enough and infinite in the digital? These two concepts together form the basis of technomagic girlhood: the ways Black girls use technology and digital media to engineer spaces for themselves to exist as both enough and infinite. It involves digital alchemy, with a dash of Afrofuturism and the creative potential of Black girlhood (to lean on a phrase from Black girlhood scholar, Ruth Nicole Brown). It is the practical ways twenty-first century Black girls

understand the depth of their own possibilities and freedoms, which because of our moment necessarily includes digital elements, and the magical essence therewithin.

This conception of technomagic girlhood plays out most clearly in comics that center Black girls: Riri Williams for example. Riri Williams, a character created by writer Brian Michael Bendis, [conflicted some comics fans when she was introduced in 2016](#). There are concerning elements of Riri's story: violence is core to her upbringing; it leans on stereotypes of Black children lacking father figures; and though clearly a "supergenius," Riri is more or less friendless. These are all issues that Harvard trained sociologist and poet, Eve L. Ewing, reconsiders when she pens the Marvel girl genius for *Riri Williams: Ironheart*. In Ewing's run, Riri is accompanied by a steadfast friend, Xavier, as well as a few others, despite her desire to self-isolate as a result of the violence that claimed the lives of her father, stepfather, and best friend, Natalie. She attends Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but interactions with upper administration early on in the series show us that Riri feels caged and on display at the institution, which leaves her but with one option: to escape. Because of Riri's affinity for technology, she can engineer herself a means to do precisely that: she can engineer herself the ability to fly.

Flight itself is a long-standing motif in African American literature and folktales. In the final pages of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the titular character takes flight; Nikki Giovanni ends her iconic poem "Ego Tripping" with the lines, "I mean...I...can fly/like a bird in the sky..."; and for generations Black Americans have passed down versions of the folktale, "The People Could Fly," notably featured in Virginia Hamilton's eponymous 1985 collection. In a 2021 interview, Eve L. Ewing

says of flight in Riri's narrative that, "it's the governing metaphor of Black poetics in all different genres and forms going back to the days of enslavement. Specifically, I would say flight—this is really unoriginal—but flight and water are two governing metaphors that are important to me and important to a lot of Black people" (Ewing). It is the ultimate liberation. So when Riri Williams, a fifteen-year-old Black girl from Chicago, takes flight; it is another link in a celebrated chain of generations of Black people who have "surrendered to the wind" and "rode it" (*Song of Solomon*).

The catch here is that Riri engineers this ability. While I maintain that she likely could simply fly on the strength of her resolve, Riri's escape is calculated by creating a version of Tony Stark's Ironman suit that befits her needs. Tony Stark flew out of desire; Riri Williams flies out of necessity. For teenaged Riri, who has lived a life of loss and grief, and continues to live one of hyper surveillance, her well-being hinges on her ability to craft spaces for her mind to be free, and many of those are connected to the digital. The Ironheart suit that can propel her skyward is one possibility, but she also, notably, creates an artificial intelligence program that can take the form of her passed best friend: N.A.T.A.L.I.E. In N.A.T.A.L.I.E., Riri is able to use technology to memorialize her friend, a sort of external processing of her grief.

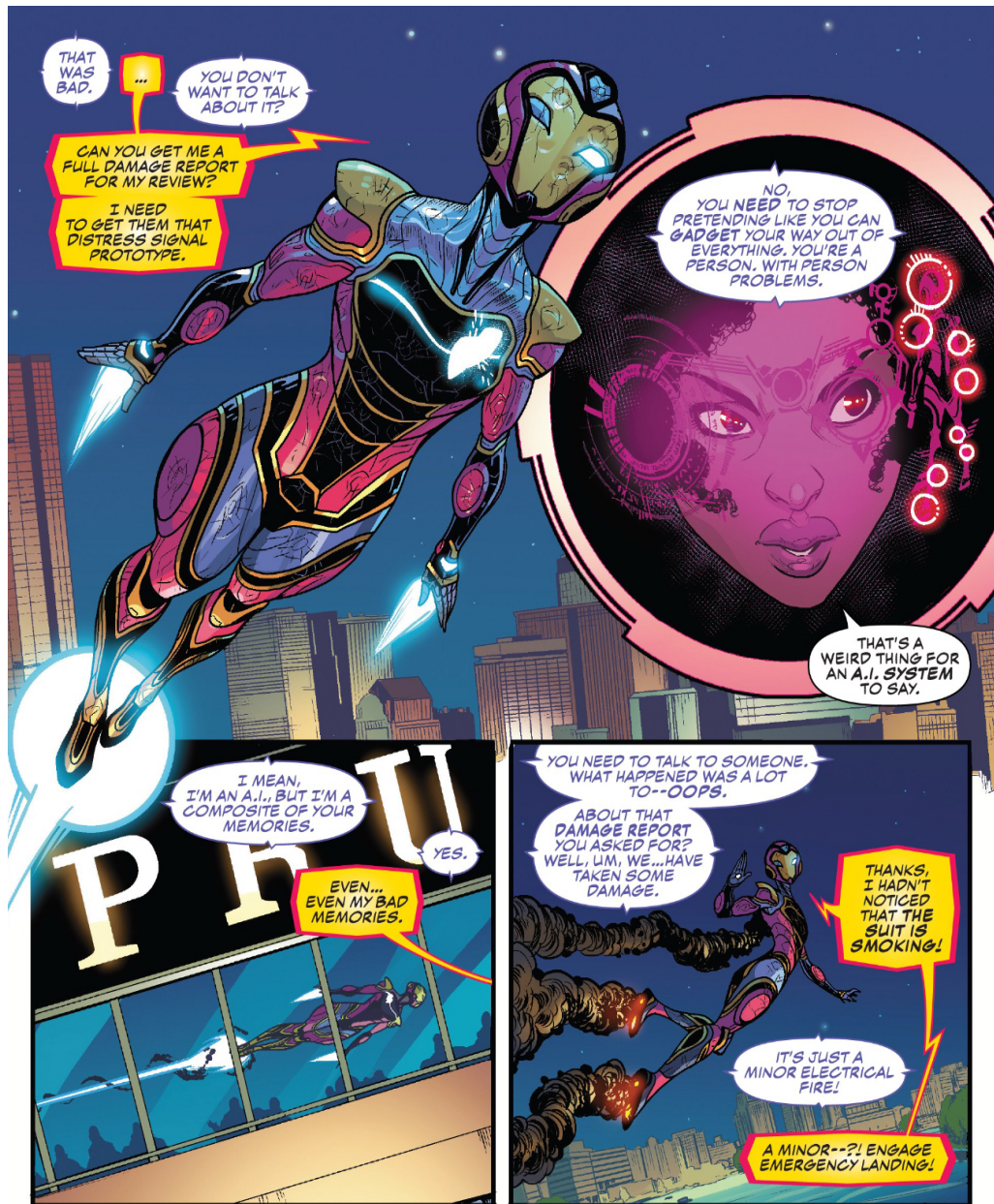


Figure 2. Page from Eve L. Ewing's *Ironheart* #2 (Art by Luciano Vecchio)

The page in Figure 2 shows an in-text example of how the lines of Black girlhood, technology, magic, self and memory become very blurry. In issue two of *Riri Williams: Ironheart*, N.A.T.A.L.I.E. reminds Riri: “You **need** to stop pretending like you can **gadget** your way out of everything. You’re a person, with person

problems” (Ewing). Everything in Riri’s life can be resolved with the right code, the right tool, the right invention—or so she thinks. It gives her a sense of agency in a world where much is out of her control. Riri asserts her agency with technology by combining it with her emotions and memories to create this next to magical companion; in a panel lower on the same page, N.A.T.A.L.I.E. reminds the reader that “... I’m an A. I. [artificial intelligence], but I’m a composite of your memories.” Through this act of digital alchemy, one of the primary characteristics of technomagic girlhood, Riri is able to restore parts of her childhood, herself. When computer theorist and early media scholar Alan Turing asked the question, “Can machines think?” in his 1950 *Mind* article, he likely could not have imagined a world where a young Black girl from Chicago would complicate that question even further.

Remembering Black girls in the age of social media has gotten complicated. While we can certainly use hashtags, for example, to amplify causes and connect and support each other, technology runs the risk of turning us from humans into another ghost in the machine. The death of Breonna Taylor was quickly turned into a viral hashtag meant to bring attention to her murder and evolved into countless iterations of viral memes. Culture writer Mary Retta writes:

“...The memeification of Taylor’s story has not only disrespected her legacy, but has driven public opinion further away from achieving justice: Most of the memes about Taylor have focused on arresting the police officers who killed her rather than insisting on pursuing the abolitionist practices that Black women have historically championed, proving once more that these memes are oversimplifying Taylor’s story and are not in her best interest.” (Retta)

Natalie, in the Ironheart world, was also lost to violence, but Ewing is careful to pay tribute to Riri's friend through technology in a way that is respectful to both Natalie's life and Riri's grief while also encapsulating the (digital) magic of Black girlhood. It feels genuine that technophile Riri would externalize her sorrow and that it would manifest in this digital form.

Other Black girls from comics fit this tradition of mixing magic and technology in Marvel comics. Shuri, the younger sister of the Black Panther, is one of the best known. In recent years, the young Wakandan princess, and the technological genius' creative team, has come to include some intellectual and creative Black women powerhouses. Award winning and critically acclaimed Africanfuturist writer, Nnedi Okorafor, penned the *Shuri* solo comic run in 2018, which followed the princess of Wakanda as the protagonist rather than an enthusiastic accomplice. Nic Stone, author of the New York Times Bestseller, *Dear Martin*, released the first of a series of middle grade novels featuring a character in 2020 of the same name; and Roseanne A. Brown, who debuted in 2020 with the young adult fantasy novel, *A Song of Wraiths and Ruin*, will be writing a forthcoming young Shuri graphic novel for children.

Shuri is best known for her position as the head of Wakandan technological advancement from the 2018 *Black Panther* film. Like Riri, in Stone's *Shuri* novel, Shuri's technological prowess also leads her to create an anthropomorphized A.I. unit, named after her: S.H.U.R.I ("Super Heroics Universal Remote Interface" [205]). While the ability to create this unit is a clear demonstration of both Riri's and Shuri's intellectual abilities, which should be celebrated, it should also give us pause. If we remember Ewing's quotation from the introduction to this chapter, which encourages

readers to question why the only type of Black girl we see in media is the “science genius,” one could read these A.I. units as stand-ins for human friendship. It sends the message that Black girls are, or at least can be, difficult to befriend. But for Ewing and Stone, it was imperative that their girl geniuses had friends. Stone created the character K’Marah to accompany Shuri on her adventures; and Ewing gave Riri a host of new friends, like Xavier and Daija, while also leaning into the relationships she would have with other young heroes like the Afro-Latino Spider-Man, Miles Morales, and Nadia van Dyne, Wasp, as a member of the Marvel teen superhero group, the Champions.

Critical to Shuri’s character is her role as “The Ancient Future.” Her connection with the Wakandan ancestors and spirits as a result of temporarily being trapped in the Djalia (the Wakandan plane of collective memory) is infused with power that includes feats we might consider magic, such as being able to transform into a flock of birds, pictured below (Coates).



Figure 3. The cover of Black Panther #9 by Ta-Nehisi Coates with art by Brian Stelfreeze.

This power, and the responsibility that comes with it, is explored in more depth in celebrated Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism writer Nnedi Okafor's 2018-2019 Shuri solo titled comic. Thus, Shuri, too, becomes another Black girl who dons wings. These girls (and critically acclaimed science fiction writer N.K. Jemisin's Black woman Green Lantern, Jo Muellein [2019-2021]) are the latest in a long line of flying Black girls in comics. One need not look further than the iconic "Weather Witch," Ororo Monroe, the X-Men's Storm, or Monica Rambeau, the superhero Captain Marvel/Photon/Spectrum, who also flies both within and outside of her superhero

persona as a pilot. Comics writer and popular historian, Stephanie Williams, pens a useful history of Monica for the Marvel website that takes the reader from her inception in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual #16* in 1964 up to her 2015 presence in *Ultimates*. After Monica Rambeau's conception in the 1970s, there was, as literary scholar and comics historian Deborah Elizabeth Whaley notes, the Black superhero "The Butterfly," better known as Marian Michaels (4). Of course, the flying Black girl motif is powered by real life Afro-Indigenous pilot, Bessie Coleman (1892-1926).

Flight is not the only manifestation or expression of technomagic girlhood; it simply is most apparent in narratives where Black girls fly. Other manifestations of technomagic girlhood that, by definition, include some type of digital alchemy, may include narratives of transformation or even representations of cyborgs. This is a place where I may stretch Bailey's definition of digital alchemy, which as we remember is how Black [girls] "transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic," to include things outside of digital media, such as machines themselves. We may think of Jane McKeene from Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation* duology and her transformation at the end of the second book, *Deathless Divide*, where Jane's lost arm is replaced with a mechanical one. A current example may be Diana from the HBO television show inspired by science fiction writer Matt Ruff's novel of the same name, *Lovecraft Country*. The protagonist Atticus Freeman's younger cousin is transformed into a cyborg in the season one finale. In these particular cases, though, perhaps the embodiment of technology becomes more of a necessity of survival, rather than an expression of true freedom.

This leads to the question: does technomagic girlhood break the Dark Fantastic

cycle? Ebony Elizabeth Thomas theorizes the Dark Fantastic cycle in her 2019 book, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. Thomas notes that many Black girls in fantasy narratives, particularly ones written by and for white audiences, become victims to violence. They are a (1) spectacle that gives readers and pause (2: hesitation), only for them to be the victims of harm (3: violence) and/or death. Some Black girls linger and become a (4) haunting presence in these narratives (consider, for example, how *The Hunger Games*' Rue's whistle becomes the rallying cry for a revolution after her death). And if they are lucky, they may make it out somehow (5: emancipation), but more often than not the cycle ends with their death, and the cycle begins anew with another victim.

What I have written and proposed here actually extends the Dark Fantastic Cycle in some ways, by showing how Black girls engineer their own flights (emancipation) through expressions of technomagic girlhood. But what we want is Black girls in fantasy narratives who do not have to exist in this cycle at all, and they can go directly to flight, or emancipation. Riri does fall victim to the Dark Fantastic Cycle, and so does Natalie. Between the two of them, they represent spectacle and hesitation (Riri), as well as violence and haunting (Natalie), but only one of them gets to experience emancipation. We deserve stories where Black girls can fly for flight's sake, because it is simply a necessary part of our coming of age. This does not suggest that all we need are stories of Black girls flying. We need all the various types of stories to exist together if we are truly committed to the fullest representations of the heterogeneity of Black girlhood.

The Magical Negro No More

In *Digital Black Feminism*, Catherine Knight Steele argues that Black Girl Magic is “not descriptive of an inexplicable supernatural power possessed by Black women” (7). She cites digital writer, author and scholar, Feminista Jones’ claim that it is simply about *being*; yet when Steele asserts that her book “seeks to unpack the magic of Black women who, particularly in their use of online technology, create possibilities for themselves,” is this not an act of what Moya Bailey would call *digital alchemy* (7)? Bailey defines two types of digital alchemy in her 2021 book, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance*: defensive and generative. While defensive digital alchemy “respond[s] and recalibrate[s] against misogynoir,” generative digital alchemy “is born of an interest in creating new media that appeals to the community from which they come” (Bailey 24-25). It is, as the alchemic element of the name suggests, about *manifestation* and *creation*—the almost intuitive ability to weave something out of nothing; table scraps into delicacies, bits of fabric into quilts. I argue that it is *both* fundamentally mundane and extraordinarily magical.

However, in the same vein as Ewing’s warning about limited representations, we must consistently and rigorously question how we, Black women and girls, are being represented. When do magical Black girls become magical Negroes? When does Black Girl Magic become an expectation of superhuman strength from Black women and girls rather than a celebration of being?

The trope of the Magical Negro appears in a variety of media. Nnedi Okorafor, a

scholar of English and celebrated Africanfuturist writer, takes up the issue of the Magical Negro in literature for an essay in *Strange Horizons*, a notable science fiction and fantasy publication. She recounts learning the term from author Steve Burns and describes the trope/character as one who is "usually depicted as wiser and spiritually deeper than the white protagonist--whose purpose in the plot was to help the protagonist get out of trouble, to help the protagonist realize his own faults and overcome them" ("Steven King's Super-Duper Magical Negroes"). This phenomena occurs often when Black writers and creators are not involved in the creation of the narrative.

Fighting against being minimized as tropes is important when we render people of color in media for Black people, and especially Black women, because it insists on centering our humanity. Political theorist Melissa Harris-Perry explains it best when she writes, "the internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of black women are inherently political...because black women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity" (5). She draws from Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist, novelist and folklorist, later in the introduction, underscoring that Black women are the mules of the earth, a popular quote from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1934). There is a heaviness associated with this constant conflation of perception and who Black women actually are, hence, the metaphor of the mule. It is a burden to carry. Black women thus struggle under the weight of tropes, myths and stereotypes. Again, with this being said, it is understandable why many would approach this theorization of Black girl magic cautiously.

Thus, we return to Ewing’s comment about the gaze those not from Chicago imbue upon her city. It is this same gaze that is directed upon Black women by those who do not know or understand our lives, yet still imagine what they must be like. This gaze is different from film theorist Laura Mulvey’s male gaze, or even the act of intentional looking which visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff popularizes. It is the gaze which fantasy scholar Bezi Yohannes skillfully articulates in her thesis using Toni Morrison’s distinction between “seeing” and “watching” in *Sula* as a guide: “‘Seeing’ is implied to be the act of viewing, whereas ‘watching’ takes what is viewed and interprets it, *participates* in it. ‘Watching’ brings preexisting worldview, critical thought, and cultural values to the text that is viewed” (Yohannes 11, emphasis my own). As non-Black folks *watch* Black people, Black women and girls, they project a fictionalized history onto us. The gaze is informed by Moya Bailey’s misogynoir, which tells us that this gaze is *both* racialized and gendered inextricably. How is it possible to *simply be*, when we are constantly being watched and interpreted—more often than not incorrectly?

Technomagic girlhood takes into account who Black girls are in digital spaces—in spite of this gaze which adultifies and stereotypes Black girls, re-inscribing cycles of harm. It is aware of this gaze, and yet chooses to engage in acts of digital alchemy anyway. In an interview with *Dreaming in the Dark*, *Legendborn* author Tracy Deonn speaks of being a Black woman aware of this gaze: “Because we’re writing in traditional publishing, an industry that does not have primarily Black women readers, editors, nothing, so we know that the white gaze is going to be on the book. I’m not writing for the white gaze, but I’m aware of it at all times, Justina Ireland says that”

(Deonn). Deonn’s insistence on writing *her* book is a declarative act of agency that is fundamentally reflected in a number of choices Bree, her protagonist, is able to make.

When considering the plight of Riri Williams, the difficulty is that her agency as a character is constrained by the limitations of Brian Michael Bendis’ racialized gaze—what he imagines Black girlhood to be: lonely, antagonistic and full of pain and violence. Eve Ewing’s understanding of a Chicago-specific Black girlhood returns agency to Riri. As communications scholar and digital humanist Catherine Knight Steele writes, “Agency, as evoked by digital Black feminists, unsettles the idea that anyone can determine who you are better than you can” (72). I evoke this conception of the digital Black feminist’s principle here because digital Black feminism, along with agency and digital alchemy, are some of the ingredients for an individualized technomagic girl potion (to borrow a turn of phrase from Micah Ariel Watson in Chapter 4). Perhaps Riri Williams tiptoes along the fuzzy line which separates technomagic girls from Magical Negroes, but it is very clear that agency is a defining principle that separates self-identifying as a technomagic girl and being defined as a Magical Negro.

Conclusion

The first issue of *Riri Williams: Ironheart (2018)* is loaded from first sentence to the last panel. In my interview with Ewing for *Catapult*, I asked her about creating such an impactful first issue. She replied:

“Oh, yeah! I mean that’s the whole thing, I mean in comics, the way you sell it

is you get these previews of the first five pages, I mean, that's one of the ways you sell it, by then it's almost kinda too late. [...] Preorders have to be in like months prior, but you know, we release previews of the first five pages the week before and you know, that's what you got. You got those five pages. And then also with *Ironheart*, I was—especially in the beginning—I was operating under the assumption that we might just get one issue. You know what I mean? How can I pack as much as a possibly can into this one issue, not just to captivate people, but because this is already so improbable and wild that this is happening that I need to really make it count.

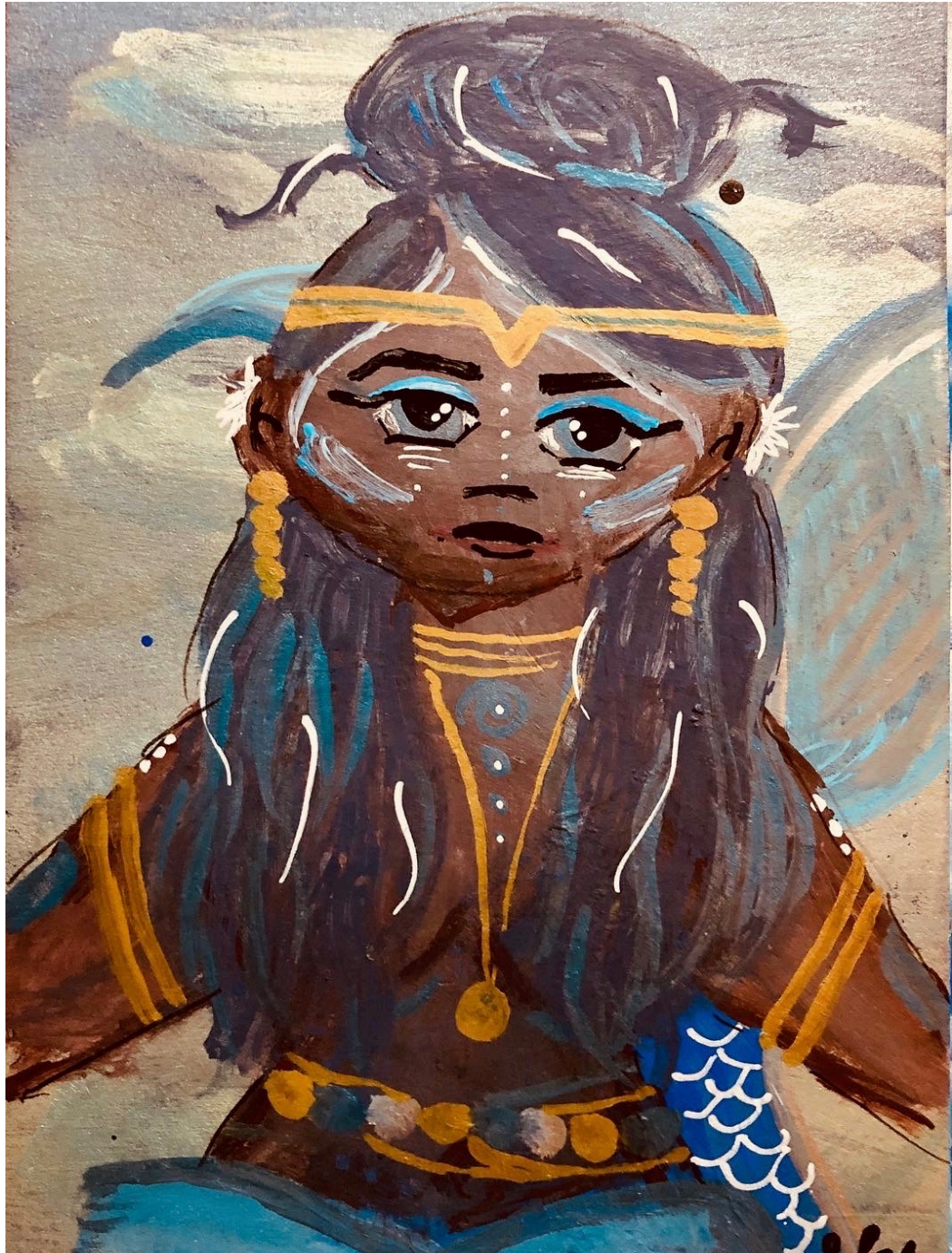
[...] It's funny because on one hand, like I worked obviously in a way [...] I worked harder on that issue than anything else after that because I just had more time. Comics are on this crazy monthly schedule and it's just very hectic and also it was my first one and people were giving me a lot of feedback. But on the other hand, from a writing perspective, I'm like, "This is my worst issue ever." I think that most—especially folks like me, who crossover from other media—like Ta-Nehisi [Coates] would also definitely also say this about his early *Black Panther*, I don't think I'm speaking out of turn by saying...a lot of folks, you look back at the first one and you're like oh my God, you just see all the things you would have done differently, and all the rookie mistakes. And so on the one hand, artistically, I'm like, this is the best thing ever, and then on the other, I'm like, "I would have done this totally differently." But that's kind of the beauty of it! You know, you make something and it lives its life without you and that's that. It captures that moment in time" (Ewing).

In this excerpt, Ewing covers a lot of territory. The assumption that she was signing on for what might be just the one issue is not simply a reaction to the comics market, but an indication of knowing how popular audience might receive a solo run featuring a Black girl ("This is already so improbable.") She also invokes contemporary writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, the acclaimed writer of the 2016 to present *Black Panther* comic series. *Black Panther* comics were the subject of my master's thesis project, and Ewing notes the difficulty of crossing over into comics writing from other media. Finally, she remarks on the beauty that is creating something that captures a moment in time.

This is, I believe, one of Ewing's core strengths as a writer and creator: her

ability to create art that captures and remarks upon various moments in time. From her academic monograph, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's Southside*, to her poetry to her comics, Ewing is less concerned with making her reflections fit into a particular form, but rather finding forms that fit the work. It is why, in her words, that she just “be writing different things” (“How Eve L. Ewing Makes Her Stories Fly”). Ewing’s commitment to finding every possible way to reflect the truths of science-and-magic-loving Black girls is technomagic girlhood at its finest. Technomagic girlhood does not need be a particular age state, but may also characterize reflections about one’s own youth. The girls we were who might have defined their identities as technomagic had we had the language are also invited to self-define in this way. It recalls the way girlhood scholar Kyra Gaunt poignantly describes Black women as “the women who affectionately call one another ‘girl’ throughout their lives” (2). Ewing’s particular way of creating across genres and disciplines exemplifies the ways Black women and girls have come to engage in acts of digital alchemy across the internet, which comes to define us as both technological *and* magical beings. Her Riri Williams is a reflection of a generation of Black girls who find magic in playing in the digital—in spite of the nature of the gaze upon us.

Interlude: Digital Dreamscapes



Digital Dreamscapes:

A Short Story

Zara took the long way home from school one day, the path that took her down by the River Terra. It was whispered that the goddess who protected the river would grant wishes to little girls in need. As she gazed down at her reflection and drew her brown eyes to the coily springs freeing themselves from the bun at the nape of her neck, she had to wonder if the goddess--if she even existed--would protect little Black girls who needed somewhere to go.

When she raised her eyes to follow the river as far as she could see from where she stood, the thought occurred to her to follow the river as far as her legs could carry her. But she could never leave without saying goodbye to her parents, and her grandmother, or her baby sister, Estelle. In fact, she could never leave them at all, not when she loved them so hard, she thought her heart might burst from the effort.

Still...

She needed to go somewhere, a place where her parents would know she was safe and wouldn't worry, but somewhere she could be free. Somewhere that pulled her up when she stretched out her brown hands towards the heavens and helped her fly. Somewhere that didn't require a stupid bun.

Zara sank down to her knees on the river bank and pulled the elastic out of her hair. The action didn't do much to her hair's shape, so she dipped her hands in the river then dragged them across her coils, again and again and again until each of the strands stood at attention all over her head. Satisfied, she allowed herself to lay back in

the grass along the river bank and close her eyes.

I wish I had somewhere to go where I could just be me.

Zara noticed something in the air shift before she could open her eyes. There was the soft tinkling of bells that just sounded in the back of her mind. The air around her felt warmer. She noticed all of these things before she heard the sound that made her open her eyes: the whooshing of water cascading off of a person emerging from it. The girl pulling herself out of the water was about her age, and was soft in all of the places Zara was sharp. Her hair, which was dripping water from the ends, was cornrowed in an intricate pattern, and adorned with pretty silver hoops and beads. Other than her hair, the girl looked exactly like anyone else she could have run into around these parts, though Zara had to admit her muted golden bathing suit made her stand out like a small but radiant sun goddess.

She blinked the water out of her eyes, droplets flying off the ends of her long lashes, and stared at Zara with keen interest.

“You’re pretty,” the girl said finally.

“So are you,” Zara replied, drinking in the way the afternoon sunlight illuminated the girl’s dark skin. “Who are you? I’ve never seen you around before.”

“I’m Nova,” the girl with the cornrows said, “I live in the house just down there.” And she pointed a little way down the hill, where, if they could see it from this angle, was where Zara lived.

“Maybe, you are confused because that’s my house.”

Nova looked a little exasperated and took Zara by the wrist, dragging her along to presumably show her that it was indeed her house that was down at the bottom of

the hill, but when they got to the crest and looked down, there was no house there at all.

The girl blinked. “I don’t understand...” Nova started to pace as if retracing her steps to help her figure out where she was, “I was having a swim after school...and I was...”

“Wishing for some place to go?”

A third voice joined the two girls as another person stepped from the river, though without making a sound at all. The woman who was pulling her other leg out of the river was magnificently tall and stunningly brown with loc’d hair which fell down to her waist, and when she turned, Zara and Nova could see it was not actually black, but a shimmering navy. Water had swirled itself around her and made itself opaque, to cover her in a thin gown of blues and teals and greens and purples. She had striking blue eyes, the same color as the river she had just stepped out of.

“I am the Goddess of the River Terra,” the woman said kindly, bending down to one knee so that she could look the awe-struck girls in the eyes. “You two called me here, and so I brought you together.”

Nova and Zara just had enough time to shoot each other quick glances while the goddess reached down beside her and pulled something else out of the water. It was a simple black box. No adornments, no clasps, just six sides made of something glossy.

“Everything you desire is there within,” Terra told them, as she pushed the box towards their feet. “All you have to do is learn to call it forth.”

Zara and Nova looked at each other with a bit of disbelief in their gaze, but before either of them could question Terra, she was slipping back underneath the

water. She gave them a last kind smile and then was gone.

“How do we learn to call it forth?” Nova asked, leaning down to inspect the box. She reached out a finger and touched a corner of it, which broke off and fell into the grass. Before Zara could even let out a gasp, the small corner of the cube began to transform. As it wriggled, it duplicated, another small piece of the glossy material shaping itself into something slender. Moments later, the two pieces had formed into handheld rectangular boxes, with two numbers engraved into the face of the object: 0 and 1.

Nova was fascinated. She held it up to the sun, turning it every which way. “We have nothing like this where I am from!”

“And where is that?” Zara asked.

“Here,” Nova insisted, though a bit of hesitation followed the word. “Although it does seem different...but I can’t place how. The grass looks greener and the sky looks brighter...like the world is...younger?”

Zara wanted to ponder Nova’s words, but before she could carefully turn them over in her mind, Nova’s attention was back on the remote-like object in her hand and she had pressed the engraved zero.

“Oh!” Zara said, “Maybe we should be careful! We don’t know what this does--”

But her warnings were cut short as a series of zeroes materialized in the air in front of her, collapsing into a pile. Nova moved forward and pulled one between her fingers.

“Hey...” Nova said, turning to Zara, and she realized that the girl didn’t know

her name.

“Zara,” she supplied.

“Zara,” Nova said, her tongue running over the letters of her name like a popsicle. “I like that. It’s a little ancient, but beautiful. Zara, you have to touch these...they feel like...they feel light, like there’s something electric running through them.” The dark-skinned girl in the gold bathing suit held out the zero in her hand to Zara, who though interested, was trembling from fear, and dropped it as soon as it grazed her fingers.

“Oh!” Zara exclaimed. Her eyes followed it and she realized that the number didn’t fall to the ground; it was hanging in midair. Zara and Nova’s eyes met. Nova pressed the engraved one and a stream of ones fell on a pile next to the zeroes.

Zara was waiting for Nova to move toward the pile and test the ones, but Nova’s brown eyes were upon her expectantly. She moved forward slowly, pulling a one out of the pile, feeling the surge of power tingling at her fingertips. There was a connection between her and this number, as if it, and the others, were at attention, waiting for her command.

“I think these make things,” Zara told Nova. “What do you want?”

“Maybe a robe to put around my shoulders,” Nova told her. And as if by instinct, Zara thrust both hands into the piles of ones and zeroes, pulled out a group and tossed them up like confetti. They watched as the numbers swirled around each other, interlocking and weaving, until the shape of a deep purple robe began to appear. It gently fluttered down around Nova’s shoulders and the girl clapped her hands with glee.

“What do you want?” Nova asked, sinking down, prepared to craft something for Zara. But Zara had to think. There were very few things she wanted.

“I want to fly,” Zara told her, and Nova’s brown eyes widened but she didn’t miss a beat. She called forth more zeroes and ones, arranging them with more care than Zara had, clearly with a specific vision in mind. A few moments later, Nova stood back, admiring her handiwork.

Zara now had beautiful golden brown wings sprouting from her back and they felt as though they were always meant to be there. With her black hair haloing around her head, she felt like an angel and had a sudden desire to be in the heavens. And she flew, soaring through clouds and letting sunlight bathe her face.

“Nova!” she called, seeing her new friend waving from the ground. “You have to come fly with me.”

Zara descended, eager to make Nova a pair of golden wings to match her bathing suit, but the girl said, “I’d rather swim among the stars.”

After a moment of consideration, Zara took her own device and called forth the most zeroes and ones yet. She threw them into the air and threw her arms wide so they would scatter as far as they could. She slashed her small hands through them again and again, until they were no longer on the river’s edge, but in the sky--the furthest reaches of the sky where everything was inky blue and the planets were shades of light blues, reds, and yellows. Then Zara took the star nearest her and pressed it gently against Nova’s chest, letting it settle there.

Nova gave her a brilliant smile, that was bright before, but was now blinding, and focused on the shooting star behind Zara. In seconds, Zara, beating her wings

gently, more because it felt nice than it was necessary, was watching Nova swimming in the stream of light trailing the shooting star.

And the girls played. They danced in galaxies, played catch with planets, collected sunbeams and watched for supernovas, pulling all they needed from the black box Terra had gifted them.

During one of their plays, a faceless snake slithered up to them from the far reaches of the sky. He admired Zara and Nova's creation and asked if they might consider creating a beautiful home for him and his kin.

The girls considered the dark shadows of faceless monsters that flickered into being behind the snake. The monsters scared the girls and they had created this place to be free, not to fear. So Nova stood with her feet balanced on two stars and told the snake and the monsters that they wouldn't help them.

Angry, the snake said, "You will regret not accepting this offer; my kin will come for you and destroy this place."

As the snake slithered away, taking the shadows with him, Zara nervously pulled at the sleeve of Nova's robe. "Maybe we should find a way to protect our alcove from him and any others that want to steal from us," she said.

Nova agreed and so together, the two of them pulled the galaxy they had created from the zeroes and ones down and put it into the black box that Terra had given them. The Rivera Terra and the hill came back into view. Before they had pulled the galaxy into the box, Nova had taken a star from the Alcove and pressed it to Zara's chest. Now, as the box stood before them, they used their devices and a carefully crafted series of zeroes and ones to ensure no one could enter the Alcove unless they had the

light of a star. Then they tossed the box into the River Terra, hiding in from everyone but them.

When they were done, they were proud of themselves and wanted to share their creation with Terra. They used their devices to call her forth and bring her with them into the Alcove.

The river goddess was delighted with the place they had created and how they had protected it.

“But we want to share it,” Zara told her, beating her wings so that a few stars moved closer to her. “You need the light of a star to enter.” She collected the stars in her hands and offered them to Terra.

“I have an idea,” the goddess said, taking the stars from her. She crushed them in her hands, then delicately opened them to reveal two sets of glowing golden hoop earrings. “These are made from the light of a star from the Alcove. You and Nova and I are the only ones who will be able to duplicate these. When you find someone you want to share the Alcove with, offer her a pair of these, and they will draw her to me.” Nova and Zara were delighted and quickly put the jewelry on, beaming at the river goddess.

“You have fulfilled your request,” Terra said, “Now wake up.” Nova’s eyes gently fluttered open. It was quiet in her room and the light from the streetlamp was flooding in through the blinds she had left open that morning.

It was quiet in her room.

She quickly sat up in the bed, trying to determine what had been real. And as the rest of her room came into view, just as she was beginning to believe that it had truly

all been a dream, her fingers grazed the edge of something warm and smooth near the nape of her neck. She touched it, and she heard a gentle sound...the echo of the laughter of a girl with wings.

Satisfied and reassured that there would always be tomorrow, Nova went to sleep.

Liner Notes

<https://open.spotify.com/user/sqe0md33g69jmz3tpp31i7mct/playlist/4NLxao2C8G8u7eTb9uqYnz>



Ravynn's Dissertation Playlist

How To Access the Playlist (two ways):

1. Click or copy and paste the URL above to access the playlist
2. Use the Spotify Code to access the playlist
 - Open the Spotify App
 - Click the Search icon at the bottom of your screen
 - Click the Camera in the top right-hand corner
 - You will need to allow Spotify to access your Camera for this to work; if this is your first time using this feature, Spotify will prompt you to do so.
 - Once your Camera is open, bring the Spotify Code bar into focus so your phone will scan it

- Once your phone recognizes the Spotify Code, it should automatically pull up the playlist in Spotify for you
- Enjoy!

Chapter 3

Gulfs, Glitches, and Ghosts:

Guiding Metaphors of Technomagic Girlhood's Poetics

Introduction

As a means of introducing everyone to each other and to me as the instructor over the internet, the first assignment for the students in my spring 2021 Black Women and Girls: Digital and Future course was to offer at least one song that came to mind when thinking of the keywords “digital/technology,” “magic,” and “Black girls.” The songs were added to a collaborative class Spotify playlist and shared with the students. The goal, beyond an introductory assignment, was to orient the students to the multimedia nature of the course and produce a collaborative, shareable product that would be representative of the work they would do over the course of the semester—which would be entirely online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, Black women’s music in particular has a rich history, especially in American culture, and the abundance of it meant that students would be able to interpret the prompt how they saw fit and propose music that matched the theme, yet was a reflection of their individual personalities (Collins; Davis). Despite this abundance, two artists’ music was substantially represented in the playlist: Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe.

While these two artists may not seem to have much to do with each other at first glance, the themes and motivations behind their multimedia creations, as well as the

spirit of innovation that underlays them, are kin. As musicology scholar Gabrielle Lochard writes in community with a media review in *The Journal of the Society for American Music* about these two creators' recent visual albums, "*Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* share a common technical foundation but diverge in the surface vocabularies they use to shape audiovisual odes to black history and identity" (268). Lochard's ethnomusicology perspective enables us to view Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe as representative of two of many types of Black feminine identity, and as such, two particular brands of Black Girl Magic. Further, Lochard is attentive to the "audiovisual," which reinforces our understanding of Black culture as multilayered, dynamic and dialectic. Beyoncé's magic in *Lemonade*, which tells a semi-autobiographical narrative about her journey through marriage, her husband's infidelity and rediscovering the self, appears to be fueled by water and spoken of as divine. Media scholars such as Kevin Allred and Omise'eke Tinsley in particular, have written about Beyoncé and *Lemonade* in relationship to the orisha, Oshun (2019 & 2018).

Monáe's magic is of the more explicitly technomagic variety. *Dirty Computer* offers a look into what happens in the near future for people who do not conform to white Western ideals about society. Lochard describes the album as "interested in a radically exuberant queerness, as utopian in its vitality as its repression is nightmarishly dystopian" (268-269). In Suechting's mini essay, one of many that make up a larger piece which analyzes *Dirty Computer*, they discuss Monáe's "power to *summon* and *channel*" (emphasis my own)[265]. Another co-author, Oore, references "communion and communication with ancestral spirits," as well as

mentioning Monáe's own note of invoking "superpowers" (260). There is an explicit connection to technology present in Janelle Monáe's work which scholars have decidedly categorized as Afrofuturist, given her android alterego whom she sings as in her first trio of albums, *Metropolis: Suite I* (2008), *The ArchAndroid: Suites II and III* (2010) and *The Electric Lady: Suites IV and V* (2013). (Bertens 2017) Yet the language used to describe Monáe's connection to technology is one of magic and manifestation: she sings "your code is programmed not to love me but you can't pretend" in "Take a Byte," "Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it, y'all can't ban it, they been trying hard just to make us all vanish, I suggest they put a fly on a whole other planet" in "Django Jane," and "Text message God up in the sky" in "Dirty Computer." Monáe mixes the technology with references to love, the desire to send Black girls with their magic into outer space as if calling in science fiction resolutions, and using technology to access aspects of religion. It is not simply the amplification to manipulate technology in Monáe's case, but it points to that *and* something inexplicable that exists within codes and algorithms. This chapter will consider both the fantasy and the technomagic girlhood represented in Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*.

I argue that the guiding metaphors of a technomagic girlhood's poetics can be identified in these two very different multimedia, but music-based projects. This argument is built upon the bodies of work which posit music as central to Black women's selfhood, meaning-making and our conceptions of Black feminism (Collins; Davis; Morgan; Gaunt). Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that Black women's intellectual thought had far more reach outside of traditional academic

outputs—as music, essays and poems—as well as providing context for how music became critical to Black feminist thought, building on the work of philosopher, Angela Y. Davis (15-16). Black *girls* in particular, musicologist Kyra D. Gaunt argues, “generate and pass on a unique repertoire of chants and embodied rhythms in their play that both reflects and inspires the principles of popular music-making” (1). Gaunt’s particular methodological focus on identifying the characteristics of Black girls’ popular musical play offers a method and foundation for approaching this chapter’s work, which is to identify the characteristics of Black girls technomagic play. In a similar vein to Gaunt asking about the games Black girls play, here I ask about the digital alchemy we create—a different kind of magic.

To designate universal characteristics of a technomagic Black girlhood’s poetics runs the risk of attempting to homogenize Black girlhood. What I attempt to offer here instead, are guiding principles that can be interpreted in different ways; a starting point for engagement, not a checklist. In investigating technomagic girlhood, and in identifying common characteristics of the poetics found in places like visual albums such as *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*, I propose three guiding principles that move us closer to an understanding of how Black girlhood, conceptions of fantasy, and our digital contemporary moment interact to make a distinct type of epistemology for Black girls that informs our orientations toward the world: Gulfs (water); Glitches (the digital); and Ghosts (fantasy and ancestry). In the conclusion of the chapter, I will also investigate flight as perhaps an additional indicator of technomagic girlhood. This orientation towards this chapter is also informed by sociologist and poet, Eve L. Ewing’s assertion that water and flight are some of the guiding metaphors of Black

poetics, a statement which rests on and is supported by the work of Black historians like Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates Jr., and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (“How Eve Ewing Makes Her Stories Fly”). It is also directly influenced by, and draws heavily on communications scholar Catherine Knight Steele’s work on drawing a line between hip-hop feminism to Digital Black Feminism. Digital Black feminism is Steele’s understanding that feminism adapts to its contemporary moment. In this case, it is being influenced by the landscape and commonplace usage of technology for communication, self-expression and community building. As such, I argue that while Steele’s work is critical here, in my understanding that our contemporary moment defined by digital tools is the basis for this dissertation, I also posit that Black women and girls on the younger end of the millennial generation and into the older end of Gen Z have a different orientation towards technology from those even ten years older than us.¹⁷ And we need a framework that fits our lives, too. Enter technomagic girlhood.

Music and visual albums are the case studies for this chapter because they demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of Black women and girls’ storytelling and knowledge production. It is, as Steele notes, building on the work of Black feminist scholars who use the metaphor of quilting to ground their scholarship, the ultimate form of knitting together various strands and loose ends to craft something totally unique. Visual albums do a lot of work, which reflects the general nature of Black girls’ creative output, as illustrated by Black girlhood and hip-hop scholar Ruth Nicole

¹⁷ This can be attributed to the rapid changes in technology. Large scale shifts in commonplace technology often occur several times in a generation.

Brown: Black girls make selves and stories out of anything, everything and nothing
(*Here Our Truths; Black Girlhood Celebration*).

Gulfs

Like the relationship many Black people supposedly have with technology, the relationship many of us have with water is fraught as well. Technology, digital humanist and communications scholar André Brock, Jr.'s work in *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* explains how we are taught to believe that Black people are not compatible with the digital, and yet we as Black people have an ability to use, curate and even manipulate technology and digital media into innovative and expressive experiences for us. (2020) There is a rift between what society tells us through histories and media, and what we know experientially to be true about our relationship to technology; in the same way there are complications with the way we experience water, both as holy and dangerous, cleansing and erasing. I argue that Black people's relationship to water remains a critical part of imagining a digital Black poetics specific to Black girlhood, which I see illustrated very clearly in Beyoncé's *Lemonade* with particular respect to the song and accompanying music video and poetic preamble to "Hold Up."

Water has deep symbolic meaning in Black culture; a history of which expands far beyond the scope of this project. But for the purposes of this investigation, it is necessary, at the very least, to understand that most understandings and interpretations of water for Black Americans begin with the Middle Passage. A multitude of early

Atlantic history scholars have “troubled the waters,” so to speak, and have worked with these studies, including Saidiya Hartmann (1997), Stephanie E. Smallwood (2008), and Jessica Marie Johnson (2020). These scholars have worked to study both the forced movement of enslaved Africans via the Atlantic, not only to the United States, but to South America and the Caribbean islands, creating the diaspora of Black people across the globe. Not only do they study the movements, but the impact the Atlantic slave trade—with transit powered by waterways—had on the descendants of these peoples. Johnson’s work in particular situates the dehumanizing effect of the Middle Passage on Black women and girls: “For enslaved women and girls bound for the Gulf Coast, the Atlantic passage threw them into a world of repeated attempts to dismantle their womanhood, girlhood, and humanity, as slave traders, trading-company officials, and would-be slave-owners struggled to make profit from their flesh” (78). Though Johnson ultimately argues that *la traversée* (Johnson’s study centers on Africans removed from Sénégal and uses terms found in French language archives) forges particular bonds between Black women and girls, it was indeed still devastating and ended in death for many (79).

Given water’s centrality to the history of Black diasporic peoples, it follows that water also becomes critical to Black popular cultures and storytelling—in particular, music. This legacy begins with Negro spirituals and work songs, traveling up through blues and rhythm & blues, and hip hop. The history of water in the Black Atlantic, as well as Black popular music and the role of water in it, are all topics that have too large a scope to investigate fully here. However, the work of Black cultural historians, anthropologists, and literary historians such as Zora Neale Hurston, Lawrence Levine

and Houston Baker solidify Black popular music and themes, as well as the work of contemporary historians such as Claudrena N. Harold, which helps to extend that legacy (1934; 1977; 1984; 2020). Through their work, these scholars establish and illustrate particular characteristics of Black aesthetics, particularly through music, but as a poetics in general. Water as a consistent pillar of Black poetics is clear in our artistic expression today.

From this vantage point, and again, with the understanding that this inquiry is an entire project in and of itself, it is possible to then take a small piece of the symbolic importance of water to Blackness and consider its importance to Black women as a measure of magic and manifestation. Even when narrowing the scope down to its role in African American and Black diasporic cultures and histories, it is far too expansive to cover in one subsection of a dissertation. But as is the nature of water: it is expansive and deep, and infinitely connected with limits that can only be imagined. It is also necessary for life; as such this project does not live without spending at least some time investigating how water is integral to my conception of technomagic girlhood, particularly as it manifests in *Lemonade*.

Singer Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, known mononymously as Beyoncé, has a relationship with water that interests a number of cultural historians and critics. In literary scholar Farrah Jasmine Griffin's 2011 article, "At Last....?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History," she charts Beyoncé's emergence from a standout member of the girl group Destiny's Child, to her first solo album, *Dangerously In Love*; from her portrayal of Deena Jones in *Dream Girls* to the launch of her clothing line, House of Déreon (Griffin 137). Griffin's article discusses how the racial history of the United

States impacts the careers and presence of two particularly situated Black women: Beyoncé and Michelle Obama. And while she ultimately concludes that Beyoncé does not blur the lines of American racial comprehension and in many ways is situated within the parameters of sex symbol and entertainer, Griffin's article offers a foundation for Beyoncé as a subject of radicalized gender analysis while providing a comprehensive history of her career.

It is not the parallels to former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, that is of interest in this particular piece, but rather Griffin's discussion of Beyoncé in relation to Erzulie (Haiti and New Orleans), Oshun (Cuba), and Oxun (Brazil), "all of whom manifest as La Mulatta, a deity of beauty, creativity, and all things sensual" (139). In addition to water as a recurring motif in Beyoncé's music and accompanying visuals, there is also the recurring motif of her as a water goddess and a divine presence, coming together as a mixture that positions her as a goddess. American Studies and media scholar Kevin Allred, noted for his classes crafted around the performer, positions Beyoncé as a Marie Leveau type conjure woman who, "conjures ghosts surrounded by water" (62). Journalist Janell Hobson argues that Oshun, the Yoruba orisha, a river goddess of "love, beauty, music, wealth and healing," is a defining feature of Beyoncé's body of work, particularly since the 2016 release of *Lemonade*. To think of Beyoncé in relationship to Oshun is an important piece of this project. While Griffin discusses the more popular renditions of this particular orisha, cultural anthropologist Martin A. Tsang draws readers' attention to lesser-known versions in *The Lemonade Reader*, describing Oshun as, "a warrior orisha who is a ferociously protective mother to all of her adherents; but she is also one of the most

difficult Orishas to please as she expects nothing but the very best for and from her devotees” (127). This is where the core of power in tying Beyoncé to Oshun lies. In this description, she appears like every Black mother I have ever known. It makes her both divine and unwaveringly human. And while I also think it is particularly important to keep Griffin’s discussion of the mixed race, *La Mulatta*, version of Oshun in the back of our minds, especially as Beyoncé weaves in cultural traditions from Louisiana Creoles of color throughout *Lemonade*, Tsang reminds us of the power at Black women’s disposal.

We see this connection to Oshun clearly in “Hold Up.” *Lemonade* is divided into eleven chapters, with “Hold Up” representing the “Denial” portion of the album. The song is preceded by poetry by Somali-British poet, Warsan Shire:

I tried to change

Closed my mouth more

Tried to be soft, prettier

Less... awake

Fasted for 60 days

Wore white

Abstained from mirrors

Abstained from sex

Slowly did not speak another word

And that time my hair I grew past my ankles

I slept on a mat on the floor

I swallowed a sword

I levitated

Into the basement

Confessed my sins

And was baptized in a river...

As Knowles-Carter performs Shire's poem, the visuals of the film, directed by filmmaker Kahlil Joseph, depict her underwater, suspended by it in the middle of a bedroom. Her clothes drape around her and flow out, encasing her like ribbons, while her hair billows out around her. Poet and scholar Shauna M. Morgan notes in an essay in *The Lemonade Reader* that the Shire's poetry and Joseph's cinematography complement each other in crafting of such an emotive piece of art, but that this is a new side to Knowles-Carter: "What Shire accomplishes with her poetry, Joseph does with film, and their aesthetic connection is clear: they both move to deliver distinct representations of Black life which depart from commonplace stylistic offerings." (78) Morgan identifies that the tropes that usually drive Knowles-Carter's work are not in *Lemonade*, leaving the viewer to articulate a new Black poetics which more accurately describes the multimedia piece.



Figure 4: Beyoncé Knowles-Carter in “Denial”; Lemonade (2016)

The imagery combined with the poem illustrate the complexity of water for Black women that is discussed above. We are told the story of a woman who has twisted and contorted herself in an attempt to make herself more lovable. The changes are sometimes benign, and sometimes violent: “wore white” versus “I swallowed a sword.” Her efforts read as performing a particular kind of gender-specific respectability politics which merges with notions about desirability for Black women (Higginbotham; Cooper; Harrison). Meanwhile in the film, Knowles-Carter is beautiful, ethereal, lustrous as she floats in the water— “levitating,” as the poem suggests—her serenity proposing a comfort and presence within the water that supports the connection to the orisha, Oshun. However, the video frequently cuts to close up shots of the singer with bubbles streaming from her nose, reminding the viewer that though she may look like a goddess belonging to the water, she is in fact a human, who needs air—and at the moment is lacking. She appears at peace—she does not fight the water but eases into it, though this could also be depicting the moment just before drowning. It is unclear who is in control, the water or Beyoncé. Then, the film cuts to the outside of a building where two large wooden doors open

outward and water cascades out, revealing a yellow gown-clad Beyoncé who descends the steps, stepping through the gushing water.



Figure 5: Medium long-shot of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter in “Hold Up” dressed in a flowing yellow gown and descending a set of stairs covered in gushing water, one foot, adorned by a golden anklet, outstretched before her.

Shire’s poetry details how the narrator self-imposes violence against herself—abuses herself mentally, emotionally and even physically—and still, at the end of the poem, it is not enough. The narrator questions whether her lover is cheating on her. And though the question echoes through the poetry—sonically trapped, Knowles-Carter does not remain ensnared, suspended in the home. She frees herself, as we see

above, empowered by the water which propels her forward. Despite water dominating the scene, Beyoncé's emergence from the house where she was close to drowning has the effect of imagining a phoenix rising from the ashes, recalling the refrain of contemporary Black poet Maya Angelou's famous poem, "Still I Rise." The water here, as indicated by the baptism mentioned in Shire's poetry, has the ability to facilitate Knowles-Carter's rebirth.



Figure 6: Beyoncé spins in a yellow dress while holding a baseball bat. She dances in the water shooting from a fire hydrant in the background as two people look on (7:32).

In Omise'eke Tinsley's book, *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism*, *Lemonade* becomes a necessary vehicle for imagining water as a tool of the fantastic. She writes, "From 'Hold Up' to 'Formation'— from bedrooms filled to the ceiling with water to New Orleans streets disappeared under flooding— *Lemonade* curates fantastically *not* naturally occurring images of water-as-black-womanness" (Tinsley

160-161). No matter how fantastic the rendering, it is rooted in reality. Tinsley, as well as American Studies and Women and Gender Studies scholar and writer Kevin Allred, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies scholar Janell Hobson, have all written for various forums about Beyoncé's use of bodies of water to invoke, or "conjure," ghosts of injustices past in their scholarship and for public facing pieces. These injustices include, for example, the difficult integration of New Orleans public pools (Tinsley 156; Allred) and the poor governmental response to the catastrophic damage of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Allred).

In *Beyoncé in Formation*, Tinsley develops a stunning analysis of the use of water to represent Black womanhood in *Lemonade*:

"Water represents the contradictory, simultaneously oppressive and lifesaving possibilities of black femininity for the main character: 'Hold Up' iconically begins with her floating underwater, drowning in betrayed black wifeness—then cuts to her in Oshun yellow cascading on a wave of water, newfound power in righteous black woman's anger buoying her up. In *Lemonade's* earlier tracks, water-as-womanness is an external element the main character muscles through to find physical and emotional safety. But in this triumphant finale black women don't have to navigate water because they *are* water, their fluid movement filling an entire pool; they don't have to wrestle with the contradictory possibilities of black womanless as an outside force because they *are* black womanhood, a legion of sisters in formation" (Tinsley 156-157).

The notion of possibilities of Black femininity is important to this project because it provides a space to imagine what Black women can manifest. It brings to mind the opening line of Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*: "Where there is a woman there is magic" (1). What Tinsley begins to unravel in this excerpt is the truth that many things can be true at once; such is the nature of Black womanhood. We can begin to understand this by bringing in legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality. In "Demarginalizing The Intersection of Race and Sex," Crenshaw

argues that, “Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender...Any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140). In her 1991 article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” she goes on to further develop her idea of intersectionality, which can be summarized as attention to the unique interlocking systems of oppression that each individual faces, however, her focus was on the unique set of systems of oppression that *Black women* face as both Black people and women. Patricia Hill Collins furthers this argument in *Black Feminist Thought* and writes, “Race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women’s everyday lives, they work together”(269). In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé takes controlling images of Black women—in particular, that they are angry—and is able to show, throughout the piece the emotional depth that lies below what presents as sole rage (Collins; Cooper). What these two theories direct us towards is understanding that because Black women’s lives, like many others, are multi-faceted and impacted by systems outside of our control, our representations of Black womanhood, as Tinsley points out, are “contradictory, simultaneously oppressive and lifesaving” (156).

Beyoncé’s chosen sisters indicate that she recognizes our freedom as girls and women is only possible if we join together; an idea that is represented clearly earlier in the film as the Black women of *Lemonade* join hands along the beach and wade into the water. Sisterhood has a large part in Black feminist writing on womanhood. The

Combahee Collective sentiment that “we’re not free until everybody is free,” stands as we consider the imagery from *Lemonade*. There are moments of sisterhood, and even intergenerational sisterhood throughout: just take, for example, the presence of celebrated tennis champion, Serena Williams, a contemporary “sister” of Beyoncé, as well as Chloe and Halle Bailey, her musical protégées, and her own daughter, Blue Ivy, in the “Formation” portion of *Lemonade*.



Figure 7: Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s daughter (middle) appearing in Lemonade (57:19).



Figure 8: Dancers link hands and wade out into water together in *Lemonade* (37:10).

But more often than not, sisterhood is tied to water in the visual album. The above image from *Lemonade* depicts Black women wading into the water, joined by hand. It evokes a myriad of histories, in particular, stories of Africans throwing themselves overboard from slave ships into the ocean. This historical image of the 1803 mass suicide at Igbo Landing in Georgia pervades popular Black media (Allred 98): think of *Black Panther*'s (2018) antagonist, Erik Killmonger's poignant and oft quoted refrain near the film's end: "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage." The imagery is also in conversation with Black filmmaker Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which even bell hooks, who penned an incisive critique of *Lemonade*, acknowledged ("Moving Beyond Pain"). And lastly, because it returns us to the idea which Tinsley put forth, that Black women *are* water. Though in the section where she states this idea, she specifically refers to the image of the Black women dancing in an

empty pool in “Formation,” but the imagery extends into other portions of the film, becoming a recurring motif of the album.

Water as a visual motif associated with Black kinship is one that appears in *Dirty Computer* as well. Monáe’s work depicts less of it, as the main narrative centers around protagonist Jane 57821 as a prisoner in New Dawn, a laboratory meant to cleanse “dirty computers.” However, as Jane 57821 undergoes her cleansing—a wiping of her memories by lab workers via a computer—the last memory the viewer is privy to is one of the ocean. The instrumental beginning of “Don’t Judge Me,” a mellow, reflective and swelling song, is the foundation for this end section of the emotion picture. Before she was Jane 57821—the New Dawn assigned identifier—Monáe freely enjoys a visit to the ocean with her lovers, Zen and Ché.

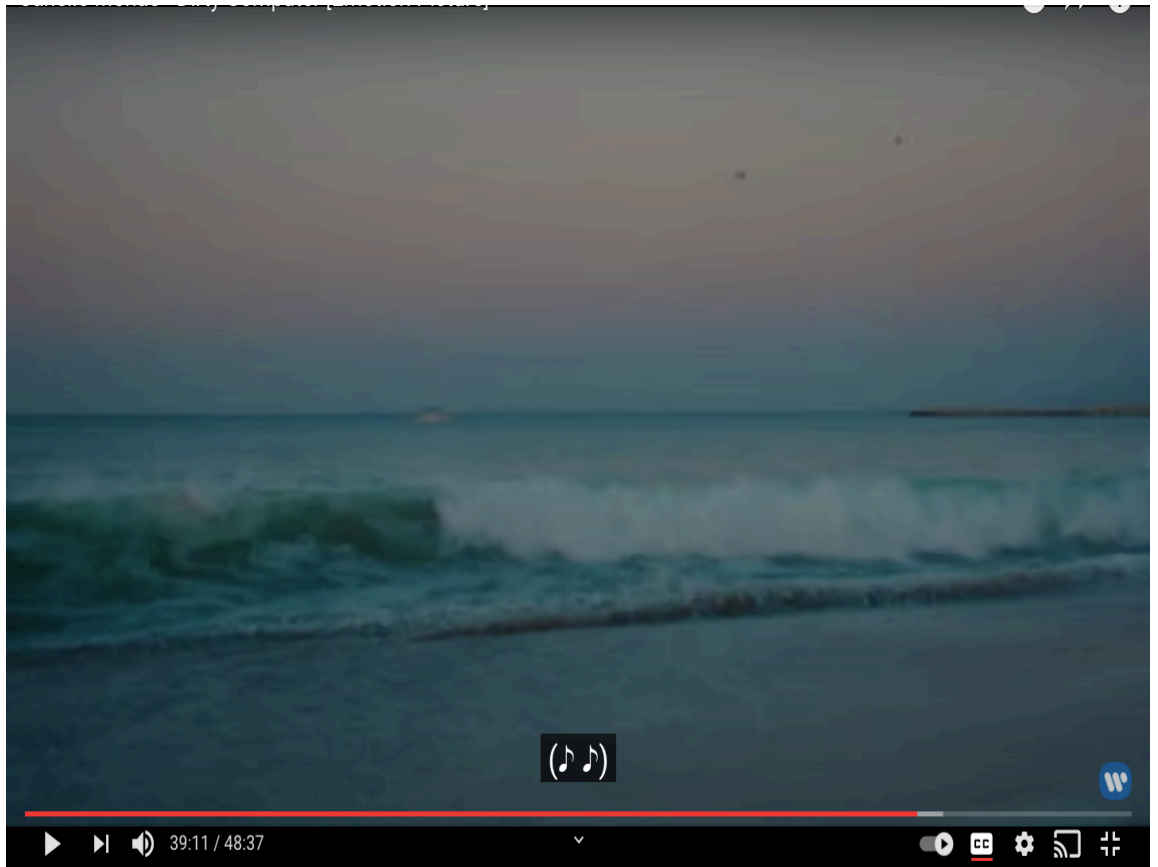


Figure 9: the ocean in “Don’t Judge Me,” *Dirty Computer* (2018).



Figure 10, Jane with Zen and Ché on the beach, Dirty Computer (2018).

*“Don’t judge me
Baptize me with ocean
Recognize my devotion”*

These memories are the last that the New Dawn workers attempt to erase, but they are some of Jane’s strongest, and most emotionally tied memories. It operates as her core essence. In order to finally and totally “cleanse” her, the New Dawn workers must sever her ties to the ocean. It is clear that her understanding of self and kinship is tied to this body, which is why this memory must be taken care of last. And it is this conception of memory as technological, easily hacked and erased by others, that makes memory an entry point into considering the glitch as another potential characteristic of technomagic girlhood.

Glitches

Like Beyoncé, and like a number of Black female artists, particular rappers, Janelle Monáe was known for using her alterego, the cyborg, Cindi Mayweather as the narrator of her songs (Crumpton; Allred 180). In *Dirty Computer*, the narrator is not Cindi, but Jane 57821. Jane 57821 is not a cyborg, but the emotion picture (the term Monáe uses to describe the visual album) positions her as cyborg adjacent. By all appearances, Jane is human, but the Nevermind, a gas which has the function of wiping one's memory, targets the human mind and memory as if it were a piece of machinery; as if there is an algorithm one can use to "cleanse" the mind. "They started calling us computers," Jane narrates. "People began vanishing, and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty, it was only a matter of time" (Monáe; Rao). Though Jane 57821 is human, she is still deeply connected to technology and its use in understanding herself as a person. It is the dirtiness of her hard drive that is her heartbeat. In essence, *Dirty Computer* is an homage to that.

Lemonade's contribution to technomagic girlhood is more indirect. While I do not think the impact of *Lemonade* as a visual album, and thus a piece of new media that touches on Black girls' fantasy, can be understated here, I am also interested in the impact *Lemonade* has had on practitioners of digital humanities. Marisa Parham, professor of English and director for the African American Digital Humanities

initiative (AADHUM) at the University of Maryland, as well as co-director of the Immersive Realities Lab for the Humanities (irLhumanities), whose research investigates Black memory from various vantage points, is inspired by *Lemonade*. Her work has performed what Moya Bailey would call, feats of digital alchemy with her 2019 long form interactive essay project, *.break .dance*. This “research pocket” of a project, as Parham calls it, explores questions of memory and performance, using tools that “break.” In an article that accompanies and supplements *.break .dance*, Parham writes:

“Breaking, not just looking for the breach, *à la* deconstruction, but rather actively looking for ways to enter spaces in-between states juridical, psychic, emotional, or otherwise, and out of such space, glimpsing freedom. As is always the case, Zora Neale Hurston is incredibly helpful in thinking about how such freedoms are made. In ‘Characteristics of Negro Expression,’ Hurston’s description of the iterative and interactive, and the intersubjective dimensions of Black dance performance, which she characterizes as the dancer’s embrace of ‘dynamic suggestion,’ which forces spectators to participate in the performance itself” (Parham).

Much of this particular passage pushes this investigation further, while also tying it to the theoretical work that it draws from. The image that Parham illustrates for us, “entering the in-between states,” as a way to “glimpse freedom,” seems to be a recurring motif in Black girls’ fantasy narratives, and thus part of our liberation praxis. It draws from Zora Neale Hurston, a figure whose life and work both underpin the work done in Side A of this project, drawing us back again to centering Black creative practices.

.Break .dance is a digital project that provides an example of how to break into the in-between spaces. Parham goes on to say, “In creating and cultivating the *.break .dance* digital project, I am thinking about how digital inquires potentiate forms that

literally and figuratively enhance, even sometimes transform, the kinds of social, creative and political networks out of which we have ourselves emerged.” The digital, then, can transform the ways we think about things like sisterhood and motherhood, for example, and other communities of Black girls that become kin. This is why Parham’s analysis of *Lemonade* in *.break .dance* is the optimal case study for how the digital, Black girlhood and magic are intertwined. Large portions of the project are inspired and indebted to Beyoncé’s work in the visual album. She writes, “The constant interplay between power and vulnerability is of course at the center of *Lemonade* itself.” In order to find, access and harness the magic and the power of the digital, as Parham has done in her project, an acceptance of vulnerability must be centered. Again, to return to the image of working in the in-between spaces that Parham illustrates, the power comes from allowing ourselves to work in pieces. Further, Legacy Russell, curator, artist, and the author of the 2020 book *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, imagines a feminism for those who are Black and play in the digital, arguing that glitch feminism “considers the *in-between* as a core component of survival” (17). Together, these ideas lead us to understand how Black women may use the in-between spaces in the digital to create pockets of vulnerability, which are ultimately critical to our own survival and self-preservation.

.break .dance also points to the ways that *Lemonade* draws on spirits, as guides and ghosts, enabling readers and thinkers to consider the ways that Beyoncé’s music is deeply intertwined with spirituality, and by extension the fantastic. Her theorization of “Black glitch aesthetics,” also helps name the work Parham does that leans into the fantastic. In thinking about how this “names moments when code runs its own

potential rupture,” I return to the image of the in-between spaces. Ghosts and spirits could be considered the ultimate Black glitch aesthetic— they trouble the boundary between the living and the dead, what we think we know and the unknowable, and exist despite the contradictions. They are how the glitches and the in-between spaces are intertwined here, how we might combine the seemingly separate categories of inquiry that involves the fantastic and the digital.

Parham’s definition of glitches underscores that there is an intentionality to the glitch. To Russell, the glitch is a “vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance” in which we redefine “glitch-as-error” (15). It is not an accidental occurrence. It can be a purposeful, potential rupture. Russell also thinks through the glitch as a “fissure”—or rupture— “within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest” (17). This is, I think, one of the most interesting connections between digital theory and Black studies: the rupture. If we go back to Manning Marable’s consideration of Black Studies, which I named in the Introduction, we know that he characterizes the Black intellectual tradition as “descriptive,” “corrective,” and “prescriptive” (17-18). When imagining what Marable means as “corrective,” I envision filling in holes, and gaps, that were not of our (Black people’s, Black students’) making, but of which we shoulder the responsibility of filling. These holes are a rupture, but the act of refilling the holes, also is an *intentional* disturbance, where Black people are able to decide what goes back into these holes— or in between spaces. Glitches, as Parham and Russell imagine them, challenge; glitches transform and transfigure; glitches compel us to shift gears and interact with a particular interface in a different way. If the glitch, in particular the way it is used by Black people, is a critical part of understanding the

landscape of contemporary digital culture, it follows that Black women and girls then engage with them as ways of creating new potentialities.

Ghosts

The fantastic nature of both *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* is tied to the figure of the specter. Ghosts and former versions of themselves, as well as their resurrected selves, appear before both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe in these visual albums in a way that is more than a memory. I argue that the representation of these ghosts in *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* are exemplary of the possibilities of Black women's self-making in digital media. The specter and death remain core motifs in the Black American imaginary and their presence has only evolved as digital media becomes the landscape of our contemporary moment. Jessica Marie Johnson argues that, "Black digital practice is the revelation that black subjects have themselves taken up science, data, and coding, in other words, have commodified themselves and digitized and mediated their own black freedom dreams, in order to hack their way into systems (whether modernity, science, or the West), thus living where they were 'never meant to survive'" (59). "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads" offers both ways of celebrating what is built through Black digital practices while acknowledging the surveillance practices therein. Black digital studies is a useful way to understand how contemporary Black women and girls learn to survive, curate their own agency, and imagine other futures.¹⁸ In *Lemonade* and

¹⁸ See also Ashleigh Greene Wade, "'New Genres of Being Human': World Making

Dirty Computer, both Knowles-Carter and Monáe use digital tools and digitally mediated personas to craft their own freedom dreams and push beyond the limitations of death. This makes ghosts/specters a critical component of the poetics and aesthetics of technomagic girlhood.

In *Lemonade*, we are set in a world where spirits are part of the fabric of life. As a contributor to *The Lemonade Reader* edited by Kinitra D. Brooks and Kameelah L. Martin, scholar Kyra D. Gaunt describes *Lemonade* as, “a womanist world of magical realism through Southern Gothic, antebellum scenes set to an Afrofuturistic song cycle” (215). Writers of Black Southern gothic narratives have long been interested in the presence of ghosts—from American novelist Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, wherein a malevolent spirit of protagonist Sethe’s daughter haunts the text, to novelist Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* where the ghost of a Black boy lingers within the pages. American Studies and popular culture scholar, Kevin Allred, writes about the phenomena of lingering spirits in Beyoncé’s work, explicitly linking it to the work of Morrison. First, he defines Morrison’s term rememory as, “the process by which memories come to life, the phenomenon through which *Beloved* walks out of the water. Rememory resurrects past events, perpetually replays what has happened there, in the place where the thing memorialized originally occurred” (83). In Morrison’s *The Source of Self-Regard*, she defines it herself as, “recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past” (324). It is an active phenomena, as Morrison describes it. Allred argues that rememory is present both in *Lemonade* and in Beyoncé’s earlier body of work and that

through *Viral Blackness*” (2017).

Beyoncé effectively time travels throughout her work. This is most poignantly displayed in Allred’s discussion of Beyoncé’s circa 2008 alter-ego Sasha Fierce. Though Beyoncé “murders” her persona in a 2010 interview with *Allure*, Allred argues that she resurrects Sasha in *Lemonade*, thus a specter of lives past haunt the visual album (169).

Lyrically, we see the specter again in *Lemonade* in the poetic prelude to “Sorry”:

So what are you gonna say at my funeral, now that you've killed me? Here lies the body of the love of my life, whose heart I broke without a gun to my head. Here lies the mother of my children, both living and dead. Rest in peace, my true love, who I took for granted. Most bomb p*ssy who, because of me, sleep evaded. Her god listening. Her heaven will be a love without betrayal. Ashes to ashes, dust to side chicks.



Figure 11, still from Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s *Lemonade* (2016). Image shows the word “Apathy” in white italics on a black and white background, illuminated by lights.



Figure 12, still from Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's Lemonade (2016). Image shows four Black women in a black and white shot, covered in white geometric patterns across their faces and upper bodies.

In this short prelude to “Sorry,” which, as in other parts of the visual album, uses bits of poetry from Warsan Shire, Knowles-Carter is able to enact moments of rememory—this active resurrection. The beginning of the poetry enables the viewer to imagine Beyoncé watching her own funeral, recounting for the viewer her violent death, in a move that draws a parallel to Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn staging his own funeral. Whereas Huck’s antics have the charm of a schoolboy, Knowles-Carter haunts this visual album. She, too, wants to know what people, specifically her husband, will say about her after she is “gone.” Her resurrection relies on particular ingredients: the grief of her husband, her god’s listening ear, and the ashes of the woman who was a catalyst for this martial breakdown. The dancers who occupy the scene, in the image above, read as mourners, or even haints, particularly in the

disjointed way they move. Allred also argues that Knowles-Carter is not just resurrecting ghosts, but is specifically conjuring, and we see that very clearly later in the visual album, with “Formation.” He describes the movements of Knowles-Carter in the early scenes of “Formation” as “erratic, disjointed, otherworldly, possessed, as is a characteristic of many Voodoo ceremonies” and that “she performs as the vessel spirits will inhabit, having been summoned from the realm of the dead” (“Beyoncé Harnesses the Power of Conjuring in ‘Formation’”). I argue that this movement is actually seen throughout the visual album at regular intervals, and specifically is seen in the movement of the dancers in the prelude to “Sorry” which I have discussed here. The poetry and visuals together create an immersive experience of cheating death. Musicologist and Black girlhood studies scholar Kyra D. Gaunt aptly uses digital ethnographer and communications scholar Henry Jenkins’ term “transmedia storytelling” to describe *Lemonade*: its participatory impact extends well into and beyond the piece itself (220).

For Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer*, the ghosts of protagonist Jane 57821’s previous lives linger throughout. In the dystopian emotion picture, a beginning narration informs the viewer that an unidentified “they” began calling “us” computers. Some computers were considered dirty, undesirable: “You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all” (Monáe). Access to citizenship in the larger society requires submitting to a status quo that does not allow for the difference that Jane 57821 and her friends exhibit. This submission is depicted as a “cleansing” in *Dirty Computer*, which requires exposure to the Nevermind, a gas which deletes

memories of the dirty computers. The viewer sees them revived as memories blended with technology to create a video, able to be paused, rewound, skipped or discarded by white clad workers in the House of the New Dawn.



Figure 13, Monáe and dancers hang from the ceiling of a lab in the House of the New Dawn and she sings “Take a Byte” in Dirty Computer.

This brings the song “Take a Byte” from the album into consideration. A “byte,” by definition, is considered a unit of digital information, historically the smallest addressable unit of memory in many computer architectures. Because a byte is related to memory, it in many ways is a storage unit of information. In an excerpt from the song, Monáe expands our understanding of memory, giving it multiple meanings and loads it with ways of understanding it in relationship to magic, the fantastic, and the inexplicable:

My random access memory wants you to come again

No, don't say goodbye

(Don't say goodbye)

I saw my therapist she thinks you are my magic sin

Oh, maybe she's right

Your code is programmed not to love me

But you can't pretend

Oh, what a surprise

Monáe gives the viewer/listener a language of technology which connects to the larger theme of memory, knowledge, and power, as well as the fantastic. Here, Monáe give the viewer an opportunity to view their memory, accessing their information, and positing themselves as someone in a position of power because of the uniqueness of their knowledge. Jane 57821, the protagonist of the *Dirty Computer* (e)motion picture, stitches together memory as it relates to technology, but also how one might engage with memory in a psychiatric setting. As one moves through the first part of the excerpt, Monáe moves from computer, to science that engages with more human emotion, to “magic” the fantastic, in a smooth arc. The two pieces together, the first in which we learn about the narrator’s “hardware” and the second in which we learn about the addressee’s code, are incompatible. Ghosts of loves past linger in the hardware, the memory, of Jane 57821 as she sings to the viewer. While there is language enough to begin to describe it all from a technological perspective, her frequent gestures to magic, and even religion, show the viewer there is more to the

address than zeroes and ones.

Conclusion: Flight

Lemonade and *Dirty Computer*'s meditations on Black women's liberation can also be seen in the depiction and usage of vehicles. Early on in *Dirty Computer*, Jane 57821 and her friends are driving along a winding road that opens up into a desert like frontier, with "I Got the Juice" as the background music. The scene has a number of jarring juxtapositions. For example: we are to understand that the setting of this emotion picture/visual album is sometime in the not-so distant future, which we are able to assume by the presence of the hover car, shown below.



Figure 14, a Mustang convertible in a still shot from Dirty Computer (2018) that hovers above the ground.

However, the flying Mustang convertible has the look of something that would have been popular decades ago, which troubles our perception of time in the film. This

mid-century car underscores the mid-century social norms that will come into play. After a few moments of carefree cruising, the girls are stopped by a police-bot in what might appear to be a routine traffic check. They flash futuristic chips that have the appearance of an identification card, it's scanned and they go on about their way (see image below).



Figure 15, Monáe as Jane 57821 driving the hoverer with a friend. A police surveillance drone stops them and scans their colorful identification chips.

Temporality is confused. As Jane 57821 and her friend encounter this policing machine, we are forcibly reminded of limited mobility of Black people at every point in history. Simone Browne's work on Black surveillance studies is particularly useful, especially as it draws a line from surveillance enacted by the enslavers in the seventeenth century in the United States as overseers on plantations and slave patrols who would eventually become the first police forces, to contemporary technological surveillance, such as what we see depicted in *Dirty Computer* (Browne). And, moments after the policing drone leaves, the girls open the trunk of the vehicle and

allow for more Black girls to be released and jump into the backseat, potentially engaging in an act of what Browne calls “dark sousveillance”— “tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of oversight” (21).

We know from the existence of the Negro Motorist’s Green Books that mobility, especially during the height of massive resistance as a result of integration, that travel has always been a dangerous endeavor for Black people. *Dirty Computer* is not the only contemporary piece of media that pays homage to the difficulty Black people face when traveling. In 2020’s *Lovecraft Country*, a television adaptation of the 2016 horror novel by author Matt Ruff, show runner Misha Green and her writers produced a pilot episode that draws upon the terror of driving through America in the 1950s for Black people. Part of the horror of the show is not just the fantasy beasts and monsters that populate protagonist, Atticus Freeman’s, world, but of the reality of racism and the acute danger he faces just by existing.

Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* draws upon this legacy of limited mobility, showcasing that this is still an issue in even our imagined future, but using lyrics such as those in the following song, “Crazy, Classic Life,” to insist upon her own freedom:

I am not America’s nightmare

I am the American dream

This assertion runs directly counter to Langston Hughes’ writing on the American Dream in “Harlem,” nearly a century before, when he asks what happens to

a dream deferred, knowing that the Black person's dream has the potential to cause a rupture if left to fester. Monáe decides that the explosion is exactly what she want. This returns us once more to the image of rupture, breaking, the in-between spaces and glitches that Marisa Parham's work encourages me to investigate in response to this work. That space is one of potentiality, one of movement and mobility that we intentionally create for ourselves. In short, and to extend the metaphor, it enables the possibility of flight.

“Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/ All that bullshit from white-collars/ You see my color before my vision/ Sometimes I wonder if you would fly/ Would it help you make a better decision?”

As opposed to many of the other instances where flight has been explored in this dissertation, Monáe appears to be speaking to oppressors, implying that if they could fly, perhaps they would understand our (Black women's) perspective. This is an interesting stance: this lyric is an invitation to join us in the air. It relies on the imagery of Black women and girls' flight, but we do not leave everyone else on the ground. Interestingly, this invitation to fly alongside us is not present in other situations. Consider Milkman's flight at the end of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. A common refrain is that Pilate, who in some ways becomes responsible and enables Milkman's flight, is left grounded. As literary scholar Gay Wilentz notes in an important study on the use of flight as a motif in African American folklore, women are the bearers of the stories of Black men's flight and in line with this tradition, Pilate carries it on (29-30). But importantly, the issue of memory comes up again, as Wilentz points out that Morrison emphasizes women as the bearers of memory: the men who fly would not be remembered if the Black women did not remain behind to tell the stories (30).

Flight, and how we get to it, is less explicit and less literal in *Lemonade*. Unlike Jane 57821's hover car which actually enables her to fly, or simulate the act of flying, Beyoncé's relationship to flight in *Lemonade* is closer to the weightlessness one experiences when swimming or when in water. I would argue that the two actions are related: letting go in water, and letting go in the air.

Chapter 4:

What's in a #BlackGirlMagicPotion?

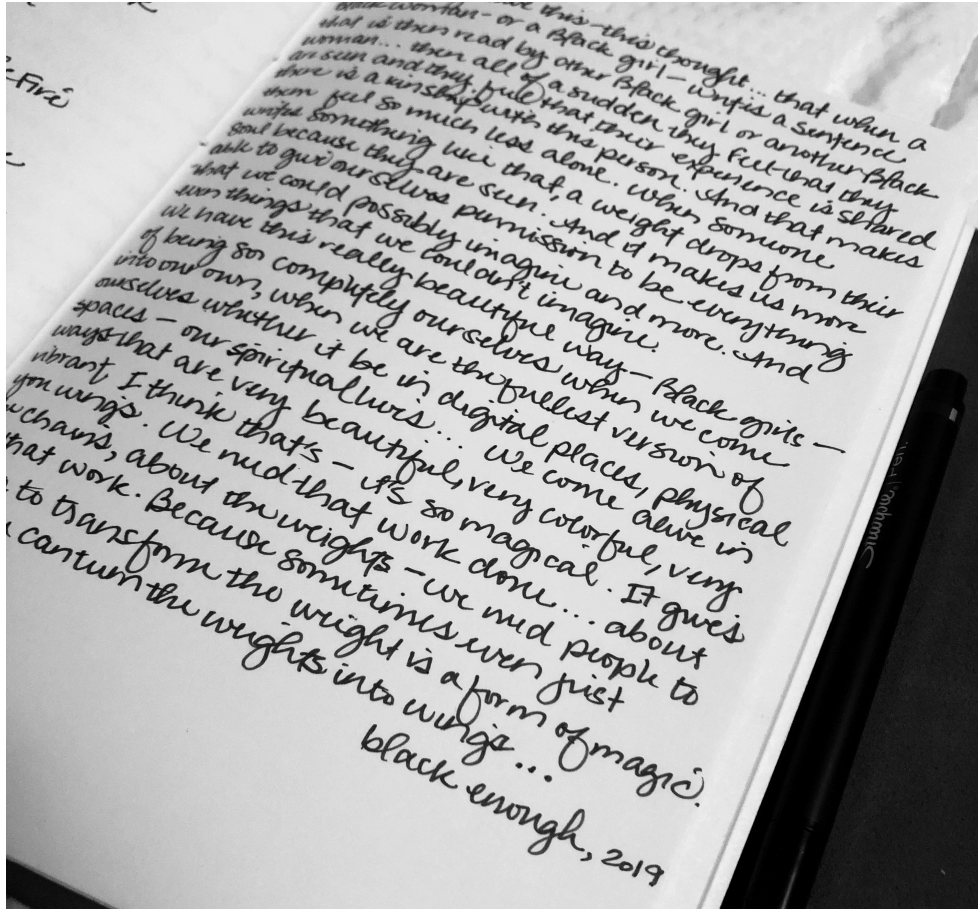


Figure 15, Author's personal journal featuring transcribed portion of interview with Watson that became the voice over for the first Black Enough season 1 trailer ("Black Enough | NEW WEBSERIES | Teaser").

Transforming the Weights into Wings

In the late spring of 2019, filmmaker, writer and director Micah Ariel Watson asked me for a favor. I hesitated: this was precisely how I found myself working as the stage manager for Watson's first independent production at the University of Virginia, *The Black Monologues*, in 2015, despite having neglected my interest in theater since high school. It was a simple ask: would I be willing to be interviewed about Black girlhood and magic for her upcoming webseries, *Black Enough?* Given that my participation in *The Black Monologues* was deeply influential in my ability to confidently self-identify as a writer, ask important questions about Blackness and form community with other young Black artists in a way that ultimately shaped my scholarly interests moving forward, it was easy to say yes.

Watson and I have collaborated on and off in the years since *The Black Monologues*. In 2016, we took our respective interests in Black film and Black comics, and created the short-lived joint blog *King of the Black Millennials*, which centered our thoughts on the 2018 *Black Panther film* in advance, filtered through our scholarly and artistic lenses. We often took part in writing challenges, meant to help us move forward on our latest script or novel project and documented them on Twitter using hashtags like #BlackGirlWritingChallenge. When Watson became an MFA student in dramatic writing at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, she became a columnist for my blog, *Black Girl Does Grad School*, writing about her own challenges in fine arts graduate school in "Fade to Black."



Figure 16, Watson's Black Girl Does Grad School column, "Fade to Black," graphic. Created by Author, 2018.

Our working relationship was scholarly, artistic, and fundamentally defined by the digital as we were only in immediate proximity during the 2015-2016 academic year. Our vibrant collaborative partnership was developed almost exclusively in text threads, over voice memo and FaceTime. Though digitally mediated, we were able to form a rigorous collaborative practice that only strengthened with each project, most recently with Watson's webseries project, *Black Enough*.

From the interview that Watson conducted with me, she pieced together the following narrative which would become the voice over for the first teaser for the webseries:

“I personally have this thought that when a Black woman—or a Black girl—writes a sentence that is then read by another Black girl or a Black woman, and all of a sudden, they feel that they are seen and they feel that their experience is shared. There is a kinship with this person. And that makes them feel so much less alone. When someone writes something like that, a weight drops from their soul because they are seen and it makes us more able to give ourselves permission to be everything that we could possibly imagine and more—and even things that we couldn’t imagine.

We have this really beautiful way—Black girls—of being so completely ourselves when we come into our own, when we’re the fullest version of ourselves, whether it be in digital spaces, physical spaces, in our spiritual lives... We come alive in ways that are very beautiful, very colorful, very vibrant. I think that’s so magical. It gives you wings.

We need that work done about the chains, about the weights. We need people to do that work because sometimes even just trying to transform the weight becomes a form of magic and you turn the weights into wings” (“Black Enough | NEW WEBSERIES | Teaser”).

The edited interview excerpt exemplified my own realization about the alchemy Black girls were able to perform not only in digital spaces, but in every facet of our lives. The intersection of the digital and the magical is clear in my declarations, but also reflected in the fact that Watson and I, over the course of several years, had built our relationship on various digital playgrounds rooted in digital alchemy and digital Black feminism that defined our own technomagic girlhoods. Where we felt safe to ask different versions of the same questions: *What makes a Black girl? What makes her magic?* We came at these questions from different vantage points: I privileged flight and magic and the digital, whereas Watson muses over water, spirituality and 16 mm film, still ultimately arriving at the same place where we learned to wade deep

into messy intellectual waters, but do so together.¹⁹ As scholars Catherine Knight Steele (who learns from and cites hip-hop scholar Joan Morgan) and Moya Bailey frequently remind readers in their work, to engage with the digital and Black feminism and/or womanhood and girlhood is to embrace messiness and loose boundaries as an intellectual process.

In this chapter, I aim to show that the digital provides fertile ground for experimentation, self-definition and relational group identity by locating *Black Enough* as a genre-defying piece of art which relies on multiple media forms. It also self-reflexively explores how my partnership with Watson became the foundation for intellectual inquiry that expanded the impact of the show. I argue that Micah Ariel Watson's *Black Enough* webseries uses a combination of digital and analogue technologies and alchemies to produce a rich, multifaceted narrative about Black girls' selfhood that is reflected on the screen and behind the scenes.

The Webseries and Black American Media Moguls (BAMMs)

The webseries is a new media form that allows for more experimentation than TV or film given that it is more accessible to make with the growing ubiquitous nature

¹⁹ Watson is known for her deep interest in water as a theme in her work, likely linked to her C.O.G.I.C. background. She writes about this in "Fade to Black: A Black Girl's Guide to Walking on Water," on *Black Girl Does Grad School* (September 26, 2018). I have written at length about flight, penning both "How a Black Girl Learned to Fly" for *Catapult* in 2020 and the keynote address for Chapter 1 Con Young Writers Conference in August 2020, "To Write Yourself Free: Meditations on Failing, Flying and Futures." And as sociologist Eve L. Ewing reminds us, "flight and water are two governing metaphors that are important to me and important to a lot of Black people" ("How Eve Ewing Makes Her Stories Fly").

of smart phones (Jenkins 4). Communications and journalism scholar Henry Jenkins is well known for his body of scholarship on new media and participatory culture—Jenkins’ arguments often center the democratization of the internet as access allows for more people to create, share, and discuss media. He argues in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* that there is a dialectic between creators and consumers of media, and that this relationship finds its roots in mass media production from the twentieth century (1). As the spread of social media allows for more and more user generated content on video platforms like YouTube, it is not only that more dialectics form, but that the two-directional relationship between creators and consumers becomes more symbiotic. I argue that this symbiotic relationship created through media is equally, if not more impactful among various facets of Black communities—particularly those which center Black girls.

Scholars such as digital humanist and Black popular culture researcher Kim Gallon and media scholar Anna Everett push students and readers of their work to think critically about this new wave of digital media at our fingertips. Gallon writes from a pedagogical standpoint about using webseries as course content in the classroom, pairing young YouTube creator turned Hollywood producer and actress Issa Rae’s breakout webseries, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, with Stuart Hall’s work on deconstructing “the popular” (“Making Blackness ‘Strange’”). Everett charts the rise of Black filmmakers turning to the digital to produce their work, coining the term “Black American Media Mogul” (2014). She focuses primarily on the digital tools that established filmmakers used to create their media magic: Spike Lee’s use of Kickstarter, the online crowdfunding platform, and the trans media story

telling success of creators like Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey, all of whom underscore the ways BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) are embracing technology, before concluding with a note about BAMMs to watch, again notably mentioning YouTube star turned multimedia content creator, Issa Rae (“Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs”). Their work on Rae contextualizes the current moment of expansion Black digital creators are experiencing.

Rae becomes an important figure in the development of Black artists in digital media as her success with *Awkward Black Girl* would pave the way for her to land her own HBO show based on the series, *Insecure* (Everett). Black digital humanities scholar Moya Bailey argues that Rae’s success also inspires more Black creators—specifically Black queer women—to try user-generated platforms to craft and disseminate their art (103). Returning to the idea of the digital being a place of opportunity to explore, one of the advantages of creating shows online is that they are catered more directly to their audiences, rather than influenced by corporations, budgets and statistics. Bailey writes, “digital media makers are less concerned with creating content that reaches privileged out-group members than creating content for their own networks. This work is less about creating positive or respectable images that would appeal to normative audiences, but rather a means for creating networks and representations that speak to communities not acknowledged in mainstream media” (104). This excerpt from *Misogynoir Transformed* speaks to Bailey’s larger goal, which is to show how Black women combat this hatred of Black women using digital tools, tactics and strategies, providing representations of our communities which accurately reflect them and the unique challenges we face without the need to

filter acting as one strategy. Rae's depictions of quirky Black girls, like J from *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and Issa from *Insecure*, who do not often get mainstream media attention—as the gaze is typically directed at consumable stereotypes of Black women like the Jezebel and Sapphire—is a strategy for combating misogynoir (Collins).

Issa Rae's presence in digital media beckons more creators forward, each with different and nuanced ideas about representing particular facets of Black diasporic cultures online. She would inspire series well into the late 2010s and early 2020s such as Moon Ferguson's *Juju: The Webseries* (2019-), Eliyannah Amirah Yisrael's *Hermione Granger and the Quarter Life Crisis* (2017-), and the web series at the heart of this chapter's inquiry, Micah Ariel Watson's *Black Enough* (2019-). While both Ferguson and Yisrael's webseries take the concept of Black girl magic very seriously, magic becomes a metaphorical essence in *Black Enough*. *Juju: The Webseries* follows a trio of young Black women who learn they are witches, and *Hermione Granger and the Quarter Life Crisis* is a fan-created riff on J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, following Hermione rather than Harry, who is in her early twenties during the show and notably draws upon her representation as a Black girl.²⁰ However, Watson's passion project, *Black Enough* (2019-), asks a series of difficult questions: *What, the first episode asks, makes up a Black girl? What is in a #Blackgirlmagicpotion? What does it mean to be "Black enough?"* The show follows

²⁰ In the 2016 West End production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, adult Hermione Granger is played by Black British actress Noma Dumezweni. For more about Black Hermione, see the coda of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*.

a first year college student and dancer, Amaya Jones, at her fictitious predominantly white Virginia institution, Weston College (loosely based on the University of Virginia), as she struggles with these questions and simultaneously deals with the typical set of freshman issues: new friends, losing touch with old friends, crushes, and finding your path. Most of the issues are Black girl-specific, such as the desire to “go natural”—cutting off chemically processed hair leaving one’s natural texture behind—and working up the courage to do so over the course of the semester. Others are larger, systemic and demand audiences, both Black and white, perform introspection—ask questions about respectability, history and the relationship between protest and art. The series demands that we never stop questioning.

Micah Ariel Watson and the Creation of Black Enough

Micah Ariel Watson, a Chicago native and Wichita, Kansas transplant, attended the University of Virginia from 2014-2018, where she would investigate stories about the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Blackness. As an undergraduate student, she created the university’s first *Black Monologues* performance (2015), in which Watson gathered a team of writers to pen monologues about their experiences at the predominantly white institution (PWI) and beyond, and alongside co-director, Kelsey Watkins, directed a team of actors to perform the collaboratively created script. The initial two performances were so popular that the university’s Drama Department scheduled three more performances the following weekend.²¹

²¹ I know this because I was there. I was the *Black Monologues* stage manager in

After *Black Monologues*, Watson would continue to be a force in the Drama department, writing, directing and producing plays and films that would garner attention far beyond the University of Virginia. Her film *40 & State* (2018) was selected for the BlackStar Film Festival, won the 2019 Best Documentary at Black Web Fest, and has been screened at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles, the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and the Toronto International Film Festival Cinematheque. Her plays, *Canaan* (2018), *Will Be Live* (2018), and *Wake Up Music!* (2017) have all garnered equal critical acclaim.

As a dramatic writing student at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Watson found interest in pursuing more forms of writing, taking to a new genre: namely, the web series. Despite the turn to the digital form, the questions and themes that form the foundation of Watson's body of work remain the same. Her work primarily centers the intersections of Blackness and Christianity/spirituality, but naturally the expansiveness of both categories begs for further specificity. In an interview with *UVA Today* magazine, Watson notes that her faith "has been [her] rock and the place where [she] feel[s] most grounded..." ("Class of 2018: Playwright Micah Watson Found the Stage She Needed at UVA"). Her experience in college helped her mesh her identities as a Black woman Christian artist so that she felt whole, rather than a *mélange* of separate identities ("Class of 2018: Playwright Micah Watson..."). Though *Canaan* (2018) follows the story of a young Black man, Louie, and other scripts of Watson's center the joy of Black boyhood, *Black Enough*, her first webseries, attempts to capture the magic of Black girlhood on film.

2015.

In an attempt to think through the threads that span this dissertation in a more public way, I began a podcast which explores fantasy for Black girls called *Dreaming in the Dark* with fellow Black fantasy scholar, Bezi Yohannes. Named in part for Toni Morrison's critical analysis, *Playing in the Dark*, and inspired by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' monograph, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, the podcast endeavors to speak with creators who are stretching the furthest reaches of our collective imagination to craft new visions of Black futures and dreamscapes. In an early episode of the first season, Yohannes and I sat down with Micah Watson to ask her about how the Digital Black Girl Magic Potion aspect of Black enough came about:

“02:48 [RKS] On that note, so you mention Black Enough, [...] So, I [...] want to ask you: how did the Black Girl Magic Potion become such a strong motif in this series?”

[MAW] Yeah, so I guess I can go back to the sort of, how the series started. So it came from a number of places but one event that happened was, I was at UVA, where both me and Ravynn went. My fourth year a bunch of well-intentioned Black girls had this idea to do a photo shoot, because the Duke Black girls had done a photo shoot and it was gonna be like a Black Girl Magic photo shoot and it was gonna go viral and it that was going to be this thing that was great and amazing. And I was like, “Oh, that’s super dope.”

So I signed up for it, then we get an email with all these pictures of what we were supposed to look like, right, like this was a Black Girl Magic photoshoot, this is what to wear, this is where to shop, this are the looks, this is the hair, this is the make-up, blah blah blah, and I was like, “Oh, this is interesting/weird,” because like this does not look like me. None of these images look like how I see myself. But yet I found myself trying to, you know, rummage through my closet and see what I could find that would make me look like one of those Instagram model girls.

And I went to that photoshoot and I just felt, like so super empty. I was like, “I

don't feel like Black Girl Magic. I feel like I'm trying to be, you know, someone else. I'm trying to fit into this mold and be performative." And I was like, "I think I would feel like Black Girl Magic if I was wearing my overalls and Docs right now or like converse." That's what would make me feel like Black Girl Magic.

04:37 And so I just started to ask the questions like: What is Black Girl Magic? Is it the same for everyone? Is it different? What are these components that make you qualified to be in a photoshoot like this? What are the components that would make you qualified to put this label of Black Girl Magic on yourself? Or I guess more specifically on myself.

And from that, I like wordplay, so I was like magic potion, Black Girl Magic Potion. I guess just simply from thinking about those things but also having a love of words too and putting those things together I guess I sort of expanded on that. So the series really asks the question: What makes up a Black girl? Those are the first lines of the entire series. I think that's a question I'm continuously asking myself, like "What makes me qualified to wear this crown of Black Girl Magic? To put myself in conversation with other Black girls I admire? What are the things that disqualify me from that? Are these qualifications fake?"

So it's like, I guess the Black Girl Magic Potion is just the idea that being a Black girl is just a series of questions and not answers. And so yeah, I don't really know what's in the potion. But that's where it came from" (Watson).

I share Watson's answer in full for a few reasons. First, it showcases the importance of questioning in art and the way these questions constitute rigorous intellectual inquiry and exploration. Second, it underscores the ability to articulate a set of questions as equally important as finding an answer, or a set of answers. Third, in questioning whether the "qualifications" of Black Girl Magic are "fake," Watson is able to point to the imagined societal boundaries and delineations we have around whether we can claim this positivity for ourselves. Watson alludes to the popular conception of Black Girl Magic: what you might find if one searches this tag on Instagram. Searching the hashtag "#blackgirlmagic" returns over thirty million posts, and the many of the first hundred have an intentional aesthetic and attention to markers of success of Black

women (graduations, weight loss, travel), which feel at odds with who Watson is on a daily basis. This line of questioning begins to separate Black Girl Magic from notions of excellence and aligns it more with ideas of "being" and "becoming." In some ways, our understanding of Black Girl Magic, and aligning it with being and becoming, returns the concept of childhood to Black *girls*, who, as we have explored throughout, are subject to extreme adultification in society.

The idea of the Black Girl Magic Potion being a series of questions and chasing of a feeling, an essence, is something that is at the core of this dissertation project. Arguably, this project is an intellectual sister of *Black Enough*: in the same way that Watson asks about the components of Black Girl magic, I find myself asking what digital culture does to our conceptualization of Black Girl Magic. Is digital culture a necessary component *of* Black Girl Magic since our understanding of it and our ability to name it is intrinsically tied to the hashtag coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013? Is digital culture an ingredient in the so-called Black Girl Magic Potion, to put it another way?

Although Watson feels that her answer to the question of the origin of the Black Girl Magic Potion does not do the term justice, it does in fact give us the starting point of a rather expansive answer: Black Girl Magic, #BlackGirlMagic, the Black Girl Magic Potion...they are manifestations of the beauty in *being* a Black girl. Simply being, not linked to a particular set of achievements or conditions. Watson asks whether the ingredients of a Black Girl Magic Potion would be different for everyone, and based on the exploration done here, I would argue that it is. The ingredients of a Black Girl Magic Potion are reflective of Black girlhoods, which we know based on

much research, exploration throughout this dissertation, and lived experiences, are *not* monolithic.

The Artistry of Black Enough

Artistically, the poetic web series is a mash up of forms and techniques that create a quilt-like experience for viewers. In the tradition of Spike Lee's mix of digital and 16 mm film work, Watson's web series also moves between 16 mm and digital film, a mix which Anna Everett writes may be considered "guerrilla filmmaking" and demonstrates the ability to successfully merge old and new media (131). The mix also adds dimensions of meaning to the episodes: Amaya's rich inner life, visions of herself dancing, imagining a Black girl magic potion, etc. are filmed in 16 mm. These shots are often overlaid with nondiegetic interviews with Black women who have theorized or thought about Black girl magic in its various forms and iterations, or poetry written by Watson herself. Poetry, theory and dance become intertwined, as if she knows that no one mode of inquiry can sufficiently explain the phenomena she pursues. This is also a tenant of Black feminist thought. Patricia Hill Collins discusses at length the way that middle class Black feminists pursued theory and writing, which is not to say that working class Black feminists did not advance their beliefs— they simply expressed them in other ways, depending primarily on arts, like the blues, and conveying personal experiences (33).

These 16 mm film shots are also moments that become semi-autobiographical in the series. They show moments of Amaya's deepest vulnerability, and in many ways,

are also a window into some of the issues Watson finds most pressing. *Black Enough* becomes a way for her to process the experiences she had as an undergraduate at the University of Virginia. The digital shots tend to be the diegetic present narrative of the show. This is where viewers see various conflicts, follow the narrative, and learn more about Amaya.

As aforementioned, the web series relies on many different forms of artistic expression and theoretic underpinnings. Though at first glance, the web series is a version of a TV show, at a closer look, it is clear Watson is experimenting with both form and content. The weaving of form is reminiscent of Ntozake Shange's 1982 novel *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* and her 1976 choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. Shange was a literary alchemist: she had the ability to transform words into whatever she wanted, from a balm for the soul to a truth as difficult to swallow as a set of knives. Watson shares this ability to weave old and new forms into something innovative. The creation of such a product, created with care with a blend of several other specific types of Black girls' magic potion, is, in and of itself, a type of manifestation. Watson captures this in her love letter to *Black Enough* in their season 2 Seed & Spark crowdfunding campaign:

“On days, in seasons when it feels particularly hard to be Black, I turn to film and music. When all I see and hear around me is death and injustice, I need to watch stories about life. Black people growing, breathing. Black people in our fullness, in our complexity. In motion, in flight. In our flaws, in our beauty, in our humanity. In love. In peace. In light. That is a primary reason why I'm a filmmaker and am pursuing this uncertain life as an artist. I want to tell stories that my people can turn to in the face of trauma. Not as a solution to injustice, but as spaces of light and restoration. It's not escapism. It's self care. It's fuel for the long journey ahead. It's affirmation, it's the forgotten reality, it's hope.

So this is how we're fighting.”

Self-care. Watson positions her art, not as frivolous, but as a weapon to help us move through the world which would rather see us belittled than empowered. It brings to mind the Audre Lorde quote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

I am not my hair...

Watson is gifted at having the viewer follow multiple storylines and arcs, all of equal importance, with a feeling of connectedness to them all. Amaya Jones’ story is one of a Black girl leaving home and finding out who she is outside of the confines of who she was always presumed to be, by virtue of her environment and companions. It is the story of a Black girl learning that she is not only “Black enough,” but that she, in her own right, is *enough*. Full stop. And it is the story of transition— as told through her relationship with her hair.

Hair is a powerful medium of expression, particularly for Black women, whose locks often convey their political philosophies and thoughts on “liberation.” As Tanisha C. Ford writes in *Dressed in Dreams*: “I know it sounds cliché to say that I found myself when I went natural. Yet it’s the truth. But it wasn’t immediate...If you went natural, people were quick to try to pin down *what kind* of woman. You were to account for why you’d want to undergo such a drastic change in hairstyling. Problem was, they had very limited reference points. Every natural woman was either an Angela, an Erykah, or a Kelis. Angela Davis types...were militant and politically

radical...Erykah Badu types were the artsy earth mothers who styles out in dreadlocks, intricate cornrowed looks or sometimes, halo Afros. And Kelis types...were just like the singer: each one a funky wild child, artistic like the Erykahs, but puncher than those earth mothers” (183-186).

Given this understanding of Black hair, it follows that Amaya would look to her “Big Chop” as a way to find herself.²² And also given what we know about Amaya from early episodes, and her belief that there is such a thing as a “Black Girl Magic Potion,” it perhaps is not a stretch to assume that she believes that the “Big Chop” will transform her into a type of Black woman that is legible to her. She will be transformed into a type— not necessarily an Angela, an Erykah or a Kelis, but perhaps a late 2010s type that makes “more sense.”

Her transformation is unfortunately a fraught experience. In episode 12, “Beneatha, 2019,” Amaya goes to the salon to have her hair cut. As she waits, viewers may notice that she is reading *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, which, while it has very little to do with hair, does indeed have much to do with chasing a woman’s magic. It implies that Amaya believes something magical, transformative is about to happen.

In some ways, something transformative *does* happen, but it is an experience loaded with many conflicting emotions, least of which is the joy she anticipated.

Amaya returns to her room after her cut and cries.

²² “The Big Chop” refers to the moment in which one removes their chemically straightened or otherwise altered hair so as to revert it to its natural, typically curly or kinky, state.

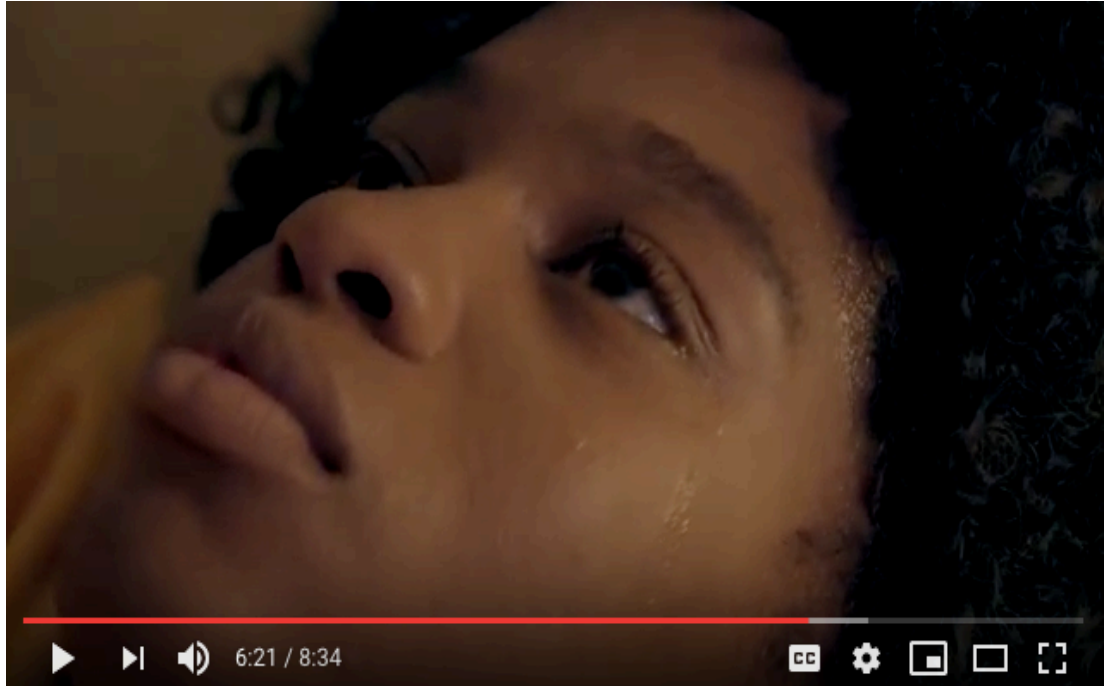


Figure 17, Close up shot of Black Enough protagonist, Amaya (played by Tiffany Gordon) in episode 12 “Beneatha, 2019,” as she cries in her dorm room after cutting her hair.

One interpretation of this scene is that perhaps her transformation has revealed someone new to her— but it may not be who she expected or wanted to be.

It takes Amaya a while to settle into her new expression of self, but her friends whom she has developed relationships with over the course of the season, see her. When Amaya asks Ember how she looks before the cookout in the season finale, her friend smiles, and replies, “Like you, baby girl,” indicating that Amaya has finally found some semblance of wholeness after searching for the better part of the season.

The Sankofa Effect

As discussed in the introduction, the concept of *sankofa* is crucial to the success of this project. As such, it is also important to the way we can think about *Black Enough*. While Watson pays homage to many different artistic legacies throughout the web series, including that of filmmaker Spike Lee, it is clear that Watson is influenced by her training in Black Studies. All of the issues that Amaya faces are rooted in a history and legacy. Her worries and anxieties seem to incorporate ancient and ancestral issues, a theme that is explored in explicit detail in episode 9, “Wash Day, 1955.” Though poetry is woven through all of the episodes, “Wash Day, 1955” and episode 11, “The Funk In Your Right,” use poetry to advance the plot and stakes, while also reflecting on important themes to Black history writ large, and the web series specifically. If we connect Watson’s use of water as a motif with the use of water in both *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* as we explored in Chapter 3, we can see that this is a recurring theme of visual works that center Black women and girls.

The use of both water as a motif and poetry as a vehicle puts the episode in deeper conversation with *Lemonade* as Knowles-Carter’s visual album weaves in poetry from Warsan Shire throughout to tie the various parts of the film and the songs together. This tradition of patchwork creation, or quilting, or even remixing to bring in concepts from hip-hop feminism (Joan Morgan) and Black digital humanities (Marisa Parham), is a quality characteristic of Black women’s storytelling. Both the influence of music and the tactile nature of quilting are synthesized in *Black Feminist Thought* when Patricia Hill Collins writes, “The polyrhythms in African-American music, in which no one main beat subordinates the others, is paralleled by the theme of individual expression in Black women’s quilting. Black women quilters place strong

color and patterns next to each other and see individual differences not as detracting from each piece but as enriching the whole quilt” (263).

In the following paragraph, Collins begins to use Ntozake Shange’s meditations on her work as an example, though I might consider such a novel such as *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*’s content and form to speak for itself. Much like quilting, Shange pulls together multiple different modes of storytelling that feel distinct and perhaps incongruent. This is particularly poignant because the story follows the lives of three sisters, each different though magical in their own way, with magic expressed through poems, monologues, recipes for potions and letters— and when they come together, they create one beautiful, harmonious piece of literature. Each individual woman gets to shine, and no one sister, or mother, overtakes the narrative. The narrative requires they all work together for the novel to work. In this way, Watson works within the tradition of Black feminist writers to integrate various modes of storytelling. The lives of Black women and girls are complex, rich, and wonderfully innovative; therefore, the stories that represent us must be also.

Having discussed the quilted nature of both pieces, I return now to consider water as a motif. The episode I explore in detail here, “Wash Day, 1955,” deals with the complicated relationship that Amaya has with “wash day,” a term used to designate the *entire* day one has set aside to tend to one’s hair. (Yes, it does usually take the *entire day*.) The year, 1955, is a signal to the view of the year which saw the murder of young Chicagoan, Emmett Till, who was lynched and then thrown into the Tallahatchie River by white men while visiting relatives in Mississippi for allegedly

whistling at a white woman.²³ Though in recent years, the woman connected to case, Carolyn Bryant Donham, has since come forward to tell the truth, the gesture is simply far too late (Pérez-Peña). Together, the two terms, like all of Watson's episode titles, give the viewer an attentive detail to particular aspects of Black history, culture or art (in this case, water) to meditate on long after the end credits roll.

In writing the poetry for the episode, Watson ties the difficult feelings of being uncomfortable with the transitioning state of a Black girl's hair from chemically altered to natural, having to know one's hair intimately in the water, to the history Black people have with water. It was never just about water running through her coils: it was also about the history of Amaya's, of Watson's, of mine, of *our* people being carted through the Middle Passage. Amaya narrates, "When we see water, we see death/ 400 years of life flashing before your eyes/ 400 reasons to stay on the shore." In a moment which recalls the discussion of Beyoncé and the connection scholars have made between the visual aesthetic of her album and the orisha, Oshun, Amaya is not at one with the water, but details all the reasons she should be afraid of it.

Much of season one of the web series follows Amaya's attempts to find her magic— as if she does not have it, as if it is not already within her. Her hesitation throughout the first season is an important contrast to both Beyoncé in *Lemonade* and Janelle Monáe as Jane 57821 in *Dirty Computer*. Though I have posited them both as Black girls within the context of this dissertation (thinking in particular of Black girlhood scholar Kyra D. Gaunt who also writes about "the women who affectionately

²³ 1955 is also the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, in which many domestic workers were unable to get in to their white employers to do housework, such as laundry.

call one another ‘girl’ throughout their lives” [2]), Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe have years on college freshman, Amaya. These narratives speak to each other in important ways because while Beyoncé and Monáe have had several albums in which to explore and embrace their magic, learn their signatures and how it manifests, Amaya, because she is not sure who she is yet, cannot know what her particular brand of magic is. While *Lemonade* depicts the painful process of having to find your way back to your power after having lost it, and *Dirty Computer* depicts being stripped of it by larger systems in place outside of your control and yet finding the strength and courage to take it back for yourself, *Black Enough* shows the stumbling path towards finding your magic in the first place.

Watson brings forth a variety of these perspectives throughout Amaya’s journey. Of course, the narrative focuses on her, but we also follow Lena’s coming of age and her desire to find a place for herself at Weston; Ember and Hadiyah’s, which are about learning to love yourself and balance love for self and community respectively; as well as the stories of many other Black girls and women through the interviews Watson weaves into the episodes. This process is intergenerational and layered; we hear a variety of Black women’s perspectives. We hear from Watson’s grandmother, a number of mentors, including writer Taylor Harris, a few friends, such as Kemi Layeni and a couple scholars of Black girlhood, including myself. The learning takes place at multiple levels: within the diegetic narrative, within the poetry, within the music and within the interviews. Watson is operating within the Black feminist framework and Black artistic and cultural traditions that enables those who come to the show to engage with what makes the most sense for them and take what they need.

You can receive the same message no matter which element(s) you pay most attention to.

Digital Black Girl Magic Potion



Figure 18, Black Enough protagonist Amaya as she writes out the ingredients to her #BlackGirlMagicPotion on her mirror in episode one, “Double Consciousness.”

Easily one of the most compelling concepts in *Black Enough* is Watson’s exploration of the “Black Girl Magic Potion.” The webseries’ protagonist, Amaya, believes that there is such a thing as a Black Girl Magic Potion, and she lists the potential ingredients on her mirror. (See above image). Writing the ingredients of the potion on her mirror become a metaphor— she writes them on a version, or a

representation of her body, an image that is her but out of her reach. Amaya needs to bridge the gap between self and representation.

The ingredients are diverse, ranging from easily accessible items, such as hoop earrings (which the series affectionately refer to as “Butterfly Wings”), to the much more transformative experience of undergoing the “Big Chop.” As she collects or experiences the various ingredients, she checks or crosses them off her list, implying that this potential collection of things will affirm her Black girlhood.

In episode 1, “Double Consciousness,” Amaya attends her first Black Student Union (BSU) meeting where we are introduced through flashes to other characters important to Amaya’s journey, including BSU president, Vaughn. Vaughn ends her emphatic speech about belonging with the words, “You’re already Black *so*...you meet all the requirements...right?” This assumption that being Black is enough, is an underlying theme of the entire show, but it also questions this claim, because as we notice, the words seem to cut through Amaya— and she leaves the meeting abruptly. Despite being Black, it does not appear to be enough for Amaya.

The episode is aptly titled, with its name, like many of the following episodes, signifying many potential meanings and important histories. Episode 3, “Toussaint,” draws its name both from the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, but also the poem named for him in Ntozake Shange's 1976 choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Episode 5, “Celie's Rites,” derives from Alice Walker's 1982 epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, and episode 12, “Beneatha, 2019,” is influenced by Black playwright Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958). “Double Consciousness” comes from W. E. B. Du

Bois' 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it Du Bois writes: "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with the second-sight in this American world...It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2). *The Souls of Black Folk* and this idea of double consciousness are foundational to many fields, including, and perhaps most importantly, Black studies, where the heart of *Black Enough* lies. In naming the very first episode of the series "Double Consciousness," Watson makes a choice to ground *Black Enough* in a history and legacy of Black scholars, artists, and other thinkers. She stakes a claim that her art will be in conversation with those who came before from the title card forward. This decision also lets viewers know what the primary inquiry and conflict will be moving forward: Amaya's own double consciousness, though hers is, in some ways, even more complicated.

Yes, Amaya likely feels the double consciousness that Du Bois describes: being Black and American, seeing yourself as you are and also acutely aware of how the white world sees you. For Amaya, we must also add the layer of being a woman, which may change our relationship to and understanding of double consciousness. She develops a so-called, "triple consciousness," a theory in which Black women see themselves through three lenses, rather than two: America, Blackness and

womanhood.²⁴ Welang rightfully notes that triple consciousness theory is not the first time Black women have had to think about the multiple identities and spaces their bodies occupy. From Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I A Woman?" speech to Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" to Taylor Leigh Lamb's 2016 article for the University of Virginia's *Iris Magazine*, "Blackwoman," Black women have been thinking and theorizing about their multiple interwoven identities.²⁵

Amaya's double consciousness is also comprised of being Black and occupying a Black body, and yet being acutely aware of how other Black folk are seeing and engaging with her. At the beginning of the season, she seems to be of the mind that there is an "in group/out group" situation happening, and whatever her Black is—is not good enough. That train of thought is what we see as Amaya flees the BSU meeting, with Vaughn watching her every move.

This moment is enough to send Amaya down a rabbit hole for the rest of the season in pursuit of “what makes up a Black girl.” Watson even asks interviewees for the series to offer up what goes in their personal brand of Black Girl Magic Potion. Some, like Kemi Layeni, chose traits, like courage. I chose objects that gave off

²⁴ For an interesting international perspective on TCT, see Nahum Welang, “Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture,” *Open Cultural Studies* vol. 2, 1 (2018) 298-299

²⁵ Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman,” (1851) <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” (1989) University of Chicago Legal Forum; Taylor Leigh Lamb, “Blackwoman,” (2016) <https://iris.virginia.edu/2016/10/blackwoman>

magical energy for me— sunflowers, yellow nail polish, vanilla extract. One thing was clear— our recipes, though bound together under the name of “Black Girl Magic Potion,” were vastly different, as were the effects they would theoretically have.

The Strength of a Digital Black Girl Artistic Community

While the content of the web series is what Watson might call “soul food,” I also believe the community around the web series that the cast and crew have created is that as well. When technomagic girlhood is fully realized, it can thrive in the digital or analog. One of Watson’s greatest talents, in addition to writing, is her ability to create and maintain a team and foster a sense of community which begins as a belief in and love of the art they create together.

In a manner similar to the ways in which the 2015 Black Monologues came together and created something much bigger than the dozen of us, the cast and crew of *Black Enough* knows that the story they are taking part in telling is exactly that. The *Black Enough* team has created something truly magnificent, and has formed a community that prioritizes the development of Black women and girls. In fact, the creative team for season two will be comprised entirely of Black women (See Figure 19 below).



Figure 19, Screenshot from Black Enough creator Micah Ariel Watson's Instagram.

Caption reads: "Season 2 of @blackenough__ can boast that ALL of our designers/department heads are BLACK WOMEN" (July 16, 2020).

Beyond that, they have developed a community with other web series helmed by Black women, such as Moon Ferguson's *Juju: The Webseries*, Malique Daniels, Kayra Clouden and Paulette Marte's *Adultin' Series*, and Janea West's *GROWN the Webseries* and come together to support and amplify each other. These teams support each other during crowdfunding efforts and have even come together for a #BlackGirlWebseriesWatchParty in March 2020, which included other Black women led creative efforts, including the 2019 established *My Sister's Magazine*, helmed by Danaya Hough, and my blogging platform, *Black Girl Does Grad School*.

While this dissertation could have also taken into consideration more explicit

representations of Black Girl Magic in a web series, like examining for example, Eliyannah Amirah Yisrael's *Hermione Granger and the Quarter Life Crisis*, I ultimately chose a web series that engaged with magic as an essence rather than a tangible thing which could then be repurposed as a commodity. And, although the web series was created by a Black woman, Hermione Granger, a main character of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, remains often raced as white in popular imagination. This web series would be interesting for further investigation because it is explicitly magical, and considers race bending, both of which are literacy scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' major modes of inquiry and interest.

Despite the differences, Black Girl Magic Potions in this particular instance are also similar in that they come produced in a digital container. Why a webseries to pursue these questions as opposed to another medium? What about the digital space enables this Black girlhood to blossom and manifest in its most vibrant forms?

In interviews with cast members, Watson asks the girls to reflect on what #BlackGirlMagic is to them:

Tiffany Gordon, who portrays Amaya, says:

#BlackGirlMagic means not allowing for the world's stereotypical view of blackness to hinder you from loving who you are as a black female. It means taking what society has considered a disadvantage (your skin tone, coily hair, facial features) and confidently showcasing it as one of your most loved attributes. You never know how much taking the time to admire what others do not consider admirable will help the person next to you. #BlackGirlMagic means spreading love to the next black girl with the hope that one day she will do the same (Gordon).

Branika Scott, who plays Vaughn, says:

#BlackGirlMagic means a lot of things to me. It means my grandmothers— for

showing me strength, love, and devotion. For teaching me how to be a lady. In teaching me about God and His love and mercy. #BlackGirlMagic is education because all of the major lessons and values I hold dear in my life I have learned from Black women. Black women built this country and are the backbone of America. Black women are the world's superwomen. Black women are the strongest beings I know. We are light, we are laughter, we are love. We are beautiful (Scott).

And Taylor Leigh Lamb, who plays Meagan and is also the digital media and marketing producer for *Black Enough*, says:

For me, #BlackGirlMagic means exactly what CaShawn Thompson, the creator of the movement, meant [when she created it in 2013](#). It is to affirm the innate ability inside of all of us that helps us to thrive in a world which does every possible thing to stop that from happening. This quote from her tells me everything I need to know:

"I need everybody to understand that the Black Girl Magic movement was created by a woman who didn't finish college, and had babies young, and grinded in menial jobs for years. This movement is for every black woman – the ratchet girls, the hood girls, the trans girls, the differently-abled girls. Black Girl Magic is for all of us" (Lamb).

I include these snippets from their interviews because I want to note the commonalities and a particular difference between the three definitions. Gordon conceptualizes Black Girl Magic in a similar way to me— thinking of it as a love and essence of inherent and inherited magic. Scott picks up on the inherited nature of magic when she says she thinks of her grandmothers. Fantasy author of *A Song Below Water* (2020), Bethany C. Morrow, has often said that she believes that Black girls' magic is inherited and matrilineal. (This is in fact the main premise of *A Song Below Water*—Tavia, one of the main characters, is a siren. Only Black women can become sirens and if your mother or grandmother was a siren, you would be one as well.) Lamb, however, is the one who notes the hashtag, thus the digital nature of the phrase.

Because of that, and her ability to connect it with the digital where it was originally coined, Lamb is able to successfully link the phrase to its creator, CaShawn Thompson. Alone, this would not be particularly striking, but in a moment where hashtags like #CiteASista and #CiteBlackWomen are rampant on the internet to encourage us to have an ethos of care in our citation politics, Lamb is employing a particular type of magic, which is giving name and attribution, and recognizing the labor of other Black women.

Watson's own journey, the community that both Watson and her protagonist create, both in the digital media and in real life, provide a stunning example of the ways that technomagic girlhood works. Technomagic girlhood necessitates a community of Black girls that perhaps begin in the digital and expand out into real life, or simply stay on our screens. So while I may not know exactly what goes in a #BlackGirlMagicPotion, I suspect some algorithms and the essence of sisterhood may be some of its primary ingredients.



Figure 20, Author and Micah Ariel Watson at the Black Enough premiere screening in Charlottesville, Virginia on September 28, 2019. Photo credit: Randy Melton.

September 28, 2019 found me walking up a hill to a small theater in downtown Charlottesville because Micah had asked me for another favor. This time, she had asked me to moderate the question-and-answer session at the Charlottesville premiere screening of the first three episodes of *Black Enough*—the city where we had met, gone to school together, and where she developed the idea for the webseries. By the time the premiere was held, I already knew I was writing this chapter for the project. My scholarly interest in the series and my ability to ask insightful questions made me a great choice to host the Q&A.

After the theater filled and the lights went down, we, the audience, all reacted to

seeing this beautiful production in real time on a big screen. Though I had seen the entire season at various points before the premiere, I found myself cringing at hearing my own voice filling the auditorium in episode one and losing my own laughter as it mixed with that of the folks around me while we took in Watson's latest creation.

An already thought-provoking series filled with poetry, interviews and music to digest, in addition to the narrative, Watson's impulse was—and is—always to push further, ask more questions, and think harder. My role now was to work with the audience as I had done throughout our working relationship and friendship: draw more out.



September 27, 2019 at 9:09 PM

BE Premiere Questions

For Micah: What prompted you to write Black Enough? What questions were you aiming to answer or grapple with in creating this series?

For everyone: What did the experience of creating Black Enough teach you that you would want to share with someone like Amaya who's searching for herself in such big ways?

For cast: what does "Black Enough" mean to your character?/What does being "enough" period mean to your character?

What were some challenges you faced as you worked to bring your character to life.

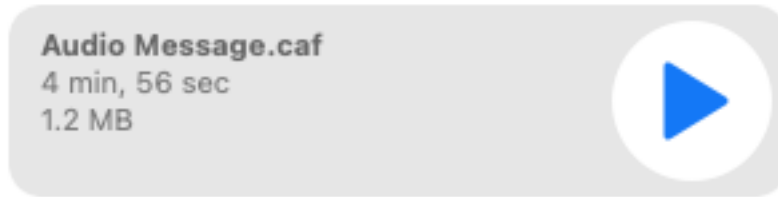
Figure 21, Photo from Author's personal archive. Screenshot of iPhone note detailing

the questions prepared for the Black Enough premiere question and answer period.

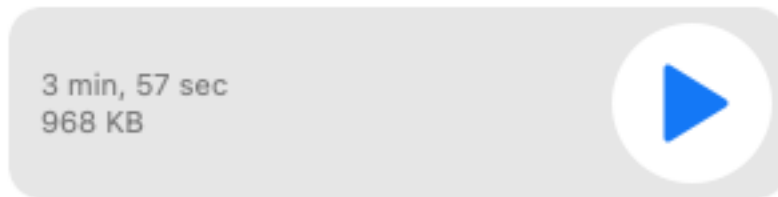
I did then what I often did with Micah: asked questions, drew out themes, made connections and mused with them. *Black Enough*, in many ways, was a thought experiment, and I was deeply involved in the intellectual life of the show, whether I initially saw myself as such or not. The relationship that the two of us had as writers and thinkers, and lovers of art and each other, was mediated through the digital: our brainstorming and drafting process often involved long text conversations, interspersed with voice memos when the ideas became too unwieldy or we got too excited to type.

September 15, 2019 at 7:14 PM

Ravynn thinking about BE 1



Ravynn thinking about BE 2



"A (Future) Black Professor's Prayer"

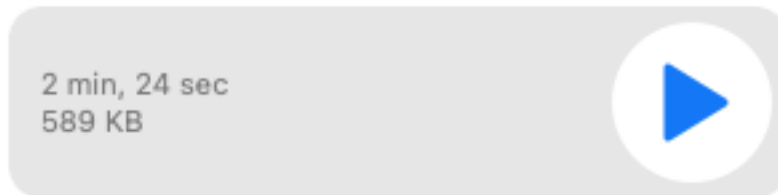


Figure 22, Screenshot from Author's personal archive. Note with audio messages to Watson about Black Enough.

In the months leading up to the premiere, I used my platform, *Black Girl Does Grad School*, a blog established in 2016 that has detailed my journey into the Academy alongside the voices of other emerging Black women scholars, to partner with *Black Enough* to produce Twitter chats to get future viewers thinking critically about the series and the themes it would explore. We held two Twitter chats using the hashtag #BGDGSxBE: one in late December 2018, "Is an MFA for me?" and one in July 2019, "Creating and Critiquing Black Popular Culture."



Figure 23, graphic created by author for the first BGDGSxBE Twitter Chat, “Is an MFA for me?” December 2, 2018.



Figure 24, graphic created by author for the second BGDGSxBE Twitter Chat, “Creating and Critiquing Black Popular Culture,” July 27, 2019.

Together with *Black Enough*'s then-social media manager, Taylor Leigh Lamb, who became a producer for season 2, we developed questions to get our respective communities thinking—we hoped to guide the *Black Enough* viewers towards sharp analysis, and the *Black Girl Does Grad School* readers to think more expansively about art. In particular, we borrowed from scholarship and the work of Black thinkers that inspired us for the “Creating and Critiquing Black Popular Culture” chat:

Questions:

1. Black art: love or duty? what responsibility do Black artists have to Black Studies? (Reference point: Langston Hughes The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain vs W.E.B. Du Bois Criteria is Negro Art)
2. Which current artists do you see engaging with black studies?
3. What pieces of scholarship/literature have you used as starting points for analyzing popular culture?
4. If you could write a paper about any piece of popular art, what would its title be and why?
5. If you could teach a class about your art or art you love, which pieces would you include in your syllabus?
6. Who's a Black artist that would also make a bomb professor? What would their class be about?



July 27, 2019 at 8:59 AM — Shared

BGDGS x BE Twitter chat
Saturday, July 27, 8 EST/7 Central

TITLE: Creating and Critiquing Black Popular Culture

FIRST, Rules of Engagement Tweet
For the purposes of this twitter chat, we're defining "art" as... and "black Studies" as...

SECOND, Introduce yourself! Tell who you are what brings you to this chat!

Questions:

1. Black art: love or duty? what responsibility do Black artists have to Black Studies?(reference point: Langston Hughes The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain vs W.E.B. Du Bois Criteria is Negro Art)
2. Which current artists do you see engaging with black studies?
3. what pieces of scholarship/literature have you used as starting points for analyzing popular culture?
4. if you could write a paper about any piece of popular art, what would its title be and why?
5. if you could teach a class about your art or art you love, which pieces would you include in your syllabus?
6. Who's a Black artist that would also make a bomb professor? What would their class be about?

Discarded questions

How does your understanding of black studies inform the way you engage with and consume media?

What are some of your favorite black studies references in art?

Figure 25, Screenshot from Author's personal archive. Note with questions prepared for the Black Enough and Black Girl Does Grad School Twitter chat.

The inadvertent result of having an artist-scholar (Watson) and a scholar-artist

(myself) collaborating at various junctures on this enterprise, which became much more than a webseries very early on, was that we frequently stepped outside the bounds of strict categorization. It was never entirely clear where the art ended and the scholarship began, yet this was precisely the appeal, and a defining characteristic of Black digital media. Communications scholar Moya Bailey argues that Black web shows that cast their friends accurately reflect their community because those involved in the show *are* the community (136). While Bailey's larger argument centers Black queer women's webseries involvement in battling misogyny and specifically speaks to casting decisions—which are visible reflections on screen of communities—what I am arguing here is that the representation of community extends beyond and behind the scenes. Watson's community of peers is a genre-defying group of scholars, artists, musicians, dancers, etc., who dabble in at least a couple of other forms of artistic expression. This is reflected not only in the multi-talented group of actors they often celebrate on social media, but on the production team, and the larger extended *Black Enough* community of creators, including myself (see Figure 26).

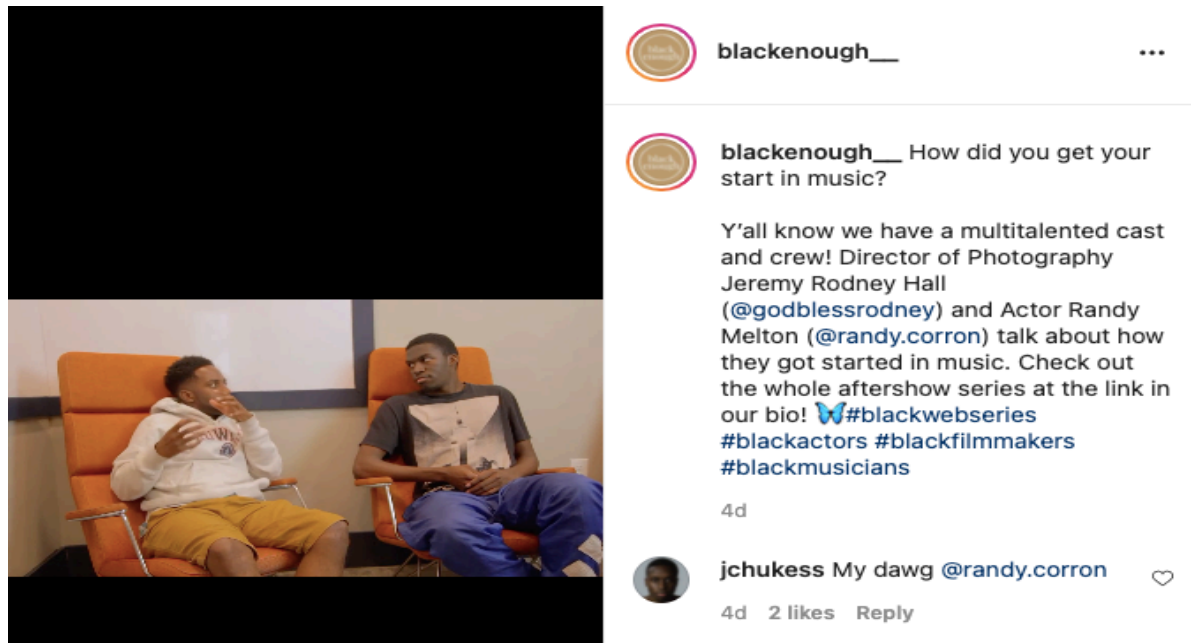


Figure 26, Screenshot from Black Enough’s Instagram page detailing Director of Photography Jeremy Rodney Hall and actor Randy Melton (Jaheem)’s start in music.

My role as the unofficial *Black Enough* scholar continued through the release of the first season. Each week, I wrote recap/reflection hybrid essays on the episode of the week for both the *Black Enough* blog and *Black Girl Does Grad School*. Some, like the “Toussaint” recap, “A (Future) Black Professor’s Prayer,” were my own meditations on the responsibility I had as an educator, inspired by the role of beloved Black Studies professor, Rekia. Others, like “When we see water, we see death,” the “Wash Day, 1955” episode recap, were my attempt to provide something akin to an annotation for the references made in the poem that serves as the narrative for the episode. Watson, an innovative thinker, and deliberate student of Black Studies, makes sure to incorporate mentions of everything from the 1619 arrival of Africans to Virginia, to the 1955 murder of young Chicagoan, Emmett Till, and beyond.

The goal was to craft an intentional community of creators, viewers, and

thinkers, who could dabble in a bit of everything. By doing all of this work in digital spaces as offshoots and continuations of the work Watson does in the webseries, she provides ample space for experimentation. Innovation and ingenuity are a Black girls' epistemology. Ruth Nicole Brown argues for versions of this in *Black Girlhood Celebration* and *Hear Our Truths* (2009 & 2013). Kyra Gaunt argues for versions of this in *The Games Black Girls Play* (2006). It is reflected in creator and doctoral student Erinnae's (@erinbecreating) phrase, "Black Girls Been Theory." The digital is a space for experimentation, which allows for more visibility of Black girls' stories in the way they want to be represented—as magical, often. I argue that self-making in the digital is communal and relational, an epistemology all our own. This draws from communication scholar Catherine Knight Steele's work on digital Black feminism, in which she ultimately concludes that Black women are *not* the magical beings that the internet makes us out to be. Perhaps I only partly agree: maybe we are not, but the digital alchemy we weave as girls in order to define ourselves for ourselves while exerting our own agency online? That work must be magic.

Chapter 5:

Building a Digital Black Feminist Classroom



Introduction

Technomagic can not only describe Black girlhood, its epistemologies and the

types of digital creative work in which Black girls engage, but it can also describe a pedagogical stance. I argue that technomagic enables educators to acknowledge the contemporary digital landscape in which Black girls find themselves and encourage the alchemic creation they produce. This orientation builds out from the work of education scholars Nicole Mirra, Ernest Morrell and Danielle Filipiak who argue for a new critical theory and practice of multiliteracies in their piece “From Digital Consumption to Digital Invention: Toward a New Critical Theory and Practice of Multiliteracies.” They argue that media education should reflect the digital world that students are living in and propose four pillars of this new literacy: teaching critical digital consumption, critical digital production, critical distribution, and critical digital invention. It also considers education scholar and digital humanist Roopika Risam’s call for a postcolonial digital pedagogy (Risam). In this chapter, I use Mirra, Morrell and Filipiak’s structure for teaching digital multimedia in the twenty-first century to explore how my own teaching takes this structure as guide, but then builds out and remixes to teach a Black girl-centric, Black feminist-oriented, multimedia digital literacy using what Risam would call both low-stakes and larger-scale digital humanities approaches (Risam).

I dreamt up the course that would become “Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital” in “The Before Times,” as Twitter users often like to refer to the time pre-COVID. The vision of it had always involved an intimate number of students gathered around a circle or square of desks to encourage conversation with each other, rather than comments directed exclusively towards me. I imagined spontaneous tangents that unexpectedly took us deeper into the subject matter at hand, the idle pre-class chatter

and lingering post-class discussions. My pedagogical philosophy has always prioritized collective community building. It is informed by engaging Black feminist theory, but also through observing the pedagogical practice of my mother, a retired fifth grade public school teacher of thirty years, her educator sisters, and the network of teachers and librarians whose classes and libraries I occupied (hooks). However, as I was preparing to teach “Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital” in the spring of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a total reimagining in order to craft an effective yet compassionate classroom for my students.

I had to ask myself a new guiding question: *how do I craft and fosters those conditions in an entirely digital space, where we lack the interpersonal affective dimension of teaching which is part of where I excel as an educator?* Alongside this question, was the acute awareness of the particular, and peculiar, position I occupied. I was a young Black woman graduate student instructor of an interdisciplinary course centering contemporary fantasy new media narratives featuring Black girls, and written by Black women, at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the South (William & Mary). The institution is one in which many of the Black students are aware that Black students were not allowed to be students in residence until Janet Brown Strafer, Karen Ely and Lynn Bailey arrived on campus in the fall of 1967.²⁶ To know Black students had an approximately fifty-year history within the school’s three hundred and twenty-eight year existence begs questions: what then was the relationship of Black people to the college prior to 1967? What strides have been made to make the campus a more inclusive place for Black students since? While the

²⁶ <https://www.wm.edu/sites/50/>

goal of this chapter, or this dissertation, is not to examine the legacies of enslavement on campus, it is important to contextualize the environment where I taught this course as it helps answer the question of why and how students, Black girls in particular, found my class and deemed it necessary.

The course filled in a matter of minutes on the first day of registration. I received a number of emails asking for overrides, several of which spoke of the importance of such a class, in particular at William & Mary. And while I was not able to accommodate every request, I began the semester with a roster of twenty-three very eager students—eight seats past capacity.

This final chapter takes as its core inquiry a question from sociologist Eve L. Ewing’s work, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago’s South Side*: “What is the meaning of a school?” and remixes it as, “What is the meaning of a classroom?” Why was it meaningful to have this particular course at this school? How does one build a digital class with Black feminist ethics at its core—what are the ingredients? And in attempting to answer these questions, I will use Mirra, Morrell and Filipiak’s framework for a critical multiliteracies pedagogy and practice, and approaches from Roopika Risam’s postcolonial digital pedagogy toolkit to build a multimedia digital literacy pedagogy in which Black girls specifically are centered and honored.

Teaching Critical Digital Consumption

“Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital” was a course designed to introduce

students to Black women’s fantasy narratives in a variety of forms: the scholars who theorize and critique these works, the creators who make them, and the terms scholars and fans alike use to articulate specific themes within the texts. The focus was on twenty-first century Black women creative works, though I took care to contextualize these texts by introducing them to the work of writers and artists who came before and created the space for these to exist. As such, the students were tasked with engaging in a number of new media forms: in addition to literature (specifically young adult literature), they read digital comics, listened to musicians’ albums, and watched webseries on YouTube.²⁷ The course argued that Black women creators are using contemporary digital media to explore themes of fantasy, futurities and freedom.

Learning to engage with these media forms was not only a matter of learning the visual literacies necessary to read comics, for example, but it was also an exercise investigating the critical questions of power and identity these texts raised. Mirra, Morrell and Filipiak argue that students must learn to “actively engage with the *critical*—not the politically neutral version connoted by the concept of critical thinking, but the politically engaged version that considers the ways that race, class, gender, and other social constructs are leveraged to construct particular narratives about marginalized groups of citizens” (16). And Risam argues that teaching students to critically consume digital media that centers postcolonial texts and ideas produces an “emancipatory digital cultural literacy,” which ultimately empowers students to

²⁷ Young adult literature included *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn (2020) and *A Song Below Water* by Bethany C. Morrow (2020); we considered singer Janelle Monáe’s emotion picture “Dirty Computer” (2018); and our webseries of choice was Micah Ariel Watson’s *Black Enough* (2019).

question and intervene in knowledge production (91). Part of the intervention then was to ensure that all texts were paired with scholarship that provided examples of how to critically engage with narrative, specifically new media narratives. These texts were paired with works from historian and digital humanist Jessica Marie Johnson, literature and gender and sexuality scholar Sami Schalk, and education and literacy scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas to name a few. Engagement with these works gave the students of “Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital” opportunities to intervene in knowledge production early and often.

Notably, in an attempt to situate the course material in a historical and literary legacy before we turned to the contemporary moment, we read an excerpt from Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1993), and Damian Duffy and John I. Jennings’ graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler’s acclaimed novel, *Kindred* (2017). The excerpt of Shange’s work illustrated the quilting properties that Black women writers and creators use to tell stories; *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* weaves together letters, prose, monologues and recipes to build out an image of Black women’s magic (1). *Playing in the Dark*’s purpose was a guide for students to learn to identify and articulate meaningful critique of Black literature.

The graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* was an effort to introduce students to the work of Octavia E. Butler, a figure in Black women’s literature that made it possible for us to study any of the works we would work through for the rest of the course. The choice to teach this form over the novel was an attempt to guide students through visual literacies, to learn to read colors and settings and expressions as they

work in concert with words—a skill I prioritize as I teach Black media because of the multidimensionality of Black storytelling.²⁸ However, the story was received with criticism. Students raised the question of power between the protagonist, a Black woman named Dana living in 1976, and the ancestor who calls her back in time, the white slaveholder Rufus Weylin. The conversation about power continued on as they wondered about Dana’s relationship with her white husband, Kevin, who eventually is drawn back into the nineteenth century with her too. And they expressed deep levels of discomfort at the visual depiction of the violence and cruelties of Butler’s neo-slave narrative.

This display was equal parts thought-provoking and heartening. My students wielded hearty critique of the work, showing that they were capable of dissecting information given to them, and incorporating critique of the form, such as noting that the graphic novel format had a visual gravity to it that could be less intense as a prose novel. I strived to guide them to contextualize Butler’s work and understand her contemporary moment, as well as what the landscape of Black science fiction and fantasy was prior to her writing, in the hopes that the knowledge of her importance as a field-defining author would coexist with their critique. Further, it compelled me to consider what lay beyond critique, and to guide my students to critical creation as a twin pillar of critique.

In New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and

²⁸ Here I think of literary scholar and historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s concept of “signifying,” which plays upon the variety of double meanings that can arise from Black people’s word play (1988). Zora Neale Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” also dissects and elaborates on the various dimensions of our storytelling (1934).

Pedagogy, Roopika Risam writes, “Postcolonial digital pedagogy responds to the needs for teaching practices that help students see themselves not simply as consumers of knowledge but as creators... They become producers who can write back to canonical formations of knowledge, the absences in which the voices from the margins fail to be heard, and the politics of knowledge that reinforce structural inequalities” (93). She further argues that low stakes approaches, like incorporating digital writing into the classroom, can be critical to engaging and developing a postcolonial digital pedagogy, or in my case a Black girl-centric technomagic pedagogy. In “Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital,” the students produced blogpost assignments on Tumblr in response to the variety of multimedia texts assigned. Students were responsible for crafting at least three 1,000-1,250 word blog posts which responded to a particular week’s readings, but were also encouraged to respond to each other and make connections beyond the syllabus.

Teaching Critical Digital Production

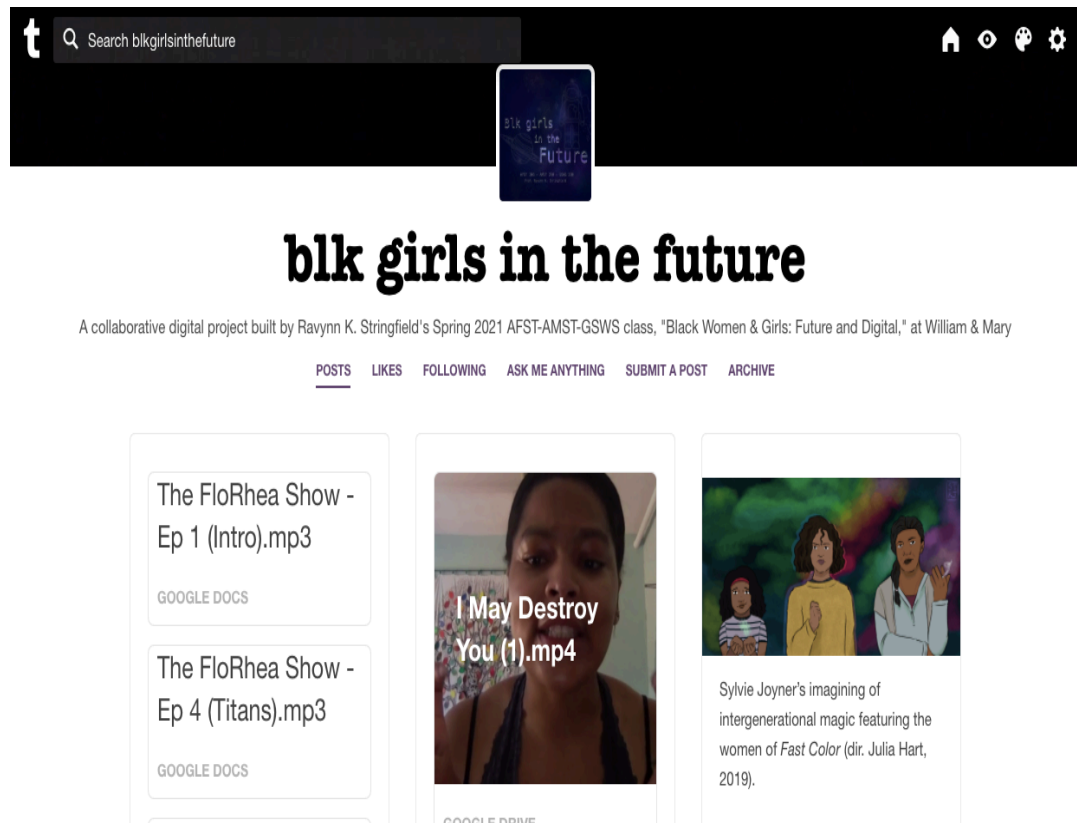


Figure 27, Screen grab from “Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital” course Tumblr site, titled “blk girls in the future,” (2021).

The rationale for choosing Tumblr as our course platform was due to the multimedia nature of it. Combining the functionality of longer blog posts than would be possible on Twitter or in an Instagram caption, with the ability to easily add any other forms of media that enhanced the argument of their posts made it the perfect site. Additionally, there was an opportunity to easily reblog other related content onto our site to prompt discussion amongst the students. Digital humanist scholar, Moya Bailey, describes Tumblr as a site which, “centered the content that was uploaded to the blog, not the user. More so than any other social media platform, the images and

texts users posted were central to the interface” (146). Traditionally blogging platforms like Wordpress or Squarespace don’t always have the interactive functionality of something like Tumblr, though in many ways, Tumblr is past its heyday, as Bailey laments (147).

Bailey’s *Misogynoir Transformed* offers a comprehensive study of how Black women have used particular tactics and facets of digital production to combat hatred against Black women—hatred specifically due to their intertwined identities. Particularly useful is her expansive use of a term developed in her article, “#transforming(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethic:” *digital alchemy* (Bailey). She describes the difference between *defensive* and *generative digital alchemy* (24). The first responds to claims of misogynoir, while the latter is independent of a specific event because its goal, or motivation, is to push for more forms of representation which will combat against the overarching system of misogynoir (24). Both are useful formations of the term, but the second pushes us deeper into the goals of the course, which we executed through the use of a Tumblr site. The purpose of the course was to introduce students to new forms of Black girlhood that appear with more agency, in part because they were crafted by Black women or folks who had once been Black girls, which gave them the opportunity to own their stories.

Allowing for the space for students to use digital tools offers opportunity for producing more expansive, fuller representations of themselves. Risam, referencing Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe, writes that learning to compose digitally, results in engagement beyond the professor’s expectation (101). My students were endlessly

creative with their blog assignments. Many began with an embedded YouTube music video which they argued connected to the larger thesis of their post.²⁹ They used hyperlinked sources to tunnel down a rabbit hole without breaking the rhythm of their prose.³⁰ Gifs became useful for emphasizing or illustrating a point.³¹ What most captured my attention was the inventive use of hashtags that lined the bottom of their posts. Often, the text of their posts would resemble something akin to a traditional, short response paper typically assigned in humanities classes; however, in the hashtags, they often codeswitched and showed their emotional response to a piece.³² (For example, in an otherwise “scholarly” analysis of HBO television series *I May Destroy You* written in the text box for the larger post, a student uses the tags which line the bottom of the piece to write, “Anyway stream I May Destroy You and give Michaela Coel her awards neowwww.”) These additional tools offered students a form of protection. They could fulfill the requirements of the assignment by using the formula for an acceptable undergraduate paper—thesis, evidence to support argument, and a conclusion—but use music videos, links, gifs and tags as a way to share more of themselves. It was an attempt to dip a toe in experimentation, while remaining able to fall back on their academic training up to this point.

The introduction of 750-1,000 word blog posts which corresponded to any or all of the week’s readings—three per student over the course of the semester—was a way

²⁹ <https://blkgirlsinthefuture.tumblr.com/post/644834580491288576/black-roots-white-magic>

³⁰ <https://blkgirlsinthefuture.tumblr.com/post/646092401458528256/its-ironheart-bro>

³¹ <https://blkgirlsinthefuture.tumblr.com/post/647571698667913216/a-crazy-classic-life-wouldnt-that-be-nice>

³² <https://blkgirlsinthefuture.tumblr.com/post/644130351658287104/black-girls-dont-have-to-be-strong-all-of-the>

of reflecting on themes and texts, I discovered that students were particularly adept at practicing what Bailey calls defensive digital alchemy. They were very skilled at identifying and condemning misogynoir, especially when it was packaged as commodifying Black women's trauma. After a few weeks of observing this pattern, I invited the students to try to answer the following prompt as an alternative to one of their three blog posts:

What does a perfect Black girl fantasy narrative look like to you? What are its characteristics? Do you have the language for it? Use specifics, not general qualifications. Try not to think in 'not's— what you know the narrative is not—but what you want it to have and be. If you are interested in pursuing this provocation, I will accept short essays of no more than 1,000 words as a substitute for one of your three blog posts for class.

The aim was to invite students to imagine and push beyond. As Henry Jenkins notes, critique alone is not as generative as it has the potential to be without the creative work of imagining. Though none of the students produced written responses to the question, it was one that gave them permission to daydream, which was apparent through conversations that they brought to our optional Fireside Chat sessions and also one of their final projects. The final episode of one pair's final project podcast was a meditation on what their Black girl fantasy looked like. It was a true example of what I think of when I hear Bailey's generative digital alchemy.

In many ways, imagining new futures is the hard part. In her 2021 collection of essays, abolitionist and organizer Mariame Kaba quotes Black thought leader of the 1960s and 1970s, Kwame Ture—formerly Stokely Carmichael: “When you see people call themselves revolutionary always talking about destroying, destroying, destroying but never talking about building or creating, they're not revolutionary. They do not

understand the first thing about revolution. It's creating" (2). The goal was to invite students into the power of creating and imagining new futures. I return to abolitionist thought throughout this chapter as it, in conjunction with Black feminist thought, has transformed how I think about my relationships to others, and the role of transformative work.

Teaching Critical Digital Distribution

Mirra, Morrell & Filipiak argue that, "what makes digital media production a potentially transformative practice is the prospect of authentic engagement with individuals outside of the traditional classroom space" (16). Students in "Blk Women & Girls: Future & Digital" began working in spaces of distribution from the first meeting session. One of our first collaborative projects was to have each student contribute a song to a thematic class playlist (See "Liner Notes"). The goal of the playlist was to encourage students to consider connections between the themes of the course with the music and media they consume daily, while building a product that they could use for themselves or share with others as an artifact which represented the course. It enabled students to think beyond the fixed notion of what can be produced within the confines of a semester, and toward products that could be taken with them after the course ended.

The blog as a public forum also afforded students the opportunity to create work which would reach readers outside of the classroom. In particular, the students' work was read by creators who visited our classroom. To prioritize deepening their

understanding of the material, I invited several guest speakers to our weekly “Fireside Chats” over the course of the semester—mostly Black women who had direct ties to the work with which we engaged. They included *Black Enough*’s creator, Micah Ariel Watson, *Dreaming in the Dark* co-host, Bezi Yohannes, and *Legendborn* author, Tracy Deonn. These particular opportunities allowed students to get more involved in the creative process, and to be able to think through what it means to create fantasy narratives for Black girls directly from the sources. The available blog posts offered Watson, Yohannes and Deonn the ability to directly enter into the conversations that students had been having about their works.

Finally, in their final project assignments (the parameters of which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section), students were given the space to decide the use of their work. By focusing students’ efforts in creating projects that could be useful beyond the confines of the class—potentially publishable writing, a writing sample for graduate school applications, a draft of a real podcasting endeavor—they were able to consider questions of audience and who they wanted their arguments and analyses to reach. In this last section, I will consider Mirra, Morrell and Filipiak’s orientation towards digital invention and Risam’s arguments for larger scale digital projects in the classroom to show how encouraging innovation and fostering student agency in their final project produced careful critical analysis that proved students could go far beyond the expectations for the course.

Encouraging Digital Invention

Integral to the experience was the students' ability to define for themselves what a meaningful display of their newfound knowledge would be for their final projects. In the spirit of Mirra, Morrell and Filipiak's work on new digital pedagogies which position contemporary students not just as critical consumers and producers, but also inventors, I offered a number of potential project ideas, including podcasts, a visual art portfolio and video essays. (2018) The syllabus indicated that a small portion of their grade would include meeting with me to discuss their project and for us to collaboratively decide what the expectations for the project would be. This required one-on-one meeting served several purposes: it allowed me to get to know the students outside of emails and blog posts (though much of their personality was detectible in these digital forms), and it enabled the students to define the parameters of their own project in collaboration with me, while also clarifying my expectations of the students, and discovering what they expected of themselves. Rather than provide everyone with the same set of guidelines, I was able to individualize the experience with the only common goal being to demonstrate a mastery of the course themes and texts. As a result, I received a number of final projects in the form of podcasts, short fiction pieces, a Twine game, video essays, visual art portfolios, cultural criticism/opinion pieces and a song. Even with the option to produce a short research paper, each student opted to try their hand at something creative.

Granted, not all classrooms or professors' workloads lend themselves to this sort of highly customized learning experience. William & Mary is a smaller liberal arts institution which prides itself on its low student to instructor ratio, and as a graduate student teaching fellow, this course was my only responsibility outside of constructing

the dissertation project. At a larger school with bigger class sizes and professors who are already teaching upwards of four and five courses, the limits of time and personal bandwidth may not allow for this type of approach. Potential suggestions for eliminating the need for mandatory individual meetings include having students produce a written document as a midterm with a plan for their final project which must be approved before proceeding; encouraging collaboration between students which would necessitate fewer meetings; and providing students with a detailed document of potential projects forms to choose from with predetermined parameters and only allowing deviation from the menu with approval. These suggestions come as reflections after engaging with Roopika Risam's chapter on pedagogy in *New Digital Worlds*, in which she adopts similar approaches to assignments.

Encouraging these untraditional displays of knowledge production based on course texts is often referred to as "The Unessay," a term which pedagogy theorist, Catherine Denial, attributes to Christopher Jones (Denial). Students approached the project with a little trepidation but a larger degree of enthusiasm. The ability to provide support for students throughout the entire process of completing their project, from inception, to drafting, to the final product, the quality and breadth of projects was impressive. Even with the option to produce a standard 10-12 page research paper, every student decided to go a different route, many working collaboratively. I received a number of podcasts, short fiction pieces, a Twine game, video essays, visual art portfolios, cultural criticism/opinion pieces and a song.

In a course whose main theme was investigating Black girls in fantasy new media, thematically, it was appropriate to encourage the use of multimedia tools to

craft responses to the semester's course materials. This is not to say that the use of the Unessay is restricted to interdisciplinary fields of study; in fact, it likely would make disciplinary fields' work more engaging and prescient to students. Most importantly, these projects gave students the agency to take control of their own learning experience. The content of the course—new media fantasy narrative by and about Black women—was not only inspirational but instructive. Literacy scholar Stephanie Toliver writes, “Zetta Elliott, Maiya Williams, Nnedi Okorafor, and numerous others have used their writing prowess to imagine new hopescapes (Hamilton, 1986) in their novels as they analyze the historic past and the troubled present to determine the possibilities of Black futures, and to explore the intricacies of Black imaginations” (2). By introducing them to work which embraced imagination, thus allowing the students to imagine anything as possible, they were able to dictate the terms of how they learned and showcased what they had learned, illustrating the true inventiveness of Black expression and creativity (Brown).

Conclusion

An immediate challenge of teaching during a pandemic is how to craft a student-centered course which takes into account their lived experiences and difficulties, while also prioritizing their ability to learn. Such a goal requires questioning, and continuous questioning of how to create the conditions under which students may thrive. One way to produce this effect was to set the tone from the beginning of the course. In my first recorded lecture of the semester, I communicated to students the following:

Now before I go into more detail about the syllabus, I want to take a brief moment to detail my expectations of you for this course. I designed this course to be fun and engaging, and I sincerely hope it will be, in spite of our distance from each other. I am aware of many of the constraints we all have trying to learn during a pandemic and I empathize with you. I have tried my hardest to approach this course with care and generosity and centering your well-being. That said, I hope you come to this course ready to work. I expect you to read, engage, share, and be able to synthesize and articulate your own thoughts and opinions about what we are learning using a combination of your reading, knowledge from other courses, as well as your life experiences, which will likely be very valuable in this course. In short, I expect you to take this work seriously. Black girls are often not valued in our society, but *in this class*, they are. So we're going to be treating the content of this course, your assignments, and each other with care, respect, and diligence. I encourage you to share any expectations you may have of me as your professor via email or however else you reach me.

Setting clear expectations for my students and myself in how we would aim to approach each other during the course of the semester was one tactic to ensure that my students knew *they*, as humans, were my priority. The course design would also reflect this. The students had a lot of freedom and flexibility to decide how, when, and why they wanted to engage (Davidson). There was the expectation that they would do the required work, watch the weekly lectures and so on, but on a week-to-week basis, students were able to decide how they engaged. They chose when they would have a blog post due, when and to whom they would respond to on the blog, what they would create for their final project, as well as the content, and most importantly, whether or not they would attend the week's Fireside Chat.

My approach to building a classroom in any circumstance is informed by these thinkers and practitioners of careful pedagogy, as well as the work of English scholar, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Ethnic Studies and education scholar Vineeta Singh and historian, Cate Denial, all of whom write on kindness and generosity in academic

settings, but particularly the classroom. Equally important are Black feminist scholars who I observe both in the classroom and through reflections on their own teaching and the myriad forms that learning takes, such as historians, Jessica Marie Johnson and Claudrena Harold. Black feminist writer and cultural critic, bell hooks', monograph, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) offered guidance for how one crafts a meaningful classroom. She writes, "The classroom remains the most radical place of possibility in the academy" (12). With generosity, kindness and great heaps of Black feminisms in mind, I built my class alongside willing, ready, and hopeful students.

Conclusion

What Becomes Possible

The work of this dissertation has primarily been to document a contemporary moment, describing a twenty-first century literacy and poetic aesthetic that Black girls have made their own. The project has shown how Black girls' digital literacies and its poetics were built out of traditions of Black women's literature and other means of storytelling. And while the idea of technomagic has inherent slant towards futurities and speculation, this dissertation has been rooted firmly in the present. I aim to leave the project by offering a thought on what these contemporary speculative digital literacies lead us to believe is possible as we imagine better futures. As a result of working with this project, "better futures" is no longer abstract. In particular, abolitionist thought and literature by Black women has made crafting a world we would be proud to live in more accessible.

Prison Industrial Complex (or PIC) abolition has made its way into many mainstream conversations about race and social justice in recent years, despite its firm place in freedom movements for decades. Long time prison abolitionist scholar and philosopher, Angela Y. Davis, defines PIC by stating, "The exploitation of prison labor by private corporations is one aspect among an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media" (*Are Prisons Obsolete* 84). This definition of PIC is what legal historian Michelle Alexander uses to argue that slavery has only evolved and formed into what we understand as the current

prison system in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. By identifying the clause in the thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution that abolishes slavery, but not in the case of imprisoned criminals, Alexander argues that conditions of slavery have continued most notably in the current prison system. As more activists and scholars solidify the work of those such as Davis and Alexander, the new rallying cry has been to abolish these conditions that not only carry legacies of enslavement, but, as Davis defines, also reach into nearly every facet of our lives. In “So You’re Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist,” an essay by abolitionist organizer and writer Mariame Kaba reprinted in her book, *We Do This ’Til We Free Us*, Kaba quotes Civil Rights leader Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael): “When you see people call themselves revolutionary always talking about destroying, destroying, destroying but never talk about building or creating, they’re not revolutionary. They do not understand the first thing about revolution. It’s creating” (2). The essay collection *We Do This ’Til We Free Us* leads readers to understand that a better world is not simply the result of dismantling; it is in fact the result of having the imagination to see, as Kaba says, “A world where ‘we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety’” (xviii). In short, we have to have the vision, and then we must execute; freedom is not secured with the critique of the current system.

It is no surprise that Black girls in particular are deeply impacted by criminalization, leading to ensnare them in the prison industrial complex at early ages, a fact which sociologist Monique W. Morris explores this at length (Morris). If we, as

readers, scholars, activists, and educators can identify the mechanisms which put Black girls, for example, at risk of experiencing violence and abuse through a combination of research and studying history, then it follows that in order to create a safer world for Black girls, we must imagine what can be, and execute (Epstein et. al; Morris). I argue that in abolitionist literature featuring Black girls, or at least literature in which abolition is an integral condition of the storytelling, that we take the first step towards building. Kaba cites Black Lives Matter founder, Patrisse Cullors, as positing that everything that exists someone had to think it first, and then it was actualized (94). Black speculative fiction and fantasy writers take opportunities to act as a catalyst towards that actualization by imagining and documenting what sort of liberations and freedoms are available to us. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* author adrienne maree brown argues that, “We are in an imagination battle,” and encourages us to indulge our own imagination and creativity to envision a world more conducive to our goals, rather than living in a world out of someone else’s imagination (18). Deeply inspired by, and in many ways writing to, speculative fiction writer Octavia E. Butler through both her speculative fiction and nonfiction, brown’s writing is a prime example of how speculative writing and transformative justice can be used as tools for building better futures.

Octavia Butler	(amb)
<i>All successful life is</i>	(Fractal)
<i>Adaptable,</i>	(Adaptive)
<i>Opportunistic,</i>	(Nonlinear/Iterative)
<i>Tenacious,</i>	(Resilient/Transformative Justice)
<i>Interconnected, and</i>	(Interdependent/Decentralized)
<i>Fecund.</i>	(Creates More Possibilities)
<i>Understand this.</i>	(Scholarship, Reflection)
<i>Use it.</i>	(Practice/Experiment)
<i>Shape God.</i>	(Intention)

Figure 28, brown writing to an excerpt of Octavia Butler’s writing in *Emergent Strategy* (2017).

Author of young adult fantasy novel *This Poison Heart*, Kalynn Bayron argues that this is part of her responsibility as a writer. *This Poison Heart* follows protagonist Briseis Greene after she inherits an estate from a biological aunt she never knew and discovers she has a deadly green thumb. The estate is in Rhinebeck, a small town in upstate New York that has recently defunded the police and poured resources into hiring licensed social workers and supporting a Public Safety Office (Bayron 83). When asked about her experience writing a novel which grapples with abolition and how it looks in practice for *Dreaming in the Dark*, Bayron says:

I feel sometimes...like life sometimes can imitate fiction...I always feel like I'm doing my part to kind of speak to those issues [abolition] when I write them into the story. And it's just a matter of fact, that in this community, the people who are responsible for kind of dealing with things in the community are not always the police. And they are other kind of licensed professionals who know how to deal with people with mental health issues and know how to

deal with, you know, families who have experienced trauma, or, you know, just a myriad of things. And so I just really wanted it to be there already fully formed already in practice” (Bayron).

The fantasy of *This Poison Heart* is not simply that of a reimagining of Greek myth centering a Black girl who has the power to control plants. Bayron’s novel is also situated in a recognizable and realistic contemporary moment, in which magical things happen, which means that she not only has the ability to create magic systems, but rewrite our reality. By centering imagination, Bayron is able to show us a world in which safety does not depend on police and in which families and community relationships are strengthened to support decentering police and prisons.

By adopting a “matter of fact” attitude about the reality she is, in some ways, writing into existence, Bayron shows us what is possible if we give into our imaginations. In Kaba’s writing, she argues part of our inability to see a world in which everyone’s needs are met is a failure of imagination. In Bayron’s world, we not only have a reimagined public safety system, but a queer Black family: Briseis’ adopted mothers, affectionately known as Mom and Mo, are deeply invested in her well-being. Briseis’ queerness, her mothers’, and her new Rhinebeck friends, are presented as matter of fact—not something that needs fanfare or overexplaining or contextualization. Briseis’ queer, abolitionist world is presented as the world as it should be—full, loving and with a touch of magic.

It is my hope that this dissertation has brought the reader “to, through, and beyond.” In learning from education and ethnic studies scholar, Vineeta Singh, and her understanding of the role of the syllabus as bringing a student “to” main ideas and themes, leading them “through” the connective tissue and arguments, and encouraging

them to go “beyond” the initial scope of the class or set of texts, I aimed to bring the reader to this question of Black girl fantasy in a digital landscape, work through the major arguments and themes of a burgeoning field, and now I leave you with what I hope is a fruitful consideration of what becomes possible in contemporary Black girl fantasy. *This Poison Heart* show contemporary readers what a better future could look like: it could exist without police and violence against Black women and girls; it queers the notion of family; and it centers the liberation of children and imagines what true empowerment could be. The mark of a good fantasy story is that it imagines the “beyond,” and Black girls are at the center of these imaginations and retellings. What this dissertation ultimately does is investigate how technomagic is a new way of illuminating ongoing issues that plague Black girls. It is often a practice of Moya Bailey’s concept of defensive digital alchemy—it resists misogynoir (24-25). But where the project leaves us is shining a light on all the spaces that we do not cover, what could be, and what we want from our stories. It is my hope that this project encourages a reader to not just think of fantasy and our relationship to creation in digital spaces as an escape, but as historically rooted ways that speculation and experimentation enables us to envision and create better futures.

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Black Women and Girls in Fantasy New Media Narratives

AFST 306/AMST 290/GSWs 290

Instructor: Ravynn K. Stringfield (she/her) email: rkstringfield@email.wm.edu

Time/Location: Asynchronous

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 3:00-4:30 PM EST and by appointment

Zoom Room: <https://cwm.zoom.us/my/ravynn>

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Ntozake Shange’s seminal novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) begins, “Where there is a woman there is magic.” This course takes into consideration the concept of #BlackGirlMagic, and examines what it has meant for Black women to create new worlds and alternate realities for Black woman- and girlhood to exist in all its multifaceted glory. We will explore what it means to investigate Black woman and girlhood through the lens of the fantastic, the afrofuturistic and the digital. This course will weave together representations of Black women and girls featured in fantastic, digital or futuristic across different media, including literature, comics, music, film, television and web series with secondary sources from scholars of Black woman and girlhood, the Fantastic, and the Digital Humanities.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To familiarize students with the fields of Afrofuturism, the Black Fantastic, and Black Speculative Fiction, etc.
2. To introduce students to prominent Black women artists and creators and their works.
3. To explore how we conceptualize and construct Black woman and girlhood through the lens of Fantastic, Futuristic and Digital creative and scholarly work.

SKILL OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Give an overview of the fields of Afrofuturism, The Black (and/or Dark) Fantastic, Black Speculative Fiction; the major scholars of the fields and their contributions; the main arguments and points of departure.
2. Read, engage with, and respond critically to a variety of texts including comics

and graphic novels, film, and music, in addition to literature.

3. Articulate how Black woman and/or girlhood is constructed with the use of magic as a tool or a lens in written assignments throughout the course and in a final (creative) project of their choice.

COURSE STRUCTURE

As you will note, this course will be taught asynchronously. I will also encourage you to choose your own level of engagement with the course. **The following outlines the minimum expectation for your involvement and participation:**

1. Read/watch assigned texts and accompanying lectures.
2. Produce three (3) blog posts over the course of the semester to be posted on the class blog.
3. Respond to at least five (5) of your classmates' posts over the course of the semester.
4. Attend one (1) office hour **or** schedule one (1) meeting with Professor Stringfield to discuss your final project plan.

1. Please produce a written plan that details your idea for your final and email it Professor Stringfield before meeting. (More on this document in ASSIGNMENTS below.)
5. Produce a final project of your choice that demonstrates comprehension, engagement with, and critical analysis of any of the major themes of the course.

Because the nature of asynchronous learning can be difficult and isolating, I will also be hosting weekly opportunities to interact with me. **These are completely optional, though encouraged if discussions aid your understanding of a topic.**

These opportunities will include:

1. **Fireside chats:** bi-weekly 45 minute to 1 hour Zoom sessions to informally discuss themes from the lectures in greater depth. Date and time of these will be solidified at the beginning of the semester and communicated to the class.
2. **Guest lectures:** monthly (February, March, April) 45 minute to 1 hour Zoom sessions to engage with scholars and artists in the field. These will be recorded for reference.

3. **Workshops:** monthly (February, March, April) 45 minute to 1 hour Zoom sessions that will help with skills necessary to complete your final project. Topics will include discussions of available software for digital projects and how to get the most out of scholarly writing.

**The aim will be to hold no more than one optional engaged learned opportunity per week and for no longer than one hour.*

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADE BREAK DOWN

You will be assessed on the following:

1. **MEANINGFUL CLASS PARTICIPATION (10%).** Since this is a virtual, asynchronous course, your participation grade will come from meeting with me once via Zoom before midway through the semester and small assessments to ensure you have watched the week's lecture.
2. **BLOG POSTS AND RESPONSES (40%).** Throughout the course of the semester, students will be expected to write three (3) blog posts of 500-750

words each for the class website. Posts can be responses to the reading, other texts or media you have come across that contribute to the semester long conversation we are going to have, or even help you develop your thoughts for your final project. You will also be expected to respond to five (5) of your classmates' posts throughout the course of the semester.

1. *Instructions:* You will sign up to post on three (3) predetermined dates during the semester. I encourage you to pick dates that correspond with texts you are most interested in, form a basis for your final or are simply more convenient for you. I will send around a sign up form at the beginning of the semester.

3. **FINAL PAPER/PROJECT (50%).** The semester will culminate in students developing a final project that engages Black women in the fantastic, the future or the digital. Research papers are acceptable final projects, however, I also encourage creative projects as well. Acceptable projects include, but are not limited to:
 1. Podcasts

 2. Websites or other Digital Humanities projects (like Scalar or Omeka)

 3. Short Films

4. Creative Fiction and/or Poetry
5. Visual Art pieces
6. Comics and/or Zines
7. Syllabus for a related course

Research papers should be 10-12 pages double spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman.

*(10% of your final paper/project grade will be producing a **written plan** for your final project. An outline, bibliography, or working script, etc. are all acceptable documents. I ask that you email them to me before you meet with me so I may review them.)

Whichever route you choose, please make an appointment with me by midway through the semester so that we can discuss (and approve) any project ideas.

COURSE TEXTS

Novels

*Bethany C. Morrow, *A Song Below Water* (2020)

*Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* (2020)

Graphic Novels and Comics

+Damian Duffy & John Jennings (Octavia Butler), *Kindred* (2017)

+Eve Ewing, *Riri Williams: Ironheart, Meant to Fly* (2020)

Music

Janelle Monae, *Dirty Computer* (2018)

TV

The Vampire Diaries, Season 1, Episode 8

Webseries

Micah Watson, *Black Enough*

Scholarship (all accessible through Blackboard)

Mark Dery, “Black to the Future” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1994)

Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism* (2013)

Reynaldo Anderson, “Afrofuturism 2.0” (2016)

Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined* (2018)

Deborah Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence* (2015)

Ebony Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (forthcoming May 2019)

Jessica Marie Johnson, “Alteregos and Infinite Literacies, part III: How to Build a Real Gyrl in 3 easy steps”

Safiya Noble, “Searching for Black Girls” in *Algorithm of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018)

Catherine Knight Steele, “Signifyin’, bitching and blogging: Black women and resistance discourse online” in *The Intersectional Internet* (2016)

Toni Morrison, “Playing in the Dark”

Toni Morrison, “Cinderella’s Stepsisters”

*Need to purchase

+Will be accessible through Course Comixology Account

WEEKLY READING SCHEDULE

Due Date	Readings/Lecture	Optional Engagement
Friday 1/29	*Introductory Recorded Lecture (RL) Mark Dery, “Black to the Future” Ytasha Womack, <i>Afrofuturism</i> , Introduction Reynaldo Anderson, “Afrofuturism 2.0”	Fireside Chat 1

Friday 2/5	<p>RL: Art as Magic</p> <p>Toni Morrison, “Playing In the Dark”</p> <p>Ntozake Shange, excerpt from <i>Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo</i></p>	Workshop
Thurs 2/11	<p>RL: Black Women of the Past</p> <p>Octavia Butler, <i>Kindred</i></p> <p>Sami Schalk, <i>Bodyminds Reimagined</i>, “Introduction”</p>	<p>Fireside Chat 2</p> <p>[cancelled; Spring Break Day]</p>
Friday 2/19	<p>RL: Black Women of the Past, pt. 2</p> <p><i>Kindred</i>, part 2</p> <p>Sami Schalk, <i>Bodyminds Reimagined</i>, “Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and the Neo-Slave Narrative”</p>	<p>Guest Lecture</p> <p>Charde Reid</p>
Friday 2/26	<p>RL: Black Women of the Medieval Past</p> <p>Tracy Deonn, <i>Legendborn</i> (p. 1-171)</p> <p><i>Dreaming in the Dark</i> podcast, Season 1 episode 5</p>	Fireside Chat 3

Friday 3/5	<p>RL: Black Women of the Medieval past</p> <p>Tracy Deonn, <i>Legendborn</i> (p. 172-333)</p> <p>Materials from The Lemon Project</p>	<p>Guest Lecture</p> <p>Bezi Yohannes</p>
Friday 3/12	<p>RL: Black Women of the Medieval Past, pt 2.</p> <p>Tracy Deonn, <i>Legendborn</i> (334-end)</p> <p>Last day to meet with Professor Stringfield about Final Project</p>	<p>Fireside Chat 4</p> <p>Guest Visit:</p> <p>Tracy Deonn</p>
Friday 3/19	<p>RL: Fly Black Girls</p> <p>Eve L. Ewing, <i>Ironheart: Meant to Fly</i> (Issues 1-5)</p> <p>Deborah Whaley, <i>Black Women in Sequence</i>, “Introduction,” p. 12-27</p>	<p>Workshop [Guest: Steve Prince ?]</p>
Friday 3/26	<p>NO CLASS WORK</p> <p>Note: if you have a blog post due on 3/26, the new due date is 4/2.</p>	<p>NO CLASS</p>
Friday 4/2	<p>RL: Black Girls in the Machine</p>	<p>Workshop</p>

	<p>Janelle Monae, <i>Dirty Computer</i>, the Emotion Picture</p> <p>Jessica Marie Johnson, “Alteregos and Infinite Literacies, part III: How to Build a Real Gyrl in 3 easy steps”</p>	[Guest: KaLyn Coghill]
Friday 4/9	<p>RL: Black Girls In the Machine, Pt. 2</p> <p>Micah Watson, <i>Black Enough</i>, season 1</p> <p>Safiya Umoja Noble, <i>Algorithms of Oppression</i>, “Searching for Black Girls”</p> <p>OPTIONAL!</p> <p>Catherine Knight Steele, “Signifyin’ bitching and blogging: Black women and resistance discourse online”</p>	<p>Guest Lecture</p> <p>Micah Watson</p>
Friday 4/16	<p>RL: The Magic of Sisterhood</p> <p><i>Bethany C. Morrow, A Song Below Water to p. 98</i></p>	Fireside Chat 6

	Ebony Thomas, <i>The Dark Fantastic</i> , “Introduction”	
Friday 4/23	RL: The Magic of Sisterhood, pt 2 <i>A Song Below Water</i> , p. 99-198 Toni Morrison, “Cinderella’s Stepsisters”	Fireside Chat 7
Friday 4/30	RL: Racebending <i>A Song Below Water</i> , p 199-end Ebony Thomas, <i>The Dark Fantastic</i> , “The Curious Case of Bonnie Bennett”	Fireside Chat 8
Friday 5/7	FINAL PROJECTS ARE DUE	