

ABSTRACT:

Title of Dissertation:

BROWNGIRL NARRATIVES:

EXPLORING COMING OF AGE

IN THE GOLDEN ERA OF HIP HOP (1986-1996)

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“Brown girl Narratives” seeks to gain a clearer understanding of what we can learn from the textual evidence about the experiences of brown girls who came of age during the post-civil rights Golden Age of Hip Hop (1986-1996) by examining the contemporary literature, film, social media and music produced by and about these black women. It is an inquiry into the ways in which brown girls who came of age in the United States<sup>1</sup> negotiate the dominant scripts that exist in their lives—literature, music, film, television and the Internet—to create and craft their own stories.

The aim here is to utilize an interdisciplinary, black female-centered framework to fully problematize phenomena such as *self-creation*, empowerment, and sexual exploration in the lives of black women who came of age during the approximate ten year period of 1986-1996. This study is an examination of black female *bildungsromane*—black female cultural texts which illustrate the coming of age and/or development processes. Additionally it is an investigation into what we can learn about the ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> The United States and its territories such as Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, U.S. Minor Outlying Islands.

individuation processes for post-civil rights brown girls by engaging texts produced by and about these women. “Brown Girl Narratives,” examines various literary, visual and aural texts by and/or about women of African descent that explore coming of age in the lives of brown girls who came of age in Golden Era.

This project will show you pieces of their narrative by carefully examining the hidden scripts amongst Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf*; Tyler Perry’s feature film adaptation, *For Colored Girls* and the dialogue which surfaced as a result; the life, work and political consciousness of musical artist Erykah Badu, and; social media texts such as blogs and online commentary. The selected narrative texts about brown girls can be unpacked and analyzed using the *bildungsroman* as a lens with which to view concepts of self-discovery—“tracing the development of complex and multidimensional” brown girls, exploring “who she is and how she became that way.” This study seeks to understand what these stories reveal about the journey toward a self-defined identity for brown girls marginalized by race, gender, class and sexuality coming of age in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. What can the cultural texts tell us about how their experiences growing up during this particular period of time shape their sense of love relationships, family, community, and the self? How are concepts like black female resistance and black female empowerment negotiated in the lives of black women of the Hip Hop generation? The research discloses important overlooked narratives—“meaningful and endearing stories about their experiences that are not solely focused on heterosexual romance”—in addition to hidden transcripts or subtexts that reveal important phenomena for this

particular group of women in terms of identity construction, black female representation and sexuality.

BROWNGIRL NARRATIVES:  
EXPLORING COMING OF AGE  
IN THE GOLDEN ERA OF HIP HOP

by

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*Everybody wanna try to box me in  
Suffocating every time it locks me in  
Paint their own pictures then they crop me in  
But I will remain where the top begins  
Cause I am not a word, I am not a line  
I am not a girl that can ever be defined  
I am not fly, I am levitation  
I represent an entire generation*

—”Fly,” NIKKI MINAJ

In memory of

Eleanor Schimberg

Leona & Joseph A. Buechler

Marie & George Jacoby

Dr. Clyde Woods

Whitney Houston . . . who moved to the end of her own rainbow.

Dedicated to

“The Brownboy Superheroes,” Sharkboy E & Cowboy Ninja A  
. . . never stop believing in your super powers.

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To my Ace #1—

*“How do you eat an elephant,” you would say.*

*“I don't know, how?” I would reply.*

*“One bite at a time.”*

I do believe WE ATE AN ELEPHANT, MARK REDDY!

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**Chapter One: Introduction—The Evolution of a Browngirl Narrative:  
Complicating the Single Story**

I am and always have been an avid reader. Growing up I read whatever I could get my hands on including Stephen King and Danielle Steele. But it was rare I came across a book in my parents' home that spoke to *me* specifically. Later, when I was old enough to pick my own books I was reading Judy Bloom, the Sweet Valley High series, and having a Pecola Breedlove moment of my own.<sup>2</sup> It was not until I went away to college and found the work of Maya Angelou in my freshman English Literature class that I realized books written by and about black women existed. I could not get enough of books filled with prose and poems celebrating black beauty and empowerment. Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" and Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Trippin'" mark my kinetic metamorphosis into a butterfly. I became obsessed with poetry of the Black Arts Movement—Jane Cortez, Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan. Then, I found black contemporary fiction. There was a time before marriage, children and all the chaos that ensued, when my boyfriend (now husband) and I had a Saturday bookstore ritual. We would spend an hour or two every Saturday in the bookstore choosing the books we would each read that week. Mostly, I was reading black fiction by authors like Terri McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell, E. Lynn Harris and Eric Jerome Dickey—what I refer to as "beach books." Then I discovered black women writers like Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange and Toni Cade Bambara...where had they been all of my life? They

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<sup>2</sup> Pecola Breedlove, the main character in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, is a poor black girl who believes herself to be ugly because she is obsessed with white standards of beauty and conformity. She yearns for blonde hair and blue eyes but as her desire grows more fervent, her quest for blue eyes drives her to mad.

spoke to me. As a scholar of black literature I have read a large number of novels and memoirs that explore black life in complex and nuanced ways written by women of the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights and Black Power generations. I have read too many coming of age novels by Caribbean and Latina authors to name but have yet to really find more than a smattering of black literary works that speak to the multidimensionality of browngirls<sup>3</sup> who came of age post-civil rights in America. Where are the stories for and about these browngirls? I wanted to understand where and why the ball was dropped. I longed for new and emerging black female writers that spoke to me in ways similar to the black female writers of the 1970s, but with the specificity of post-civil rights, Hip Hop generation experiences. And that is where my passion and urgency to document a small piece of post-civil rights browngirls' magnitude and capacity originated. It began with the desire to hear my own voice, celebrate my own becoming and subvert dominant male-centered scripts which skew my black female subjectivity and it evolved into a *browngirl narrative*.

“Browngirl Narratives” seeks to gain a clearer understanding of what we can learn from the textual evidence about the experiences of browngirls who came of age

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<sup>3</sup> **Browngirl:** (n.) *and* (adj.) My preference. I keep it as one word because I believe they are inextricably linked. (n.) Term of endearment for girl or woman of African descent- as in “hey, girl”; young at heart; the free-spirit within us waiting to be unleashed; act of acknowledgement/ empowerment/self definition- as in “I am a browngirl”; all lower case lettering resists “less than” status; embraces women of African descent and the multitude of brown skins from the lightest taupe to the darkest espresso; it leaves things open for expansion to include our transnational African Diasporic sisters.

during the post-soul<sup>4</sup>, post-civil rights Golden Age of Hip Hop by examining the contemporary literature, film, social media and music produced by and about these black women. Through the lens of the bildungsroman, the aim of this project is to conceptualize what I term “browngirl narratives.” By looking at literature, music, film, television, and digital media texts, an inquiry into the ways in which browngirls negotiate the dominant scripts existing in their lives to create and craft their own stories becomes possible. What I am most concerned with are how these meta-narratives of black womanhood for young black women were [and continue to be] negotiated, resisted and perpetuated in this temporal and geographical space. Too often our stories are told *for us* rather than *by us*—if at all. As a result, these particular narratives of browngirlhood are lost; overshadowed by the masculine discourse. Browngirl narratives help to complicate what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as “the single story.”<sup>5</sup> They illustrate the

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<sup>4</sup> I believe Nelson George was the first to use the term in his 1992 book, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* however the notion of such an era and a “new” aesthetic emerged and was explored in Trey Ellis’ book *The New Black Aesthetic* (1989) and Greg Tate’s essay, “Cult Nats Meet Freaky Deke: Return of the New black Aesthetic,” (1986) 20 years before under the label “new black aesthetic.” Providing no working definition Greg Tate simply calls the Post-Soul “the African American equivalent of postmodernism.” Since this time, several scholars have theorized the term: what it means, who it applies to and what actual dates it encompasses. More recently, the concept “post-black” was explored by Thelma Golden in her introduction to the Freestyle catalog for the Studio Museum in 2001: “For me, to approach a conversation about ‘black art’ ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time. . . . [The Post-Soul] was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”<sup>3</sup>; and then again by Mark Anthony Neal, using a derivative in the title of his book, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. He uses the term *post-soul* to describe “the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements” (Neal 3). And a *post-soul aesthetic* to comprise social criticism of those “folks, artists and critical thinkers, who live in the fissures of two radically different social paradigms... children of soul if you will, who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to de-industrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to meta-narratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past” (Neal 4).

<sup>5</sup> Our lives, communities and cultures are created around many layered and entangled stories. In her TEDTalk, “The Danger of a Single Story” novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Adichie (Africa Unchained Blog, entry posted October 10, 2009 <http://africaunchained.blogspot.com/2009/10/chimamanda-adichie-danger-of-single.html> (accessed March 12, 2011)) tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice—and warns that if we hear or subscribe to only a single story about another person, place or idea we risk a critical misunderstanding.



multi-vocal nature of contemporary black women's lives influenced by race, class, gender, color, and culture among other things. Additionally, brown girl narratives are important because they illustrate the ability for erotic power to exist in black women's lives in a way that moves beyond their sexuality.

The aim here is to utilize an interdisciplinary, black female-centered framework to fully problematize phenomena such as *self-creation*,<sup>6</sup> empowerment, and sexual exploration in the lives of black women who came of age in the United States during the mid-1980s and 1990s. This study is also an examination of the black female *bildungsroman*<sup>7</sup>—black female cultural texts that illustrate the coming of age and/or development processes—for brown girls who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop. I must make clear what I mean when I refer to *coming of age*. The bildungsroman's processes of exploration and articulation for Black and Latina females range from the coming of age in adolescence to a mature coming of age that encompasses narratives more confessional in nature, “emphasizing the reexamination of the past through recollection of past experiences in order to arrive at an understanding of her female self.”<sup>8</sup> To be clear, coming of age operates as an ongoing developmental process

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<sup>6</sup> Annie O. Esturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel* (New Mexico: U of New Mexico, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Bildungsroman (bildungsromane is the plural form) is a German literary term meaning “novel of self-development,” historically applied to European male coming of age novels. Over time, it has been expanded to include Anglo-women and black men and more recently, it has been rearticulated to include women of color. The African American female and Latina bildungsromane take the traditional male-defined genre on a new path of “self-discovery that is a conscious quest for authentic female selfhood.”<sup>2</sup> Writing in the tradition of African American female initiation novels such as Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maude Martha* (Third World Press, 1992), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (New York: Picador USA, 1996), my research considers brown girls' relationships with the popular culture landscape coming of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop.

<sup>8</sup> Esturoy, 4.

however, the focus of this study is focused on women who were born between 1968 and 1982. Missing from the fabric of the larger narrative are the particular stories about this group of black women, particularly how growing up during the mid-1980s to mid-1990s in the United States affected their maturation and identity formation.

By engaging texts produced by and about post-civil rights women of African descent, it is possible to learn about the ongoing individuation processes for browngirls who came of age during the mid-1980s and 1990s in the United States. “Browngirl Narratives” examines various literary, visual, and aural texts by and/or about women of African descent that explore coming of age in the lives of black women. Focusing on approximately 1986-1996, the Golden Age of Hip Hop works well to frame this period but it is important to note that this dissertation is not actually about *Hip Hop*. Instead, it is about how coming of age in the mid-1980s and 1990s—a time highly influenced by Hip Hop culture—impacted the behavior, socio-political ideologies, and identity formation for a particular group of browngirls. It gives us a glimpse of what they were like: How their thinking has evolved and how those narratives inform who they have become. The selected narrative texts about browngirls can be unpacked and analyzed using the bildungsroman as a lens with which to view concepts of self-discovery—“tracing the development of complex and multidimensional” browngirls, exploring “who she is and how she became that way.”<sup>9</sup> I will show you pieces of this narrative by carefully examining the hidden scripts enmeshed within the work bridging black girlhood and womanhood, notions of black female subjectivity and erotic power, and the processes of

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<sup>9</sup> Esturoy, 26

self-discovery and self-definition. Hip, gritty and woman-centered, Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* remains a relevant and timely cultural text for contemporary women of color navigating the current landscape. Shange's original text juxtaposed with the national staging of Tyler Perry's 2010 feature film adaptation, *For Colored Girls*, reignited a dialogue around who has permission to tell our stories. The life, work and political consciousness of musical artist Erykah Badu complicates contemporary black female representation while illustrating the radical act of a self-defined self. Additionally, social media texts such as blogs and interactive websites add yet another layer of dimension to the ways in which black women subvert the master-narrative. Using these culturally produced materials, this study seeks to understand what these stories reveal about the journey toward a self-defined identity for brown girls marginalized by race, gender, class and sexuality, coming of age in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. Additionally, this study seeks to understand what the cultural texts can tell us about how their life experiences growing up during this particular period of time shaped their sense of love relationships, family, community, and the self. The research here also discloses important overlooked narratives and hidden transcripts or subtexts that reveal important phenomena for this particular group of women in terms of identity construction, black female representation and sexuality.

Perhaps a shift in storytelling mediums occurred with the heightened popularity of Hip Hop culture and rap music. Hip Hop is a male-dominated cultural movement born out of the need for a creative outlet. School and recreational programs in New York City

were losing funding for their arts programs so kids took to the streets. What began in public parks and street in 1970s Bronx, New York is now a worldwide cultural phenomenon permeating almost every aspect of our society from language to dress to brand marketing. Since its inception there has emerged a considerable body of work about the cultural attitudes that constitute Hip Hop as a way of life. As a result, coming of age stories were being told through rap lyrics from a male-dominated perspective and a space dedicated to telling the stories of brown girlhood and womanhood got overlooked.

As early as 1978, Hip Hop was being written about as a local phenomenon being celebrated at block parties in the uptown boroughs of New York. *Billboard Magazine* writer Robert Ford Jr. penned “B-Beats Bombarding Bronx” stating, “B-beats are the rage all over the borough and the practice is spreading rapidly.”<sup>10</sup> Although it was quite some time before academia would begin to converse about this street culture, journalists and photographers were there covering the birth of a movement from its nascent stages, before anyone would know it as “rap,” b-boying (breakdancing) and graffiti. The contributions of several of these pioneering journalists include Robert Ford, Jr., Nelson George and Sally Banes. Today, the trend continues and there are a plethora of journalists, authors and bloggers vying for an opportunity to sound in on Hip Hop’s latest and greatest. Benchmark films such as *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*, both released in 1982 began a trend of incorporating the culture into film and exposed a whole new group of youth to what was initially happening solely in the enclaves of New York City uptown

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Ford Jr., “B-Beats Bombarding Bronx,” *Billboard Magazine*, July 1, 1979, 65.

boroughs.<sup>11</sup> The images, sounds and sensibilities of Hip Hop were contagious. Consequently, Hip Hop studies was born. It can be traced back to the work of David Toop's *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* in 1984 and Steven Hager's *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music and Graffiti* the same year. They and many others that shortly followed, presented a focused examination of the cultural climate in which Hip Hop germinated, grew and flourished. While these initial examinations of the culture were often limited to fixating on the culture's marginal status and origins in "ghetto poverty," they remain important artifacts in understanding how Hip Hop was viewed and received at the time. The contemporary outpouring of books and articles dedicated to the study of Hip Hop being widely circulated through academic journals, websites and presses illustrates the analytic rigor created by this area of study. Hip Hop has garnered scholarly respect along with creating a space for itself among the other areas of popular culture research.

For a while Hip Hop studies remained typically couched in African American studies. However, we have come a long way toward understanding that while Hip Hop represents cultural continuity of specific African American traditions, its influence and implications extend beyond this area of study. Today's Hip Hop scholars find innovative ways to appropriate academic theories to discuss the culture's complexities in a language that is learned and hip. Additionally, many institutes and research centers have been established for the advancement and preservation of the culture such as the Hip Hop

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<sup>11</sup> Russell Simmons, *The Show*, DVD, directed by Brian Robbins (Savoy Pictures, 1995). Peter Spiner, *Rhyme and Reason*, produced by Daniel Sollinger (Miramax, 1997). Taye Diggs, *Brown Sugar*, DVD, directed by Rick Famuyiwa (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002).

Archive housed in the W.E.B Du Boise Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University<sup>12</sup>.

Although, much has been done over the last 30 years in the way of establishing Hip Hop culture as a critical site of knowledge, there is still very little research on women's experiences on the landscape. There is even less still dedicated to constructing a narrative around the everyday lived experiences of brown girls and women who came of age simultaneously with Hip Hop. More recently, black feminist scholars and cultural critics have worked towards constructing this important aspect of black popular culture. However, much of this work has leaned toward a focus on Hip Hop feminism and/or black women's roles in the industry as emcees, deejays, video models, executives, etc. To a large extent, what has been considered Hip Hop studies—and more specifically, Hip Hop feminist studies—excludes a discussion of how the cultural phenomenon informed and continues to inform black girlhood and womanhood. This is due, in part, to the fact that many black women who came of age with Hip Hop are just now coming to an age where they are ready or able to share their stories, both within and outside the realms of the lyrical sphere. Outside of the lyrical narratives found in rap music and Rhythm and Blues, black women's stories tend to be overlooked. For example, in the lives of every day black women there seems to be a strong reliance on the orality of telling and

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<sup>12</sup> For example, there is the Florida A&M Hip Hop Institute housed on the University's campus; The Hip Hop Museum Project— an interactive program that collaborates with local museums, youth, community and arts organizations, creative artists, historians and educators to archive and create the history of youth art and political movement in their own communities; The Hip Hop Academy-Kansas- teaches youth of Kansas City the arts of Hip Hop Dance, DJ'ing & Turntablism, Hip Hop History as well as other disciplines; The Cornell University Hip Hop Collection housed on campus; Universal Federation for the Preservation of Hip Hop Culture, Hip Hop: A Cultural Odyssey exhibit at The Grammy Museum (2011) and; Hip Hop Won't Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (2006).

recognizing their stories; whether it be in beauty salons or at kitchen tables, in the park through a hand-clapping game or in the lyrics and delivery of our favorite song. These are not isolated incidents but representative of a larger woman-centered phenomenon. Sometimes it is only an off-handed comment and a look of recognition exchanged by two women that speaks volumes about their collective black female experiences. Other times it is an elaborate recollection of childhood memories sparked by everyday conversation. The spontaneous and impromptu qualities of these moments can make collecting these stories or capturing their spirit difficult. Additionally, the Internet serves as an accessible and rich site for sharing these experiences whether it be through blogs, social media sites, Internet magazines or reader comments/posts but can prove difficult to archive. Given that such media are allowing for the proliferation of these girls' stories, several questions arise— How do we recover the stories and begin to understand what they mean for black girls and women beyond idle chitter chatter? In what ways did black cultural production in the 1980s and 1990s affect the ideologies, thoughts, behaviors, and practices of browngirls who experienced them? For instance, What role(s), if any, does feminism play in the processes of self-definition, self-discovery and black female selfhood for post-civil rights women? How has their particular standpoint informed the way they deal with issues of love relationships, identity formation, sexuality, mass media representations, single motherhood, etc.? Lastly, What particular phenomena (if any) in the lives of browngirls who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop make their narrative uniquely their own?

### Literature Review:

While Hip Hop was being researched and written about since 1978, women's roles in the movement have been deeply overshadowed. Tricia Rose is, perhaps, the most notable scholar including women in Hip Hop's narrative. She was definitely one of the first writers to disrupt the male-centered master-narrative with her essay, "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, her seminal book *Black Noise* (1994) laid the foundation for a more inclusive and comprehensive narrative. Consequently, Rose opened a space for a number of other scholars to address the complex relationship between Hip Hop, feminism and black women. Joan Morgan's memoir, *When Chickenheads Come to Roost* (1999) introduced the term "Hip Hop feminist," marking a paradigm shift not, only for women in Hip Hop culture, but also for a self-defined feminism rooted in everyday realities. Morgan's alternative standpoint breaks the silence, acknowledging the significant contentions faced by brown girls of the Hip Hop generation in negotiating feminism and their sexual desires. Morgan approaches this in a way that is more focused on praxis—"keeping it real"—than theory.

Hip Hop feminism at its best, however, operates as a site of intense self-reflection allowing contemporary black women to confront the hybridity, multiplicity and complexity of their identities. Again, opening the door to a whole new sub-discipline, Hip Hop feminist studies boasts of several writers on the topic including Gwendolyn D. Pough. Pough built upon this work by dedicating her book, *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture and the Public Sphere* to a discussion around black

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<sup>13</sup> Tricia Rose. "Never trust a big butt and a smile" *That's the Joint*, ed. Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Foreman, 349.



women, feminism and Hip Hop music. Pough uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine the ways in which female artists such as Queen Latifah, Missy Elliot and Lauryn Hill have built upon a long legacy of female centered black women. She shows how women use rap and Hip Hop soul music, novels, spoken word, and Hip Hop cinema as avenues to tell their own stories and combat distorted historical and contemporary representations of black womanhood. Pough uses music and the autobiographical texts of writers such as Sister Souljah, Queen Latifah, Veronica Chambers and Joan Morgan as a gauge for the experiences of black women who came of age in “an era of Hip Hop.” The study focuses heavily on the potential rap music has to tell black women’s life stories and validate their experiences. My work is closely aligned with Pough’s but it is critical to note at what point it diverges. Whereas Pough’s study focuses more on black women’s participation in Hip Hop itself, my research focuses more on what we can learn about browngirls who came of age during a time period heavily influenced by Hip Hop culture—the mid-1980s and 1990s—from the literature, film, social media and music produced by and about these black women.

When I first began researching black female coming of age during the mid-1980s and 1990s, there was almost no literature that spoke to this phenomenon. Surely there was nothing I found that spoke of black females coming of age as an ongoing process. What was out there on black women and their relationship with Hip Hop culture was limited to prefaces in books about black girlhood. They typically mentioned this generation of black women in very general terms. Occasionally essays or books on Hip Hop made honorable mentions of b-girls and emcees. In other cases,

mention of black females was limited to Hip Hop feminists, video models or recording artists.<sup>14</sup> Almost nothing was available that spoke to the experiences of everyday black girls navigating the overall Hip Hop landscape “back in the day” or presently. These contributions are valuable but exclude a large percentage of the black female population from the discussion. The majority of us are not feminist cultural critics or theorists, entertainers or video vixens. Nor do we work in A&R for Arista and few of us can say we grew up in the Bronx. Most of us are everyday black women whose voices just got left or edited out along the way. Our stories may seem uninspired and irrelevant but that is an inaccurate assessment. This important realization is evident in the work of Ruth Nicole Brown and Kyra Gaunt, both of whom privilege black girlhood, their voices and their experiences.<sup>15</sup> The aforementioned are products of dynamic feminist scholarship on black girlhood and the importance of storytelling. By looking at the ways in which both Hip Hop culture’s narrative is male-dominated and the white fairytale formula is privileged in female-dominated narratives, we can gain a clearer understanding of how and why black women’s erasure is both gendered and racialized.

The work of Hip Hop feminist scholars such as Tricia Rose, Joan Morgan and Gwendolyn Pough has been influential to shaping the gender consciousness of a younger generation of scholars, myself included; they have encouraged us to find our voices. They have also encouraged us to search for the hidden scripts, hence the emergence of

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<sup>14</sup> Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999). Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Homegirls Make Some Noise! Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* (California: Parker Publishing, 2007). Tracy Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Hos Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2007). Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness (Music in American Life)* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

this study. In searching for the hidden scripts, I have found a little more of myself and my own voice. By nature of my formal training, this project must be able to move among academic disciplines, browngirl spaces and cultural texts. Consequently, I bring perspectives from black popular culture, literary theory, cultural history, black women's studies, ethnography and digital humanities. I use these to explore visual and aural texts (film, television, music, interviews, images), memoirs, social media, and auto-ethnography. Over the last couple of years, as I have been researching and formulating my argument for this project, other studies on Hip Hop and black girlhood and womanhood emerged.<sup>16</sup> The end of the decade also brought the studies on black girlhood and Hip Hop by Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration* and "*Don't Believe the Hype*": *The Polemics of Hip Hop and the Poetics of Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood* by Chyann Latrel Oliver. *Black Girlhood Celebration* is an examination of how performances of everyday black girlhood are mediated by Hip Hop culture using an after-school program, while SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths) begins the work of addressing what is significant about growing up young, black and female during a historical moment in Hip Hop. While Brown includes snippets of her own coming of age story, the study highlights the present day, attempting to define a black feminist pedagogy to help young girls now and in the future. Oliver's dissertation, *Don't Believe the Hype* (2009), asks the important questions: How can black girls, and more specifically, working

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<sup>16</sup> Several other important studies on black girlhood include: Nikki Jones, *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City Violence (Series in Childhood Series)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009). Joyce West Steven, *Smart and Sassy: The Strengths of Inner City Black Girls* (New York: Oxford University, 2002). Bonnie J. Leadbeater, *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities* (New York, NYU Press, 1996). Jodi Miller, *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequalities and Gendered Violence* (New York: NYU Press, 2008). Rebecca Carroll, *Sugar in the Raw: Young Black Girls in America* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1997).

class black girls, who are faced with inequities because of their race, class, and gender find new ways to define themselves, and name their experiences, in their own words and on their own terms? How can black girls develop ways of being resistant and resilient in the face of adversity, and in the midst of this Hip Hop “attack on black womanhood?” Oliver examines the ways in which black women negotiate race, gender, class and sexuality from 1979 to the present and the importance of black women’s vocality in Hip Hop. She addresses the hiatus of the black female rapper and the rise of the video vixen. Similarly to Brown, she goes on to discuss the viability of Hip Hop as a political vehicle. She posits the development of creative writing workshops for black girls which stress feminist vocality and resistance through poetry and spoken word as a new method for investigating black girlhood and exploring issues of resistance and resilience.

All of these studies provided interesting starting points for which to talk about browngirls coming of age alongside Hip Hop. However, my research has always sought to ask different questions. Even before it was narrowly focused I knew this study was not foremost about Hip Hop but rather about black girlhood and womanhood for a particular generation of women. On my own quest to find black woman-centered literature, I have found little written in nuanced, thought-provoking ways that speaks to me and my particular experiences as a browngirl who came of age alongside Hip Hop.

Scholars such as the aforementioned laid the foundation for my project, however, my research will show that there are some important areas that have not been fully developed in past research or overlooked altogether. This dissertation focuses on a very particular area of Hip Hop studies where little has been previously done. It was

important to me to have the thoughts and experiences of everyday black women who also came of age in the mid-1980s and 1990s represented here. In order to privilege everyday brown girls, it was imperative that I identify and explore the spaces where their voices are loudest. Whereas Brown's brown girl space(s) exist within a more structured after-school environment with a specific group of teenage girls, my brown girl spaces include multiple locales and black women from polycultural backgrounds. It was the thoughts that open this chapter that I turned to when considering the alternative places we, as contemporary, New Millennium women might be sharing our stories. At the most basic level, this study stretches the notion of "narrative texts," exploring new spaces which consider contemporary African American cultural production. Front porch steps, music videos, YouTube.com videos, everyday conversations, social media sites and the blogosphere remain rarely considered spaces.

Where Oliver's study focuses more on female rappers and video models, this study privileges the experiences of everyday black girls and women. Along with locating the places brown girls are sharing their stories, I felt it was important to gain a better understanding of which cultural products were salient in their coming of age. I knew what literature, television shows, film production, music and so forth, were integral to my own coming of age but how could I write a whole dissertation on "brown girl narratives" based solely on the texts that had meaning in my own life? My goal of illuminating the experiences of brown girls has been served best through textual analysis, survey, questionnaire and various ethnographic and life writing methods. I chose the representative texts by conducting an extensive survey with a network of over 350

women who identified as being of African descent, between the ages of 14 and 18 during 1986 to 1996 (born between 1968 and 1982) and living in the United States and/or any of the U.S. territories between the ages of 14 and 18.<sup>17</sup> I conducted the survey (Appendix I) on SurveyMonkey.com and located the respondents through various methods of sampling—namely convenience and snowball sampling—and the social networking site, Facebook. The survey was a combination of multiple choice, short answer and essay questions with a space to include contact information if the respondents were interested in further participation. The largest concentration of women were born between 1975 and 1978 and were predominantly from the Northeast (33%), Midwest (28.4%) and Southeast (22.9%) regions; however, all U.S regions were represented.

After identifying my salient texts, via email, I sent out two follow-up questionnaires to the respondents who provided their contact information and indicated their willingness to further participate. The first questionnaire (appendix II) was a series of questions centered around Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide|when the rainbow is enuf* and Tyler Perry's film adaption *For Colored Girls*. Motivated by strong indications during my research process that the Internet—particularly blogs and social media sites—proved to be not only a rich site for information on black women but also a source of social support, my second questionnaire (Appendix III) asked questions about the respondents social media habits and views on social media as support.

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<sup>17</sup> There were 352 women who qualified and participated in the majority of the survey. An average of 255 women answered every survey question completely.

As a browngirl—bi-racially black identified—who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop, I use my own life experiences as a useful roadmap to navigate the period. Because of my placement on the historical continuum, my experiences speak to a particular period of time bridging the past (the work of the aforementioned writers) and the future (blogs, web series, online magazines). Given this, the self-ethnography became especially important. According to John Caughey’s work on self-ethnography, looking at any group “involves important reflexive dimensions.” There are important possibilities for adapting ethnographic methods to the study of everyday life in one’s own social circles.<sup>18</sup> Inevitably, by doing this I am not only learning more about black women of my generation, I am learning more about myself. In turn, I am able to provide my readers with a personal, more detailed understanding of the intricacies and multidimensionality inherent in being a browngirl of the Hip Hop generation. Growing up bi-racial, the product of a transracial adoption, with a disability and in a small, predominantly white Midwestern town makes my story quite unique; however, I have much in common with the other black women of my generation depicted in the following chapters.

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<sup>18</sup> John L. Caughey, “The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture Studies,” *American Quarterly* 34 (1982): 239.

### **Time Span:**

The time span for this study is narrowed to an approximate 10 year duration of 1986-1996, arguably the Golden Age of Hip Hop.<sup>19</sup> One might ask why I felt compelled to hold on to the marker “Golden Age of Hip Hop.” There were times I questioned letting it go since Hip Hop was never my true focus. However, when I conducted my survey, an astounding 92 percent of women reported they listened to Hip Hop/rap music between the ages of 14 and 18, placing them squarely on the Hip Hop landscape. How could I ignore the high probability Hip Hop culture influenced and continues to influence their selfhood in some capacity or another? This becomes a slippery slope. So to be clear, as I previously stated, my use of the marker is so much less about the aesthetics of the *music* than it is about providing historical brackets. My use of the term Golden Age of Hip Hop is so much more about the ways in which the cultural climate of this highly creative period of time, the rhetoric that was being espoused and the subject matter affected, and continues to affect, the identity formation of young black women navigating what was often regarded as hostile terrain.

I am of a different generation. Kids today are in the throes of a very different Hip Hop; they have a narrative distinctly their own. The Hip Hop culture I grew up in partly informed my sense of self and it made me feel empowered as a browngirl. I have a definite nostalgia for what it used to be like “back in the day.” I remember Hip Hop’s

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<sup>19</sup> Understanding that that era’s beginning and end range from the early 1980s to as late as 2010 depending on with whom you are talking and where they see themselves on the trajectory. Hip hop’s “Golden Age” (or “Golden Era”) is a name given to a period in Hip Hop culture, the music specifically—usually cited as the late 1980s to the early 90s—said to be characterized by its diversity, quality, innovation and influence. There were strong themes of Afrocentricity and political militancy, while the music was experimental and the sampling, eclectic. The specific time period that the Golden Age covers varies slightly from different sources. Some place it square in the '80s and '90s – *Rolling Stone* refers to “rap’s ’86-’99 Golden Age,” and MSNBC states, “the “Golden Age” of hip-hop music: The ’80s” and ‘90s.”



evolution. This in turn affects the way I rear my children in the face of this “new” Hip Hop. Looking back over my life what did I learn? Within the complicated experiences of our lives that we now heed remains cultural continuity. I came of age with Erykah Badu and she reaches back and references Diana Ross and Isaac Hayes as influences on her style. Through her music I find a deeper connection to the generations that came before, just as my own children will connect with me through the samplings of “Rapper’s Delight” or the reincarnation of Michael Jackson’s moves in Usher, Justine Timberlake, NeYo, even Jaden Smith and Justin Beiber.

### **Storytelling/Narratives:**

Studies which privilege stories and narratives provide rich insight on how to think about and to construct the browngirl narrative. Stories are useful to both the person telling the story and anyone who is a recipient of the story. Sharing a story is one of the most basic forms of communicating and creating understanding for yourself and others. Stories help us make sense of our lives and put them in understandable terms for others. They “mediate reality” and construct spaces that are socio-political in nature. Stories are loaded with embedded, often times, hidden information. Through a close reading of the stories in this study, a rich picture of the browngirl narrative emerges. We use narratives to make sense of our world(s). Stories are a common, habitual method people use to communicate their ideas. Narrative can be defined as a sequence of events, experiences or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole. To be clear, a narrative is comprised of a subset of stories. The browngirl narrative operates similarly as it is comprised of a sequence of events, moments, places, smells, sounds,

images, memories and actions experienced and witnessed by black women as a result of their placement on the Hip Hop landscape. There are narratives that do not necessarily operate as stories but are more encompassing. An encompassing narrative can be understood as the grand narrative “that entertains several themes over a period of time.”<sup>20</sup> The Hip Hop narrative serves as such and over the period of almost forty years, we have seen themes of disenfranchised youth, black men, inner city strife, musical innovation, misogyny and sexism. In this project, the stories and texts are part of the larger Hip Hop narrative. These rarely seen stories encompass a counter-narrative of black female identity, discovery, empowerment and eroticism. It is with these stories of browngirlhood and womanhood in post-soul, post-civil rights America, that the Hip Hop narrative comes closer to making a meaningful whole.

The information presented in the narrative becomes extremely important because there is the risk of trading one incomplete story for another. Additionally, the counter-narrative collection is influenced by what stories are included, excluded and emphasized. Each of the women whose stories are included in this project illustrates her version of the action, just as I have shared my own personal stories as I recalled them. Of course within this remembering process nothing is “just fact,” rather it is more of what Audre Lorde calls *biomythography*. The storyteller not only illustrates her own version but also provides a sort of interpretation or reflective commentary on it. In the telling of a story, much is revealed in the way it is told. The sequencing of a story can tell us about the significance of certain practices, ideas, places, etc. It is important to look at not only

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<sup>20</sup> Martha S. Feldman, Kaj Skoldberg, Ruth Nicole Brown and Debra Horner, “Making Sense of Stories: A Rhetorical Approach to Narrative Analysis,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol. 14, no. 2, (2004) 147-170

what the story says but what the storyteller *means*. How does the narrator tell the story? What is being included and excluded? Stories provide rich data that conveys movement, interprets ideas and describes from the storyteller's perspective how things used to be, how they are now and how things should be. In this study, narrative data is gathered from a number of sources: literature, interviews, conversations, blogs, micro-blogs, social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, films, television, music videos and lyrics, surveys and self-ethnographic expressions.

### **How I Came to This Project:**

This is a partly selfish project in that the journey was initially embarked upon as a way to validate my own self; a way to articulate who and why I am the person I am becoming. This project has allowed me to explore concepts that explain myself into existence. Playing off of Paule Marshall's book title *Brown Girl Brownstones*, Mark Anthony Neal initially explored the concept "brown girl narrative" in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*.<sup>21</sup> Referring to Jill Scott's debut recording, *Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds, Volume 1.*, Neal describes the album as "a homage to the North Philly streets where she came of age and a collection of brown girl narratives." *Brown girl narratives*. Those words stuck with me. I have carried them with me since 2002 knowing I was going to write about them. The descriptor brown girl spoke to me and I felt like it described me in a way black girl never will.

In the essay, Neal went on to suggest the cover photo (a head shot of Scott wearing a hat tipped forward, covering most of her face) and title, *Who is Jill Scott?*

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, "Native Tongues: Voices of the Post-Soul Intelligentsia" in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge 2002).

“represent the invisibility and silence of brown girls within the black community and the larger American society,” and he concludes, “Rarely have black women been allowed to publicly tell the stories of those little brown girls that Scott’s childhood photo evokes...”. I thought to myself, who is telling the stories of the browngirls like me, Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, my best friend, the anonymous black women I identify with, and those that I do not? Who is listening to the “round the way” browngirls who have a story to be told but no voice, language or vehicle to move it?

As with the nature of popular culture, several books on women and Hip Hop came out during the time I was developing my idea and I began to question my desire to write on black women and Hip Hop. I read them fervently, realizing I still felt as though something important was missing. It was my story and the stories of browngirls like me that were missing. It was then that I realized Hip Hop was my backdrop and not my subject. Browngirls who made sense of their world and their meaning in it, looking through the lens of Hip Hop was actually my subject. I had not yet seen the everyday browngirl’s struggle to self-actualize represented in the literature but rather the experiences of female rappers, video models, music executives served as stand-ins for the real thing.

Who are the browngirls of whom I speak? They are girls who come from working and middle class backgrounds who ranged in age from 10-18 years old during the Golden Era of Hip Hop. Being the second generation since the Moynihan Report, they were not privy to the initial discourse around “the state of the black family” however, the circumscription still served to define their ideological framework. They

were in limbo between the rhetoric around the black family “crisis” and aspirations to create a life modeled after Bill and Claire Huxtable; torn between images of demonized single black mothers and independent women choosing to define family for themselves. We were raised at a time when the Black Power ideology of prioritizing our race and sacrificing our gender in the name of “The Struggle” was made real all over again with the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas trial. Though often conflicting, the ideologies of these browngirls were greatly influenced by The Moynihan Report, Reaganomics, multiculturalism and a widening of the black middle class. In many cases, the browngirls of this era about which I speak were exposed to middle class life because of their parents’ hard work. As a result, many have experiences of desegregating schools and token black isolation as a result of suburban flight, and/or are first generation college students. In either case, middle-class values and aspirations of a better life were common denominators. As illustrated by Mary Patillo’s book *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* and Jennifer Baszile’s memoir, *The Black Girl Next Door*, many of the browngirls coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s were the first to experience predominantly white schools and neighborhoods as a result of their parents’ upward mobility. Many of them experienced identity formation, racial difference and desegregation in very different ways than previous generations. Racial tracking, covert comments and outright bullying were just some of the ways in which their otherness was marked.

In thinking through this project, I asked: How could I track the impact of this period on those identities? I knew I could collect snippets and vignettes from Hip Hop

generation black women through a process of interviews and ethnography; however, I also knew there was a wealth of material already in circulation. I began to think about the untapped resources available in cyberspace and as a result, it is present in most facets of this dissertation. Blogs, reader comments to online articles, Facebook status updates, Twitter feed, etc. became my barometer for how contemporary black women are talking about their identities, their relationships with one another, men, and family among other things. The more I talked with other women of African descent about my topic, the more I realized I was not the only one who yearned to see snapshots of meaningful and consequential browngirl moments captured. Where have we accounted for the complexity, range of experiences, struggles, joys, pains and triumphs in the everyday lives of black women growing up in the 80s and 90s? What happens when browngirls are given a voice? I felt compelled to offer insight on the importance of acknowledging browngirl narratives as more than “stories” or “chitter chatter” but rather as black-woman-centered narratives of empowerment and cultural continuity. To traverse this landscape and to examine black women’s processes of individuation and creating themselves, I have assembled a set of tools that are useful to carry on this metaphorical journey. These tools frame my discussion of browngirl narratives and allow better connections to be made among the sources and for those connections to be more coherently read. Identifying salient themes and concepts provides a useful platform from which to view the self-reflexive journey of becoming for browngirls included in this study.

The interplay among the chosen texts illuminates the politics of empowerment, sexuality, gender, race, class and storytelling. In this study, I explore their interaction and the implications they have for brown girls who came of age with Hip Hop. Naturally, empowerment becomes the crux of this discussion. Empowerment is based on action. Cheryl Sanders defines empowerment as "the process by which an individual or group conveys to others the authority to act."<sup>22</sup> Empowerment ethics are the norms, values and principles that have guided black people's journey.<sup>23</sup> Self-definition is the first step towards empowerment; empowerment dictates the ways brown girls self-define and the ways in which we allow others to define us. Empowerment allows us to create our own scripts and tell our own stories; the freedom to embrace, reject or refashion feminism to suit our particular needs; or to redefine what concepts such as "family" and "erotic" mean in our lives.

As demonstrated above, self-definition and reflexivity are critical to this project. I am a brown girl who came of age with Hip Hop; so are the women included in this project. To capture an accurate picture of who we are as brown girls requires a discovery or recovery of self through a process of candid self-reflection. Through a process of self-reflection we can begin to define ourselves on our own terms rather than by the controlling images of black womanhood. Patricia Hill Collins maintains that the "self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead self is found in the context of family and community."<sup>24</sup> The personal self is reflected in

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<sup>22</sup> Cheryl Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for Liberated People* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Sanders, ix

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 113.

the larger self—it is a continuance of the larger black female community. This reflection of a larger black female community in the process of self-definition is critical to the community’s survival.

This latter phenomenon is best described by Juan Flores’ articulation of “temporal and spatial cultural continuity” suggesting continuity of a [black women’s] tradition of cultural expression:

For peoples caught up in circulatory, back and forth migratory motion...culture is experienced as dramatic movement and change, adaptability and resilience....If economic and political conditions forbid such transactional mobility, performative memory makes it possible, or even necessary. We did this back then, over there, so let’s do it again now, over here. In fact, we’d better if we’re going to survive (174).

He expresses the importance of cultivating and maintaining homegrown spaces which kindle connections to an imagined place and time and highlight diasporic vernacular culture. Many of the stories collected here mention or allude to fluid continuity of ancestral influences, the importance of connections from girlhood to womanhood, elders to youth, reaching back and looking forward simultaneously. The theme of cultural continuity exists in the interplay of black girlhood and womanhood in *for colored girls who considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf*. Harnessing performative memory allows us to capture browngirl moments that emerge from these spaces and places. Enacting performative memory is a fitting way to describe the choreopoem’s various black woman-centered monologues. This is also seen in the Afro-futuristic Erykah Badu whose fusion of afros, ankhs and b-girl style is both a response to contemporary black womanhood and an homage to an ancestral Africa and Hip Hop’s influences on her self-actualization. Change and adaptability is illustrated by the browngirl presence in new and emerging cyber “spaces” such as blogs, micro-blogs and



social media sites. It is within these spaces browngirls are able to speak their minds and create themselves without the restrictions of suffocating hypersexualized images or stereotypes. As a result, they are able to explore reflexivity, open-endedness and possibility while engaging an audience of like minded black women intergenerationally and transnationally. Constructed outside male models of power, the erotic can exist in black women's lives in a way that moves beyond their sexuality. It becomes a "measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings."<sup>25</sup> Once recognizing this depth of feeling and the power that lies within it, we can require no less of ourselves. This is the feeling of empowerment and as Audre Lorde states emphatically, "WOMEN SO EMPOWERED are dangerous"(emphasis hers).

The power of the erotic then takes on a life independent of the ways in which the erotic operates in a sexual capacity. Rather, it is a "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings."<sup>26</sup> It is the "life force" of women, a harnessing of creative energy manifested in black female cultural expression. This erotic power can be seen in the browngirl narrative in the execution of telling browngirls' stories; the language we use, the moments we capture, the history we reveal. It is the liberatory act of reclaiming "our loving, our work, our lives."<sup>27</sup>

The ways in which contemporary black women use their power of the erotic are considered in this study. Many women suppress this erotic power reducing it to

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<sup>25</sup> Lorde, 285

<sup>26</sup> Lorde, 285.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 286.

something shameful because they lack a clear understanding of the erotic as a feminine power. As a result, they are unable or unwilling to unleash the power of the erotic outside of a sexual capacity. It is a movement beyond the public imagination's hypersexualized depiction of us and popular culture's representation of us as sexual objects. An invocation of our freedom-writing foremothers' philosophies on black female empowerment serves as a starting point from which to fashion powerful creative energies.

Where are the Z.Z. Packer's and Danzy Senna's? I wondered. Then I began to think about the alternative places we as contemporary, new Millenium women might be telling our stories. I started to think about my girlfriends and family members whose stories I already knew intimately but were not represented anywhere besides in our shared looks of knowing. I decided they held the key to discovering where the scripts are hidden. I chose the representative texts by conducting an extensive survey among a network of women who identified as being of African descent and between the ages of 14-18 during the 1986-1996 time period. I located the women through various methods of sampling—namely convenience and snowball sampling, social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook and my blogs<sup>28</sup>. They passed it on to their friends and family and their friends and family also passed it on. I received over 375 responses, giving me a solid idea about what many browngirls were taking in as they entered womanhood. From this, I was able to begin a research project locating the most salient texts for a generation of black women and with that I was able to learn something about their experiences.

Some of the women I learned about are my friends, others are cultural critics, fictional

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<sup>28</sup> Melissa Reddy, *Browngirl Narratives Blog*, [browngirlnarratives.blogspot.com](http://browngirlnarratives.blogspot.com). Melissa Reddy, *Browngirl-isms Blog*, [browngirlisms.tumblr.com](http://browngirlisms.tumblr.com).

characters, personas, famous entertainers, and still others are real people who I may not know personally but are living, breathing, feeling extraordinary women in their own right. I locate the brown girls I am researching in the middle of a time marked by the Reagan/Bush Era, desegregation, deindustrialization, affirmative action, the articulation of a black middle-class, multiculturalism, the infiltration of crack cocaine in black communities and welfare reform. My exploration of Hip Hop is of Hip Hop *the culture* at a particular moment in time when the artistic expression told us something about the community it was coming out of in innovative and nuanced ways.

In the chapters that follow I explore brown girlhood and womanhood in the lives of black females who came of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop while interweaving vignettes of my own bildungsroman beginning with Chapter Two, “Searching for a *for colored girls* of Our Own: Building Bridges from Girlhood and Womanhood.” Chapter Two explores how black girlhood and womanhood operate on a continuum for brown girls who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop. This chapter looks at Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* juxtaposed with Tyler Perry’s film adaptation, *For Colored Girls*. I argue that *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* served and continues to serve almost 40 years later, as a critical text bridging the culturally inscribed binaries of black girlhood and womanhood. I then critically analyze how the continuum of brown girlhood and womanhood is disrupted in Perry’s film adaptation. Chapter Three, “‘Analog Girl in a Digital World’: Erykah Badu, the Public Sphere, African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Power,” is a critical analysis of Erykah Badu’s life and

music. This chapter considers the ways in which Badu navigates the public sphere and what role it plays in the lives of everyday black women. Additionally, using a critical framework centered around African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism, I will illustrate the ways in which Badu redefines concepts such as *representative publicity*, the erotic, and family. The fourth chapter, “Browngirls Be Blogging: The Future of Browngirl Narratives and Spacemaking,” examines black female authored blogs which operate as cyberwomanist text. I argue these blogs and other social media websites act as sites of knowledge and provide social support. Within that I will interrogate the possibilities of blogs to serve as safe spaces, redefine black girlhood and womanhood and provide and incite intergenerational dialogues.

**Chapter Two:            Searching for a *for colored girls* of Our Own:  
                                 Building Bridges from Girlhood and Womanhood**

It started as a weekend thing. It became an afternoon ritual which bled into the weekdays after school. At first I was just bored. It piqued my curiosity. The book began,

*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.*

*Dear God,  
I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl.*

I was intrigued: *He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around Then he hold my titties...* I knew my mother would not approve. That is what made it so fun. I would climb the stairs to their bedroom and lay on the side of my parents' bed that did not face the door. Then I would pull her copy of the novel from beneath the bed where I hid it the day before: *I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive.*

This was my introduction to *The Color Purple*. I was ten years old. Little did I know as a ten year old girl reading Alice Walker on my parents' bedroom floor that I was only a stone's throw away from Nellie McKay at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Black women like Nellie McKay, Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate and Mary Helen Washington were on the cusp of creating a black feminist movement we now all but take for granted. As that little black girl reading her mother's forbidden novel how could I have known that 15 years later I would be attending school in Madison, Wisconsin,

sitting in Nellie McKay's classroom reading and discussing her friends' and sisters' works? She referred to them on a first name basis: Mary Helen, Audre, Barbara, June. She would speak of solidarity and sisterhood in the academy among black women because there were so few of them and they were struggling to create something big. Most importantly, she would introduce me to black women writers and novels I had never heard of before like Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl Brownstones* and Michele Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*. She would encourage me to fall deeply in love with the work of Ntozake Shange. Finding *The Color Purple* beside my mother's bed foreshadowed the love affair between me and black women's literature that later ensued.

It was 1986 and I had not yet become a woman but I was on the cusp of menarche. I understood what it meant when Celie touched herself but I could not begin to fathom the complexity of black women's relationships with themselves, their bodies or other black women. This defined my placement on the trajectory of girlhood and womanhood. On the one hand, I was all about *Sweet Valley High*, Judy Blume, and Beverly Cleary but on the other hand, I was reading Alice Walker. I was trying to navigate what seemed like two different worlds on my own and I was receiving all sorts of mixed messages. I so wanted to be Jessica Wakefield: blue eyed and blonde haired, popular, smart and driving a little red fiat. But even at ten years old, my consciousness was evolving; I understood that the children I went to school with saw me differently. *I* felt different...as though I needed and was searching for something more. I did not see myself reflected anywhere.

Black girls and women are constantly negotiating the dominant scripts entering their lives in an effort to create and craft their own narratives. Which scripts were mine to follow? For some of my informants it was *The Color Purple*, for others *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* and still for more, it was not any of these black female-centered classics. In any case, it is about what the book represented—or failed to represent. It is about our captured moments, memories, and how they shape who we are and who we become. There is a constant interplay between the self and the world and the most influential of those meaningful moments and experiences are revealed through snapshots rather than a full account of our lives.<sup>29</sup> What does this mean for the browngirls of my generation who were navigating the spaces between kids' fictional series created with white girls in mind and our mothers gritty, uncensored novels? It was a tumultuous time and browngirls were receiving all sorts of mixed messages. We were caught between black girlhood and womanhood without a bridge to take us safely from one side to the other. As an adult, I now see that *The Color Purple* was not/is not a dominant script in my life but I will never forget how that trip to my mother's room one rainy afternoon changed my life in a real and meaningful way.

Autobiography and memoir have always played a crucial role in the lives of people of African descent. Creative fiction writing has also been a way to illustrate their humanity and establish a definition of self. As a result, literature serves as an excellent site to locate moments of self-definition, creation, resistance and empowerment in the

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<sup>29</sup> Esturoy, 6.

lives of black women. Black women have been telling their stories since before African enslavement narratives but it was not until black women like Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince and Annie Burton put their experiences in print that black women's lives were ever truly considered. Later, during the Harlem Renaissance, with the writings of black women like Jessie Fausset, Nella Larson, Zora Neal Hurston and Anne Petry we caught a glimpse at the complexities beneath the surface of black womanhood. It was in the 1960s that we saw a sharp rise in works by and about black women and their lived experiences, largely as a result of the women's liberation movement. This literary movement sparked browngirl moments around kitchen tables, in beauty salons, on front porches and in church basements everywhere. Black women were discussing, truth-telling and theorizing their lives in new and transgressive ways. Black female writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Cade Bambara, Jamaica Kincaid and Ntozake Shange provided us with alternate views of black female realities and provided a springboard for discussions around race, gender, sexuality and class for black women and what it means to tell their own stories on their own terms. Many of these writers were integral in providing a space to address black girlhood and coming of age however, with the 2010 release of Tyler Perry's film adaptation *For Colored Girls*, black women of all ages began looking back to Ntozake Shange's original choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf*,<sup>30</sup> with new (or renewed) fervor. This chapter examines the ways in which black girlhood/womanhood operates on a continuum for those that came of age during Hip Hop's Golden Era using *for colored girls* and film

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<sup>30</sup> Referred to as *for colored girls*... hereafter.



adaptation as the lens. I argue that *for colored girls...* served and continues to serve almost 40 years later, as a critical text bridging the culturally inscribed binaries of black girlhood and womanhood. First, I will discuss how the black female bildungsroman operates for browngirls who came of age with Hip Hop. Then through both critical analysis of the text and the social commentary that surfaced online after the release Tyler Perry's 2010 film adaptation, *For Colored Girls*, we can engage in a deeper conversation about the perceptions and realities of girlhood and womanhood. Ultimately, we can gain a more accurate understanding of the ongoing coming of age process in the lives of contemporary black women.

#### **Articulating a Browngirl Bildungsroman:**

“I read whatever my mother had around the house.”  
—BLANCA\* <sup>31</sup>

“In my 20s I started reading Terri McMillan.  
Waiting to Exhale; all of them was a little me.”  
—TOSHA\*

Various forms of literature have incorporated black female coming of age, awaking, or self-creation themes. Poetry and personal narratives during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s up through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s prove to be rich sites as they were both highly creative and innovative periods of time. One of most notable female bildungsroman of the Harlem Renaissance is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Throughout the novel we see the protagonist, Janie Crawford's evolving selfhood take shape when her quest for identity takes her on a meaningful journey. The most notable narrative of the Black Arts Movement is perhaps

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<sup>31</sup> A quote from a survey respondent. \*Pseudonym. All names with an asterisk have been changed.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.<sup>32</sup> It is regarded by modern literary critics as possibly one of the first contemporary bildungsroman or coming of age narratives and alludes to earlier black writings expressing the traditionally silenced female standpoint. The story is of Pecole Breedlove, a young black girl who longs for the quintessential American standard of beauty: blue eyes, blond hair and white skin. It serves as a portrait of African American identity and the ways in which popular culture, namely Western beauty culture has an impact on the creation, or in this case destruction, of that identity. *The Bluest Eye* deconstructs whiteness, considers gender, race and class components and pushes the boundaries in discussing black girlhood in relationship to taboo African American subjects such as colorism and internalized racism.

The 1980s brought *The Color Purple* and the latter part of the decade into the 1990s opened the genre up to more "popular fiction" by writers such as Terri McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell and Tina McElroy Ansa. While popular fiction may not carry the same weight in literary circles as those texts regarded as African American canons, as illustrated by my second respondent's quote in the epigraph, their role in influencing the lives of black women who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop is central.<sup>33</sup> Black female bildungsromane writing seemed to slow down during the Golden Age of Hip Hop. As I touched upon in Chapter One, this could have been attributed to Hip

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<sup>32</sup> The list is of coming of age or bildungsromane written by black women is extensive and these are just some examples. Nella Larsen, *Quick Sand and Passing (American Women Writers)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Ann Petry, *The Street: A Novel* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998). Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl Brownstones* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981). Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name – A Biomythography* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1982). June Jordan, *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001). Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly enough, when asked who was most influential in informing their identity, the work of Terri McMillan was mentioned by almost as many respondents as that of Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni. Bobo details this as well in her analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*.

Hop's rising popularity and rap music serving as the new form of storytelling for this new generation. At any rate, literature detailing black female coming of age was not being produced in the same capacity we were seeing in the 1960s and 1970s.

Popular black fiction continued to be popular for several reasons: its accessibility in both circulation and content; the relatable nature of the protagonist to contemporary black women and; the handling of contemporary love relationships.<sup>34</sup> To this end, the mid to late-1990s saw a flurry of memoirs by black women such as Sister Souljah (1995), Lisa Jones (1997), Veronica Chambers (1997) and Joan Morgan (1999). However, by the new Millennium we saw black female coming of age literature take yet another form. The influence of Hip Hop culture—even on literature—seemed to be a natural trajectory. Much like the writings of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines<sup>35</sup> in the 1960s, rap music was filled with tales of black male inner-city strife. However, we had not seen a similar formula applied to black female literature until the 1999 release of Sistah Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*; (re)opening us to the subgenre of urban fiction. With the international popularity of Hip Hop culture and rap music, *The Coldest Winter Ever*

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<sup>34</sup> Novels such as April Sinclair, *Coffee Will Make You Black* (Tennessee: Harper Paperbacks, 1995), Pearl Cleage, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2009) and Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) were on the cusp of popular fiction while speaking to both contemporary issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

<sup>35</sup> In the 1970s, during the culmination of the Black Power movement, a jailed Black man named Robert Beck took the pen name Iceberg Slim and wrote *Pimp* (Los Angeles, CA: Holloway House, 1987), a dark, gritty tale of life in the inner-city underworld. While the book contained elements of the Black Power agenda, it was most notable for its unsparing depiction of street life. Iceberg Slim wrote many other novels and attained an international following. Some of the terminology he used in his books crossed over into the lexicon of Black English. Other writers included Donald Goines and, notably, Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1965). Also published that year was Alex Haley and Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965). Because this non-fictional read captured the realistic nature of African American urban life for coming-of-age young men, the book has consistently served as a standard for reading among African American teenaged boys.

marked a paradigm shift in African American literature, changing the face of black popular fiction forever.<sup>36</sup>

Women of color writers have played a central role in the formation of my own gender consciousness; they inspire me to read between the lines and look at what is being said along with what is being silenced both in myself and in the work of other black women. Ruth Nicole Brown cites *for colored girls* among canonical text “that we can use to rethink Black girlhood, particularly from the perspective of Black woman writers.” She goes on to explicate the interplay between girlhood and womanhood in black women’s writing stating, “Black girlhood has been made the subject of analysis from the explicit standpoint of Black women looking back and forward through autobiography and memoir.”<sup>37</sup> This illustrates the ways in which black female writers and memoirists regard the concept of black girlhood as central to a conversation of past, present, and future experiences and in turn, crucial to making the transition into womanhood. In other words, coming of age narratives are crucial to the understanding of black female self-identity formation, self-creation and becoming. It is the lens of black girlhood through

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<sup>36</sup> Urban fiction, also known as “street lit,” “gangsta lit,” or “Hip Hop lit” is a literary genre set, as the name implies, in a city landscape; however, the genre is as much defined by the race and culture of its characters as the urban setting. The tone for urban fiction is usually dark, focusing on the underside. Profanity, sex, and violence are usually explicit, with the writer not shying away from or watering-down the material. As defined by Alma Dawson and Connie J. Van Fleet’s *African American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004) the two major categories in this section are old school (also known as “black experience” or “urban crime” novels, originally published between 1958 and 1975) and street life (or Hip-Hop novels or urban pulp fiction, published since 1990). Both are characterized by violence, brutality, graphic descriptions, and adult language. They represent the “ghetto realism” style and frequently depict a protagonist who is molded by society and trapped within a dysfunctional community, one who can make only limited choices and whose destiny is to a large degree preordained” (Dawson and Van Fleet, 44). Ushered in by Sister Souljah at the turn of the new Millennium, urban literature was revived and more inclusive of the black female experience. As a result, the genre became very popular with adolescent females. Though Omar Tyree’s *Flyy Girl* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) was the precursor to urban literature’s revival, it was Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (New York,: Simon & Schuster, 1999) that brought commercial success to the genre.

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 16.

which most everything is viewed for grown black women. As Ruth Rosenberg points out, often times little black girls “learned their lessons in self-authentication from autobiographies”<sup>38</sup> because there were few fictional depictions of themselves they could identify with. It was this same absence of fictionalized characters that drove so many black women to write. Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, and many others have admitted their reasons for becoming writers was due to the inability to locate books that spoke to their experiences as black and female. Though the availability of books written by and about black girls and women were greater growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, many black girls had similar experiences of “mostly read[ing] white writers” because no one gave them any literary work by black writers to read.<sup>39</sup> Toni Morrison shared a similar feeling noting she felt compelled to write about “the people who in all literature were always peripheral—little black girls who were props, background...”<sup>40</sup> It is this particular sentiment that motivated Morrison’s writing of *Bluest Eye* which is based on her own growing up in Lorain, Ohio.

Ernessa T. Carter, an emerging black female writer of the Hip Hop generation wrote *32 Candles* out of the same sort of need to fill a void in contemporary black female literature. In the story of a Southern black girl named Davidia Jones (Davie), Carter takes John Hughes’ focus on wealthy white suburbia in the movie *Sixteen Candles* and shifts it to examine what is viewed as the exact opposite on the trajectory—poor rural

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Rosenberg, “Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in the *Bluest Eye*,” *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 21, 4 (Winter, 1987), 437.

<sup>39</sup> Claudia Tate, “Interview with Sonia Sanchez” in *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1984), 147.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Strouse, “Toni Morrison’s Black Magic,” *Newsweek*, March, 1981, 54.

black life. In doing so, she provides something necessary for those of us brown girls who grew up in the 1980s longing to be part of the *Sixteen Candles*, *Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink* “brat pack” even though we could not see ourselves in the faces of any of the characters. *32 Candles* speaks to a particular generation of black girls, all grown up, as a latent cultural response to the movie *Sixteen Candles*. Although we could not physically see ourselves in Molly Ringwald’s character, Andie, most of us could relate to *Sixteen Candles*’ universal “fantasy” of having the most popular guy in school fall in love with us. Carter explains, “Everybody wants to have the guy fall head-over-heels for them. They want to get the richest guy in school. That fantasy may be universal, but I don’t necessarily think the experience is universal.”<sup>41</sup> Much like myself and many of my survey respondents, Ernessa Carter reveals that *The Color Purple* was a pivotal text in her life. Reflective of real life, this is also the case for *32 Candle*’s protagonist Davie. When asked in an interview why the impact of *Sixteen Candles* was more influential on Davie’s story than the impact of *The Color Purple* Carter rationalizes,

*The Color Purple* is one of those things that every dark skinned, black woman has read, so I felt like oh, you know, there’s no way she [Davie] wouldn’t have read it. But then *Sixteen Candles* is something every American girl her age had seen. And also I think *The Color Purple*, as far as our experience, is actually pretty reflective for a black woman. So I think the fact that she’s chasing after this fantasy for the majority of the novel makes it more like *Sixteen Candles* than, you know, *The Color Purple*.<sup>42</sup>

Oppression and struggle are common themes of the black female experience we see illustrated. However, experiencing a fairytale ending is not. Through her novel, Carter

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<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Hawkins, “It’s All in the Perspective: An Interview with Ernessa T. Carter,” *The Nervous Breakdown* (June 2010), <http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/chawkins/2010/06/it%E2%80%99s-all-in-the-perspective-an-interview-with-ernessa-t-carter/> (accessed October 31, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Hawkins, 1.

provides black girls—dark skinned black girls in particular—with the fairytale that has been reserved for white and lighter skinned black women as a result of Western standards of beauty.<sup>43</sup> Back in the day, it would have been comforting to have known our time to shine was coming and that *32 Candles* would be the black girls’ sequel to *Sixteen Candles* when we grew up. Even though I always understood it to be make-believe, it would have been nice to know the fairytale does not always privilege a porcelain-skinned princess, but is in fact for colored girls too.

**Shange’s for colored girls...**

i am on the other side of the rainbow | picking up the pieces of days spent waitin for the poem to be heard | while you listen | i have other work to do.

—NTOZAKE SHANGE<sup>44</sup>

Ntozake Shange’s 1974 iconic choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide|when the rainbow is enough* was written at the height of the black power and feminist movements. It was a time when the San Francisco bay area, in particular, was ripe with female artists expressing their ideas of womanhood through poetry and art. Shange describes these texts as a “force...as we directed our energies towards clarifying our lives—& the lives of our mothers, daughters, & grandmothers—as

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<sup>43</sup> Though most black girls of all skin tones can relate to feeling excluded from the white fairytales, lighter (closer to white) skinned black women were typically regarded as being in a more privileged position due to beauty standards set forth by Western culture. Tension was created between lighter and darker skinned blacks as a result, also referred to as colorism. "Colorism," according to Alice Walker, is a form of self-hatred, manifested in celebrations over "the birth of a 'golden' child" or being encouraged to marry a "high-yellow" in an effort "to lighten up the race" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harvest Books, 2004) 290-311). "The structured colorism of the black middle class ... is camouflaged by the promise of 'upward mobility,' i.e., proximity to, imitation of, and eventual merger with the white middle class" (310).

<sup>44</sup> Shange, Ntozake, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Scribner, 1997), xvi.

women.”<sup>45</sup> Initially staged at the Bacchanal, a woman’s bar outside of Berkeley, *for colored girls...* went on to become an off-Broadway play. Due to its enormous success, it was then performed on Broadway later the same year, 1976, nominated for a Tony award and winner of an Obie award. Structurally, *for colored girls who consider suicide|when the rainbow is enuf* (referred to as *for colored girls...* hereafter) is a series of 20 poems incorporating movement and music collectively defining a choreopoem. The poems were modeled after feminist Judy Grahan’s *The Common Woman* and “were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women,” each named for a color of the rainbow and referred to solely as lady in red, yellow, brown, blue, purple, orange, green. Shange writes in the book’s introduction: “The women were to be nameless & assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives.”<sup>46</sup> She goes on to explain that in much the same way I see the collection of stories in this project to embrace a browngirl narrative, she came to understand the “twenty-odd poems as a single statement, a choreopoem.”<sup>47</sup> Shange describes the poems as “the words of a young girl’s growing up, her triumphs & errors, our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten.”<sup>48</sup> It is a narrative illustrating the symbiotic relationship between girlhood and womanhood. The pieces also deal with the colored girl’s love relationships and friendships including heavy topics of date rape, abortion, betrayal, domestic abuse and infanticide. However, within the choreopoem also

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>46</sup> Shange, xii.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, xv.



resides uplifting themes of self-love and self-discovery, resistance, empowerment and liberation. It is described as a “coming-of-age story that uniquely feature[s] the point of view and political experiences of black women”<sup>49</sup> through poetic monologues such as “graduation night,” “latent rapist,” “abortion cycle,” “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff,” and “a night with beau willie brown.” The choreopoem culminates with what Shange calls, “the laying on of hands,” invoking woman-centered empowerment (*not my mama| holdin me tight| sayin i’m always gonna be her girl|not a layin on of bosom & womb| a layin on of hands| the holiness of myself released*). While the text is one capturing struggle and survival in the lives of black women in America, it is with this “layin on of hands” and Shange’s powerful message in the mantra, “i found god in myself|& I loved her|I loved her fiercely” that becomes “a song of joy.” Thus, we are uplifted and filled with hope and the possibilities of freedom. Through the layin’ on of hands, the women locate a ritual to begin the healing work caused by emotional, sexual and physical damage.

### **The Choreopoem:**

The poems are set up as monologues to be performed by each of the seven women who are associated with a color and a city: the lady in brown (Chicago), lady in yellow (Detroit), lady in purple (Houston), lady in red (Baltimore), lady in green (San Francisco), lady in blue (Manhattan) and the lady in orange (St. Louis). Historically, each of the represented cities has had a large black population and Shange’s selection of cities across the nation is representative of black women’s collective experiences in

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<sup>49</sup> Salamishah Tillet, “Black Feminism, Tyler Perry Style,” in *The Root*, <http://www.theroot.com/views/black-feminism-tyler-perry-style?page=0,1> (accessed January 20, 2011).

America. The choreopoem begins with the colorful ladies all running onto the stage and freezing in “postures of distress.”<sup>50</sup> The light is shone on lady in brown as she comes to life explicating the “dark phrases of womanhood.” She asks “somebody/anybody” to “sing a black girl’s song” as a plea to let black girls’ voices be heard. Lady in brown begins the introductions: “i’m outside chicago” and the other women join in and identify themselves as well. After they finish lady in brown states: “& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide| but moved to the ends of their own rainbows,” letting us know this is not only a story of pain and struggle but also one of survival and redemption. Everyone begins singing “mama’s little baby likes shortnin, shortnin” transporting us back to childhood. They invoke the hand clapping games and double dutch of black girlhood:

little sally walker sitting in a saucer  
rise, sally, rise, wipe your weepin eyes  
an put your hands on your hips  
an let your backbone slip  
o, shake it to the east  
o, shake it to the west  
shake it to the one  
that you like best<sup>51</sup>

“You’re it,” yells lady in purple as the lady in brown tags the others. Beginning with childhood, the choreopoem quickly moves into the more complicated terrain of young adulthood with lady in yellow’s vivid recollection of “graduation night” and becoming “grown.” She recalls her night of cruising, dancing, drinking and losing her virginity in the back of a pick-up truck. The other women ask questions, “you gave it up

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<sup>50</sup> Shange, 3

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 6.

in a [b]uick? (sic)” and reminisce, “we used to do it all up in the dark in the corners...”<sup>52</sup> Others are disgusted, “some niggah sweatin all over you.” Lady in blue comments that she “never did like to grind” and lady in yellow smugly replies, “what other kind of dances are there?” to which lady in blue responds, “mambo, bomba, meringue,” referring to her own special night out dancing. Her sultry Spanish accent speaks to the Middle Passage and black folks’ multiple points of dispersal throughout the African Diaspora as she begins, “when i was sixteen i ran off to south bronx...”<sup>53</sup> She goes on to tell a story of Puerto Rican heritage and an Afro-Latina identity— “cept we waz just regla niggahs wit hints of spanish.” Throughout her monologue her language is peppered with bits of Spanish never letting us forget her bi-cultural status.

Lady in red begins her monologue “no assistance,” about the man she loves too hard, “assiduously for 8 months 2 wks & a day,”<sup>54</sup> doting on him and giving him her everything. She claims it “waz an experiment to see how selfish [she] cd be...if [she]cd stand not being wanted|when [she] wanted to be”<sup>55</sup> and she quickly concludes that she cannot so she is ending the affair. This is a universal story of a woman’s love unrequited lady in red, empowered, speaks for us all who have allowed ourselves to be debased “for the love of another” when she makes the decision not to let herself be walked over anymore.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 14

After a few exchanges among the ladies, we are reintroduced to lady in blue who begins a dialogue between the women in the poem “latent rapist.” She starts “a friend is hard to press charges against.” Having been date raped and questioned as if she was the one on trial, the ladies respond directly to the politics of being a woman in a man’s world, sarcastically offering rationalizations for why it may have happened: “if you know him| you must have wanted it,” “a misunderstanding,” “are you sure you didn’t suggest,” and “had you been drinkin.”<sup>56</sup> They speak to the ridiculous assumption that if the woman knows the man who forces himself on her, she must have really wanted it because “a rapist is always to be a stranger.”<sup>57</sup> The women understand that it is not this clear cut “cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed.” However this does not change the judiciary process of punishing the crime or the way she is perceived by society because “pressin charges will be as hard| as keepin your legs closed| with five fools runnin a train on you.”<sup>58</sup> The lightning changes and the women look to be hit by imaginary slaps.

Lady in blue begins her monologue, “abortion cycle” detailing the trauma of enduring an abortion. She illustrates the shame often associated with getting pregnant in the first place and choosing abortion as the solution. For the majority of women, it is not a form of birth control taken lightly but rather a traumatic experience that stays with them. Additionally, because of the stigma attached to abortion, it is often experienced without the support of family, friends or loved ones. Lady in blue explains: “i cdnt have people| lookin at me| pregnant| i cdnt have my friends see this| dyin danglin tween my

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 18

legs...to get| those eyes offa me| get them steel rods outta me| this hurts|this hurts me| & nobody came| cuz nobody.” Through her monologue she complicates the ways in which society views women who exercise their reproductive rights and choose abortion.

Typically viewed as a choice devoid of feeling and emotion, lady in blue’s words contest that imagery as she speaks of “metal horses gnawin on [her] womb” and “bones shattered like soft ice cream cones.”<sup>59</sup>

Lady in purple then tells the story of “sechita,” an exotic dancer in a redneck bar in Natchez, Mississippi. Her story is then juxtaposed with that of a young girl in St. Louis who discovers Toussaint L’Ouverture. Lady in red portrays a woman from Southwest Los Angeles who flaunts her sexuality, hurting men, not allowing herself to “feel” anything for them as a defense mechanism. This is narrative of reckless abandon is complicated by the last lines, “& when she finished writin| the account of her exploit in a diary| embroidered with lilies & moonstones| she placed the rose behind her ear| & cried herself to sleep.” Alluding to a traumatic history as the cause for her self-inflicted pain, this last line humanizes her.

Lady in purple tells the story of three close friends caught in a love triangle: “three of us like a pyramid| three friends| one laugh| one music| one flowered shawl| knotted on each neck.”<sup>60</sup> They are all in a relationship with the same man. Still, if not more relevant today, the narrative speaks to the shortage of available black men due to incarceration and street violence. (“The season waz dry| no men| no quickies| not one dance or unrelenting eye”). When lady in purple discovers the rose she gave him on her

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 39

friend's desk, her friend responds: "he's been after me| all the time| says he's free & can explain...& i don't wanna hurt you| but you know i need someone now| & you know how wonderful he is." They are all ultimately disappointed by him and find solace in one another despite the seeming betrayal:

she held her head on her lap  
tha lap of her sisters soakin up her tears  
each understandin how much love stood between them  
how much love between them  
love between them  
love like sisters<sup>61</sup>

This interaction addresses an important caveat regarding the ways in which black women treat one another. Shange shows us what true sisterhood can look like if we privilege platonic love relationships with other women. Rather than the poem ending with the women blaming one another and the dissolution of their friendship, they realize that they were both mistreated by this man and "the love between them" is more important and powerful. All too often we see or hear about women fighting over an unfaithful lover, hurting one another instead of placing the blame on its rightful owner. Disillusioned by the scarce prospects, it becomes easier to fault the other woman for if we lay blame on him, we are left with nothing.

One of *for colored girls*... most traumatic and well-known narratives is that of "a nite with beau willie brown." Lady in red tells the story of Crystal and her man of nine years, a Vietnam veteran named Beau Willie whose Vietnam war experience and inability to secure work upon his return affected their relationship. Highly political, the monologue addresses the ways in which black men returned home from Vietnam to racism and governmental negligence. Unable to get his veteran's benefits Beau Willie "got himself a

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 42

gypsy cab to drive| but his cab kept breakin down| & the cops was always messin with him.” Left to feel inadequate and emasculated because he was unable to secure stable work and Crystal would not marry him, he beat her repeatedly. By the end of the poem, he has done the unspeakable: “he kicked the screen out the window| & he held the kids offa the sill.” Threatening to drop them, he asked Crystal once again if she would marry him. She agreed pleading for him to bring the kids back in from the window: “He looked from where the kids were hangin from the fifth story| at alla the people screamin at him| & he started sweatin again| sat to alla the neighbors| you gonna marry me.” Standing there with her babies screaming her name, Crystal could “only whisper| & he dropped em.” While the poem speaks to the realities of black war veterans—post-traumatic stress disorder, drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence as a result of returning to a hostile United States, still applicable today, Shange was criticized for her negative portrayal of black men.

The choreopoem culminates as the women come together finding hope and possibility with her uplifting monologue “a layin on of hands” which ends, “this is for the colored girls who have considered suicide| but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows.”<sup>62</sup>

***for colored girls of the Hip Hop generation:***

I write for young girls of color...for girls who don't even exist yet,  
so that there is something there for them when they arrive.”<sup>63</sup>

somebody| anybody  
sing a black girl's song

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 64

<sup>63</sup> Rebecca Carroll, “Back at you with Ntozake Shange,” *Mother Jones* (January-February 1995), <http://motherjones.com/media/1995/01/back-you> (accessed November 9, 2010).

bring her out  
to know herself  
to know you  
but sing her rhythms  
carin| struggle| hard times  
sing her song of life  
she's been dead so long  
she doesn't know the sound  
of her own voice  
her infinite beauty

- Lady in Brown, *for colored girls who have  
considered suicide|when the rainbow is enuf*

As Pamela Hamilton points out in her essay, “Child’s Play: Ntozake’s Audience of Colored Girls,” in the above poem excerpt from “Dark phrases” the lady in brown introduces the “trauma” of being a black girl: “she inhabits the space where gender and race intersect.”<sup>64</sup> The *double jeopardy*<sup>65</sup> of being black and female in America has been a struggle and *for colored girls* was one of the first artistic articulations of her struggle for liberation and self-definition. Black women’s inability to be seen or heard, whether it be because of “interrupted solos” or “unseen performances” is a result of systematic, patriarchal oppression. It is this silencing in girlhood that brings about the “dark phrases of womanhood| never having been a girl.” Shange intends her work to be for young girls, “for young girls who don’t even exist yet”<sup>66</sup> perhaps because they have not yet found the “girl” in themselves (*bring her out| to know herself*), or because their childhood has been taken from them (*she’s been dead so long| closed in silence so long*). Either way, when they are ready, Shange’s work will be there for them when they “arrive” whether that be in 1974, 1994 or 2014.

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<sup>64</sup> Pamela Hamilton, “Child’s Play: Ntozake Shange’s Audience of Colored Girls,” in *Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2007), 84.

<sup>65</sup> Frances M. Beal, *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* (New York: Third World Women’s Alliance, 1969).

<sup>66</sup> Carroll, “Back at You with Ntozake Shange,” 69.



Still touching on deeply relevant issues almost 40 years later, Shange's "border-crossing ways, love of vernacular, diaspora and musicality lend Shange's work both timeliness and timelessness."<sup>67</sup> Shange's "border-crossing ways" in *for colored girls...* operates as a bridge builder from girlhood to womanhood for many contemporary black women. In many ways it serves as a tool to create spaces for intergenerational conversations between mothers, aunts and daughters; at other times, in their absence, it serves as their guide to black womanhood "so that there is something there for them when they arrive."

This is evidenced in a number of brown girl narratives including Joan Morgan's memoir, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. Morgan admits that as a young girl, her *for colored girls...* obsession drove her to sneak into the adult section of the public library, steal the book, and inevitably fall in love with the words and images despite not being old enough to fully understand it.<sup>68</sup> Morgan may have been too afraid to ask her mother to check the book out for her or maybe her mother already expressed to her it was not really for colored *girls*. Whatever the reason, liberating the book from the library was an individual act on Morgan's part illustrating the greying between girlhood and womanhood. The introductory chapter of Morgan's memoir, "intro. dress up" was dedicated to discussing her own relationship with the choreopoem. Waxing poetic about her time as a brown girl growing up in the Bronx, Morgan reminisces about being "Wide-eyed" and "watching regla project girls transform into Black Moses capable of parting

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<sup>67</sup> C. Davida Ingram, "10 Things To Know about Ntozake Shange and "For Colored Girls,"" Ms. Magazine (October 2010), <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2010/10/28/10-things-to-know-about-ntozake-shange-and-for-colored-girls/> (accessed October 28, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> Morgan, 19.

the seas of otherwise idle Negros.”<sup>69</sup> She could not wait to be one. She was not allowed to see the play on Broadway in 1978 with her mother even though she “reasoned that the play had something to do with being black, female and surviving—and those were intuitive if not conscious concerns for any ten-year-old girl growing up in the South Bronx ‘round 1975” but she had her chance two decades later when the choreopoem had its twenty year anniversary. “The dress was my personal tribute,” she writes. “So when dude called out an appreciative, ‘Heeyyy, lady in orange,’ ...I had to slay him.” She recalls envisioning herself to be none other than Shange’s “sechita,” describing her as “*the deliberate coquette with orange butterflies and aqua sequins* floating between her breasts.” Through the telling of this story, Morgan illustrates the ways in which the Lady in Orange served as an accomplice in her empowerment, if only for a moment. Words that painted a powerful image—“she was hot| a deliberate coquette| who never did without| what she wanted| & she wanted to be unforgettable”—gave Morgan the self-assurance brown girls search for in the ongoing attempt to define their sexuality.

In a post on her blog, writer Thembisa S. Mshaka writes, “Like many Black women of my and the generation before mine, Ntozake Shange’s classic work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* changed my life as a young girl.” She goes on to explain how she was “captivated” by the book and “wowed” by the stage adaptation. She had never heard poetry performed in such a way. “Seeing girls and ladies who looked and sounded like the ones in my family, and indeed,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 17.

like me, complete with wrapped heads and flowing skirts rocked my world.”<sup>70</sup> Again, Mshaka speaks to the need brown girls have to see themselves reflected in the narrative texts that surround us. It is also quite apparent in listening to the stories of Carter, Morgan and Mshaka, as underexposed as I thought I was living in an exclusively white (except for me) community, we were all starving for stories that resembled our own or at the very least where the characters understood what it is like to be black and female.

In another blog post, Nigerian-born poet/writer, Bassey Ikpi speaks of memorizing Lady in Red’s iconic monologue, “A Night with Beau Willie Brown.” She also “tried” producing and directing the play twice but she claims, “the man shut us down.” She states this all to make her point about how much she loves the play. “I love it. I love Ntozake Shange’s words and the way she depicted black womanhood in color and texture and built these stories for women to identify and find themselves in.” She goes on to admit, like Joan Morgan and even me when the first time I read it, she “was too young to really connect with the stories on a personal level” however as a woman, “as a colored girl,” she “understood the tragedy and the joy that encased these women. These women that were all of us and none of us at the same time. These women who were everyone and nobody all at once.”<sup>71</sup> *For colored girls...* is a text we can grow into as we leave the safety of adolescence and usher in rocky adulthood terrain. *For colored girls...* is a coming of age story which bridges several generations of girls and women. It serves

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<sup>70</sup> Thembisa S. Mshaka, “For Colored Girls...Interrupted,” *The Thembisa S. Mshaka Blog*, entry posted November 8, 2010, <http://thembisamshaka.com/2010/11/08/for-colored-girls-interrupted/> (accessed December 31, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> Bassey Ikpi, “For Colored Girls Who Need Motivation When the Oprah Endorsement Ain’t Enough,” *The Huffington Post* (November 2010), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bassey-ikpi/for-colored-girls-who-nee\\_b\\_778846.html?](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bassey-ikpi/for-colored-girls-who-nee_b_778846.html?) (accessed August 2, 2011).

as an excellent example of one of the ways in which girlhood and womanhood can be in conversation with one another. Though speaking louder than in 1974, contemporary black women are still struggling to be heard. Over thirty-five years later we are still having a difficult time sustaining a conversation about violence against black women, their (mis)representations and the physical and verbal attacks on their sexuality, among their other various lived realities.

Describing her reaction to the choreopoem when she saw it in 1995, Morgan sheds light on a critical distinction between what the choreopoem means to us and what it means for our mothers: “I’d come into the theater hoping to feel what my mother must have over two decades ago. I wanted Shange’s language to arm me with the awesome power of self-definition. I left realizing this was impossible. As much as I appreciated the artistic, cultural, and historical significance of this moment it was not mine to claim.”<sup>72</sup> It is with this realization, Morgan articulates the ways in which the experience informs her own consciousness. Morgan goes on to theorize how as Hip Hop generation women, we have “struggle songs” which consist of the same notes, however, “they are infused with distinctly different rhythms.” She admits that what she really wanted was a *for colored girls...* of her own. The only problem was that she was waiting around for someone else to write it.<sup>73</sup> Recognizing the trailblazing of our black foremothers “who passionately articulated their struggles and suggested agendas (imperfect or not) for black female empowerment,”<sup>74</sup> Morgan places the responsibility for contemporary browngirls

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<sup>72</sup> Morgan, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

and women's "saving of our lives" squarely on our shoulders. She offers an analogy, "Consider our foremothers' contributions a bad-ass bolt of cloth. We've got to fashion the gear to our own liking."<sup>75</sup> Morgan's analogy elucidates that while being black and female are the strongest links we have to our foremothers, as a new generation of women coming of age in a different temporal space, we are forced to write our own scripts rather than appropriating those of our mothers, grandmothers and aunts.

Hamilton uses trauma as the descriptor for the "event of being a both black and female." It may be that this realization of your skin color and gender facilitates a sort of rite of passage; a loss of childhood innocence that we see documented in many memoirs such as Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Jennifer Bazille's *The Black Girl Next Door*. "The girl is forced into early womanhood and is never a girl because she remains fixated on the original trauma and is thus unable to move into healthy adulthood."<sup>76</sup> However, it is important to note that this same "trauma" of discovering ones' blackness and ones' femaleness as markers of difference, of inferiority, or "Other" status through a journey of self-discovery, often times becomes central to browngirls' identities. It is intimately connected to the process of self-definition and serves as an "awakening." This recognition of black girlhood's importance is encouraged (*somebody| anybody| sing a black girl's song| bring her out| to know herself*) and legitimated (*sing her song of life| she's been dead so long| closed in silence so long| she doesn't know the sound| of her own voice| her infinite beauty*) in the work of Ntozake Shange. "Dark phrases" then may serve to foreshadow the dissonance of the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>76</sup> Hamilton, 84.

women's stories to follow. The girls and women survive a series of events such as loss of virginity, rape, love unrequited and domestic violence before finally in the last poem, "a laying of hands" they realize they "waz missin somethin" and that something needed to be found within—not in a man, or a mother or anyone else. It is in the culmination of Shange's choreopoem where the awakening takes place and self-actualization occurs (*i found god in myself | & i loved her | i loved her fiercely*).<sup>77</sup> In their triumphs and tragedies, it is a statement showing the black female can make it through and overcome.

The browngirl narrative is part of a progression in women's creative expression (specifically in women's literature). In the last forty or so years we have seen women alter the basic style of the traditionally male-defined bildungsroman but considering "the particular nature of female development" female bildungsromane have "transformed the concept of bildung and thereby also the traditional definitions of the genre."<sup>78</sup> The most important tenet to the bildungsroman, its defining feature, is the close attention paid to "growth and development of the protagonist."<sup>79</sup> Often times we focus solely on those texts that chart a girlhood to womanhood rite of passage but we stop there, not fully discussing or analyzing the ways in which girlhood moves into womanhood. For example, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* focuses on black girlhood whereas with *Sula*, she wanted to move to the other parts of their lives. She builds on the first novel and briefly revisits childhood as to speak to the disconnection. She asks the important question,

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<sup>77</sup> Shange, 63.

<sup>78</sup> Esturoy, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

“What...do those feisty little girls grow up to be?”<sup>80</sup> and offers a response to that question in *Sula*. Writers such as Morrison and Shange realize the growth and development process that defines the black female bildungsroman genre does not stop with menarche, losing ones’ virginity or the realization of their racialized and gendered status. Girlhood and womanhood are much more interconnected than we acknowledge. This has been rearticulated by women of color, particularly black and Latina, to be an ongoing, nonlinear process. Annie O. Esturoy explains the process to be “both environmental and psychological” rites of passages depicted as one of several themes: a girl’s coming of age; her striving towards independence and a self-defined future; or the mature woman’s “awakening to the reality of her social and cultural role as a woman and her subsequent attempts to re-examine her life and shape it in accordance with her new feminist consciousness.”<sup>81</sup>

Often times, black female narratives encompass more than one of these themes. However, there is the absence of a critical examination and dialogue around the ways in which these rites of passage operate on a continuum. Unfortunately, the socially inscribed binaries of black girlhood and womanhood prevent these dialogues from taking place. The choreopoem’s themes of coming of age, self-discovery, and definition in addition to moments of awakening, not only situates it squarely in the bildungsroman genre but also speaks to the inclusion of important, often times non-linear rites of passage.

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<sup>80</sup> Jan Furman, “Black Girlhood and Womanhood: The Bluest Eye and *Sula*” in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>81</sup> Esturoy, 3.

*for colored girls* becomes a theatrical bildungsroman, with characters progressing onstage through life stages. As the piece progresses, the characters in the play undergo rites of passage that illustrate the growing psychological, and importantly, spiritual development of seven girls who are coming of age. The choreopoem begins in a black girl's childhood, charts first and successive experiences, and ultimately ends as the girl crosses the threshold of adulthood with improved awareness.<sup>82</sup>

For example, it serves as an initiation piece, poignantly illustrated in “graduation night: “doing nasty ol tricks i’d been thinkin since may| cuz graduation night had to be hot| & i waz the only virgin.” It is also a black feminist statement about what was going on at a particular historical moment: “integrated home| integrated street| integrated school| 1955 waz not a good year for lil blk girls.” Additionally, it serves as a coming of age tale of black girlhood and womanhood exploring black female realities in 1970s America. It is a text that speak to us as the daughters (and in some cases granddaughters) of those women. However, it cannot fully speak for us. As Morgan suggested, we need a *for colored girls* of our own.

### **Tyler Perry’s *For Colored Girls*:**

In 2010, *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* was adapted by Tyler Perry into the major motion picture, simply titled *For Colored Girls*. Much like the other black female texts that were adapted by non-black and/ or non-females, such as Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* (1985) and more recently Sapphire’s *Push* (*Precious*, 2009), the movie version of *for colored girls*... sparked controversial debate. Feminist and cultural critics as well as movie reviewers were already critical of Tyler Perry's ability to do the African American classic justice when it was announced he would in fact be writing, directing and producing the film all himself.

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<sup>82</sup> Hamilton, 85.



Their concerns were not unfounded considering Perry is known as one of Hollywood's most conservative black evangelical voices and Shange's classic black feminist text is one of gender equality, reproductive justice and sexual liberation. Concerns included his ability to transition from "escapist affair" to tackling a serious piece of black women's literature and to his decision to not only produce the film but to write and direct it as well. In light of the critical reception of Steven Spielberg's film adaptation for *The Color Purple*, their apprehensions were well warranted. Perry is known for his story lines appealing to black working- and middle-class audiences that emphasize Christian ethics and heteronormative families. Best known for his slapstick comedic films featuring Perry himself in drag as Madea he was famously described by Hilton Als as a "six-foot-five, homespun, truth-spouting, pot-smoking, politically incorrect middle-aged black matriarch, [who] wears a silver wig, spectacles and a series of interchangeable floral-print dresses."<sup>83</sup> This would be Perry's first attempt at something as heavy as *for colored girls...* and it was met with mixed reviews.

An excerpt from Arlene McKanic's piece, "For Colored Girls: The Reviews Are In" states:

Responses to the film have been a mixed bag. Manhola Dargis of *The New York Times* liked it, Roger Ebert didn't, though he didn't hate it. Bill Gibron of PopMatters gave it a positive; Cynthia Fuchs of the same site didn't. Suzanne Rust, writing for *The Griot*, liked it. Teresa Wiltz of *The Root* was not happy: "It is, in a word, awful."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Hilton Als, "A Critic At Large – Mama's Gun – The World of Tyler Perry," *The New Yorker* (April 2010), [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/04/26/100426crat\\_atlarge\\_als](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/04/26/100426crat_atlarge_als) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>84</sup> McKanic, Arlene, "For Colored Girls: The Reviews Are In," *Ms. Magazine* (November 12, 2010) <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/author/arlenemckanic/> (accessed December 23, 2010).

While Tyler Perry's film adaptation of *for colored girls* may not have been widely received by most critics, it is important to note how it was received by the general viewing audience and black feminists critics. Additionally, it is important to consider the ways in which it has created a space for an open dialogue about black female representation, on a very public platform—the Internet. The adaptation of *for colored girls...* does a couple of things: It (re)introduces Ntozake Shange's work to several generations of women and it facilitates a dialogue between Hip Hop generation brown girls and our elders around issues of sexuality, trauma, abuse, etc. that operate transgenerationally. It is important to note, this dialogue does not occur because the film adaptation created any sort of paradigm shift. Rather it occurred because the film served as an impetus for black female interpretive communities to participate in a much needed, ongoing conversation around black female representation, womanhood and sexuality. Cultural critic Tricia Rose urges us not to let the outrage over the movie's execution overshadow the other important issues.<sup>85</sup> Brown girls remain invisible and undervalued “at a time when our bodies are most commodified, consumed, and made hypervisual in popular cultures.”<sup>86</sup> If nothing else, the film adaptation *For Colored Girls* has created a space and an opportunity for Black women and those interested in Black women's well-being to share, discuss and in some cases, begin healing.

Mark Anthony Neal considers *For Colored Girls*' placement in the popular culture mass market: “If you are Shange and Lionsgate, your concern is not quality but

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<sup>85</sup> Esther Armah on “Wake Up Call,” November 9, 2010, NPR website, [www.npr.com](http://www.npr.com) (accessed November 13, 2010). Since removed.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, 39.

how do you translate this thirty-five plus year-old classic black feminist piece of work to the broadest audience possible?” Additionally, he poses a question worth thinking about, “In that negotiation there is something lost, but is there something to be recovered?” One could argue because Tyler Perry did the production, there are more people who will see or hear Shange’s words. The major concern is not Perry’s participation in it but rather his hi-jacking of the work altogether—insisting upon writing, directing and producing the film adaptation. As a result, the sentiment around achieving greater exposure and a more diversified discussion due to Perry’s faithful fan following, seems to be overshadowed by the outrage around his co-optation of a sacred black female story that many black women believe is our story and ours alone to tell.

So when Tyler Perry announced he would be producing the film adaptation of *for colored girls* I was conflicted. I was excited there would finally be a revival, but by Tyler Perry?! Please let him do this right. I was really grateful that someone who had the financial wherewithal was taking on the project. However, I had a feeling of collective ownership over *for colored girls*... Did I want to share this piece of “our” culture with the whole world? What if Perry completely butchered it? This was a cultural moment in the making and it could only be made once. But it was necessary. There are too many browngirls out there that need her to speak to them the way she spoke to me. From blog

carnivals<sup>87</sup> to pre-arranged sister-friend viewings of the movie, this cultural moment was providing the springboard for discussions around race, gender and class in an accessible space where black women could be heard and seen in a new way. I would have the opportunity to see firsthand how a diverse population of black women all over the country felt about how we were, are, and continue to be represented as black women.

A large part of the controversy is rooted not only in Tyler Perry's procurement of the film rights but how he came to acquire them and within that, his decision to write, direct and produce the film himself. In March of 2009, Lion's Gate announced the project was being spearheaded by music video director Nzingha Stewart. Seven months later it was announced that Tyler Perry, whose own production company has a distribution deal with Lionsgate, would be writing and directing the screen adaptation of *For Colored Girls*. It made sense that Stewart, who got her start directing videos for musical artists such as Bilal, Jay-Z and Common, would write the screen play and direct the adaptation of a text where music, movement and a black female standpoint were crucial components to its execution. Stewart had a vision:

I saw it as a movie through my work with music videos. The poems seemed like songs. So I listened to them until I saw them. I've read *for colored girls* since I was fifteen. And ultimately, it has a traditional movie arc. It's light at first, grows

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<sup>87</sup> A Blog Carnival is a particular kind of blog community. There are many kinds of blogs, and they contain articles on many kinds of topics. Blog Carnivals typically collect together links pointing to blog articles on a particular topic. A Blog Carnival is like a magazine. It has a title, a topic, editors, contributors, and an audience. Editions of the carnival typically come out on a regular basis (e.g. every monday, or on the first of the month). Each edition is a special blog article that consists of links to all the contributions that have been submitted, often with the editors opinions or remarks. There is so much stuff in the blogosphere, just finding interesting stuff is hard. If there is a carnival for a topic you are interested in, following that carnival is a great way to learn what bloggers are saying about that topic. If you are blogging on that topic, the carnival is the place to share your work with like-minded bloggers. —<http://blogcarnival.com>

more intense, then there's a breaking point and the characters experience a spiritual awakening.<sup>88</sup>

So what happened? Instead of writing and directing, Stewart was eventually listed as an executive producer for the movie. The executive producer role varies from project to project and Stewart explains that,

On "for colored girls," my role [involved] the initial development. [I had to have the] vision to say this should be a movie – to package it in a way where the studio could see it. It's a play with no plot, with seven nameless black women, and it's all poetry. I figured if I could get the right names involved, I could get the studio involved. I talked to the author, optioned the rights, and wrote a draft script...I handled the initial childbirth.<sup>89</sup>

In a television interview on the daytime talk show, *The View*, Perry seems to have a different take on the way the project came to him. He stated, "[*For Colored Girls*] haunted me. I didn't choose it; it chose me." He was referring to Whoopi Goldberg approaching him for financial support for her Broadway revival in 2008. He also made mention of "someone else" approaching him regarding the movie and he said he was not interested. "And then it came back again," Perry continued, "and when something is coming back to you that many times, it is for you. So I had to face my fears and just jump into it." Stewart has chosen to take the higher road and remains fairly close-lipped about how it all unfolded only stating, "Tyler Perry is one of those directors who finds his ways into the project by doing everything in the project, writing, producing, directing, and playing in it." Additionally, in Stewart's interview with Felicia Pride for the *Atlanta Post*, when asked who her inspiration was, she named Judd Apatow stating, "He seems to have a style where he lets people do what they're good at and he allows his friends to

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<sup>88</sup> Felicia Pride, "Networking with Writer-Director Nzingha Stewart," *Madame Noire* (July 20, 2010), <http://atlantapost.com/2010/07/20/networking-with-writer-director-nzingha-stewart/> (accessed December 31, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Pride, "Networking with Writer-Director Nzingha Stewart."

contribute. Often, people think they have to do everything, but the project isn't as good as it can be because you're not letting people do what they can do."<sup>90</sup> In this case, that is telling black women's stories. One cannot help but wonder if this statement was meant for Tyler Perry.

Regardless of their somewhat strained ability to interpret the text due to Tyler Perry writing and directing, many black women found ways to feel empowered by and connected to the film, subverting the patriarchal direction of the film. Whereas, if the film had been directed by a black female such as Nzingha Stewart, her in-group status makes her instantly more relatable and aligns her, "with other black women within the history of these women's creative tradition. It is an activists' tradition that opposes the forces that negatively affect black women. Black creative artists bring a different understanding of black women's lives and culture, seeking to eradicate the harmful and pervasive images haunting their history."<sup>91</sup> This is an understanding Perry was unable to comprehend much less convey. Because *for colored girls...* is regarded as a black feminist classic and several generations of women hold the text dear to their hearts, it would have been difficult to come away uncriticized even if a female had written and directed the piece, however, negligence would have been much less likely. With the 1982 television adaption written by Shange herself and directed by Oz Scott, perhaps it was Shange's hand in writing the screenplay that made all the difference.

I approach my life from a black female-centered standpoint and align myself with self-identified feminists often and while I saw problems with the film, I deliberately went

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<sup>90</sup> Pride, "Networking with Writer-Director Nzingha Stewart."

<sup>91</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 5.

to see the film without reading reviews on it beforehand. I approached it in the same manner as most of my sisters, which was not from an academic perspective. In discussing the movie with many of them, the general consensus was they too liked it and felt deeply connected to it. Sadly, upon reflection I am not so sure if it was the movie I liked or if it was that I loved seeing a group of beautiful, fiercely spirited Hip Hop generation brown women coming together on the screen telling a story of substance that is meaningful for black women. While flawed and often problematic, it was a story centered around black female experiences we rarely see portrayed. I believe this means it was not so much that I enjoyed Tyler Perry's adaptation but that my thirst for more nuanced and complex depictions of contemporary black womanhood has not yet been quenched. While neither I nor any of my girlfriends expressed really feeling "uplifted" by the movie (as was more the sentiment in reading the choreopoem and seeing stage adaptations) we all felt it was an accurate depiction of *some* of the experiences of *some* black women. "Natasha" shared similar sentiments in her response to a film review in Crunk Feminist Collective's blog:

I enjoyed the movie. It was heavy and I did leave feeling some kinda way... mostly remembering that we are all connected, can collectively be stronger, the need to tell our stories both the struggles and the celebratory. I think the stories are important to share as many people (black, brown, white, and in between) don't think about black women and SOME of the experiences they may be going through. I disagree with the assertion that themes of self-love, pleasure, hurt and healing, and decentering of men were not present. I felt all of those things while watching the scenarios play out. Perhaps it was because I could see a little bit of myself in each character. The little bit that no one ever asks about, the little bit that no one seems to care about, and the little bit that could make one consider suicide when the rainbow is enuf! Empowerment was throughout the poems and stories. And those characters, whether wholly, partly, or pieced together, represent women you or I know.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> "On #For Colored Girls \*Spoiler Alert\*" The Crunk Feminist Collective (November 8, 2010), <https://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/2010/11/08/on-forcoloredgirls-spoiler-alert/> (accessed on December 23, 2010).

So while in considering many of the black feminist cultural critics' and bloggers' critiques of the movie express many of black women's concerns, they by no means speak for the majority, as these critiques are coming from specific black feminist theoretical standpoints that are considerate of but not representative of everyday brown girls or how they view themselves and their world.

As Jacqueline Bobo states, "...analyst with no clear understanding of the subtleties and nuances of black women's lives, are confident that their evaluations of these women's creative work are adequate. The opinions of those who are actually reading the works...are never considered. As a result, any potential value the works may have for audiences is neutralized."<sup>93</sup> Herein lies the problem. Not to say the black feminist bloggers and critics do not have a "clear understanding of the subtleties and nuances of black women's lives," as those I am discussing are black women themselves. However, they are often times not representative of the majority of everyday black women's feelings on the film. By taking the black feminist cultural critics' and bloggers' opinions as those of all black women is to perpetuate a continued cycle of misunderstanding about who black women are. In this cycle, regardless of the intentions to explode static and stereotypical notions of them, black women continue to be essentialized and represented by one of a few stereotypical tropes. As a result, we continue to trade one representation for another rather than giving breadth and depth to the actual diversity and polyculturalism of black womanhood.

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<sup>93</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, Blackwell Publishers (2001) 2



Believing strongly this to be the case and understanding that my social network of women is only representative of a small range of black women's experiences, standpoints, and ideologies, I utilized many of the blogs where black women were discussing *For Colored Girls*. This method allowed to me to access a large group of polycultural black women quickly and because the Internet it is public domain the content can be used here easily. Additionally, it is a critical space where women were/are able to talk freely about their own feelings in their own words on *for colored girls...* and *For Colored Girls*, being black women, and browngirl storytelling.

Reminiscent of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* being made into a film, there was quite a ruckus around the adaptations of both the novel *Push* and the choreopoem *for color girls who have considered suicide |when the rainbow was enuf* into films adaptations. In all the aforementioned cases, the books were written by black females and men constructed the film versions. In the case of *The Color Purple*, not only was it a man who took the project on but Steven Spielberg, a white man (which complicated the criticisms in yet another way). As Bobo observes, even while the literary and cinematic texts for *The Color Purple* differed in that the first was created by a black woman writer and the other, a "mainstream media product" was constructed by a white man, "during the heated and bitter exchanges following the release of the film, the two were fused together in the minds of the harshest critics, with most of their perceptions of the novel based upon their viewing of the film."<sup>94</sup> Perhaps the fact that *The Color Purple's* film adaption was released only three years after Alice Walker wrote the novel

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<sup>94</sup> Bobo, 2.

made it more difficult to separate the two. In the case of *for colored girls...*, many black feminist cultural critics and mainstream movie critics alike held Perry's film adaptation to an arguably unrealistic standard, even before it was released. In contrast to the film critics' reception of *The Color Purple*, black women, who possibly had a larger investment in the work of Walker felt differently. Bobo goes on to say:

For many black women the heightened attention to the novel in the wake of the film's release directed them once again to the novel. Or they were motivated to read it for the first time after seeing the film. In their minds, there was a clear separation between the two works, but the issues addressed in both were meaningful for them. Aspects of their lives and histories, missing from other well-known works, were depicted for the first time in a medium accessible to a large number of black females.<sup>95</sup>

This sentiment seemed to be echoed with *for colored girls...* as well. Over the course of almost 40 years there was a large number of women who grew up feeling a strong connection to Ntozake Shange's choreopoem. They had seen it on Broadway or in smaller theater houses, high school gyms and college auditoriums across the country. They had read it as young women and their daughters had been exposed to the prose in college. The colorful women spoke to them, spoke for them and represented them. This was no different for me or my respondents. I was introduced to the poems in an African American literature course in college and over 60% of my questionnaire respondents shared they were introduced to the choreopoem before or in college. One respondent, Jalene\* stated,

I think *For Colored Girls* is one of those timeless texts that will always have some relevance and resonate with black women. We may not get all of the references, those things become dated, but the themes are timeless and that's what we relate to. And unfortunately the things that black women have to go through when coming of age, coming into themselves, etc, change so slowly that we still relate to the women's pain and their triumph over that pain because we have been through or are going through similar things.

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<sup>95</sup> Bobo, 3.

So even in the wake of Perry's film adaptation, the women who had already made a connection with Shange's work highly revered the literary text. Those who were being introduced to Shange's work for the first time were seeing the film because it was "for colored girls," and they were excited to see themselves represented or perhaps because they were Tyler Perry fans. In any case, much like with *The Color Purple*, there was a clear distinction made between Shange's and Perry's works.

John Fisk, who has done much work around popular culture, makes a valuable assessment in regards to the role of popular art versus the role of radical art. Fisk explains:

Popular art is *progressive*, not *revolutionary*. Radical art forms that oppose or ignore the structures of domination can never be popular because they cannot offer points of *pertinence to the everyday life of the people*, for everyday life is a series of tactical maneuvers against the strategy of the colonizing forces. It cannot produce the conditions of its existence, but must make do with those it has, often turning them against the system that produces them (emphasis mine).<sup>96</sup>

So while many feminists of color, particularly black feminists, deeply criticized the film adaptation of *for colored girls...* because it acted as *popular* art rather than *radical* art, many of them failed to acknowledge the ways in which the film operated as a meaningful text in the lives of everyday black women. It is important to note the film was most effective in operating as a meaningful text to such a large group of black women *because* it was popular. To see themselves and issues that affect them seriously considered on the movie screen was a *progressive* act. It moved black women's truths a little bit closer to being fully realized. However, as Fisk points out, it is almost impossible for a work to be both revolutionary and popular by its very nature. So much attention was drawn to Tyler

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<sup>96</sup> Fisk, 161

Perry by the feminist and mainstream critics—not only because he was a black man writing, directing and producing the film, but also because his own history of trauma and childhood sexual abuse colored the ways in which the text was translated onscreen. Unfortunately, with so much emphasis on Perry and his own personal narrative, in the eyes of the critics, *For Colored Girls* never truly got to be about for colored girls solely. Many of the empowering aspects of the film were overshadowed—including the all black cast, the life the actresses brought to their characters, the ways in which the poems were woven into a contemporary storyline to reflect the lived realities of many black women and the role Shange herself played in charging Perry with the responsibility to bring her choreopoem to the masses. Ultimately, although the film was highly contentious and deeply problematic in a number of ways, everyday black women found a number of ways to make use of it as a tool to fuel a much larger discussion.

### **Mixing up the Rainbow: Misrepresentation and Disempowerment:**

When others assume to know black women,  
gender malpractice and misrepresentation are often not far behind.

—PSYCHE WILLIAMS-FORSON<sup>97</sup>

Tyler Perry's *For Colored Girls* brought in \$20.1 million in its opening weekend, grossed 37.7 million in theaters and topped the home video sales charts making it a definite financial success.<sup>98</sup> Named the highest paid man in Hollywood on Forbes Magazine 2011 list, Perry raked in one hundred and thirty million dollars between May 2010 and May 2011. Ultimately, as the most financially successful black film maker of

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<sup>97</sup> Psyche Williams-Forson, *Making Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>98</sup> Arnold, Thomas K., "Tyler Perry's 'For Colored Girls' Tops Home Video Sales Charts," *The Hollywood Reporter* (April 2010), <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tyler-perrys-colored-girls-tops-100541> (accessed February 16, 2011).

all time, one cannot argue Perry was able to reach a larger audience than any black female filmmaker could. However, one of the biggest missteps made by those adapting classic works is failing to present the characters as they are rather than how (s)he wants them to be—a sort of *malpractice*. Shange’s original text not only encompassed the trauma and tragedy of being a colored girl in America, it depicted colored girls’ nuances and diversity. She captured the sensuality and desire of everyday women yearning for something more, the delights of black sisterhood and the power of self-love and liberation. In a historical period of time when women, especially black women were considered revolutionary for speaking out about issues such as sexual freedom, reproduction rights, domestic abuse and sexual assault, Shange committed the ultimate subversion of the coming of age story—the antithesis of the male defined bildungsroman—by becoming “the narrator of her own text.” Within the browngirl narrative, the “female ‘I’ is central to the consciousness” of the character as, just like in the bildungsroman, the whole process is based on a “female experiential perspective.”<sup>99</sup> With this in mind, there seems to be almost no way around Perry writing, producing and directing the film all himself without committing what Psyche Williams-Forsen refers to as *gender malpractice*. Wherein Shange’s text “the female ‘I’ takes on narrative authority over her own life and her own story,” in the case of Perry, the female self is completely stripped of any authority over “the formation of her own cultural or gender identity”<sup>100</sup> framing it once again within the boundaries of patriarchy. In addition to Perry’s

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<sup>99</sup> Esturoy, 86.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 87.

reassignment of characters, his creation of new characters and relationships among them compromised the intentions of the original text.

In this section, I would like to consider the ways in which Perry commits gender malpractice and how this gender malpractice overarches every facet of the ways in which the choreopoem is interpreted and enacted. As a result, opportunities are missed and representations are compromised, further reinforcing gendered stereotypes about black girls and women. Through the reassignment of characters and rewriting of scenes Perry does several things to drastically alter the original text. Among them he creates a fracture in the continuum from girlhood and womanhood further reinforcing these social binaries, implements a cult of black womanhood as a moral compass for his protagonists and presents the contentious nature of *some* black female relationships as the benchmark. In all of these cases, he offers a very narrow definition of how to navigate black womanhood and gives no alternatives with which to balance out the negative and biased perception of black female interaction.

Gender malpractice, a term coined by Psyche Williams-Forsen, is a concept heavily reliant on the work of philosopher Tommy Lott. Regarding race, Lott affirms that when black artists use black vernacular or dialects that may misrepresent black folks, they are committing *cultural malpractice*. In cultural critic Jacqueline Bobo's analysis of Steven Spielberg's execution of *The Color Purple*, she gives an example of cultural malpractice when she demonstrates his inaccurate and inconsistent interpretation of black vernacular. While Bobo alludes to cultural and gender malpractice in her analysis of *The Color Purple*, Williams-Forsen articulates it as such, considering the intersections of race

and gender. She asserts, “When those outside the race display these phenomena it is relatively easy to levy a charge of racism. The more difficult tasks of assigning judgments reveals itself when the perpetrators are ‘in-group’ or black, and in some contexts of this discussion, female.” Williams-Forson explains in her use of the term gender malpractice she is “considering instances when black women have been intentionally misrepresented by white people and ambiguously misrepresented by blacks.” As Williams-Forson points out, charging someone with committing cultural or gender malpractice does not negate his or her work: “Rather, it highlights and showcases their artistry to call attention to the complexities that inhere in the production of cultural artifacts, particularly those surrounding black people.”<sup>101</sup>

While gender malpractice overshadowed many of the discussions around the film even before it was finished, I found there to be a major disconnect between many of the black feminist cultural critics and the general black female audiences who viewed the movie. As I stated earlier, the majority of the blog reviews spoke of Tyler Perry’s film in very critical and negative ways. Lack of consensus brings up critical issues for feminist and cultural scholars. Heated discussions ensued via the Internet; the blogosphere was abuzz with harsh criticisms stemming from what seemed to be an already established opinion about how poorly Perry would translate the text. After the film’s release, many of the reviews and critiques paralleled the preconceived notions about Perry’s adaptation: He had made a mockery of the choreopoem; Shange’s original message was lost in

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<sup>101</sup> PsycheWilliams-Forson, “Taking the Big Piece of Chicken,” in *Making Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 165-185.

translation; a black woman should have written and directed it. Why did he feel he needed to do it all?

With good reason, people were afraid Perry would not be able to do the classic black female text justice. As writer, editor, and author Michele Kort describes the film, “Its cinematic representation is more than a movie; it’s a cultural *event* of deeper import.” Many could not get past the fact that it was directed by 1) someone other than a black female; and 2) Tyler Perry specifically. Pre-release Mako Fitts argues: “What is most damaging about [Perry's] characterizations is that they are coming not from the lived experiences of Black women, but from the mediated gaze of a Black man. ...Classic Black feminist texts adapted from the perspective of a man is problematic.”<sup>102</sup>

Unlike Steven Spielberg's 1984 adaptation of *The Color Purple*, 27 years later the outrage around *For Colored Girls* is not as much about an airing of the black community's dirty laundry—the mistreatment of women, family abuse, the scope of black female sexuality—but about *who* was doing the telling.<sup>103</sup> This time, the majority of the criticism was around Tyler Perry's inability to portray the nuances and intricacies of black womanhood. The criticisms became even more complicated by what critics referred to as the influence of his own history of sexual abuse and trauma "coloring" the ways in which he approached the characters' developments. Esther Armah described the film production

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<sup>102</sup> Mako Fitts, “Can Tyler Perry Pull Off a Black Feminist Masterpiece?” *Ms. Magazine* (October 2010), <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2010/10/14/can-tyler-perry-pull-off-a-black-feminist-masterpiece/> (accessed December 31, 2010).

<sup>103</sup> The questionable "villainization" of black men still remained a sensitive topic and once again issues of black male protectionism surfaced as a result of black women telling their truths.



to be both “molesting and magical.”<sup>104</sup> Molesting because Perry is a man who has chosen to reveal his own childhood trauma and transforms it on the screen. As we all understand, most writing is somewhat biographical in nature so it does not come as a surprise that Perry’s own life experiences would come across on the screen. However, it is magical by the sheer nature of the poetry, power in the historical moment and the ways in which it potentially operates in a transformative capacity.

dream hampton understands that the play itself has been done “eleventy million times”; however, she holds a reverence for the original text describing it as, “Sacred. Subtle. Succinct.” With mixed feelings hampton asserts, “It wasn’t as bad as it could have been and there were times that it could have soared.” She spoke to a dichotomy that exists between Shange and Perry noting that unfortunately, the whole cultural moment focused much too heavily on Perry stating, “It is somewhat concerning that the public spin is on Perry.”<sup>105</sup> With similar feelings Tricia Rose stated, “I really don’t want this to be about Tyler Perry,” pointing out, she believes we are really missing an opportunity to have some important discussions.<sup>106</sup> Though the conversation around black women's stories being told for them and misrepresentation of them is not a new issue, the significance of this concern still remains a deeply relevant one. What could have been an opportunity to discuss important issues in black communities was lost on Perry's own personal history.

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<sup>104</sup> Esther Armah on “Wake Up Call,” November 9, 2010, NPR website, [www.npr.com](http://www.npr.com) (accessed November 13, 2010).

<sup>105</sup> Esther Armah on “Wake Up Call.”

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

A number of Tyler Perry's own personal ideologies permeated this script and inform his female protagonists across all of his films. Among them are religious dogma, skewed ideas of black womanhood and femininity and his own personal trauma that Armah alludes to above.<sup>107</sup> For example, Perry fails to fully comprehend Shange's complex portrayal of the ways that black women can find God. Shange articulates a spirituality that is fluid and introspective, even divinely feminine. Religion is never centrally cast in the text; spirituality is rather understood as a vehicle through which black women communicate with each other and with themselves. Also, his misreading of the importance of woman-centeredness directly affects the way he views and portrays black female relationships in the film. There are no sentiments of community or camaraderie amongst the women. Rather their relationships translate as competitive, spiteful, judgmental of and disconnected from one another. Trauma is the omni-present theme; overshadowing any possibilities of highlighting self-love, sisterhood or recovery.

Tyler Perry's reading of black womanhood and femininity and his conservative definition of black female sexuality changes Shange's original message of sexual awakening and liberation to a message about black women's trauma and punishment due to poor decision making. In Perry's film adaptation of the choreopoem women are punished for their sexuality at every turn leaving no room to contemplate desire, sexual exploration and liberation, or the power of the erotic in positive or healthy ways. For example, in reassigning characters, Perry collapses the monologues of lady in yellow (losing her virginity graduation night) and lady in purple (having a back ally abortion)

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<sup>107</sup> About him being sexually assaulted as a boy.

into Nyla (lady in purple). Consequently, Nyla is the victim of a botched back alley abortion as the result of giving up her virginity on graduation night. This in turn changes a first sexual experience from a sexual awakening—a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood—into a tale of morality about what awful things can happen when you have sex. Rather than the loss of her virginity being seen as a rite of passage or act of agency and empowerment, Perry portrayed her as a powerless victim who had the act done *to* her. Tangie (lady in orange) is portrayed as an empty, unfulfilled, and coldhearted jezebel rather than the sexually liberated and free-spirited, “sechita” Shange portrayed in the choreopoem. Additionally, Kelly (lady in blue) is unable to bear children because of a sexually transmitted disease that went untreated in college. Kelly’s inability to bear children is the punishment Perry added to her storyline. In every instance, we see black women being punished for asserting their sexual freedom.

While there are an abundant number of examples illustrating *gender malpractice*, I would like to focus on Tangie and Nyla to point to a larger critique of black female sexuality. Within Perry’s storyline, the sisters’ relationship with one another and their mother, their sexualities, and their own personal traumas offer rich sites of discussion about how, in fact, Perry treats black girlhood and womanhood. By honing in on these relationships, we can engage in a conversation around the ways in which black women come into their sexuality. Nyla, Tangie and their mother Alice (lady in white) provide us with three generations of thought—all of which are reflections of the geographical locations, time periods and cultural climates in which they came of age. Alice’s outlook is punitive regarding any expression of female sexuality; free-spirited Tangie stands in as

the “fast-assed” black sheep—the freedom and pleasure she finds in her sexuality debased as salacious and lascivious; and Nyla, the innocent much younger sibling has her foray into sexuality tainted with the fear of serious repercussions. Perry builds a storyline around Tangie and Nyla’s contentious and spiteful relationship with one another and their mother but there is never any resolution. This is a place where the importance of continuity and community could have been recognized and illustrated in the three generations of black women. However, he clearly missed the opportunity to establish an intergenerational connection between the two sisters and their mother. Additionally, he misses an opportunity to speak to how the lives of brown girls coming of age post-civil rights were impacted and shaped by their cultural landscapes. By considering the complicated relationship between Tangie, Nyla and their mother Alice, I hope to not only point to instances of *gender malpractice* but also begin a discussion around the ways in which issues of girlhood, womanhood and black female sexuality could have been addressed within the context of Tyler Perry’s film adaptation. In doing this, I hope to encourage a more intersectional, radicalized gender discourse in presenting and viewing black women, as well as to encourage black women to think more critically about self-representation.

### **Bridging Browngirlhood and Womanhood: Tangie and Nyla**

As Pamela Hamilton points out in her essay, “Child’s Play: Ntozake’s Audience of Colored Girls,” by focusing solely on black womanhood, we are ignoring the choreopoem’s “deliberately chosen title.” She goes on to argue her case, pointing out

Shange characterized her poems as “words of a young girl’s growing up.”<sup>108</sup> Hamilton states this classifies the work as “a charting of girlhood” with a significant number of the poems targeting girls. Despite the title, Perry all but eclipses black girls and girlhood as a relevant theme in the film. To his credit, critics and the interpretive community as a whole tend to focus much more largely on the ways in which the choreopoem speaks to and about black *women* rather than girls as well. Hamilton points out this more than likely becomes a woman’s play because of “its explicit treatment of life experiences from which most parents strive to shield youth: sex, unwanted pregnancy, disappointment and death.”<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, this is not Shange’s original intention. As grown black women who have experienced or know other black women who have experienced any of the issues detailed in *for colored girls...* Shange sees this an opportunity to teach black girls and young black women alike a few life lessons. Ntozake Shange’s approach in 1974 is still progressive for 2012 considering it is still uncommon for women to have these real life conversations with their daughters for numerous reasons. Often times, it is a cycle; they were not provided with this information by the women in their lives because it is taboo, “unladylike” or just plain “grown folks business,” therefore they may not know how to or never even considered approaching the topics with the girls in their lives. It becomes “the elephant in the room.” So it does not become a relevant conversation until a teenage girl becomes pregnant, gets raped, has to deal with an abortion on her own, or some other trauma motivating us to break silences. Even in these instances, much like with Alice or Tangie, the results are punitive or chastising in nature. In other cases, it

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<sup>108</sup> Hamilton, xv.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

may be a sort of hazing or initiation into womanhood or a result of feeling resentment: No one shared this crucial information with me and I had to learn the hard way. Why should I help other young women when no one helped me?

For example, in the movie Nyla has an abortion after having sex for the very first time and when she seeks support from her sexually uninhibited sister Tangie, rather than offering her guidance, she chastises her for her poor decision making and naivetè. She subtly mentions an abortionist and provides all the pertinent details, knowing Nyla's desperation will more than likely lead her to the address. After Nyla ends up in the hospital, their religious zealot of a mother, Alice, tells Nyla that what was growing inside of her was a sin and she needs to repent. Alice pushes her down and commands her to pray in front of a make-shift alter, smearing ashes on her forehead and pouring something what resembles oil and blood on her head.

Nyla's trauma could have been an event sparking a dialogue around safe sex, unplanned pregnancy and woman-centered support; it demonstrates the intergenerational disconnect and reinforces the lack of regard some of us have for our sisters. Alice, her relationship with her daughters, and the relationship between the sisters offered a perfect opportunity to create a space for a multi-generational exploration of the symbiotic relationship between browngirls, their sisters, their mothers and other female elders. Especially since we have so few representations of this—though we know some families are like this—sharing the opposite could have gone far. Rather than Tangie assisting her younger sister Nyla in her transition from girlhood to womanhood and bring her safely across, she sabotages her by providing her with the address, detailed description of the

building and apartment number of the back alley abortionist their mother took her to the first time she got pregnant. Tangie's time enjoying girlhood was stunted by her father raping her, therefore her development into womanhood was arrested because just as Tangie is not there for Nyla, their mother, Alice was not there to help her across. As a result, Tangie is still struggling with her own rocky journey from girlhood into womanhood after her experiences with sexual trauma and abortion. Consequently, she is unable to provide her little sister with the support she needs, detailing the sort of trauma Hamilton highlights as problematic to making smooth transitions from girlhood to womanhood.

A cycle ensues and we continue to struggle with bridging the ever-widening gap between black girlhood and womanhood. As black women coming of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop, continuing to grow and develop, it is our responsibility to prepare the generations of women to come. It is important to give them expectations to strive for, to motivate them to really look at themselves and to encourage them to become comfortable with themselves in their skin. How can we possibly expect them to fully realize themselves if we do not talk to them? Really *talk* to them. As one of the female child characters, Claudia, laments in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, "Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issues orders without providing information" pointing out, "we didn't talk with grown-up; we answered their questions."<sup>110</sup> Ntozake Shange believes sheltering young girls can only be a detriment, "doing more harm than good."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Shange, 22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 79

and that this sort of truth-telling is very necessary to brown girls' survival. Much ahead of her time, she believed *for colored girls* could do this sort of truth-telling:

The reason for colored girls is entitled, for colored girls, is that that's who it's for...I want a twelve year old girl to reach out for and get some information that isn't just contraceptive information but emotional information...If there is an audience for whom I write, it's the little girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them.<sup>112</sup>

The relationships Perry constructs between Tangie, Nyla and their mother, Alice is completely stripped of Shange's original message letting young girls "know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think of them." The relationships between the mother and her daughters are competitive, manipulative, and unfeeling. As a result, the truth-telling that occurs only further contributes to the trauma and more importantly, leaves no opportunity for healing. For example, after discovering she is pregnant, Nyla goes to her sister to get money for "college applications" but because Nyla asks for three hundred dollars, Tangie suspects she's pregnant and actually needs the money for an abortion. Rather operating as the caring older sister, Tangie makes a joke out of Nyla's situation. "You didn't use a condom? Baby, you got to use a condom." This remark is consistent with the rest of Tangie's character construction. After all, how could a woman who beds so many men be feeling or compassionate? Nyla is frightened and seeking for support from her sister but instead she gets ridiculed. Tangie then goes on to tell Nyla of the first time she got pregnant. "I was so scared," she says in a daze, almost outside of herself. She looks at her for a long while and continues, "I went to this apartment on 138th. Old red build in middle of the block down a back

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<sup>112</sup> Tate, 161-162.



alley apartment 331. I didn't have any money for no college application...but I wasn't pregnant anymore." Then she looks her sister in the eyes and coldly tells her, "I'm not giving you any money" to which Nyla responds very matter of fact, "I'm not pregnant," and walks out. While this could have been the perfect opportunity to explore the interplay of female life stages, instead it further widens the chasm between girlhood and womanhood.

After Nyla ends up in the hospital after passing out in the street, Alice finds out about the abortion and goes to Tangie's apartment. She bangs on the door and yells, "What have you done?!" Tangie opens the door and they begin to wrestle. Alice exclaims, "She could have killed her!" to which Tangie retorts, "She could have killed *me* too!" Alice responds, "I was there with you! You sent her there alone," revealing their mother Alice, in fact, took Tangie to see the same woman so many years before. After they tire of wrestling, they both fall the floor. It is then the audience is made privy to the root of all the family's issues—Alice was raped by her father and then "given" to a white man, who in turn, gave her Tangie and Nyla. We find out he touched Tangie as well. It is then that Tangie begins reciting, "i am a deliberate coquette.." while her mother recites her own inaudible dialogue in the background. Once again, another opportunity to engage in an intergenerational dialogue is missed.

As a sort of attempt at bringing resolution, Perry creates a scene wherein Nyla and Tangie sit together to have a heart to heart. Nyla confronts her sister asking her, "Why do you hate me so much, Tangie?" Tangie tells her that she does not hate her to which Nyla replies, "Oh yah? Because you act like it." Lost in her own world Tangie begins,

C'mon. You can't love somebody with that much hurt in them. I'm learning that more and more. I don't know what's wrong with me. I've lost touch with reality. I don't know who's doing it. I thought I was but I was so stupid. I was able to be hurt and that's not real. Not anymore. We should be immune. If we were still alive. How are we still alive? My dependency for other living beings for love. I survive on intimacy and tomorrow. That's all I've got going. It's all I've got. Being alive and being a woman. Being colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't quite conquered. You see the point?

Nyla quickly responds, "We're sisters Tangie. You'd think at least that we can do is be there for each other." The way the dialogue between the sisters plays out seems disconnected. Tangie's monologue, edited and taken out of its original context, it seems cryptic and misplaced. The original monologue which belonged to lady in yellow was a moment of clarity, a bearing of her soul and a plea for humanity after, perhaps, years of emotional abuse and damage to her spirit. Lady in yellow's original monologue reads,

i've lost it  
touch wit reality| i don't know who's doin it  
i thot i waz but i waz so stupid i waz able to be hurt  
& that's not real|not anymore| i shd be immune| if i'm  
still alive & that's what i waz discussin| how i am still  
alive & my dependency on other livin beings for love  
i survive on intimacy & tomorrow| that's all i've got goin  
& the music waz like smack & you knew abt that  
& still refused my dance was not enuf| & it waz all i had  
but bein alive& bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical  
dilemma| i haven't quite conquered yet| do you see the point  
my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of  
soul & gender| my love is too delicate to have thrown  
back on my face.

She then repeats, "my love is too delicate to be thrown back in my face," to the other colored girls who stand frozen. Each of them then comes alive as they respond with powerful affirmations speaking to their own self-worth:

lady in brown:  
my love is too beautiful to have thrown back on my face  
lady in purple:  
my love is too sanctified to have thrown back on my face  
lady in blue:  
my love is too magic to have thrown back on my face  
lady in orange:

my love is too saturday night to have thrown back on my face  
lady in red:  
my love is too complicated to have thrown back on my face  
lady in green:  
my love is too music to have thrown back on my face

Once again, by reassigning this monologue, Perry strips Tangie of her sexual autonomy and illustrates the punitive damage exerting one's sexual freedom can bring for black women. Wherein the original context Shange's colored girls have fighting spirits and redemptive qualities, Perry's version reinforces Tangie as pathetic and defeated. This scene could have been transformed into a very powerful moment. However, Perry's directing does not even give a slight pause to let the words resinate. Instead, Nyla's quick response conveys the message that she is not even listening and more importantly, that Tangie's words are not important. The power of the original monologue is lost and comes across as nothing more than a disjointed and hazy rambling. This important oversight is a reflection of Perry's position and what he deems relevant. Instead of allowing Tangie a moment of humanity and redemption, he further solidifies her characterization as weak and without agency. Additionally, the dismissal of Tangie's words speaks volumes to the ways in which browngirl's stories are consistently told but rarely heard or acknowledged.

While many of the poems may speak to young girls, many of the messages are more likely to resonate with grown women reflecting on their own coming of age, whether that be at age 12 or 52 or at age 12 and again at 35 and yet again and 48. The ever evolving process of creating oneself and self actualizing is fluid and continuous. Hamilton brings light to an important role Shange's play serves—that of “cross-

writing”<sup>113</sup> which gives the piece appeal for brown girls and women alike. This very well explains why every time I read the choreopoem, year after year, I am able to see and take something different away from it. As I continue to evolve and come closer to creating a more complete me, the poem reveals new layers.

In her essay, Pamela Hamilton discusses the usefulness of considering feminist theory in children’s literature to think about “commonalities between women’s literature and children’s literature, one of them being the language of otherness” (80). Whereas children’s literature theorists utilize the concept of cross-writing “as a means to rescue children’s books (and their critics) from the periphery of literature studies,” I believe here it is useful in thinking about the ways in which *for colored girls...* worked, and continues to work to liberate generations of both black girls and women. Many of the issues brown girls and women deal with germinate in the same places. Creating oneself—nurturing self-esteem, developing self-identity and self-actualizing—are all fluid concepts that do not begin or stop with adolescents, puberty, losing one’s virginity, getting married or having children. They are ongoing and ever-evolving processes.

As articulated by U.C. Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers, cross-writing texts are defined as those transcend[ing] culturally imposed binaries by employing a “dialogic mix of older and younger voices” allowing for “interplay and cross-fertilization” thus, activating “traffic between phases of life where we persist in regarding as opposites.”<sup>114</sup> *For colored girls...* operates with the same type of fluidity as self-creation, reflecting the

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<sup>113</sup> Hamilton, 80.

<sup>114</sup> U.C. Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers, *Children’s Literature*, Special Issue on Cross-Writing Child and Adult Vol. 25 (May 1997) vii-viii.

various life stages of brown girls in the choreopoem. Shange subverts the culturally inscribed binaries of girlhood and womanhood, creating a space where both can comfortably exist in conversation with one another. Hamilton speaks to the choreopoem's ability to highlight a range of life stages:

The seven female characters in the text are at a variety of life stages. Among the voices that emerge from for colored girls are those of an excited eight-year-old courting a childhood hero, a curious teen pondering shedding her virginity, and a world weary woman who has suffered through physical abuse and the loss of her children to emerge self-fulfilled. These voices often compliment and parallel each other. Ideas about sexuality, relationship and, identity that younger characters express, emerge altered by experience in the words of older characters.<sup>115</sup>

Neither this same sort of cross-written text, nor the of “rites of passage on their way to self-fulfillment” occur for the female protagonists in Perry’s film adaptation. The film version seems completely disengaged from the original text. It seems unrealistic to achieve a full and accurate depiction of black female realities or their relationships with themselves or one another from solely a male standpoint. Even in the numerous spaces where there is an opportunity to create a dialogue between generations—Nyla’s going to see Tangie after finding out she is pregnant, their mother Alice going to visit her in the hospital after the botched abortion, Alice confronting Tangie about her role in Nyla ending up there, or Tangie confronting Nyla about the hate she harbors towards her—Perry chooses not to complicate these relationships, instead reinforcing the already established culturally inscribed binary of black girlhood and womanhood.

Hamilton points out that one of Shange’s projects in her choreopoem is to “warn young women about the dangers of sexual intercourse” and the “potential dangers of heterosexual relationships.” However, Tyler Perry not only warns women about the

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<sup>115</sup> Hamilton, 81.

dangers of sexual intercourse and heterosexual relationships, but executes punitive consequences to drive his message home. Tangie is the first character in the film to be introduced. The scene opens with her sitting at the kitchen table and her lover entering the room. He attempts to shower her with affection and her response to him is cold and unfeeling. She tells him to leave and go home to his wife, reciting lines from lady in red's monologue, "one"

you'll have to go now  
i've a lot of work to do  
i can't with a man around...it's been very nice  
but i can't see you again  
you got what you came for  
didn't you

In the film adaptation, Tangie's character is based more on the original text's lady in red; however, whereas in the original text she is sexually liberated, Perry reduces her to a jezebel. Perry inserts so much of himself, we miss the nuances of Shange's original text. It is almost as if Perry cannot complicate black female sexuality beyond the Madonna/whore rubric to encapsulate a dimension of the erotic. An interaction she has with a man she takes home with her from a bar serves as one example of the ways in which Tangie is debased to a hussy. In this scene, Tangie is mistaken for a prostitute by one of the men she meets while bartending. Upon bringing him home with her, he confesses he does not have much cash on him. She looks at him incredulously and he apologizes saying, "I guess I'm just old fashioned. What type of woman picks up a man at a bar and bring him back to her apartment if she's not a hooker?" She replies, "One that likes to fuck!" He laughs at her yelling, "This is some sick shit!" She mumbles something about double standards and tells him to get out. Still laughing, he says she

must do this too often to be healthy. Two things occur here to strip Tangie of agency and power. The first is her inability (or Perry's unwillingness) to articulate the difference between promiscuity and exerting sexual freedom. The second is the man's moral judgement in assuming she is a prostitute because she embraces her sexual freedom and then laughing when he realizes she is not, in fact, a prostitute. His laughing at the situation strips her completely of any of her power or autonomy over sexual liberation. This is not the lady in red, a "*deliberate coquette with orange butterflies and aqua sequins| ensconsed tween slight bosoms*" nor is it "*sechita| goddess| of love| egypt| 2nd millenium| performin the rites,*" that Shange's version encapsulates. She is left with no humanity, no real story to reveal her trauma so in turn, because she exercises her sexual autonomy she is punished.

In an interview with Mark Anthony Neal, Joan Morgan articulates how Tyler Perry's own (male) standpoint is reflected in his portrayal of lady in orange/Tangie's complexity.

The thing that disturbs me, because artists have the right to work through trauma, is where you are in that process how you shortchange the story. So in something like *For Colored Girls*--because I spent a good two and half decades of my life wanting to be the lady in orange [Tangie]—I wanted to be her, I wanted to be able to walk down the street like that, a deliberate coquette. Because Zake's work deals with trauma but it deals with *desire*, it deals with *sensuality*, it deals with *nuance*, it deals with *joy*, with *hope*. Thandie Newton was just a hoochie...there was nothing aspirational in wanting to be that depiction of a lady in orange. Because thats all his trauma could allow her to see her as.<sup>116</sup>

So for someone unfamiliar with Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, having the film adaptation being their first Shange experience, much is lost in the translation. A nuanced

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<sup>116</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, 'Left of Black' Season 1, Episode 2, NewBlackMan blog, <http://newblackman.blogspot.com/2010/11/left-of-black-episode-9-featuring-joan.html> (accessed November 19, 2010).

and complicated character like lady in red with the power of the erotic gets reduced to an unfeeling, sexually promiscuous “hoochie” who uses sex and drugs to ease the pain.

As illustrated through the narratives of several black women who came of age in the era of Hip Hop throughout this chapter, *for colored girls...* continues to serve almost 40 years later, as a critical text bridging the culturally inscribed binaries of black girlhood and womanhood. Joan Morgan identifies the themes of “love, friendship, heartbreak, sexism and the negotiation of desire” inherent in Shange’s classic work as never being dated.<sup>117</sup> What happens when brown girls and women are not allowed to tell the stories and truths that speak so intimately about who we are? Through critical analysis of Tyler Perry’s 2010 film adaptation, *For Colored Girls* juxtaposed against the original text, we can see that while exposure to black women’s experiences is much needed to fully articulate the coming of age process in the lives of black women, it is equally as critical to account for their multiplicity and nuances. For black feminist cultural critics, Perry’s adaptation was a flawed and ill-representation of black female experiences while many black women viewers enjoyed it.

Cultural narratives of black womanhood that paint us as lascivious, lewd and insatiable, must be contested and re-imagined by us, for us. It is part of the hard work in bridging the continuum of girlhood to womanhood for our daughters. It is rewriting of a social binary so that there will be “something there for them when they arrive.” The current cultural images continue to depict black women as a binary of asexual/sexual objects, and/or overly aggressive and emasculating. Brown girls coming of age in 2012, a

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<sup>117</sup> Tillet, “Black Feminism, Tyler Perry Style.”



new generation of Hip Hop, are faced with a complete set of images speaking to who they are. Basing their definitions of self off of these negative images portraying them as sexual objects or emasculating ball-busters is detrimental; never allowing them to fully realize themselves. This trauma occurs, once again, when black women internalize the phobic representations<sup>118</sup>—images created out of fear or lack of understanding—the dominant culture creates and disseminates about us in music, film and media. Regarded as one of the most important works of fiction by a black woman, Tyler Perry's adaptation of Ntozake Shange's, *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is Enuf* was an opportunity to illustrate the lived emotional experiences of African-American women to a mainstream audience. The total control of its production by the inimitable Perry serves as another example of our inability to image ourselves. Whether one believes he gets the presentation of this story wrong or right, we must still be adamant in our questioning of who in this culture is allowed, through access and privilege, to tell the stories and control the representations of black women. In Chapter Two, we will see some of the ways in which one woman who came of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop offers a unique site for analyzing and understanding the multiple layers black women possess. By taking control of her image and sharing her multi-dimensional self, Erykah Badu makes a valuable contribution towards articulating a *for colored girls* of our own. Ultimately, Badu serves as a self-authored cultural narrative of black womanhood that moves beyond Tyler Perry's phobic representation of who colored girls can be.

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<sup>118</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 133.

**Chapter Three: “Analog Girl in a Digital World”: Erykah Badu, the Public Sphere, African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Power**

Peace and Light,  
My name is Erykah Badu also known as Badoula Oblongata.  
Also known as Sara Bellum. Also known as E B Breezy. Analog Girl in a Digital World.  
Low Down Loretta Brown...Annie. The A to P to P to L E S Humdi Lila Allah  
Jah Jehova  
Yahweh Dios Ma’ad Jah Rastafara Fyah. Ya’ll be careful.  
Nah...be DANGEROUS.

— ERYKAH BADU<sup>119</sup>

Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

—AUDRE LORDE<sup>120</sup>

Unfortunately, as a pivotal space of cultural production for browngirls, Hip Hop’s willingness to acknowledge a broader spectrum of the black urban experience—one that addresses the multi-dimensions of class, color, sexuality and exposure among other factors—has yet to be seen. Mark Anthony Neal points to the urban fiction of writers such as Sapphire as being more representative of the narratives of black women that we should see more often within contemporary Hip Hop.<sup>121</sup> Although the culture germinated in an urban environment and the music speaks most often to a black and brown urban experience, this does not change the impact the music and culture had on a generation of black rural and suburban browngirls as well. The “narratives of black women” Neal points to already exist. However, they oftentimes go unnoticed. As a result, we still lack

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<sup>119</sup> YouTube, “My Name is Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtKhBi6343A&NR=1> (accessed June 15, 2011).

<sup>120</sup> Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” 286.

<sup>121</sup> Neal, 168.

a critical examination of how Hip Hop culture has affected and continues to affect black girlhood and womanhood for those who came of age during its Golden Era. Little, in regards to women of the generation, has been given airtime and what has been illustrated barely scratches the surface of browngirlhood, their stories of self-creation, constructions of identity and black woman-centered ideologies. This phenomenon could likely be attributed to the tensions and fears associated with contemporary black masculinity we see articulated through homophobic, sexist, and misogynistic rhetoric littering Hip Hop narratives. As one of the most prominent themes in rap music, there is an illusion black women are present. Seen but rarely heard, this presence is grossly misrepresented. As a result, the browngirls narrative is overshadowed, silenced, and rendered insignificant in the male dominated world of Hip Hop, black communities and American society as a whole. As we saw in Chapter Two, How can we get a clear picture of browngirls' lived experiences when the subject is seen through the eyes of an observer, rather than through first person accounts and narratives? If we would listen, *really* listen we would see that black women create multiple scripts. Instead we adhere to the tired monologues laying out what black girls *should* be.

This chapter will critically analyze Eryka Badu's life and music to illustrate the phenomenon of some browngirls coming to their voices via Hip Hop. In this chapter, I will first layout a brief synopsis of her contributions to the articulation of the subgenre, Neo Soul. I will then touch upon her affiliation to the Five Percent nation and its influence on her political consciousness and music. I will then engage in a discussion of the black public sphere and its significance for Badu and other women on the Hip Hop

landscape. Finally, I will illustrate the ways in which Badu exudes African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism in her music and performance, *representative publicity* and public/private life by redefining concepts of the erotic, family and community. By examining Erykah Badu and her numerous scripts such as “Analog Girl in a Digital World” and “Badoula Oblongata” we can gain a clear understanding of how one woman in particular makes sense of her browngirl existence. She creates and asserts her own scripts on the Hip Hop landscape never settling for what Audre Lorde refers to in the epigraph as “the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected...the merely safe.” Rather, she demonstrates some of the ways in which harnessing the erotic operates as power, thus commissioning black women to “be DANGEROUS.”

This discussion suggests that the consideration of Erykah Badu’s life and music as a *Kunstlerromane* and valuable collection of browngirl stories illustrate some of the ways in which a browngirl space can be forged on the Hip Hop landscape and ultimately the larger black public sphere. The creative control Erykah Badu exercises and the choices she makes—both public and private—are often times deliberate and in direct response to her growing process. These particular aspects, “the intersections of self-development and creativity,” inherent in Badu’s music and public life situate her among the *Kunstlerromane* sub-genre of the bildungsroman. A *Kunstlerromane* can be explained as the artistic variant of the bildungsroman portraying the development of an individual who becomes an artist of some kind. In the traditional definition of a *Kunstlerroman* the

protagonist rejects conventional life, opting for an artistic path. This classification is typically reflective of the author's own artistic journey.<sup>122</sup>

When asked to choose from a list of black female artists, 63% of my survey respondents stated they “identify strongly” and 25.7% “identify somewhat” with Erykah Badu’s music.<sup>123</sup> I too, identify strongly with Badu’s music and personal ideologies. I believe our collective experiences coming of age with Hip Hop plays a contributing role to the ways in which we can identify so strongly with her music. The multiple scripts present in Badu’s music and personal life elucidate particular black girlhood experiences of the 1980s and 1990s and black womanhood currently. My own brown girl stories and the stories of the numerous women highlighted throughout this dissertation are reminders of how meaningful and powerful these narratives can be. Badu understands this as well, which is yet another reason this chapter focuses on her background, development as an artist, and her political consciousness. Individual black female artists of our present era such as Erykah Badu emphasize in performance and visual representation the possibilities of a multi-vocal black female experience. This project considers Erykah Badu as a “site of expression and resistance”<sup>124</sup> because Badu fractures and complicates the black female artist/performers’ role as indicated by the epigraph, in a time where we see market demands for sexually charged representations supporting gendered and racialized

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<sup>122</sup> Esturoy, 4-5.

<sup>123</sup> 76.5% of respondents reported they “identify strongly” 17.8 “identify somewhat” with Lauryn Hill. 66.9% of respondents reported they “identify strongly” and 27 % “identify somewhat” with Mary J. Blige. Although Lauryn Hill’s percentage was higher, I chose Erykah Badu because of her current online and media presence in and outside of Hip Hop spaces.

<sup>124</sup> Diane Bartlow and Janell Hobson, “Introduction Representin’: Women, Hip Hop, and Popular Music,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 2.

stereotypes. Erykah Badu encompasses “multiple black female personalities” serving as a metaphor for the multiplicity black women possess; a multiplicity that is almost never recognized, captured, or valued. This is most obviously displayed through the performance of her repertoire of aliases and personal style of dress and adornment. However, it can also be seen in more detail through consideration of her musical lyrics, performances and public/personal lives. In an increasingly misogynistic and commercially focused Hip Hop culture, there are less and less opportunities for women to create and foster female empowered spaces, much less politically and/or socially conscious music and images. Somehow, Erykah Badu has been able to create and sustain an African-centered, politically conscious space that situates the browngirl experience (seemingly) effortlessly on the Hip Hop landscape while moving against the grain of the dominant culture.

We have an established body of work on black women and Hip Hop originating from the words and images of female rap artists like Salt-n-Pepa, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah, articulated in Tricia Rose’s seminal *Black Noise* and Hip Hop feminism as articulated by Joan Morgan in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. Gwendolyn D. Pough’s book *Check It While I Wreck It* builds off of the latter two, further examining black women and their relationship with Hip Hop and feminism through an exploration of Hip Hop novels, film and Hip Hop Soul music in addition to spoken word poetry. Additionally, we are beginning to see the experiences of black women of this generation represented in novels and memoirs such as Heidi W. Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, Ernessa Carter’s *32 Candles*, Jennifer Baszile’s *The Black Girl Next Door* and

Helena Andrews' *Bitch is the New Black* respectively. However, we still lack a critical examination of brown girlhood and womanhood experiences for those who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop.

I looked to the work of Ruth Nicole Brown as a model of the ways in which Hip Hop operates on an everyday level in the lives of black girls and how it affects them. In her book, *Black Girlhood Celebration*, we are able to catch a glimpse of Hip Hop's effects on Brown's own 1980s and 1990s coming of age, along with how black girls she works with are presently being affected. However, this still leaves much work to be done because there were—and continue to be—multiple ways of existing on the Hip Hop landscape.

How can music in particular, serve as a springboard for further discussion about the coming of age of brown girls? When brown girls “hear ourselves spoken, rhymed, and sung back to us in a way that is appreciated and familiar”<sup>125</sup> our experiences are recognized and validated. The contributions of black women to Hip Hop as a cultural phenomenon are typically overlooked and often times reduced to solely being their love and support of rap music.<sup>126</sup> In her work, Brown weaves her own experience into the Hip Hop narrative giving us a better understanding of the ways in which the culture influenced her black girlhood. She unapologetically states, “My hip-hop coming of age story is different.” She then goes on to explain how she understands herself to be part of a movement that was “*generational*.”:

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<sup>125</sup> Brown, 19.

<sup>126</sup> Brown 40.

Growing up a Black girl child, my hip-hop membership was marked by biker shorts, bright red lipstick, hoop earrings, and an asymmetrical haircut I longed for and only received as a high-school junior. For Christmas, my older brother gave me my first tape recorder and radio boom box. Later that summer, I received my first tape. Salt-n-Pepa's *HOT, COOL, and VICIOUS*. I didn't know all the words to every Wu-Tang, Rahkim, and Sugarhill Gang anthem, but it didn't matter. But every time I heard Salt-n-Pepa's "Push It", I knew it was my turn to shine, as I sang that song while dancing with the faith of a church(ed) girl I came of age during a time when girls' desire was all the rage, and hip-hop was in part to thank.<sup>127</sup>

Reading Brown's Hip Hop narrative makes me nostalgic about my own girlhood defined by many of the same things—biker shorts, bright pink (in my case) lipstick, humungous gold hoops ("door knockers"), and asymmetrical haircuts. The mention of the above cultural markers, along with tape recorders (pushing "stop" and "record" at just the right moment so you got most of the song and none of the DJ) and Salt-n-Pepa all promoted a knowing nod of recognition from me. I could identify. I silently co-signed and went through my own mental Rolodex: big glasses, neon colors, jelly bracelets, ProKeds, Lee jeans and ratted and hair sprayed bangs. It took me back to 12 years old and carefree of the socio-political and socio-economical realities of the 1980s. The nostalgia overcame me and I found myself asking, Why don't black women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s (*feel* as though they) shine anymore? Why are we no longer all the rage (or at least *believe* we are)? Will black girls now grow up and look back in twenty years at 2012 with strong feeling of nostalgia as well? Perhaps it is a matter of each generation of black girls looking at the current generation and feeling as though they do not have it as good as *we* did. Or perhaps, it is a matter of crossing the bridge from girlhood to womanhood that prevents us from seeing life through the rose colored glasses of childhood. I do acknowledge somewhere along the line we went from being "fly girls"

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<sup>127</sup> Brown, 42.



and “honeys” to “bitches” and “hos,” but quite possibly nostalgia romanticizes our golden era. Will the current generation see this as *their* Golden Age? They very well might—because it *will* be theirs.

Defining our identity occurs through a constant act of narration; thus, the reclamation and documentation of our stories becomes imperative. We must think of ourselves as both the narrator and the audience, actively resisting uni-vocal or third person narratives of black girlhood that do not include us. Through this process of reclaiming and documenting our lives along with our participation in the *interpretive community*, we are collectively responsible for “formulating, editing, applauding, and refusing various elements of the ever-producing narrative.”<sup>128</sup> Through critical analysis of cultural texts, the process of remembering browngirl moments, images and stories, and the act of constant narration we can reimagine the Hip Hop narrative.

The historic reach of the Golden Era of Hip Hop should be analyzed as deeper, wider and richer than solely a musical aesthetic focused exclusively on celebrating black masculinity. Black women are one of the most deliberated subjects in rap music but unfortunately too often we “are not considered experts on the very issues we live, create, influence, and are influenced by.”<sup>129</sup> Hip Hop belongs to black girls and women too. It gives meaning to our girlhood and as a result, our womanhood. Our experiences as browngirls growing up in the age of Hip Hop makes us experts on our own lived realities, including the ways in which Hip Hop has been experienced and created by us. However,

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<sup>128</sup> Barbara Czarniawska *Narrating the Organization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1997), 14.

<sup>129</sup> Brown, 45

even though our narratives are voiced often, they are rarely heard and almost never acknowledged. Browngirls are silenced and deemed irrelevant in the male dominated world of Hip Hop, black communities and American society as a whole. In turn, black women globally have been portrayed as “either decorative, fetishistic, manipulative, fragile, or in need of rescuing (or submission) in contemporary popular music lyrics, music videos, music concerts, and movie soundtracks.” Made hypervisible, these sexualized representations, “while severely limited in the popular imaginary” have real consequences, shaping the lived realities and experiences of browngirls globally.<sup>130</sup> Erykah Badu serves as an excellent example of the ways in which Hip Hop informs and gives meaning to browngirls’ lives. Her lived reality is reflective of how Hip Hop culture has been integral shaping many black women’s lives.

I started performing at two or three on a tape recorder, one of those little flat recorders where you just push play and record.

—ERYKAH BADU

...then as a teenager, I was a Hip Hop baby. The heartbeat of my music became the bass line and the drums.

—ERYKAH BADU

Badu brought an iconoclastic spirit to soul music with her towering African-inspired geles and attire, incense, Kemetic symbols and mysterious lyrics. Her debut served as an entry point for many female artists to come, most notably Macy Gray,

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<sup>130</sup> Bartlow and Hobson, “Introduction Representin’: Women, Hip Hop, and Popular Music,” 3

Lauryn Hill, Angie Stone,<sup>131</sup> Jill Scott and later India.Arie, Alicia Keyes. Music collective, Soulquarians, comprised of Neo Soul and rap artists D'Angelo, The Roots, Erykah Badu, Bilal, Mos Def, Common and Q-Tip among others contributed greatly to the exposure the neo soul movement received in the 1990s. Badu's groundbreaking 1997 debut album, *Baduizm* went multi-platinum and earned her a Grammy for Best Female R&B Vocal Performance and Best R&B Album. Not only was this a large accomplishment for black female artists but more importantly, the album along with D'Angelo's *Brown Sugar*, helped usher in a new mode of black consciousness. As stated on her website, "...hindsight reveals that Badu's debut was more than just an album, it was the introduction of a new lifestyle. The music evoked speakeasies, incense, head wraps, and boho coffee shop culture all in one easy breath."<sup>132</sup> At the forefront of black creativity in the 1990s and still today, Erykah Badu has been referred to as "a bohemian B-girl"<sup>133</sup> whose interplay of jazz, soul and Hip Hop is effortless and seamless. As the epigraphs allude to, expressing her creativity at an early age, Badu's identification as a "Hip Hop baby" informs the way in which she approaches her music. Badu embodies not only a new mode of black consciousness but she also melds an eclectic personal style—one part Afro-bohemian B-Girl, one part Afro-futuristic and one part old school Hip Hop.

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<sup>131</sup> Both Angie Stone (*Sequence*, 1979) and Lauryn Hill (*The Fugees*, 1994) were in music groups which predate Erykah Badu's debut and serve as precursors to Neo Soul. However, D'Angelo's album, *Brown Sugar* was released in 1995, sparking a conversation around the articulation of this new subgenre of music. Badu's 1997 release of *Baduizm* and subsequent recognition as one of the first female Neo-Soul artists was perhaps more about timing. During that same year, *Love Jones*, a movie about a group of black bohemian artists was released, further articulating the Neo-Soul and Spoken Word phenomenon. The *Love Jones* soundtrack featured artists such as Dionne Ferris from the group Arrested Development (1992) and Meshell Ndegeocello (1993) both whose work is also arguably precursors to Neo-Soul.

<sup>132</sup> Erykah Badu, Erykah Badu Website, [www.erykahbadu.com](http://www.erykahbadu.com) (accessed March 15, 2011).

<sup>133</sup> Miles Marshall Lewis, "Erykah Badu Interview," *Oneworld* (September 2001), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/baduizm-19970130> (accessed April 25, 2011).

Her voice, reminiscent of Lady Day,<sup>134</sup> still maintains its own unique individuality. In fact, Badu argues that she sounds more like Diana Ross being that she learned about Billie Holiday seeing *Lady Sings the Blues*.<sup>135</sup> Erykah Badu's successful attempt at invoking her African ancestors while bringing something fresh and new to black contemporary music made people stand up and take notice. Melding the blues, jazz, soul and Hip Hop with ease, Badu cannot be categorized as easily as "R&B." This is illustrated by her Grammy award (Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group) winning contribution to The Roots song, "You Got Me." Melding soul, funk, jazz and Hip Hop, it is difficult to put a label on Badu as reflected by her multiple personas.

She built on this formula with *Live*, her follow-up concert CD and in 2000, Badu released her second studio album, *Mama's Gun*, showing her growth as an artist and a woman. Deeply introspective and personal, *Mama's Gun* exposes Badu's vulnerability. Described as a "rich assembly of soul, funk, and organic Hip Hop textures" *Mama's Gun* also went platinum, staying at the top of the charts for seven weeks. (website) "not one sample can be found on Mama's Gun, further proof of Badu's natural musical process".<sup>136</sup>

In 2003 she founded B.L.I.N.D., Beautiful Love Incorporated Non-profit Development, which is focused on igniting social change through "economic, artistic and cultural development." B.L.I.N.D. provided arts, crafts, and dance classes to the displaced children of Hurricane Katrina. Badu further stepped outside the box with the

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<sup>134</sup> Billy Holiday

<sup>135</sup> YouTube, Youtube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsBnWdTmJr4> (accessed December, 2010) (Since removed)

<sup>136</sup> Sal Cinquemani, "Erykah Badu: Mama's Gun Album Review," Slant Magazine (April 2001), <http://www.slantmagazine.com/music/review/erykah-badu-mamas-gun/14> (accessed April 10, 2011).

launch of her own label, Control FreaQ, in 2005. The label, whose mission according to the official Erykah Badu fan site, is to “free the slaves and the slave masters” by allowing signed artists to own their own masters in a 10-year conversion deal, operates primarily as a production house. This mission is consistent with her personal ideologies regarding the importance of controlling her own image and craft. Control FreaQ’s first project was developing now well-known MC/Lyricist, Jay Electronica. The label also produces remixed records and supports Badu’s side projects such as The Cannabinoids, the group she founded with Dallas-based DJs, musicians and beat smiths, which is an improvisation production akin to a live “remix” set.

### **Religious Rebel: The Five Percent Nation, Kemet, and Egyptology**

My next phase was that of being rebellious: religious rebellion. I don’t feel that any organization or anything could define my relationship with the Creator ‘cuz its ours—mine and the Creator’s.

—ERYKAH BADU

Humdi Lila Allah Jehova  
Yahweh Dios Ma'ad Jah  
Rastafara fyah dance, sex, music, hip-hop

It's bigger than religion  
hip-hop  
it's bigger than my nigga  
hip-hop  
it's bigger than the government  
(humdi luli lali lulo)

—”The Healer” *New Amerykah Part 1: 4th World War*

When I say that Hip Hop is bigger than religion and the government, I’m saying it because I’ve travelled all over the world. Even though I don’t have a particular religion, I acknowledge a higher power of course. Whatever the title of the name is, it doesn’t matter to me. It’s just the uh, worship of the thing and Hip Hop is worshipped more than anything. I see, when I go all over the world, people pray to different gods, and pray to different things, pray at different times and we all get that feeling inside of us when we hear the music. We are all inspired to do something—to move, to change, to do something. That’s what religion does too. Hip Hop is the biggest one... It has infected the world in such a positive way. [Humdi Lila Allah Jehova Yahweh Dios Ma'ad Jah Rastafara fyah dance, sex,

music, hip-hop] All those things are the same to me. Hip Hop.”

—ERYKAH BADU<sup>137</sup>

There is this Afrocentricism about Erykah Badu reminiscent of a Black Power type passion. She is the “poetic revolutionary” Audre Lorde sees to be antithetical to modern world views, wherein we separates the spiritual (emotional) from the political.<sup>138</sup> Demonstrated by the epigraphs, Badu’s personal ideologies are influenced by a constant interplay between what she deems culturally, spiritually and politically relevant; Hip Hop serves as the catalyst bridging the spiritual and the political. Badu’s “religious rebellion” serves as an act of resistance against being defined—whether that be actually by her religion, her politics or position as a black woman. The majority of her songs are about personal growth and human relationships from a socio-political, black female perspective. However, she does not speak much about being a black woman specifically—again, resisting the confinement of labels. While her image, lyrics and influences are extremely Afrocentric and many of her lyrics address womanhood specifically, she does not align herself with a black feminist or womanist ideology and almost never speaks of her need for autonomy and agency in terms of black female empowerment. “I’m not a feminist by any means, I’m a humanist”<sup>139</sup> she declares adamantly. She rarely speaks of being a black woman but seems to identify more closely

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<sup>137</sup> YouTube, “Interview Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZi1nfEcUy8> (accessed June 15, 2011).

<sup>138</sup> Lorde, “The Erotic as Power,” 287.

<sup>139</sup> <http://bossip.com/244957/erykah-badu-on-the-monique-show-performance-and-interview-she-is-on-her-own-planet-video/> (accessed May 8, 2011) (Since removed).

with an overall black struggle.<sup>140</sup> This could be attributed to her past affiliation with an Islamic “sect” known by outsiders as the Five Percent Nation of Islam, and by those in-group as the Nation of Gods and Earths which are said to “hold beliefs so far removed from mainstream Islamic teachings as to be virtually unrecognizable as Islamic to a majority of Muslims.”<sup>141</sup> God/Allah, for Five Percenters, is not the Divinity in monotheistic terms but rather god is perceived as the black man. Additionally, the sun serves as another symbol for black men (as in, What up, Sun?) and black women are represented by the moon, children by stars. Badu’s affiliation with the Five Percent Nation is not a flash in the pan and can be most clearly seen in her earlier work on songs such as On & On (most intellects do not believe in god/ but they fear us just the same) and Orange Moon (I’m an orange moon/reflecting the light of my sun). On the contrary, Islam has a large influence on Hip Hop culture and music and is situated squarely in the cultural phenomenon. Nas, Poor Righteous Teachers, all of the members of Wu Tang Clan, Brand Nubian, The Fugees, Tribe Called Quest, Rakim, The Digable Planets, The Roots, Big Daddy Kane, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, Mobb Deep, and Gang Starr among others are affiliated with, make references or allusions to, and/or are practitioners of the Five Percent Nation.<sup>142</sup> Interestingly enough, as many rap artists affiliated with the Five

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<sup>140</sup> Erykah Badu is a co-creator (with Queen Latifah and Jill Scott) of the Sugar Water Festival, a festival designed because each singer wanted to “bring a specific message to African American woman.” [Wynn Jr., Terry (18 July 2005). “Sweet Sounds at the Sugar Water Festival.” NBCNews.com Retrieved July 30, 2011.] This is one project she has explicitly stated, was created with black women in mind.

<sup>141</sup> Ted Swedenburg, “Islam in the Mix:Lessons of the Five Percent,” <http://comp.uark.edu/~tsweden/5per.html> (Accessed January 10, 2011)

<sup>142</sup> It is important to stress the above individuals and musical groups range of engagement with Five Percent Nation varies from practicing members to simply making references to Five Percent Nation doctrine. I am by no means inferring all of those mentioned are Five Percenters. For example, members of Tribe Called Quest, Q-Tip and Phife are Orthodox Muslim and Christian respectively.

Percent Nation, it is almost never discussed in academic circles or mass media. Ted Swedenburg attributes this oversight to “a blind spot afflicting scholars working in the fields of Cultural Studies and popular culture when it comes to the question of religion, and especially Islam.” He feels as though many progressives are so invested in the “oppositional” quality of rap music and Hip Hop culture, that they fail to recognize Islam as a conduit of resistance. Additionally, the references and allusions will be lost on music critics, no matter how knowledgeable they are about rap music, if they have not taken the time to research the Nation of Islam and the Nation of Gods and Earths. This coded language goes beyond the typical culturally coded language of black communities, so while many blacks may have knowledge of the Five Percent Nation and some of the very basic tenants of the religion/culture, most still will not understand the majority of the references. It is important to understand “Islamic rap's lyrical illegibility is not just a question of signifyin(g), of rappers playing black word games that white outsiders cannot comprehend”<sup>143</sup> but rather they operate as hidden texts much like the coded messages embedded in the quilts and spirituals of enslaved Africans. Considering this, when we begin thinking about, talking about and reacting around the ways in which stories and ultimately narratives created by brown girls counter or reify popular messages and tropes about black women, we must consider the hidden and disappeared messages enshrouded within those seemingly innocuous texts. The brown girl narrative is a complex collection of brown girl stories with messages that range from “Ladies First” to “Power to the

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<sup>143</sup> Russell Potter, *Spectacular Venaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Post-Modernism*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 81-85.



People.” Badu highlights one view of the multifaceted narrative that emerges from young black women’s stories.

Detailing the teachings of the Five Percent Nation is beyond the scope of my research; however, I believe to gain a clearer understanding of Erykah Badu and her lyrical texts, it is important to mention its influence on her music. In line with Nation of Gods and Earths which is viewed more as a culture than a religion, Badu has stated she does not practice “a particular *religion*” however she “acknowledges a higher power.”<sup>144</sup> Her music— “It’s bigger than religion. Hip Hop,”<sup>145</sup> emotes her ideology, “art is my religion.” In addition to studying the teachings of the Five Percent Nation, the Nation of Islam, and Farrakhan’s teachings, Badu has expressed her interest in and deep appreciation of Kemet and Egyptology.

“It’s a loaded word—ankh to me is funk without the f. and also, it’s a word you can find on the walls of the ancient hieroglyphics in Kemet. Kemet is the original word for Egypt. Kemet means land of black faces. This word means life. This round portion represents the womb of the woman. These two portions represent the fallopian tubes or the children and this is the male principle or the birth canal and all together it’s eternal life. It’s life, it’s ever-flowing. And it means also evolution<sup>146</sup>

Here Badu displays the thoughtfulness of her actions—wearing body adornments serves as more than fashion accessories but rather they are deliberate acts of representing her selfhood. Badu consistently shows her interest in acquiring knowledge is not based on projecting an image but rather independent thought which privileges her position as a woman of African descent. Sharing “her *mélange* of Yoruba/Five Percent Nation/

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<sup>144</sup> YouTube, “Interview Erykah Badu.”

<sup>145</sup> Erykah Badu, “The Healer,” *New Amerykah Part One: 4th World War*, Universal Motown Records, CD, 2008.

<sup>146</sup> <http://bossip.com/244957/erykah-badu-on-the-monique-show-performance-and-interview-she-is-on-her-own-planet-video/> (Accessed May 8, 2011) (Since removed).

Kemetic theology...and sky-high gelées,” along with her peace-and-blessing bohemian black language, she explodes the stereotypical tropes of black womanhood.<sup>147</sup>

Mark Anthony Neal explains that the black popular musical tradition has “often contained the core narratives of these efforts to create and maintain concepts of community that embody a wide range of sensibilities, formations and purposes. Some forms of community are expansive in size and influence while others are often very personal and simply linked to memories and the music that helps reanimate them.”<sup>148</sup>

Erykah Badu seems to have found a space where is she is able to do both; influence the larger community and interject her own personal experiences and outlook on the world through her music. Badu affirms, “Every single song that I write...has me in it, because it’s my experience.”<sup>149</sup> This can be best articulated by looking at her latest works *New Amerykah Part 1: 4th World War* and *New Amerykah Part 2: Return of the Ankh*.

Reflecting on the albums Badu states,

...1997 when I did Baduizm we were all in a place together. There are groups of people that feel a certain way. Here in 2010 A.D. we are in another place. It’s just, uh, I have...I’m a product of my environment. What I see what I learn what I feel to the best of my ability. And I feel like I have evolved as a result of learning and getting lessons and going to the next great level.<sup>150</sup>

What Badu conveys through her music is a process of laying bare her own self-discovery process, passing along pieces of her own evolution while simultaneously creating a listening experience that anyone can enjoy.

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<sup>147</sup> Miles Marshall Lewis, “Erykah Badu Interview.”

<sup>148</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), x.

<sup>149</sup> YouTube, “Rehearsal Space: Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e\\_NBxA8Xy0s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_NBxA8Xy0s) (accessed July 1, 2011).

<sup>150</sup> <http://bossip.com/244957/erykah-badu-on-the-monique-show-performance-and-interview-she-is-on-her-own-planet-video/> (Accessed May 8, 2011) (Since removed).

### **Interlude: Black Girl from the Past and the Future**

There is sentiment among many that post-modernism is dominated by white male intellectuals “who speak to and about one another with coded familiarity”<sup>151</sup> that is inaccessible to the rest of the general population. However, Mark Anthony Neal argues that such theory can offer “a wider range of vantage points to fully problematize the African-American experience” used in conjunction with more traditional modes of inquiry. Attempting to locate tropes within African American vernacular and culture to analyze black realities, Neal identifies the concept, “post-soul aesthetic” as a framework to achieve this. He states:

In the post-soul aesthetic I am surmising that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation, the corporate annexation of black popular culture expression...the general commodification of black life and culture, and the proliferation of black ‘meta-identities’ while continuously collapsing on modern concepts of blackness and reanimating ‘premodern’ (African?) concepts of blackness.<sup>152</sup>

Focusing on her last two albums, *New Amerykah Part One: 4th World War*, and *New Amerykah Part Two: Return Of The Ankh*, I will illustrate the ways in which Badu’s lyrical texts speak to the “proliferation of black ‘meta-identities’” and within that, her own coming of age illustrating multiple ways of performing black womanhood. She is able to strike a balance between “modern concepts of blackness” and “‘premodern’ (African?) concepts of blackness” which Kimberly Ruffin refers to as *spatial desire*. (This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.) She achieves this spatial desire in a number of ways including but not limited to the ways in which she

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<sup>151</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990.)

<sup>152</sup> Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, 4.

centers herself within the African Diasporic conversation and incorporates and articulates her knowledge of Kemet and Egyptology, both illustrated through her physical appearance (a fusion of traditional African adornments, high-end couture and Afro-futurism) her lyrical texts and her public/private lives. A metaphorical hybrid and border-crosser, she exists in the spaces “in-between.” She is both from the past and the future (“the mothership is sailing and your ass is gon’ get left”), serving as a model of African (female) cultural continuity. This is demonstrated by her creative use of jazz, funk and Hip Hop elements and the lyrical content of her music. She operates as the local and the cosmopolitan at their best—what Ruffin coins *African Diaspora Cosmopolitan*.

Historically, blackness has been “inscribed socially and culturally on black bodies”<sup>153</sup> and blacks have often used “blackness” and their own physical bodies as sites of resistance against the prevailing notions of what blackness should be. Erykah Badu uses her body of lyrical texts, performance art and physical body (appearance) as sites of resistance against the socially inscribed notions of what constitutes blackness and femininity. She redefines concepts such as freedom, family, and the erotic on her own terms. Additionally, she pacifies the need for a language to understand the cultural specificity or local, she illustrates the importance of employing a transnational or Diasporic (read: African roots) strategy of building a community, and then there is the obvious narrative quality that lends itself to her ideologies on how gender, sexuality and the erotic operate for her as a browngirl of the Golden Era of Hip Hop. A student of

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

Ntozake Shange's school of thought, Badu similarly uses her art—music and performance—as metaphor in the exploration of African American female self-hood.

### **Erykah Badu and The Hip Hop Sphere:**

*everything around you see  
the ankhs, the wraps, the plus degrees  
and yes even the mysteries, its all me  
sometimes it hard to move, you see  
when you growing publicly  
but if I have to chose between, i chose me.*

—“Me,” *New Amerykah Part I: 4th World War*

I think a lot of people have lost respect for the individual, you know, the individual, the person who doesn't conform.

—ERYKAH BADU

I'm a total control freak, with my music. I write all my songs, if I don't produce, I have a big hand in production and all of the music. And it's because there's really nothing freaky about controlling your own image.

—ERYKAH BADU<sup>154</sup>

The omission of browngirls' and women's stories creates a sense of cultural amnesia and has much to do with the social placement of black women in Hip Hop culture's hierarchy. Jurgen Habermas theorizes the public sphere as “the sphere of private people coming together as a public” whose use “the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.”<sup>155</sup> Fairly ambiguous, many contemporary theorists have reconfigured the model to describe multiple publics regulated by race,

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<sup>154</sup> YouTube, “Rehearsal Space: Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e\\_NBxA8Xy0s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_NBxA8Xy0s) (accessed July 1, 2011).

<sup>155</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger. (Cambridge Massachusetts Institute of technology Press, 1991),27.

class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality.<sup>156</sup> These theorists see multiple counter-publics created by minoritized groups existing within the public sphere. Much has been debated on what constitutes a counter-public. To be clear, for the purposes of this particular project, counterpublics are not based solely on marginal identity but rather, counter-ideologies must also be expressed. In the epigraph, Badu speaks to the lack of currency individuality and non-conformity carries in modern day society. It is this sort of speaking and acting out against societal norms, in addition to a marginalized identity that constitutes a counter-public. This is important because it acknowledges both the public struggles and political ingenuity of minoritized groups working to counter mainstream discourses dictated by white bourgeois males. In other words, it is not solely based on a marginalized classification; it is based on acknowledgement of that marginalized identity and as a result mobilizing toward change. During the 1980s and 1990s, the black public sphere began expanding in reach and complexity even as conservative rhetoric, policies and legislature overshadowed any progressive black political agendas or social programs. However, as African Americans became more integrated into America's cultural fabric, in many ways they continued to be segregated, misunderstood and misrepresented.

Nancy Fraser's response to Habermas, *Justice Interruptus*, explicates "in order for a theory of the public sphere to be adequate it must encompass the multiplicity of public spheres that exist, distinguish between them, and show how some of the spheres marginalize others."<sup>157</sup> Fraser recognizes this model is applicable beyond media and

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<sup>156</sup> See Craig Calhoun, ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge Massachusetts Press, 1992); Bruce Robbins, ed. *The Phantom Public Sphere*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>157</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* New York: Routledge, 1997), 118.

government public spheres and encourages us to also consider “everyday, informal public spheres.”<sup>158</sup> Pough... Additionally, she sees more than one way of being “political,” asserting that “multiple spheres interact with and even marginalize each other.” For example, if we imagine an actual network spheres where there is one large all-encompassing sphere with several spheres inside of it, some overlapping, some smaller and nesting inside of others and privileging some over others, we create a hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, the black public sphere is then nestled in and mediated by the all encompassing governing public sphere and the Hip Hop sphere takes its own position among the others. Now we can better conceptualize the ways in which browngirl spaces exist within and grate against the borders of what Gwendolyn Pough refers to as the “Hip Hop sphere,” the black public sphere and the public sphere at large.

In discussing the black public sphere we must be willing to rethink the relationship between “markets and freedom, commodity and identity, property and pleasure.”<sup>159</sup> Looking at the public sphere model, if we the apply same concept to discuss black women as “private people,” Hip Hop/black communities as the public sphere, and commercialism as the commodity exchange and social labor, we can better understand the ways in which the black women, even in spaces that feel familiar and safe, are governed by a larger patriarchal community that deems them irrelevant or inferior. If mainstream rap music and Hip Hop culture dictate the ways in which black women are viewed in the public imagination, young girls and women will continue to be seen as “the

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<sup>158</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It Before I Wreck It*, (New England: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>159</sup> The Black Public Sphere Collective, ed. *Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, (University of Chicago Press Journals, 1995), book jacket.

fast-asses, the hot-asses, the hooker-hos, the groupie bitches, the trick-ass bitches, the bust-it-babies and the lil' freaks"<sup>160</sup> who too often fall prey to verbal and sexual assault and violence as a result. So long as sex sells and Hip Hop culture and music remains a commodity to be bought and sold on the marketplace, black women will continue to be pimped out; their bodies literally and figuratively being bought, sold, manhandled and misrepresented. In this "privatized but publicly relevant sphere" black women are disempowered, excluded, and rendered silent. If the black public sphere is not offering a space for critique of the dominant order and action to transform that order, then it is all "idle" talk.<sup>161</sup> We must continue to seek out and highlight critical brown girl spaces among the Hip Hop landscape and within the larger black public sphere which address black girls' and women's issues specifically.

The Black Public Sphere Collective complicates Habermas' initial theory of the public sphere by expanding it to incorporate intersections of race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. It moves beyond magazines, salons, coffee shops, and highbrow tracts to include vernacular practices such as street talk, new music, radio shows and church voices. The Black Public Sphere Collective's theory "marks a wider sphere of critical practices and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the united states."<sup>162</sup> Thus, the public sphere becomes

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<sup>160</sup> Akiba Solomon, "The Gang Rape of a Latina 6<sup>th</sup> Grader, and a Horrific Community Response," *Colorlines* (March 2011), [http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/03/cleveland\\_texas\\_gang\\_rape\\_horror.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/03/cleveland_texas_gang_rape_horror.html) (accessed December 5, 2011).

<sup>161</sup> The Black Public Sphere, 328.

<sup>162</sup> The Black Public Sphere, 16.



“reconfigured to fit the black experience.”<sup>163</sup> As discussed earlier, black girls and women are marginalized and by articulating a model which includes them in the larger Hip Hop sphere, black women are at more of an advantage to control their black female subjectivity. In turn, they will have more opportunity to subvert negative imagery and stereotypes in Hip Hop’s public sphere and by extension, the black public sphere and larger public sphere.

In her book, *Check It Before I Wreck It*, Pough discusses Hip Hop as a *counter-public sphere* and the ways in which black women in particular experience that sphere. While Hip Hop music and culture is “vilified, alienated and marginalized certain elements within Hip Hop work to vilify, alienate and marginalize others.”<sup>164</sup> So when we think about Erykah Badu’s public life and the browngirl space she occupies within the Hip Hop sphere and the black public sphere, she is at once vilified and revered, condemned and celebrated. As a result, Badu subverts any established dominant order by negotiating a space within the Hip Hop sphere, disrupting the heteronormativity male dominated landscape, and inevitably inciting action to transform the sphere. Sexism, misogynistic music, anti-woman rhetoric and ill-representation in the culture marginalizes women, homosexuals and anyone outside of this black heterosexual male rubric. As a black woman who refuses to move to the margins, with an opinion that falls outside of traditional race, gender, sexuality politics and access to the pulpit, Badu’s personal choices and artistic integrity must inevitably be challenged and policed. We are so caught up in the notion of preserving black womanhood and black humanity that we

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<sup>163</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It Before I Wreck It*, 20.

<sup>164</sup> Pough, 19.

fail to recognize the ways in which Badu's response empowers women to unleash the erotic, what Audre Lorde describes as an untapped resource of feeling allowing them to make choices based on their own personal wants and needs. Liberating herself from the confines of the chastity belt and the cult of black womanhood, she is free to navigate the public sphere in a different and liberating way.

Gwendolyn Pough suggests that navigating the black public sphere calls for a certain amount of spectacle and that spectacle becomes key to achieving visibility. One must be seen before they can be heard.<sup>165</sup> She goes on to explain that spectacle and cultural representation are the first steps in creating a disruption. When black bodies and voices lay claim to public spaces previously denied to them, that space necessarily changes on some level due to their very presence. Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, Grace Jones, Missy Elliott, Lil' Kim, Janell Monae, Erykah Badu; they all create a certain amount of spectacle in order to be seen and heard in the public sphere. Bessie Smith achieves spectacle through her controversial lyrical content; Josephine Baker and Lil' Kim through the use of their bodies and; Grace Jones, Missy Elliott and Janell Monae as disruptions to the established black aesthetic. Badu, as many of the other women mentioned here, achieves spectacle through her use of *representative publicity*.

*Representative publicity* is a useful concept that predates the public sphere in Habermas' model. It is described to be a sort of aura; something that makes the invisible visible. It is something "set and wedded to personal attributes such as insignia (badges and arms), dress (clothing and coiffure), demeanor (forms of greeting and poise), and

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<sup>165</sup> Pough, 21.

rhetoric (form of address and discourse in general)- in a word, to a strict code of noble conduct.”<sup>166</sup> Reworked to consider race within this project, *representative publicity* can operate, for example, as black and Latino folks asserting their humanity or black women and Latinas asserting their respectability. In post-bellum times, club women imposed their own restricting definition of black womanhood in an effort to counter white people’s image of black women as lascivious and promiscuous. Middle class notions of virtuous womanhood enlisted silence around black female sexuality, policing black women’s bodies in a different but nonetheless confining and stifling manner. In addition to the previously named entertainers, black women such as Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Mary J. Blige, Foxy Brown and Lauryn Hill respond to those restrictions by disrupting this private public split and in turn, give black women who coming of age in the era of Hip Hop alternative models of how to embrace womanhood and black female sexuality. In Erykah Badu’s case specifically, her insignia, dress demeanor and rhetoric—her “aura” created an immediate and successful spectacle. Erykah Badu’s use of *representative publicity* is defined by her insignia: her name, adronments such as ankhs, incense and other kemet symbols; her dress: a combination of African inspired clothing, hairstyles and accoutrements including ethnic prints, gelees, dread locs, 1970s afros, and tribal ink and; her peace-and-light, power to the people rhetoric. She is African, she is futuristic, she is Hip Hop, she is the “queen of neo-funk.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Habermas, 8.

<sup>167</sup> YouTube, “ASSR Studio Stories – Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF2tHTzyAEU> (accessed July 6, 2011).

## Spatial Desire:

“I believe in creating spaces where Black girls and women can have the conversations that need to be had in order to connect with the girls we once were, the girls we are, the Black girls and women with whom we live, the women we’ve become.”

—RUTH NICOLE BROWN<sup>168</sup>

“New space...formed by the inwardness of the outside, the interiority of the ‘othered,’” the personal that is always embedded in the public. In this new space one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression, world “already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be closed.”

—TONI MORRISON<sup>169</sup>

The “inwardness of the outside” constitutes the “erotic” Audre Lorde defines in her essay, “The Power of the Erotic.” The erotic is that “resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings.”<sup>170</sup> In a discussion around black girlhood, self-creation and black female empowerment, ideas of “home” and space-making are important concepts. Brown reminds us these spaces are integral to connecting with “the girls we once were” those that we, the women we’ve become and other black women like us. Home and space-making must be considered when trying to understand how brown girls view themselves and their world(s) in relationship to their self-development and identity processes. It is possible to engage in a rich exploration of this terrain by considering the connections between the (African) Diaspora and local space and place or what Kimberly N. Ruffin refers to as *spatial desire*: a balance between local experience and the potential

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<sup>168</sup> Brown, 55.

<sup>169</sup> Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 3-12.

<sup>170</sup> Lorde, 285.

to be realized in understanding oneself as a part of the larger African Diaspora.<sup>171</sup> The need for cultural continuity among subjects of migration (forced migration or otherwise) bleeds into our built environment, manifests itself in our foodways and is revealed in our music. Concepts of cultural continuity and *spatial desire* operate much in the same ways when applied to notions of freedom or personal liberation, harnessing the erotic or constructing family/community models. The bridge between temporal locales and the balancing of physical places exist in a metaphorical “border space.” Gloria Anzaldúa’s book, *Borderlands/La Frontera* serves as an excellent example of bridge building, specifically between transnational and feminist projects. Anzaldúa imagines a place that is not here nor there (Mexico/U.S) but an “in-between” that functions as an actual place/reality, a “geography of *mestizaje*” in the context of the physical borderland of the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. Additionally it serves as a metaphor for the concepts of hybridity and queerness. Erykah Badu imagines a similar sort of space with arbitrary borders existing “not here, not there,” (contemporary America/ancestral Africa) but rather as a futuristic vision of what the browngirl landscape can become through a hybridization/queering process. Badu lives among both worlds; this *mestizaje* geography serves as her reality, “embracing multiple psychic locations”<sup>172</sup> in her musical and performative approaches and execution of a transnational, Afro-Diasporic sensibility.

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<sup>171</sup> Kimberly N. Ruffin, “A Realm of Monuments and Water: Lorde-ian Erotics and Shange’s African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Massachusetts: South End Press, 2007), 137.

<sup>172</sup> Shelley Fischer Fishkin (“Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 14, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 17-57) used *Borderlands/La Frontera* as the lens with which to view transnationalism through in her Presidential address to the American Studie Association in 2004. She described Anzaldúa’s work as illustrating “the arbitrariness of borders” and the “challenges and delights of embracing multiple psychic locations.”

Part one of a two part series, *New Amerykah Part One: Fourth World War* is the more political album, *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh* being the more personal. Badu explains the albums to be her perspective of what's been going on in the world since she's been here.

They're two of the same galaxy. They're from the same place, the same tribe. Part one was the left brain analytical, social political part of me and part two is the more emotion, creative, um, moody part of me. I recorded everything at the same time....The whole thing, the two parts together feel like my magnum opus. It's been what I've been wanting to say forever."<sup>173</sup>

Through the production of this two part series, Badu illustrates the ways in which the art she produces is a reflection of her evolution as an individual situating her squarely in the *Kunstlerroman* genre. Typically reserved for literary texts, here we see how Badu's lyrical text embodies the same characteristics of growth and development of the artist, a rejection of the conventional, and reflections of the author's own artistic journey. The *bidungsroman*'s unifying concept is the attention the genre pays to the growth and development of the protagonist. Badu asserts, "Every single song that I write...has me in it because it's my experience." Esturoy affirms that this growth and development emerges as a result of the protagonist's interaction with the world; it's their response to their environment. Erykah displays her *spatial desire*—the local and cosmopolitan—as “two of the same galaxy. They're from the same place, the same tribe,” complimenting and balancing one another.

In her essay, “A realm of Monuments and Water: Lorde-ian Erotics and Shange's African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism,” Ruffin takes cosmopolitanism one step further. It is

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<sup>173</sup> YouTube, “Part 1/4 - Keep an Eye on Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsBnWdTmJr4> (accessed November 22, 2010).

a mode of inquiry that has been the subject of several scholarly studies: *African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism*. She describes it as “an early and consistent culturally rooted transnationalism of African-descended peoples.”<sup>174</sup> This begs the question, What benefits can we as brown girls derive from an *African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism* approach to black mobility, cultural identity and a sense of self? *African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism* acknowledges the complicated geographies of contemporary black life in an age of information and increased globalization. It also illustrates the ways in which history and the cultural continuance of that history inform contemporary societies and life and finally, it gives us a platform to negotiate our African heritage while situating it in a contemporary “cultured” existence.<sup>175</sup> *Hauntings*,<sup>176</sup> or narratives of an African past operate as forms of enacting cultural continuity. Through this lens, we can negotiate defining concepts such as the erotic, family, or community counter to the established ways of seeing things, particularly when these alternatives are inclusive of the *missing* and *invisible*.

Erykah Badu’s artistic expressions and responses exude an *African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism*. Much from the school of Ntozake Shange, Badu is able to balance the scales between an art “rooted in the historic mistreatment of people of African descent

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<sup>174</sup> Ruffin, 138.

<sup>175</sup> I do not in any way want to infer that African is the opposite of cultured but rather we are able to live this hip urbane contemporary lifestyle while infusing a African Diasporic sensibility.

<sup>176</sup> *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* by Avery Gordon (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) is useful in theorizing key epistemological concepts which give me language for writing what Gordon terms “the *disappeared*” into existence: considering the impact of what is omitted or ignored about brown girls lives and most importantly, “writing the history of the present” (Gordon, 195). *Haunting* is defined as “that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence...the sociality of living with ghosts, a sociality both tangible and tactile as well as ephemeral and imaginary.” (Ibid., 201) Gordon greatly impacts my approach to both my subject matter and ethnographic research methods because her assertion that “to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories” has much applicability to this study (Ibid., 17).

and a multicultural legacy that celebrates Africanity.” Badu’s self-identification as an “analog girl in a digital world” serves as a wonderful metaphor for the local and the cosmopolitan. Badu fully realizes the complexity of contemporary black life in an “information” age and how it can be (mis)represented, co-opted, revered, despised in the face of Globalization. The self-identification as “an analog girl in a digital world” emphasizes the importance of “‘provincial’ identity remain[ing] crucial in navigating cosmopolitan geographies.” The provincial keeps you grounded and provides you a “home.” While spatial and temporal changes alter expressions of tradition clearly Erykah Badu’s Dallas roots are an important part of her identity and contribute greatly to the creating of herself as a black cosmopolitan woman. Badu affirms, “I am a result of what Dallas is. I am a result of my five mothers. My momma, my grandmothers, Godmother and mother nature. I’m what Dallas feels like, looks like, smells like.”<sup>177</sup> Badu’s *spatial desire* promises to value her music, performance, private life and midwifery as both aspects of her Southern folk culture and her connection to the larger African Diaspora. It is the fusion of her cosmopolitan experience (going out into the world) and provincial rooting (“I am...what Dallas is”) that informs Badu’s process of self-discovery and self-definition.<sup>178</sup> As the narrator of her own text and through “the act of questioning and interpreting her socio-cultural context” she acquires a new and evolving understanding of herself and her position as a “Southern girl” in America as well as a cosmopolitan African queen in the Diaspora. Through this evolved understanding and her attempt to make

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<sup>177</sup> YouTube, “Part 1/4 - Keep an Eye on Erykah Badu.”

<sup>178</sup> Ruffin, 147.



sense of Western ideologies, concepts of womanhood, sexuality, family and the erotic are questioned and critiqued by Badu.

### **Window Seat as a Site of Erotic Power:**

When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; that of creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

—AUDRE LORDE <sup>179</sup>

In Audre Lorde's seminal essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" Lorde poses alternative ways to view the erotic. She suggests "there are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise" describing the *erotic* as: "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling."<sup>180</sup> In order to suppress this power, we, particularly as women, have been taught to "suspect this resource."<sup>181</sup> It has been distorted and corrupted by Western society as something shameful or to be relegated to the bedroom rather than a "source of power and information" providing energy for change. Erykah Badu's work recognizes and renames the erotic as a source of feminine power. Her video for the song "Window Seat" from *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh* is an example of her subversion of the male-defined erotic.<sup>182</sup> In it she strips naked, walking through the streets of downtown Dallas.

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<sup>179</sup> Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 287.

<sup>180</sup> Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 285.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> *Window Seat*, video, directed by Erykah Badu, Coodie and Chike (2010; Dallas, Texas).

The video for Badu's latest single, "Window Seat" caused an immediate stir. The words *Inspired by Matt and Kim* open the video. The video is influenced by Matt and Kim's video for "Lesson Learned" in where the duo strips down in Times Square. In "Window Seat" Badu walks a downtown street in her hometown, Dallas taking off her clothing piece by piece. She starts with the unzipping of her jacket, moving to her tee and then her pants. She effortlessly removes her bra and panties as bystanders stare at the courageous singer disrobing. No sooner has she stripped nude, a gunshot rings out and Badu falls to the ground in the same place John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Instead of blood, a blue puddle with the word *groupthink* written in it, leaks from Badu's head onto the sidewalk. At the end of the video, Badu recites a passage from off camera: *They who play it safe, are quick to assassinate what they don't understand. They move in packs, ingesting more and more fear with every act of hate on one another. They feel more comfortable in groups, less guilt to swallow. They are us. This is what we have become, afraid to respect the individual.* Badu goes on to explain,

Evolving takes a lot of bravery. Because I was petrified when I did this. Peeling back layers of things we learned and separating ourselves from the group is also horrifying because we are afraid of being ostracized and assassinated by the group if we have our own thoughts and our own mind and our own will and our own direction. And that's one thing that scares us a lot and at the same time it's the same thing that holds us back as a race of people on this planet. Groupthink is actually the term that I was protesting. It was a performance art in the tradition of Josephine Baker or Yoko Ono or any of the other brave women who took a stand for something. Art has so many layers. You can peel back one or you can peel back many layers. I don't think the nation or the world misunderstood what I did, I just think they peeled back one layer and decided to focus on that one. [Groupthink] happens in every sector of our lives whether it's school or church or the office, or on the playground or in a setting like this. When someone decides to be different they are usually assassinated either verbally, mentally, spiritually or worse. Symbolically I assassinated myself in the video after I took off all the layers of things that people felt were, I was supposed to be doing or wearing and it was horrifying it was petrifying because I don't love my body I don't love those things. I think we as women have been put in such a position or predicament to try to fit a criteria we will never fit into, physically. You know,

I'm a mother of three, I'm 40 years old. And I am also beautiful and also relevant.<sup>183</sup>

Badu successfully achieves spectacle and as a result, she is able to convey a message of resistance as power over the fear of growth. It is resistance as an act of liberation for the self or a group from the confines of a fearful, oppressed existence. The same Western discourse of power that defines the erotic from a male centered perspective regulates the ways in which groupthink is enacted. Just as Audre Lorde speaks to the misnaming of erotic power, Erykah responds to the ways in which that misnaming occurs, through a groupthink ideology.

As Audre Lorde explicates in her essay, the erotic has been “mislabeled by men and used against women” as a way to oppress. Erykah Badu’s video was immediately criticized because of the nudity, completely overshadowing her intent. We have been taught to treat the erotic in any form—a nude body, a woman’s sensuality or a provocative display of emotions as something to vilify and condemn. In this case, like most where women redefine the erotic, our learned response is to “turn away from the exploration and consideration” of it as a source of female empowerment, “confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic.”<sup>184</sup> Ironically, the pornographic is actually the absence or suppression of any true feeling or emotions. “Pornography emphasized the sensation without feeling.” Badu, though she does not identify as a feminist, is consistently black female-centered in her views. In an interview Badu makes an

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<sup>183</sup> YouTube, “Erykah Badu Interview with Billboard,” YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2-QfIrJ7Zg> (accessed July 6, 2011).

<sup>184</sup> Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” 286.

interesting point about the ways in which the female body and sexuality are policed in patriarchal society:

The nudity, I think, scares the nation as a whole or people in the world as a whole because we are taught that nudity is a bad thing. But what I really learned is that, when it was packaged the way I was with no high heel shoes or, or long hair or spinning around on a pole or poppin' it, people have a hard time processing it when it's not packaged for the consumption of male entertainment. So they don't know quite to do with it or how to place it, what to say, cuz surely a women couldn't be intelligent enough to be making a point. It has to be for publicity or some kind of sales or- I don't make money from record selling.<sup>185</sup>

This is a complete distortion of the message. The media bashed Erykah for producing the video as way to achieve higher record sales. Possibly lost in translation, this assumption completely dilutes her original message, ultimately contorting what the erotic can be. Erykah responded by explaining,

that's not how I make money. I make money from performing and I don't need any help doing that. I've been doing that for many many years. My point was to protest groupthink and I was speaking in English and it was English written on the ground and I was speaking English at the end and I think the nation and people choose to ignore the message. If they want to see it it's there for them. It doesn't belong to me anymore.<sup>186</sup>

Erykah created spectacle with her video for "Window Seat" and like Pough advises us, in order to create that spectacle, one must be seen before they are heard. Often times, black women are seen (hypervisible) but never heard, leaving their messages to be translated and distorted by others. Through an act of spectacle, Badu was able to claim the public space long enough to be heard. This creation of spectacle is the first step in accessing the public sphere however the spectacle's gaze must be controlled by the representative to prevent co-optation by the larger power. In other words, "Spectacle is limited because it works only as long as the group attempting to impact the public sphere controls the gaze.

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<sup>185</sup> YouTube, "Window Seat: Erykah Badu's Explanation," YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bI3qRovp1A8> (accessed July 1, 2011).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

As soon as the spectacle is co-opted, it ceases to be effective.”<sup>187</sup> A less vocal (or perhaps politically invested) artist may have chosen not to respond for a number of reasons risking co-optation of the spectacle by fans, critics and the media. However, Badu chose to respond, creating a contentious dialogue but in turn subverting co-optation of her message. In this way, Erykah’s use of spectacle seems to be successful. Either way, her point seems effective because one of two things occur: 1) people understand her message and are forced to critique groupthink as illustrated by “Darkaqua” an MTV.com reader response:

Badu's body of work over the years speaks for itself. The reference to JFK [is] great, using nudity as a reference to people not wanting to conform to the masses, but shot down for their beliefs, was a classic touch. Badu has never followed the script from the very beginning. ... She's always been naked to the industry, never following status quo. Kudos to her. She doesn't have to explain herself. Alanis Morissette did it years ago for the very reason. Stripping down for your beliefs no matter what others say or believe.

or; 2) they completely miss the groupthink message, persecute her for stripping nude giving her the opportunity to initiate a dialogue: “I expected people to ride with me. ... So it is true. Being honest CAN get u assassinated. Your character, spirit, & sometimes physically. Interesting. What drives this? Keep dialoging.” Either way, a meaningful dialogue ensues around the issue she is trying to flesh out.

### **“That’s Just my Baby Daddy”: Badu’s Alternative Black Family Model**

I am complete with or without a partner and will always be. And I have dreams of a family structure. All of my dreams do not come true.

—ERYKAH BADU<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Pough, 30.

<sup>188</sup> Sista, “Erykah Badu Responds to Her Critics,” Brown Sista Blog, entry posted July 13, 2008, <http://brownsista.com/erykah-badu-responds-to-her-critics/> (accessed July 09, 2010).

Over the years there has been several incidents in where the Hip Hop sphere and the black public sphere felt compelled to speak out in regards to Erykah Badu's life, namely her initial unveiling of "the wrap,"<sup>189</sup> as I detailed in the previous section, her decision to strip naked for her music video, "Window Seat," and her decision to have three children out of wedlock parented by three different fathers. This section will look at Erykah's open letter posted on okayplay.com as evidence of how Erykah Badu's redefinition of family serves as yet another example of the ways in which she employs African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism. Her adaptive response—raising her three children with their three fathers and extended family, collectively— operates outside of the traditional European family structure model. However, like most women, Badu alludes to her desire to be part of a two-parent family partnership but she does not allow this to define her role as a mother. Just as for many black women, this sort of family structure has not become one of her life scripts. However, this did not stop her from adapting the family model to fit her needs and desires. While Badu's decision to become an unwed black mother with three children and three different "baby daddies," appears to reinforce the Single Black Mother stereotypes, deeper analyzation reveals a more complicated personification of a single motherhood. Badu's status as an educated, upwardly mobile woman who thoughtfully enacted her adaptive response, upsets the established Single

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<sup>189</sup> According to [www.erykahbadu.com](http://www.erykahbadu.com), approximately ten years ago, Badu visited Cuba to get a Santeria reading, clad in a white head wrap and dress and her Afrocentric jewelry. She stated it was part of her; who she was. She waited alongside a man with dirty nails, smoking a cigarette and swigging beer. She goes on to recount she finally went in for her reading and there was a beautiful older woman who had on a yellow long dress and wore a short haircut. She started walking around Badu, speaking to her in Spanish. She assumed she was the priest who was going to give her the reading. When the guy with the dirty nails came in, she told the interpreter she rather it be private. She was then informed he was, in fact, the priest. She says she never wore the head wrap again. Realizing it was not necessary anymore, because the priest was from a long line of healers and did not feel he must dress a certain way. He was born with the power to heal and no one could take that from him. Badu states it was then she was freed and began to evolve.

Black Mother persona in the public's imagination. Interestingly, Badu's adaptive response is more common than one may realize. It is becoming more common nowadays to see professional single black women choosing to have children out of wedlock. While it may appear that many black women are single black mothers by pure happenstance, closer examination shows this may not always be the case. For example, we are seeing more instances of middle-class black women deliberately having and adopting children without a partner or spouse.<sup>190</sup> This is not to say these women never had "dreams of a family structure" such as Badu speaks of in the epigraph. However, financially stable and prospects of marriage dimming with age, many professional single black women are choosing alternatives to traditional two-parent homes.

I guess I am disillusioned by conservative Hip Hop generationers when it comes to the reproductive rights and marital status of self-sufficient, educated, well-read black women. And even more disillusioned by how fully invested they are in making it their moral duty to play judge and jury. I feel strongly that any (black) woman who stands up to the media when her female respectability is being challenged with an insightful, well thought through response gets my vote. Just as the "badge of humanity" black folks fought to acquire for centuries, this "badge of respectability" the black public sphere is trying to revoke from Badu is just another way to police black women's bodies and disempower them. We've seen it before: Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, Billie Holiday. Why are they unable fit our definition of black womanhood? Disrupting the established

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<sup>190</sup> Karima Haynes, "Latest Trend in Motherhood: Single Black Women Who Adopt," *Ebony*, May 1994, 68-72.

John Blake, "Single Black Women Choosing to Adopt," CNN Living website, [http://articles.cnn.com/2009-07-01/living/bia.single.black.women.adopt\\_1\\_african-american-black-families-white-women?\\_s=PM:LIVING](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-07-01/living/bia.single.black.women.adopt_1_african-american-black-families-white-women?_s=PM:LIVING) (accessed March 7, 2012).

European model, Erykah Badu creates a paradigm shift by posing an alternative model of black womanhood and female sexuality along with an alternative model of the black family. I am by no means saying that the not-married-but-I-have-three-baby-daddies thing has not been done before or is the most desirable situation. However, where I make a distinction is in the way Badu redefines what a healthy, nurturing nontraditional black family structure can look like. She is an intelligent, successful artist who has the means and the access to support three children. Her children are surrounded by stimulating, creative geniuses, they are well-travelled and appear to be fiercely loved by the people in their lives. But like many browngirls “around the way,” she still risks falling victim to the “baby mama” stigma. After rumors circulated about Erykah Badu being pregnant for the third time with father number three, she came under scrutiny by fans, bloggers and other media outlets. So inevitably, Erykah served as the figurehead for single black mothers out to destroy The Black Family. With three children, three different fathers, is Badu reinforcing one of the many stereotypes black women have to endure over the years? Is she sending the wrong message to young girls?

A brief background about The Black Family in America is critical to an understanding of where post-civil rights black men and women received their messages about what the family unit should look like. It was the 1980s, a time of conservative political, social and economic ideologies and the effects the policies had on black families are undeniable. Unbeknownst to little browngirls and boys, everyone was up in arms about the Black Family “crisis.” Idealized pro-family life orientations as standards



against which to measure black family life<sup>191</sup> set the tone for the era and were affecting us even though we had no idea of the residual impacts. Regarded as the neo-Moynihan<sup>192</sup> period by some, in 1986, the documentary "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America"<sup>193</sup> was released inciting a flurry of material to support the negative perception of black families.<sup>194</sup> Common themes included highlighting black teenage pregnancy, the number of black female headed households, welfare costs (implying the majority of black folks are on welfare and that the majority of recipients are black), reduced life chances of young mothers and their babies, and the permanent class of intergenerational welfare families. Conservatives and their supporters frequently excoriate black families and the

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<sup>191</sup> Brenda Crawley, "Black Families in a Neo-Conservative Era" *Family Relations* 37, no. 4 (1988): 415-419.

<sup>192</sup> In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote the Department of Labor report warning that the ghetto family was in disarray. Titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," the prophetic report prompted civil rights leaders, academics, politicians and pundits to make a momentous - and, as time has shown, tragically wrong - decision about how to frame the national discussion about poverty. Mr. Moynihan argued that the rise in single-mother families was not due to a lack of jobs, but rather to a destructive vein in ghetto culture that could be traced back to slavery and Jim Crow discrimination. Though black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier had already introduced the idea in the 1930s, Mr. Moynihan's argument defied conventional social-science wisdom.

He also described the emergence of a "tangle of pathology," including delinquency, joblessness, school failure, crime and fatherlessness that characterized ghetto - or what would come to be called underclass - behavior. Mr. Moynihan knew the dangers these threats posed to "the basic socializing unit" of the family, because more than most social scientists, Mr. Moynihan understood what families do. They "shape their children's character and ability," he wrote. "By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child." What children learned in the "disorganized home[s]" of the ghetto, as he described through his forest of graphs, was that adults do not finish school, get jobs or, in the case of men, take care of their children or obey the law. Marriage, on the other hand, provides a "stable home" for children to learn common virtues.

Implicit in Mr. Moynihan's analysis was that marriage orients men and women toward the future, asking them not just to commit to each other but to plan, to earn, to save and to devote themselves to advancing their children's prospects. Single mothers in the ghetto, on the other hand, tended to drift into pregnancy and to float through the chaos around them. Such mothers are unlikely to "shape their children's character and ability" in ways that lead to upward mobility.

<sup>193</sup> *The Vanishing Family - Crisis in Black America*, DVD, directed by R. C. Streeter (New York: Carousel Film & Video, 1986).

<sup>194</sup> e.g. W. F. Buckley, "The Black Family Summit," *National Review* 36, no. 11 (1984): 62-63 and; M. Manning, "Black Conservatives and Accommodation: Of Thomas Sowell and Others," *Negro History Bulletin* 45, no. 2 (1982): 32-35

public welfare program used by some these families<sup>195</sup> instead of looking at the recent historical events and barriers which led to the current depressed status of many black families. The policies enacted during the Reagan/Bush Era, the exorbitantly high unemployment rates for black males and excessively disproportionate rates of incarceration of black male suspects relative to white male suspects were also conveniently overlooked as contributing to the deterioration of black families.

The history of blacks in America is a tangled and twisted tale of forced migration, slavery, Jim Crow and segregation accompanying more discreet policy and structural constraints. The 1954 school desegregation ruling, the passage of civil rights laws, voting rights and affirmative action laws gave the illusion of equal rights for black people and their families. From their unique history, black families recognize struggle and survival as salient leitmotifs. As a result of their perseverance and drive, over the years, black folks have adopted alternative definitions of family out of their desire to survive and for self-sufficiency. Adaptive responses of black families to their socio-economical circumstances include jumping the broom<sup>196</sup>, common-law marriage, two-parent families, male-headed households, female-headed households (stigmatized as matriarchal) and reliance on extended family.

In the face of alarming statistics surrounding divorce, incest and child abuse the 1980s brought incessant rhetoric emphasizing intact two-parent homes as the model

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<sup>195</sup> e.g. Buckley, W. F. (1984). The black family summit. *National Review*, 36(11), 62-63; Manning, M. (1982). Black conservatives and accommodation of Thomas Sowell and others. *Negro History Bulletin*, 45(2), 32-35; and "Reagan and the Blacks," 1982.

<sup>196</sup> Jumping the broom signified a union between slaves in a time when slaves were not allowed to legally marry.

American ideal. This is a fantasy image which described less than 1/3 of all families.<sup>197</sup> While there is no argument that most black folks desire an idealized two-parent family structure, one cannot ignore the ways in which they were and continue to be economically undermined and socially disadvantaged.<sup>198</sup> Many of the behaviors identified as crises by the discourse were in reality normative behaviors for many young blacks including “heterosexual cohabitation” and premarital sex (sexual freedom). Like most of the European standards, using the two-parent model as the barometer villainizes those who deviate from the prescribed model. Those who are not married or choose an alternative family structure are blamed because marriage is perceived as a personal choice. By violating a perceived valuable standard, public outrage ensues and we are put in full “crisis” mode. Corruption of the model of family life is ample basis for using it as a standard against which to measure black families. Even though black families have never had the economic, social, or political underpinnings, as has the majority, for developing or maintaining this ideal model, single black mothers became the target.

The rhetoric around The Black Family has not changed much over the last forty years as we are still seeing articles with titles like, “Why the Black Family is Failing”<sup>199</sup> though the conversation has taken on a different tone. There seems to be two main explanations for the lack of black two parent homes. At the low-income end, the

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<sup>197</sup> B. Sancier, “Feminists and Families,” *Affilia* 1, no. 4 (1986): 3-5.

<sup>198</sup> Black families have consistently received less income than white families and two-parent homes (one earner, one home maker) were being hit the hardest. In 1970, Black families received \$61 for every \$100 received by white families and by 1980 that number dropped to \$58 for every \$100 respectively.

<sup>199</sup> William Raspberry, “Why Our Black Families are Failing,” *The Washington Post* (July 2005), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/24/AR2005072401115.html> (accessed April 20, 2011).

disproportionate incarceration, unemployment and early death of black men make them unavailable for marriage; at the upper-income level, it is the fact that black women are far likelier than black men to complete high school, attend college and earn the professional credentials that would render them "eligible" for marriage. What we now have is a paradigm shift in the cultural values—a culture whose worst aspects are reinforced by oversexualized popular entertainment and places a reduced value on the things that produced nearly a century of socioeconomic improvement. Within that, black women are villainized. Journalist dream hampton asserts, “When it comes to family and the corrosion of America’s ideas of family ideals, then the black woman has always been the first group to get thrown under the bus. We’re the welfare mothers, we’re the ones who let our children to go to school with guns and create havoc and chaos, we’re the head of households that are failing miserably, so in that way we’re just vulnerable.”<sup>200</sup> It is no wonder brown girls coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s would be confused by the mixed-message discourse of Claire Huxtable and The Single Black Mother, Oprah Winfrey and The Welfare Queen. We are not a monolithic group nor are we a “Claire Huxtable/Welfare Queen” dichotomy.

Coming under fire for sending the wrong message to young girls for her decision to have a third child by a third father, Badu responded via a post to the okayplayers.com message board. Responses to Badu’s open letter on okayplayer.com ranged from “Erika is a \*\*\*\*\*, and a horrible representation of what the black woman stands for and truly is.....what an embarrassment!!” to “i applaud erkyah for what she said. i don’t plan on

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<sup>200</sup> Britni Danielle, “It Was All a Dream: dream hampton Talks Black Women, Sex & Hip-Hop,” Neo-Griot / Kalamu ya Salaam's Blog, entry posted April 18, 2011, <http://kalamu.posterous.com/interview-dream-hampton-talks-black-women-sex>, (accessed April 20, 2011).

getting married b/c i don't believe in the institution. i do plan on having children and raising a family...i think erkyah's point of view is empowering."<sup>201</sup> Badu responded to her critics with what many would call an insightful and thought provoking response while others condemned her even more.

Most of Badu's reply is published here because of its importance to the remainder of this discussion. However, I am not discussing the letter in the order it was written but rather I will talk about important themes I see emerging at different points throughout the letter:

“peace, HOW DARE YOU DISRESPECT THE QUEENDOM...AND MY CHILDREN AND MY INTELLIGENCE. i've never been so disgusted in all of my life,” starts Badu's letter admonishing her fans and critics and holding them accountable for their words. She continues, “there is no other place i used to enjoy more. i post no where else,” inferring that this was space she considered safe and that that safety has been compromised/violated. Throughout the letter she consistently defends herself as a mother and illustrates the her humanity and the humanity of both of and her children: “i am a great mother and care giver to my 2 children and to this world. my children are 2 of the kindest and happiest people i have met. I home schooled them and taught them the ways of good to the best of my ability. i am their doctor and their nurse. and even sometimes their mother and father.” This statement disrupts the image the public imagination holds of “The Single Black Mother” as irresponsible and incapable of loving and caring adequately for her children. Additionally, Badu makes a point to let her audience know

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<sup>201</sup> Sista, “Erykah Badu Responds to Her Critics.”

that her children have not suffered as a result of being raised with an alternative family structure.

Badu, although very controversial in her lyrical content and ideological beliefs proves just as vulnerable as any other black woman whose respectability is attacked, particularly in a space she previously regarded as positive. She paints her humanity, defends her womanhood and re-affirms her worth, while acknowledging her flawed growth process stating, “I AM ALIVE . I AM BEAUTIFUL WOMAN. I AM A GOOD WOMAM (sic). I AM GROWING.” She goes on to further disrupt the public image of Single Black Mother as irresponsible stating “I HAVE PUT MUCH TIME AND THOUGHT INTO HAVING AND RAISING MY CHILDREN.” She is compelled to defend her female respectability stating, “every relationship i have been in was because i loved the person DEARLY and was dedicated to us ‘exclusively’ FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS.” She goes on to paint the humanity of her partners as well, making it clear they serve as more than just “baby daddies.” Rather the fathers of her children are her “brothers and friends” and they “have a great deal of respect for one another and always will.”

Coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, browngirls were entrenched in a discourse around, What do we with The Black Family? coloring the ways in which they view concepts of motherhood and family today. Couched in this rhetoric was the essentialist notion that The Black Family was monolithic; that black families faced the same circumstances—regardless of class, sexual orientation, religion, age, etc.—because they were all black. Two major factors that faced black America in the 1980s were 1) deep-

rooted multi-generational poverty being largely black; and 2) this multi-generational poverty was intricately intertwined with the collapse of the nuclear family in the inner city. These are unfortunate circumstances however, the same reasoning fueling critiques of the Single Black Mother in the 1980s, are not the same circumstances affecting Erykah Badu or a number of other black women choosing to build families outside of the traditional European model in 2012. Race remains a factor in how society views black women. However *class* becomes the distinguishing marker of difference for Badu and many other professional black single women. Though a few online readers' posts made points to bring up Erykah's status as a special circumstance, most of her fans and critics are not able to see her outside of the Black Single Mother rhetoric with which we have been inundated for so long. They do not recognize that her access to an upwardly mobile lifestyle (travel, cultural experiences, creative outlets, organic food, etc.) complicates the Single Black Mother stereotype and as a result, they see her as just another irresponsible, unintelligent Single Black Mother.

The readers' comments to Badu's open letter were overwhelmingly conservative regarding what they felt a family structure should look like. Even in the cases where the reader agreed with Badu's adaptive model, Badu's socio-economic status seemed to be the determining factor in their opinion. For example, "Kaye" stated, "I agree with her, but most people couldn't afford to do this. The point is she is doing her own thing, and doin (sic) it well, and who are we to judge?" Additionally, "Stef" makes a distinction between Badu's situation and a teen pregnancy asking, "Would it look any better if Erykah had 2 failed marriages, 2 kids and working on her 3rd marriage and 3rd child,

what's the difference? At least she can afford to take care of her children and she's not a 16 year old high school drop out mother of three." "Stef's" response further complicates the Black Single Mother Trope, illustrating how people often times conflate Single Black Mother with teenage mother. "Talulazoeapple" made an insightful observation about the ways in which celebrity and access provide a very different outcome than the circumstances of poor, uneducated and/or young women:

I guess it's easy to judge. I agree that too many women are 'baby mammas' but i think we make the mistake in thinking stars are just like us. They are not. What makes single motherhood so detrimental in the 'hood is the economic aspect, the stress it places on the family unit, and the pressure of only having one parent to supervise and provide. Most of these stars, like Halle, Erykah, ect. who choose single motherhood don't have the exact same hurdles. They do however share the moral responsibility to provide the best nurturing environment for their children. Most believe, including myself, that two parents or more (including grands, aunts, and uncles) is best.

Here "Talulazoeapple" straddles the line between feeling there is a distinct difference between a "star...who *choose* single motherhood" and feeling as though, "too many women are 'baby mammas'." "Talulazoeapple's" statement speaks to the contradictions inherent in the views of Hip Hop generationers. Stuck between neo-Moynihan rhetoric and "baby mama drama" and "that's jus my baby daddy" lyrics of the Hip Hop era, negotiating what an "acceptable" adaptable family structure looks like remains difficult for black women. Several responses to Badu's letter state things such as, "Another fatherless black child in our society. Good Job Erykah!!!!" and "Erykah's problem goes back to childhood; her father not being there for the family. So she continues the legacy with fatherless children."<sup>202</sup> illustrating how deeply ingrained neo- Moynihan rhetoric

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<sup>202</sup> Street Knowledge Media, "Erykah Badu Goes Nuclear on OkayPlayer Bloggers," Street Knowledge Blog, entry posted July 14, 2008, <http://streetknowledge.wordpress.com/2008/07/14/erykah-badu-goes-nuclear-on-okayplayer-bloggers/> (accessed August 25, 2011).



remains in newer generations. So even though Badu reiterates several times that the fathers of her children are very much present, these readers cannot see beyond her single mother status whereas the label “divorced mother” connotes a father was/is present. Assumptions are also made that when a woman is a single mother who has never been married to the child’s father it is because there is something wrong with her, she is promiscuous, she “can’t keep a man” or she did not try to make it work.

### **Creating an Alternative Family Structure:**

For some reason, people think marriage makes a happy home. The “OMG, kids out of wedlock” idea needs to be put aside. The main concern should be that kids grow up in a good home, with a parent (or parents) who love them and will raise them to be a good person. Marriage is no longer, if it ever truly was, proof that two people love each other and will be capable of a happily ever after story...It certainly doesn’t prove that they’ll be good parents, and it shouldn’t be used method to judge people and their character.<sup>203</sup>

As “Majesa” speaks to above, in an age where over 50% of marriage end in divorce, marriage is not the catch-all solution to experiencing happiness. Nor does it serve as any sort of guarantee children will be raised in a loving, healthy home. However, the Reagan/Bush administration established a discourse around The Black Family that was steeped in neo-Moynihan rhetoric. We can see this idealized pro-family rhetoric reflected in several of the reader responses. For instance, one reader wrote about “the nuclear destruction of black family” and another referred to “the proliferation of black single mothers,” illustrating the ways in which future generations continue to be inundated with messages of idealized family structures. In a similar vein, Badu understands much of people’s disapproval to be rooted in the Church and State’s investment in the institution of marriage. She defends her decisions stating, “IS IT

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<sup>203</sup> Sista, “Erykah Badu Responds to Her Critics.”

REALLY ‘GOOD’ TO STAY IN A RELATIONSHIP WHERE BOTH PARTIES ARE UNFULFILLED , LONGING FOR RELIEF , BRINGING one another down as a result of improper training, creating BAD ENERGY AND EXPERIENCES FOR THE CHILD TO REPEAT ?” By posing this question for consideration, she suggests her unions may not have been stable and that she does not take the idea of entering into marriage lightly. Badu continues, “we took our own ‘vows’ and CONTINUE TO UPHOLD THEM,” then goes on to ask, “WHAT IS MARRIAGE ? WHO IS THE JUDGE? WE ONLY UNDERSTAND THE EXAMPLES WE ARE GIVEN ( well sort of) WOULD IT “LOOK BETTER ” TO MARRY AND DIVORCE AND MARRY AGAIN ? WOULD THAT BE MORALLY CORRECT ? WHATS THE DIFFERENCE ?” I posed a similar question on Facebook: “Question: In your opinion, in today's society, which status is looked upon more favorably, ‘single mother’ (who has never been married) or ‘divorced mother’?” According to the responses, marriage ending in divorce is more accepted in our society. After all, we operate as a society that has become desensitized to divorce but single motherhood, black single motherhood in particular, has a history too long and too deeply entrenched in our country’s fabric to forgive at this point. All of the respondents to my Facebook status—with the exception of one—felt that it was more favorable to be a divorced mother than a single mother. Interestingly enough, the respondent who said single mothers were more favorable was only 22 years old and of another generation of Hip Hop. In a day and age where wifeys, MILFs, cougars, and Real Houswives set the standards for female respectability and womanhood, divorced (single) mother status holds much more social currency than single (never been married) mother status. It is a

possibility that this new generation growing up in a culture glorifying “wifeys,” “baby mamas” “jump-offs”<sup>204</sup> and “sidepieces”<sup>205</sup> do not carry the same sort of uneasiness women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s feel around being stigmatized as Single Black Mothers.

When asked why they thought divorced mothers were looked at more favorably one black female respondent said “because they did try to make the family unit work.” Another stated, “Single mothers are sometimes put in a box with the letter A pinned to their chest because the belief is that before you bring a child into the world u are suppose (sic) to be married. And since our society picks and chooses which parts of the bible we want believe this way of thinking I guess just kind of stuck more than the divorced part.” Both of these responses assume that there is no alternative way of establishing a family unit outside of the institution of marriage, reinforcing a static notion of what a family structure should look like. This notion is perpetuated and supported by a conservative ideology that continue to affect black mothers. One of my Facebook friends, Lena\* shared a story about when she was pregnant with her child stating the parents of the father told him he needed to marry her. “We were told we needed to get married when I got pregnant with Z, (for religious reasons) but I didn't agree with that.” She wrote that she believed the child was a blessing but was not a reason to marry the father. She went on to explain that if it was going to happen she wanted it to be initiated independent of

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<sup>204</sup> A term used to describe a woman who is just used for sex. Typically, the man is in a relationship with another woman.

<sup>205</sup> A term used (typically) to describe “the other woman.”

the birth of their child. Their relationship ended shortly after the birth of her child and she feels she did the right thing.

Badu, once again reinforces her commitment to acting as an individual, moving against a groupthink mentality and asserts her rights to motherhood outside the institution of marriage. Badu illustrates her adaptive response as deliberate and thoughtful in her approach to raising her children:

how about this:

I PRAY WITH MY CHILDRENI FEED THEM GOOD FOODTHEY  
RESPECT PEOPLES DIFFERENCETHEY TRAVEL THE WORLD WITH  
METHE KNOW WHO THEY ARETHEY ADORE THEIR FATHERS AND  
ARE LOVED BY 2 PARENTS OR MORE -OR TWO OR MORE SETS OF  
LOVING GRANDPARENTS

Here we can see the ways she strives to raise her children don't differ much from how most of us want to raise our children—healthy, respectful, appreciative of difference, self-assured, and well-loved by a solid family unit. Her desire to have children is independent of her desire to have a partner. Badu defends her decision to have children out of wedlock and believes strongly regardless of having different fathers does not mean she is irresponsible or careless. She addresses this attack on her reproductive rights and so-called lack of responsibility stating:

BIRTH CONTROL lol ... could have 10 babies instead of 2 .  
I LOVE CHILDREN AND I WILL HAVE AS MANY AS GOD WILL GIVE  
ME . I AM VERY HEALTHY AND RESPONSIBLE AND SO ARE ALL OF  
MY PARTNERS  
I CHOSE THEM WISELY AND SOBERLY .  
ALL GOOD BROTHERS .  
your opinions lack experience and are not only careless but also very uninformed  
and immature.

Badu is honest and forthright about the possibility of having more than three children if that is what she chose to do. She infers she was, in fact, responsible in her family planning. There are many everyday single black women coming under fire for making

very similar decisions about their reproductive rights. Some of my Facebook respondents have a similar sort of disenchantment with the princess fairytale. As brown girls growing up, many of us dreamt of a tall, dark, successful, and handsome man sweeping us off of our feet, having a strong marriage, healthy, bright children, a great career modeled off of Clair Huxtable's character on The Cosby Show and traveling the world. As grown women in our late Twenties, Thirties and early Forties many of us have written an alternate script. Lena\* remarked, "the institution of marriage is not how it used to be... 'Unbreakable'." Badu acknowledges this as well. With a realistic outlook on love and relationships, she is not disillusioned by fairytales of a Huxtable Family future. She writes,

IDEALLY, IT WOULD BE EXCELLENT TO FIND THE MAN OR WOMAN WHO FULFILLS YOUR SPIRIT AND STAY FOR EVER AND EVER (thru sickness and health till death do us part) AND HAVE HEALTHY STRONG CHILDREN AS A RESULT OF A HEALTHY AND STRONG UNION. (this CAN happen ... we need much training, however.)

She believe in the possibility of a strong family unit and a lasting union, alluding to marriage—or at least a life partnership, but not fully endorsing it. In her open letter, Badu presents her audience with several different scenarios putting adaptive responses for black family survival in perspective:

HOW MANY OF YOU GREW UP IN 2 PARENT HOMES THAT WERE MISERABLE AS FUCK ? OR 2 PARENT HOMES THAT WERE NOT PERFECT BUT WORKED?  
HOW MANY GREW UP IN ONE PARENT HOMES WHERE THE MOTHER WORKED HARD TO MAKE SURE YOU WERE CARED FOR BUT SHE WASNT QUITE HAPPY? HOW ABOUT A HOME WHERE THE FATHER WAS THE MAIN CARE GIVER AND DID THE BEST HE COULD - LACKING NURTURE? HOW MANY OF YOU HAVE A SIBLING THAT HAS A DIFFERENT FATHER OR MOTHER? DOES HE OR SHE MEAN LESS TO YOU? HOW MANY OF YOU HAVE MORE THAN 1 MOTHER OR FATHER OF YOUR OWN CHILDren ? HOW MANY OF YOU HAD /OR /

ARE PARENTS RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILDREN, THAT DONT QUITE FIT ANY OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS? HOW MANY OF YOU STAY IN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR FEAR OF GOING TO HELL? HOW MANY HOS OUT THERE ... THAT HAVE KIDS TO GET A PAYDAY?HOW MANY PEOPLE GETTING THEY ASS KICKED AND ARE FORCED TO SUBMIT CAUSE YO MAMA GOT HER ASS KICKED?THEN WHAT is CORRECT?

She describes a two parent home that was “miserable as fuck” but also confronts the facade of a picture perfect two parent home, 2.5 kids a dog and a picket fence in the suburbs that most of us know now as adults is inaccurate. Considering all the possibilities, she acknowledges marriage is hard work in that there are “2 parent homes that were not perfect but worked.” Once again disrupting the prevailing stereotype, she gives us alternate scenarios of single mothers who “worked hard” but weren’t “quite happy” and fathers who were the main caregiver doing “the best he could- lacking nurture” showing the importance of the sum of the whole and acknowledges marriage does not guarantee the ideal environment in which to raise a child. She addresses most of the arguments around the politicization of the institution of marriage along with those of the The Black Church.

Additionally, Badu holds her audience and critics accountable for their accusations and judgement of her character and morals asking: “HOW MANY OF YOU HAD /OR /ARE PARENTS RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILDREN, THAT DONT QUITE FIT ANY OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS?” Situations “that don’t quite fit any of these descriptions” is possibly what compelled Erykah to create an alternative script that made sense for her and her family unit. She makes it very clear throughout the letter that her definition of family extends way beyond the traditional notion of a father, mother, child but rather

follows a more African culturally rooted “it takes a village to raise a child” sort of approach to family. Furthermore, Badu displays her familial connection and dedication to generations of black women elders stating,

AND DESPITE ALL OF THE PAIN IN MY LIFE ...IN MY MOTHERS  
LIFE ...IN MY GRANDMOTHERS LIFEWE HAVE ALWAYS  
ENDURED  
I NEVER HAD A FATHER AND I DONT KNOW WHAT THAT FEELS  
LIKE -  
BUT MY CHILDREN DO, AND THEY LOVE THEIR ‘PARENTS’ .

It becomes apparent she is not the only woman in her family to implement adaptive strategies out of necessity. Additionally, mentioning she does not know what it feels like to have a father but her children do reaffirms being a single mother does not equate with abandonment not does it equate with being “fatherless.” Within this “fatherless” model, we do not see the male donor held responsible for his role in raising the child, therefore the mother is head accountable and many times villainized. An (anonymous) poster sheds light on the inherent double standard for men:

Ain't this about a double standard beotch? DIDDY HAS 3 BABY MAMAS. Flava Flav, Old Dirty Bastard, Quincy Jones, Lil Wayne, J Dilla(R.I.P), Jesse Jackson...I could go on and on about the masses of successful men that have had MULTIPLE CHILDREN OUT OF WEDLOCK and were recognized for nothing else but their success. Their talent. Their gifts to the world. Then we have a sista go and do what men have done for centuries and we jump to attack her? WTF? I know chicks that have had more abortions than sunny days. Killing our most precious resource. I respect my sistas who stick it out and are not afraid to be true to themselves and wear 'socially declared' imperfections like diamond studs. So, I am still and will forever stay a Baduist-because of the musical and creativity that comes from her-It ain't none of my business what goes on in her bed. Maybe ya'll need to go and fuck something.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> <http://streetknowledge.wordpress.com/2008/07/14/erykah-badu-goes-nuclear-on-okayplayer-bloggers/>

So while black women are berated and villainized for choosing to have and raise their children outside of a traditional union, the fathers of these children, in addition to the plethora of black male celebrities like those mentioned above, are let off the hook for their role.

By the end of letter, Badu loses her cool. She finds it necessary to push back and resist the Hip Hop sphere's patriarchal hold. Her loyalty to this Hip Hop community juxtaposed against her need to speak out, parallels black women's continued support of Hip Hop as a whole and their continued loyalty and support of black men historically. Audre Lorde warns us, "The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women."<sup>207</sup> Badu's public response serves as a liberatory act; she enacts her range of erotic power, demanding the most of herself. In the final portion of the letter Badu speaks out not only to defend herself and her children but to resist being "externally defined" and preserve her sense of self:

if i lose you as a fan because i want to continue to have children  
then FUCK OFF... WHO NEEDS YOU ....CERTAINLY NOT ME ...  
KICK ROCKS ... CALL TYRONE ... PACK LIGHT .... BITE ME  
i have defended myself here ON THIS SITE and hurled a few insults .. but only  
in response to your insults of my music , my clothes , my lyrics , my hair ,  
my being a woman , my spirit, my choices of partners....these have all  
been on trial here . and i continued to support the energy of this place.  
this is to all the okay players / REAL HUMAN BEINGS hiding behind  
screen names in order to insult one another and who ever else you will.  
geeeez...i had to say something i am so sad for parents who try, today guys  
enough is enuf.  
dont judge too quickly , OKAY PLAYER?  
i know you are having fun, but what if it were you and your children?my  
son is 10 .my daughter, 4.

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<sup>207</sup> Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 286.



peace  
ANALOGUE GIRL  
and if this post is not clearkiss (sic) my placenta.<sup>208</sup>

For Badu and other black women who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, just as black women and families have done for hundreds of years, they are creating alternative definitions of family and adaptive responses to fit those definitions. Much like the old African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” Badu enlists those around her to act as extended family, helping to teach and guide her children. She subverts the traditional European model, opting to enlist the African Diaspora Cosmopolitan sensibility consistent in her other life scripts. Ultimately, in her music, performance and private life—in the spirit of Audre Lord—Badu moves beyond static notions of womanhood’s “convenient...conventionally expected,” opting to “be DANGEROUS.”

Badu uses the the Internet as a place of self-expression evidenced here in several ways. Her video for the song, “Window Seat,” has received over five million hits to date and along with her open letter, originally posted on okayplayer.com, has been reposted on countless sites all over the Internet. These are just a couple examples of the ways in which black women are taking to the Internet to tell their stories, create themselves and redefine the mainstream notions of black girlhood and womanhood on their own terms. The chapter that follows, “Brown girls Be Blogging: The Future of Brown girl Narratives and Spacemaking,” will delve deeper into the ways in which black women are finding voice and visibility through blogs and other social media sites.

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<sup>208</sup> Sista, “Erykah Badu Responds to Her Critics.”

**Chapter Four:            Browngirls Be Blogging:  
                                 The Future of Browngirl Narratives and Spacemaking**

**Prelude:**

*Girl posses, hand-clapping games, double-dutch, jams in the park...these are the things of which black girlhood is made. However these are not my black girlhood experiences. As a grown black woman, these are the collective browngirl memories I have wished for so long were part of my own browngirl narrative. I have always longed for memories of playing outside with neighbor kids “until the street lights came on.” Although this was a memory exclusive to city and suburban kids, as other kids who grew up in the country missed out as well, I still felt like I missed something important or at least it represents what I thought I was missing.*

*My first experience with hand-clapping games was The Cosby Show. It was the episode where Rudy is feeling left out by her older siblings so Cliff agrees to let her have a slumber party. Upon arriving at the house after picking up all of Rudy’s friends, Cliff asks the kids to sit on the couch and requests anyone with notes from their parents (who has allergies or needs any other special accommodations) to bring them to him one at a time. This segment of the show captures the brilliance of Bill Cosby’s improvisations. He knew how to respond to the children truly capturing the comedy of their innocence. Playfully putting each child on the spot, when it is their turn, twins Kyle and Dana (as in Dana Bryant the spoken words artist) are asked by Cliff if they could sing or dance or “know any little songs.” Kyle answers “yes,” and the girls begin singing a song while engaging one another in what looks like a sophisticated version of patty cake.*

*“Uno, dos, siesta| I said a-east, a-west| I met my boyfriend at the candy store | He bought me ice cream, he bought me cake | He brought me home with a belly ache | Mama, mama, I'm so sick | Call the doctor quick, quick, quick | Doctor, doctor will I die? |Count to five and you'll be alive| I said, a-one...a-two...a-three...a-four...a-five...I'm ALIVE!*

*I was captivated. Right there and then, in a way that only children can, I memorized every word and motion and practiced it several times so it could be saved in my memory bank for recess the next day. It was not something I could name at the time but I knew it was something special and soulful that belonged to “black girls.” Little did I know at the time, this was not some new phenomenon that the writers of The Cosby Show invented, but rather a long-standing black tradition girls had been participating in for generations to which I was just not privy.*

*Double-dutch came many years later. I don't even think I knew it was called double-dutch and never differentiated it from “jumping rope” up until this point. I was 26. Yes, TWENTY-SIX the first time I experienced double-dutch. I was working at an after-school program and the majority of my students were black. On warm days we would take the kids to the park down the street and let them play. Some played basketball, others tag, and still others just sat on the swings and talked to their friends. One day some of the girls requested we bring jump ropes to the park so they could play double-dutch and so we did. Many of the girls were only six and seven but I was simply amazed at how they swung the ropes swiftly and deliberately. It was truly a talent, as those who could not handle the ropes correctly were quickly dismissed and replaced by someone more skilled. They would sway their bodies back and forth, watching the ropes as to time their entrance just right. Jump in! The ropes went faster, the girls jumped higher, one leg, spinning, throwing in a dance move here and there to make it their own.*

*They asked me to join them. I had seen it on television and in movies, “jumped rope” in the traditional sense but never with two ropes. Not the way “real” black girls jump rope. I was intimidated. I felt as though my card was about to be revoked. I hesitantly admitted I had never really played double-dutch. They encouraged me to just try, said it was easy. So I did. I mean, they were only six and seven year olds, right? Could I really embarrass myself? I watched the ropes go around. They were taking it easy on me. I jumped in. My feet pounded hard on the ground. I did not feel how the little girls looked when they were doing it, graceful and light; I felt clumsy and heavy. I felt as though I lacked the necessary cultural capital.*

*I thought of my best friend as I was writing this. She is a browngirl from the South side of Chicago. She grew up in the city but her parents kept their thumb on her. I wondered if these were the memories of her girlhood too. I texted her, “Were you part of a ‘posse’ when you were a girl? What about double-dutch and hand clapping games? I feel so cheated!” She responded, “Of course! All of the above! Don’t worry...I’m ur [sic] posse now.” But sometimes I revert to the little brown girl raised by white parents in the rural Midwest that does not fit the paradigm. These are the collective experiences of browngirl adolescence that make me feel cheated. There are days I know these are not the only experiences of browngirl childhood, after all, I am living proof, aren’t I? But then there are other days when I feel as though they are THE defining experiences of browngirl childhood and I begin to question my own narrative all over again. When I read the narratives of other black women, of my generation in particular, I begin to more easily accept my own. While there are many common themes of growing up black and*

*female, poly-culturalism has affected my generation like no other generation before it. While the standard tropes of jezebel and sapphire have evolved into gold digger, ho, bitch and baby mama, we are making more and more progress around exploding notions of what it means to be a black woman of the Hip Hop generation. However, there are still stories to be told. In real time, we as black women know the browngirl bildungsroman for our generation and the generations following it is so complex and nuanced while what is being addressed is still the urgency for the world to simply acknowledge the black female story as more than one of four (pick your poison) tired-ass stereotypes. We are crying for more than just the privilege to exist when the reality is, that is not enough. That does not cover the multitude of our experiences.*

*The introduction of social networking and blogging sites lends a space for our presence to be seen and our voices to be heard on our own terms. The black female stories being told via the Internet are a testament to our poly-cultural selves. These are browngirl narratives that do not leave me feeling alone, different or Othered but rather give me purpose; I am part of a struggle to be fully realized.*

- MELISSA K. CHAE REDDY

This chapter argues blogs and other social media websites operate as cyberwomanist texts and sites of knowledge, providing social support for black women who came of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop. Within these (cyber)spaces, they are able to redefine notions of black girlhood and womanhood, affirm black female subjectivity and foster positive and empowering intergenerational dialogues with women throughout

the Diaspora. Additionally, these cyberwomanist spaces offer yet another avenue to learn about the experiences of browngirls who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop. The chapter starts with an overview of the history of blogging, not only discussing black women's positioning within that history but also talking about the ways in which blogging and other sources of social media could be said to serve a similar purpose as memoir/storytelling in the lives of black women. More common with those women born at the latter part of the study range, blogs and social media serve as rich sites of browngirl discourse.<sup>209</sup> I provide examples of the ways in which black women are using the blogosphere and social media to document their experiences, realities, hopes and struggles as browngirls who came of age with Hip Hop. Paying particular attention to salient themes across the blogs, I look more closely at Jamilah Lemieux's blog, *The Beautiful Struggler* and Demetria L. Lucas' blog *A Belle in Brooklyn* to critique the intersectional ways in which black women currently use the Internet to self-express, self-define and foster woman-centered communities. As a result, through careful examination we come closer to understanding how concepts like race, gender and sexuality operate as part of that identity.

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<sup>209</sup> Most of blogs I found during my research authored by women who fall in the age range of this study were born in the later years of the range. As a result, most of the bloggers were in the 29-31 year age range and reflect specific scripts dictated by their life stage. For example, all of the bloggers were single, most had never been married and only a couple have children. While I believe there are specific reasons for lower activity on social media and blogging sites with black women in their mid to late 30s, I do believe they are still very present in the blogosphere, just in a different capacity. As I discuss later in the chapter, I question if the shift in life scripts from your twenties to your thirties such as marriage, career, children, and lack of down-time are contributing factors to fewer bloggers over the age of thirty. Additionally, our relationship to technology in the mid-to-late eighties was minimal in comparison to the roles computer technology played in and outside of the classroom in the mid nineties and beyond.

### **History of Blogging:**

Growing up in a small homogeneous town in Wisconsin, television shows such as *Different Strokes*, *A Different World*, *21 Jump Street* and *New York Undercover* marked my childhood and teen years and provided escapes for me. *Different Strokes* spoke to my unique family situation and validated my existence as a black girl with adoptive white parents. *A Different World* opened my eyes to the possibilities, creating a blueprint for how I wanted my life to unfold. I saw a little bit of myself in Denise, Freddie, and Whitley. *A Different World* also exposed me to a profusion of black identities and the multiplicity of black female experiences. Debuting in 1989, *A Different World* disrupted many of the pervasive, negative images audiences were presented of black women, their relationships with one another and with black men. The show's progressive content and subject matter, which often focused on such issues as race, HIV/AIDS, suicide and homosexuality, remains relevant today. Besides the *Electric Company* and *Sesame Street*, *21 Jump Street* was the first television show I remember having a multicultural cast. It was my prelude to *New York Undercover*<sup>210</sup>, wherein Lauren Vèlez's (Nina Morena) Afro-Latina identity<sup>211</sup> introduced me to the complexities of African migration (forced or otherwise) throughout the Diaspora. Though at the time I did not have the capacity to articulate it as such, I began to better understand the intricacies of blackness, realizing blackness is not one-dimensional and claiming black and Asian did not need to be

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<sup>210</sup> *New York Undercover* aired from 1994-1998. Interestingly the years coincided with my high school matriculation and helped shape my identity during this time.

<sup>211</sup> Laren Vèlez is of Puerto Rican heritage and self-identifies as Afro-Latina. She has done many panel discussions detailing her Afro-Latina identity. Other entertainers who identify as Afro-Latina include choreographer and actress Rosie Perez, actresses Zoe Saldana, Gina Torres, Tatiana Ali (Fresh Prince of Bel Aire) and Rosario Dawson, and R&B singer Christina Milian.

mutually exclusive. In the absence of women who looked like me in my own community, seeing bi-racial and polycultural women on television corroborated their actuality. Women such as Lisa Bonet (Denise Huxtable), Cree Summer (Freddie), Jasmine Guy (Whitley) and Lauren Vèlez (Nina Moreno) encouraged me to take pride in my own *mestizaje* identity.

Reading also served as portal to a world outside of my current location. As I have alluded to previously, as a young girl I had a large (ok, maybe huge) collection of Francine Pascal's *Sweet Valley High* books. Again, my identity was so conflicted at this age. I was seeing these snippets of black life showing me what I was missing and how to be black but then on the other hand, everything in my immediate reality was white, white, white. Although I have always claimed my Korean heritage, this part of my identity has always remained in the backdrop. This is for a couple reasons: For one, being both black and Korean in the 1980s and 90s proved to be a very contentious existence, as illustrated



by Ice Cube's song, "Black Korea."<sup>212</sup> Secondly, I didn't speak the language, keeping me further isolated from the Korean community. So instead, I would imagine myself to be one of the beautiful, long-haired, blonde Wakefield twins (usually Elizabeth because she was sweet and popular and dated Todd, a tall, handsome, equally popular basketball player). I thought I wanted that life. During my high school years, as I got older and became more invested in my black identity, I would imagine the typically white protagonists to be a blacker, cooler version of myself.

By college, the Internet was becoming a sophisticated mechanism with which to connect with people all over the world and it completely fascinated me. I have fond memories of skipping class to sit in the computer lab with my homegirl Johnetta and surf

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<sup>212</sup> Ice Cube's 1991 release of "Black Korea," is a reaction to the death of fifteen year old Latasha Harlins at the hands of a Korean market owner Soon Da Joo in 1991. Ice Cube attempts to draw attention to the alleged bigotry of Korean business owners in black communities as a result of negative black media representations. Koreans owned many of the beauty supply and corner stores in African American communities and though they provide much needed services, they are depicted as rude and disrespectful to their African American clientele. Thus, their presence is historically a major point of contention. April 29, 1992, the day the riots erupted, known as "sa-i-gu" by Korean Americans, was a result of the Rodney King verdict. During the L.A. Riots the racial tension were further heightened as a result of Korean grocers taking up arms against black rioters. Part of the racial and ethnic tensions are a result of cultural differences, expectations and misinterpretations. Examples include the Korean practice of putting change on the counter instead of into the hand of the customer, command of the English language, not making eye contact in contrast to African American practice of such as a form of acknowledgement. Ice Cubes' song "Black Korea," The Hughes brothers' film *Menace II Society*, and Bebe Moore Campbell's book *Brothers and Sisters* all illustrate the racial tensions between the African American and Korean communities in Los Angeles specifically, although this was a trend throughout the country. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Forrest Whitaker's *Strapped* also contain scenes depicting black and Korean conflict. In 1986, Reverend Willie Wilson of Union Temple Baptist Church led a famous boycott fueled by the alleged disrespect towards a black customer by an Asian store owner.

My freshman year of college, militant black friends of mine boycotted a local Korean beauty supply store, because the owner supposedly hurt a woman trying to steal from the store. The outrage was centered around the racial and nationality differences, not the situation. Instead of perceiving it as a man defending and protecting his livelihood against a thief, it became a Korean man laying his hands on a (helpless) young black woman. Stealing was omitted from the situation and the incident became the impetus to embark on racialized discourse villainizing Koreans. It became difficult for me to embrace both sides of myself because I feared being vocal about the Korean store owner's rights at the risk being ostracized by my black community. I rationalized this would leave me "homeless" because the Korean community did not accept me either.

the Internet chat rooms as “Bonita Applebaum”<sup>213</sup>(me) and “True Honeybuns”<sup>214</sup> (her). We found “black” chat rooms and made virtual friends from all over the country. I was connecting in real time with other black folks. This was my first memorable experience with the Internet and it was only the beginning. With all the new Internet platforms, chat rooms have become a thing of the past. In their place social networking websites became popular. Sites like Black Voices and Black Planet (similar to MySpace but geared towards African Americans) filled a void in my life and kept me constantly in the loop with black culture. Websites such as the aforementioned opened me to a virtual world of black culture you could not read about in books or magazines. Typically they were meat markets disguised as black online “networking” communities. Yes, they were interactive and collaborative but they could not be considered safe spaces for black women and they rarely spoke specifically to my needs as a black *woman*.

That was before I learned about Black Feminist Thought and womanism and said things like, “I don’t really have any friends that are girls, I get along better with guys,” and “ Girls don’t really like me, they’re catty,” and thought that it was normal, even “cool” to not have meaningful relationships with black women. It was before I knew that what I *needed* was a woman-centered space—a place inviting truthfulness and variation—to connect with African-centered, woman-centered black women. It was also before I understood I was not the only one to be hurt by and spiteful of other black girls and that those who were hurting me were in pain too. If there had been a space to retreat to, where browngirls and women could be honest and vulnerable, it would not have taken

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<sup>213</sup> A Tribe Called Quest, “Bonita Applebaum,” CD, single, Jive Records, 1990.

<sup>214</sup> Bahamadia, “True Honey Buns,” *Kollage*, Chrysalis, CD, 1996.

me until my early Twenties to realize my experiences mirrored the experiences of many other brown girls feeling Othered and inferior. So, it became abundantly clear that as women of color, we needed to foster our own spaces, agendas and movements to address our individual and collective experiences. Ultimately, brown girls telling our stories on our own terms becomes a subversive and necessary act and the Internet evolved to function as a space in which our stories can be cultivated.

With the surge in black self-help books in the 1990s, it is clear black women were suffering silently. Isolated and disconnected from woman-centered communities, social support was and remains imperative to the recovery of self. The term social support first emerged in popularity in the 1970s. S. Cobb asserts that the function of social support is to let a person know that he or she was cared for and valued.<sup>215</sup> In 2004, D.J. Goldsmith argued what s/he referred to as *enacted* social support—talking with friends and family—aided individuals in coping with anxiety and stress.<sup>216</sup> One example of the ways in which some women achieved enacted social support previously, was through (formal or informal) organized book clubs. Book clubs provide a forum for women to come together weekly or monthly, offering opportunities for social interaction, discuss topics relating to the book and their lives, and develop a sisterhood. In the mid 1990s, the majority of women who came of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop were just beginning to use the Internet and the digital divide—the gap between those with and without computer access—was much greater than in the new Millennium. It was not common

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<sup>215</sup> Cobb, S., “Social Support as a Moderator of Life Stress,” *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 38, 1976, p. 300-314.

<sup>216</sup> Goldsmith, D.J., *Communicating Social Support*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2004.

practice to own personal computers in the early 1990s and access was fairly limited to school computer labs and public and university libraries.<sup>217</sup> This changed fairly quickly over the next few years. Personal computers were still expensive but many more people had them in their homes. The average price of a computer was upward of a \$1,000 whereas today you can find affordable options for as low as \$400. Additionally, portable computers, or laptops, were introduced, opening a whole new world in accessibility to sending and receiving information through the World Wide Web. With the growth of the Internet during the late 1990s there was an important shift in Internet usage that exploded in the new Millenium. According to Amy Aldridge Sanford, in her article, “‘I Can Air My Feelings Instead of Eating Them’: Blogging as Social Support for the Morbidly Obese” by “2008, 74% of North Americans and 20% of the world’s population used the Internet.”<sup>218</sup> There was a significant decline in online chat rooms, forums, and message boards drastically increasing interest in blogging and social networks such as Black Voices, Black Planet, MySpace, and Facebook for social support. In 1999, three friends under the name Pyra Labs, created the weblog platform Blogger and by 2001, the first crop of blogs were nominated for the “Bloggies” award. By 2003, Google had acquired the rights to Blogger.<sup>219</sup> Wordpress released their first official version of an open-source

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<sup>217</sup> I remember while attending college at an HBCU in Atlanta (many HBCU’s received access to technology much later than public universities), technology was so outdated we literally stood in line all day to register for our courses in person and we did not have the ability to register for school email addresses until 1997. The library had a small number of computers and “surfing the internet” was limited as there were only one or two computers with Internet access in the library.

<sup>218</sup> Sanford, Amy Aldridge, “‘I Can Air My Feelings Instead of Eating Them,’: Blogging as Social Support for the Morbidly Obese” *Communication Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 5, November-December 2010, p. 568.

<sup>219</sup> Blogger, “The Story of Blogger,” Blogger website, <http://www.blogger.com/about> (accessed April 11, 2011)

blogging service for download and Six Apart released its first version of Typepad blogging service.<sup>220</sup>

Sanford notes one important distinction between message boards and blogs<sup>221</sup> is the “higher level of control the blogger has over the form and format of one’s communication.” Chat rooms and message boards were “emblematic of an earlier era where the Internet forum was typically externally pre-formatted and possibly monitored through chat rules and guidelines (such as word limits, post approvals, and narrow topics).”<sup>222</sup> With the creation of free blog hosting sites such as Blogger, Wordpress and Typepad, blogging has become an accessible format for promoting personal, cultural, political and business marketing agendas. Blogger.com defines a blog as “A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world. Your blog is whatever you want it to be’.”<sup>223</sup> It is an online journal of the blogger’s interests, opinions and musings. While blogging “offers the Internet communicator a richer and deeper unbroken medium of expression,” with the introduction of microblogs such as Twitter and Tumblr, social support and interaction has become accessible for even the busiest of people. Defined as a “quick and dirty stream of consciousness,”<sup>224</sup> much like a text or instant message, microblogging in its best form reads reminiscent of minimalist thought-provoking prose.

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<sup>220</sup> Allison, “The History of Blogging: Twelve Years of Blogs,” Blog World website <http://www.blogworld.com/2011/08/24/the-history-of-blogging-12-years-of-blogs/> (accessed March 1, 2012).

<sup>221</sup> Blog is a portmanteau for weblog.

<sup>222</sup> Sanford, 569.

<sup>223</sup> Blogger, “What’s a Blog?” Blogger website [http://www.blogger.com/tour\\_start.g](http://www.blogger.com/tour_start.g) (accessed April 11, 2011).

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

Other social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are equipped with their own microblogging feature better known as “status updates.”

Blogs and other social media internet outlets such as Blogger, Wordpress, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr serve as spaces to reflect, analyze, and critically think about who we are, why we are this way and who we are becoming individually and as a community. They allow for what Mark Anthony Neal refers to as the cultivation of browngirl spaces and re-imagining of their positioning. They can operate as a space to collaborate with like-minded women, foster black female safe spaces and women-identified communities. Blogs are interactive by design and function best when there is reader participation. Many blogs contain a comment section at the end of each post and this section is just as important as the actual blog entry to which they are responding. Referring specifically to the memoirs of post-civil rights era women but just as applicable to personal blogs, Kimberly Springer asserts, “These women share their life stories in the public forum as a way of asserting a contemporary Black female identity that is mindful of historical context and community imperatives.” Through the use of a public, interactive space, black female bloggers facilitate “the recuperation of self”<sup>225</sup> and encourage other black women to critically evaluate their own personal selves. By encouraging a meaningful dialogue the women collaborate in fostering a black woman-centered space that ultimately transcends the online community, disrupting our silence and invisibility throughout the Diaspora.

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<sup>225</sup> Springer, 1059.

Very little has been published on people of African descent and the blogosphere and much less has been devoted to black women specifically. “Reinventing Black: Digital Media as a Catalyst for Change and Social Race Perceptions of African Americans,” a Master’s thesis by Mignon DeWalt, explores the possibilities of re-articulating social perceptions of race through new digital media that fosters a reality based understanding of cultural relevance. The study utilizes a mixed methodological approach to understand how individuals are working to combat negative stereotypes of African Americans. And more recently, Alexis Astrid Harris wrote, “The Diary of a Black Female Millennial Blogger: A Discourse Analysis of Theybf.com” a study on black women and blogging in 2011. Harris did a textual analysis of one black celebrity gossip blog, *The Young, Black and Fabulous*, in an effort to gain a better idea if the blog posts were consistent with the established rhetoric around African American women in American society.

### **Interlude: Blogging as Memoir**

Coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, we were growing up post-civil rights and during a time when the gap was widening between the urban poor and middle-classes. There were two common themes of the black middle-class experience for post-civil rights children of the 1980s and 1990s. Described in Mary Patillo McCoy’s book, *Black Picket Fences*, there were those that articulated a black middle-class existing within segregated black communities and; those whose families were experiencing great upward mobility and were expected to fully participate in the desegregation of white schools and neighborhoods. As a result, many of these people were privy to exclusive upper-middle

class neighborhoods that garnered better schools, safer communities and state-funded programs bussing city kids out to the suburbs. Unfortunately, the progress of the Civil Rights movement did not protect African Americans from the hostility and isolation they would still endure as a result. “Moving up” also meant little interaction with other black children in school. An additional effort needed to be made by our parents in order to keep us “connected” to black culture. National groups such as Jack and Jill of America<sup>226</sup> and The Links Incorporated,<sup>227</sup> along with local black middle-class organizations, became critical to maintaining community ties and black cultural awareness as blacks dispersed from urban centers. For many brown boys and girls moving to new neighborhoods and attending predominantly white schools in the 1980s and 1990s, it proved to be an isolating and bewildering time.

As those same brown girls, grown and now living in a highly technological age, we are coming into our own via the Internet, tell our truths and engage in a third world cyberwomanism<sup>228</sup> in real time. Blogging as memoir is an interactive way of journaling;

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<sup>226</sup> Founded in 1938, Jack and Jill grew out of the community work of 20 upper-class African American women in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who wanted their children to have cultural opportunities, develop leadership skills, and form social networks in the extremely segregated society of the time. Today, still a mothers’ group, there are around 218 chapters across the United States and the world, and about 30,000 parents and children who participate.

<sup>227</sup> According to their website, The Links, Incorporated is an international, not-for-profit corporation, established in 1946. The membership consists of 12,000 professional women of color in 274 chapters located in 42 states, the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. It is one of the nation’s oldest and largest volunteer service organizations of extraordinary women who are committed to enriching, sustaining and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other persons of African ancestry.

<sup>228</sup> Cyberwomanism, a variation of cyberfeminism and my preference, refers to a range of theories, debates and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanigan and Booth, 2002, 12)



however, it is important to understand it as more than simply a digital journal.<sup>229</sup> As Trish Wilson points out in her essay, “Women in the Blogosphere,” underexposure can be related in part to the tendency to label some women’s blogs as ‘journals’ or ‘personal diaries’ due to their more personal voice. As a result, women’s blogs may be taken less seriously, overlooking the political nature of their personal voices. Wilson goes on to explain the social hierarchies of the blogosphere that mimic those of the material world, particularly the gender hierarchy. Just as in everyday life, the blogosphere is dominated by masculine voices resulting in the marginalization of female voices.<sup>230</sup> As a result, discussions of sexuality, representation, health and reproductive rights, abuse, gender discrimination, family issues, and a myriad of others are discounted. While Wilson never addresses race as an additional factor of hierarchical placement in her essay, one can only imagine how the mirroring of the established real world social structure in cyberspace impacts women of color.<sup>231</sup> The real world social hierarchies also place white women before women of color and appropriately, in feminist (predominantly white) cyberspaces, the marginalization of women of color is reified.

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<sup>229</sup> Amy Aldridge Sanford cites according to the Pew Institute, in 2006 the most popular topic of blogs was the personal journal, with 37% of bloggers writing about their personal life experiences and issues that directly related to and affected their lives and the lives of other like them. Sanford, Amy Aldridge. “I can air my feelings instead of eating them”: Blogging as social support for the morbidly obese. *Communication Studies*. Vol. 61 No. 5, November-December 2010, 569

<sup>230</sup> Much in the way Booker T. Washington asserted “art as propaganda,” feminism has long recognized the “personal as political.” Unfortunately, the white middle-class men who created the first blogs in the mid-1990s dictated what constituted a political discussion. This definition was extremely stifling and limited to topics such as the Bush administration, the war on Iraq, militarism, economics and world affairs. With this narrow definition setting the precedent, any political discourse outside of this range was rarely taken seriously.

<sup>231</sup> Trish Wilson, “Women in the Blogosphere,” [http://content.ebscohost.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/pdf25\\_26/pdf/2005/OOB/01May05/17587781.pdf?T=P&P=AN&K=17587781&S=R&D=aph&EbscoContent=dGJyMMTo50SeqK84zdneyOLCmr0mep7JSsq64S7SWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPPj34r34ux8uePfgex44Dt6fIA](http://content.ebscohost.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/pdf25_26/pdf/2005/OOB/01May05/17587781.pdf?T=P&P=AN&K=17587781&S=R&D=aph&EbscoContent=dGJyMMTo50SeqK84zdneyOLCmr0mep7JSsq64S7SWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPPj34r34ux8uePfgex44Dt6fIA) (accessed November 11, 2011).

I was recently surfing the Internet and came across a blog post titled, “I Am Not a Feminist (There is No But),” written by a black female blogger named Renee Martin who does not, as the title suggests, self-identify as a feminist. Like many women of color, for Martin, feminism evokes a feeling of racial and ethnic exclusion. Our placement as black women in the blogosphere is just one example of the ways in which our existence in cyberspace is complicated by race and gender. Our historical placement in feminism also impacts the ways we navigate Internet spaces. Martin stated the “trend of focusing on white women would continue” throughout her life. This sentiment is shared by many black women coming of age during the Golden Age of Hip Hop.<sup>232</sup> Though feminism’s reach has broadened beyond the academy, Martin later refers to the ways in which the exclusionary feminist discourse privileging white women’s experiences she witnessed in the classroom is reinforced on the Internet. Martin believes the feminist blogosphere “serve[s] as modern-day conscious raising sessions”<sup>233</sup> which are intended to formulate new theories and create spaces for previously silenced voices. However, many of the larger blogs run by white women such as Feministe.com and Feministing.com continue to replicate the same white privilege of the academy. These (cyber)spaces can leave women of color feeling alienated and frustrated. This is why it becomes crucial to create alternatives and foster our own browngirl (cyber)spaces, highlighting gendered and raced issues that speak to our needs specifically.

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<sup>232</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/10/white-feminism-black-woman-womanism> accessed May 21, 2011

<sup>233</sup> Renee Martin, “I am Not a Feminist (and There is No But),” The Guardian website, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/10/white-feminism-black-woman-womanism> (accessed July 21, 2011).

## **You Gotta Let ‘Em Know, You Ain’t a Bitch or a Ho: Black Women and Cyberwomanism:**

As discussed earlier in Chapter Two, the 1960s and 1970s inundated us with a flood of black women writers such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange blazing trails and creating spaces for black women’s stories to be told and to be heard. Their writings, steeped in the black female experience, often times dealt with what Annie Esturoy calls the process of “becoming” aligning their narratives with the bildungsroman genre. While this label is typically saved for fiction, it is generally perceived to contain some degree of autobiography. As established throughout this dissertation, rites of passage, coming of age and the “exploration of the path toward self-development”<sup>234</sup> are typically present in the autobiographical, memoir, non-fictional, and fictional accounts of the aforementioned black female writers. We come from a long line of black female autobiographers and memoirists; it only make sense in the day and age of the information super highway that we would take our stories to a larger, less exclusionary platform. While the pro-woman consciousness of female rappers in the late 1980s and 1990s like Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, MC Lyte and Yo-Yo among others had distinctly pro-woman sensibilities, many black women who came of age during this time period are resistant to claim the feminist title. As a result, there seems to be a disconnect between black women who came of age in the Golden Age of Hip Hop and the black feminist movement of the generations before us. The feminist struggles of our foremothers placed us in a unique position; it gave us the

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<sup>234</sup> Esturoy, 3.

newly found option to “choose”—whether that be embrace feminist ideologies and/or labels, remix what feminism means for a “90s kinda girl”<sup>235</sup> or reject it all together.

At a time in the popular culture sphere when black women’s voices were being silenced, female rappers such as Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah and MC Lyte negotiated vocality and respect for women. Though they avoided being labeled feminist at the risk of being aligned with a white woman’s movement, which they equated as anti-black male, their music encompassed a black female-centered, female-empowered stance.<sup>236</sup> For example, the pro-woman lyrics of song like MC Lyte’s, “Paper Thin,”<sup>237</sup> Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First,”<sup>238</sup> and Salt-n-Pepa’s “Shake Your Thing”<sup>239</sup> (Don’t try to tell me how to party| It’s my dance and it’s my body) provided a girl power soundtrack for many brown girls, myself included, coming of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Salt-n-Pepa were carving out a female-centered space within the Hip Hop sphere in which black women’s sexuality could be openly expressed. Pro-woman rap lyrics serve as excellent examples of the ways in which black female-centered artists resisted cultural invisibility, privileging the black female experience, supporting one another, and demanding equal treatment on the Hip Hop landscape long before Joan Morgan articulated the concept, Hip Hop feminism.<sup>240</sup> According to Tricia Rose in her essay, “Never Trust a Big Butt and

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<sup>235</sup> Reference to the television show *Living Single*’s theme song of the same name.

<sup>236</sup> Rose, 349.

<sup>237</sup> MC Lyte, “Paper Thin,” *Lyte as a Rock*, First Priority Music, Atlantic, 1988. “Paper thin” is a song about male dishonesty and infidelity.

<sup>238</sup> Queen Latifah, “Ladies First,” *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

<sup>239</sup> Salt-n-Pepa, “Shake Your Thing” A Salt with a Deadly Pepa, Next Plateau Records, 1988.

<sup>240</sup> Robin Roberts, “Ladies First”: Queen Latifah’s Afrocentric Feminist Music Video. *African American Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Black Women’s Culture Issue (Summer, 1994), 245-257.

a Smile,” Salt, MC Lyte and Queen Latifah “saw feminism as a signifier for a movement that related specifically to white women” and they also believed that it meant “adopting an anti-male position.”<sup>241</sup> Given black women’s roles in black movements historically, what was seen by some as privileging their needs as women over the needs of the overall black community made adopting a feminist label a dangerous endeavor. Rose explains that in talking with MC Lyte about her feelings on feminism, once she provided her working definition to MC Lyte, Lyte agreed under Rose’s definition she in fact did consider herself a feminist:

I would say that a feminist believed there was some sexism in society, wanted to change and worked towards change. [She] either wrote, spoke or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations [organizations] that were trying to better the lives of women. A feminist feels that women are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality.

Once Rose and Mc Lyte analyzed the concept of feminism further—“as a mode of analysis rather than as a label for a group of women associated with a particular social movement”—Lyte became much more comfortable with the concept. Queen Latifah, though “sympathetic” of feminist agendas prefers to self-identify as pro-woman. For these women and many other women who came of age with Hip Hop, feminism is a label for members of an exclusive white female social movement that has little to do with black women or black communities.<sup>242</sup> It was this same concern that drove black writers and theorists such as Alice Walker and Patricia Hill Collins to find alternative ways to talk about woman-centered/pro-woman sensibilities. Walker’s and Collins’ articulations of womanism and Black Feminist Thought respectively, are more encompassing,

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<sup>241</sup> Tricia Rose, “Never trust a big butt and a smile,” 349.

<sup>242</sup> Rose, 350.

accounting for the lived realities of being both black and female. Morgan's introduction of Hip Hop feminism gave modern-day women an opportunity to fashion a contemporary brand of feminism. Hip Hop feminism's biggest distinction from our mother's feminism is the ways in which its women-centric worldview takes into account the realities and contradictions of being a woman who is part of the Hip Hop generation specifically. Consistent with the images and lyrics of pro-female rap artists like those mentioned above, Hip Hop feminism speaks to the complexities of "loving an art and a culture that is reluctant to include you, and rejecting sexual objectification while actively and proudly embracing your sexuality."<sup>243</sup> Self-described black feminist blogger MsAfropolitan believes that we have the agency to self-define our feminism based on lived experiences "because we live in an age of individual feminisms rather than theory-centered doctrine. And it also does not matter if a woman who opposes patriarchy calls herself a feminist, a womanist, motherist, mujerista, goddess etc., we have similar hopes at the end of the day, there are many ways to transform society."<sup>244</sup> She states in another blog post,

So looking again at feminism, for me it has been a means to internalizing a sense of power. I can't imagine not having discovered feminism. It has helped me in so many ways; to aspire to live without restriction, to express my sexuality the way that I want to and not the pseudo girl-power way videos... imply, to explore my creativity, and much more. Feminism helped me understand that only I can define my femininity.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Akoto Ofori-Atta, "Is Hip Hop Feminism Alive in 2011?" Th Root website, <http://www.theroot.com/views/hip-hop-feminism?page=0,1> (Accessed May 17, 2011).

<sup>244</sup> MsAfropolitan, "Why Men Love Feminists," MsAfropolitan blog, <http://www.msafropolitan.com/2011/10/why-men-love-feminists.html> (accessed September 3, 2011).

<sup>245</sup> MsAfropolitan, "How to Use isms to be more Open-Minded," MsAfropolitan website, <http://www.msafropolitan.com/2011/05/how-to-use-isms-to-be-more-open-minded.html> (accessed September 3, 2011).

Ultimately, falling strongly in line with Erykah Badu's vision of humanism MsAfropolitan believes, "the vast majority who see feminism as a woman-centered part of humanism, where equal value of all human beings in all realms of life is the fantasy."<sup>246</sup>

Similarly, many of the blogs I found during my research reflected a similar standpoint on feminism. The welcome message on Ananda Leeke now defunct blog called Sisterhood, The Blog spoke to contemporary women and privileges them without labeling itself as distinctly feminist:

Who are twenty-first century women?

They are a diverse group. They represent all shapes, sizes, colors, ages, sexual orientations, socioeconomic classes, and religions. Many define themselves with identity labels. Several call themselves feminists from the 2nd wave, 3rd wave, and 4th wave. Some walk the earth as womanists. Others prefer to just be who they are without the labels. The two things they have in common are their womanhood and right to choose who they want to be.<sup>247</sup>

In an interview I conducted with blogger (ABelleinBrooklyn.com) and author Demetria L. Lucas, I asked her how she identifies. Lucas expressed many of the same conflicting feelings about adopting the label, working through this conflict aloud.

Ultimately, Lucas decided she does, in fact, consider herself to identify as a feminist:

Umm, I've gone back and forth. I think when I was just "blogger" starting out I was much more free with my opinion, you know labeling myself as a feminist. But when the blog started to blow up, especially when the blog was the face of Essence.com, I realized that feminism, for some people is like a really good thing, and then other people they bring in all this extra baggage to like what it means. I wrote a blog on Essence, it was like, am I comfortable with the F-word? The F-word being feminism. Just because, if I call myself a feminist, what I mean is I believe in equality. I'm not saying that men and women are the same but respect me for what I do, respect me for the woman ish that I bring to the table and more than anything respect my opinion and my rights as a women. But

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<sup>246</sup> MsAfropolitan, "Why Men Love Feminists," MsAfropolitan blog, <http://www.msafropolitan.com/2011/10/why-men-love-feminists.html> (accessed September 3, 2011).

<sup>247</sup> Ananda Leeke, Sisterhood the Blog, <http://sisterhoodtheblog.wordpress.com/> (accessed on November 12).

people like to think that that [sic] means man-bashing or man-hating or lesbian or all these other things. I have mixed feelings about being attached to the word. As of late I've just been claiming it because I think it's the best way to express what I do—the things that I think, the things I subscribe to are very woman-centered. They are very woman empowering. It's not at the disempowerment of men, it's just, I think women should be equal. I think our opinions should be respected. I think people like Rush Limbaugh have no business telling us what to do with our house. But, I've been very outspoken so now I claim it. I am claiming it right now.<sup>248</sup>

Neither the black community or feminist community could speak to all of our experiences or concerns specifically as black women. The opinions of the bloggers and other women illustrated above, gives us a better understanding of the role woman-centered identities—be it feminism, womanism or simply a pro-woman stance—play in the processes of self-definition, self-discovery, and black female selfhood for women who came of age in the mid-1980s and 1990s. More times than not, those of us who explored feminism in the classroom rarely saw ourselves fully represented as women of color, having to seek out alternative texts such as Alice Walker's, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, which spoke to our experiences as browngirls specifically.

Much like myself, and many other browngirls and women, Rene Martin's was an independent treasure hunt made of online searches, indexes and bibliographies, “desperate to read journeys that mirrored [her] own.”<sup>249</sup> This journey so many of us can relate to, is similarly illustrated in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* by lady in brown when she explains her own journey of finding black literature in “tousasint.” Lady in brown recounts,

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<sup>248</sup> Lucas, interview.

<sup>249</sup> Renee Martin, “I am Not a Feminist (and There is No But),” The Guardian website, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/10/white-feminism-black-woman-womanism> (accessed July 21, 2011).



i found toussaint  
but not til after months uv  
cajun katie| pippi longstockin  
christopher robin| eddie hayward & pooh bear  
in the children's room  
only pioneer girls & magic rabbits  
& big city white boys  
i knew i waznt sposedta  
but i ran into the ADULT READING ROOM  
& came across

#### TOUSSAINT

my first black man<sup>250</sup>

Lady in brown goes on to explain how “TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE” was the “beginning of reality” for her, emphasizing the ways in which this awakening informs the lives of children of color. Unfortunately, many of us were unable to locate these cultural texts so early on in our lives.

Although there is a rich collection of black woman-centered literature from which to choose, as many of my friends and the respondents to my online survey have agreed, they did not find many of the black female authors until they were adults. Respondent, Renon,\* spoke to this phenomenon stating, “Each [book] helped me see me and let me know that there have been others like me, who feel and struggle in the same way; we have a history of it. Our battles due to gender, race, relationships resound throughout each of these works. I didn't come across these until my mid, to late 20s and at 40, I've never forgotten them.” Misha,\* another respondent remarked that she understood the survey was covering what texts were being consumed during a particular period of time; however, “many of the musicians, authors, and artists that formed [her] identity, the one [sic] that persists today, were discovered and explored in [her] early and mid 20s.” This

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<sup>250</sup> Shange, 26.

leads me to question why it is that so many of us are deprived of such critical texts in adolescence. One of the few survey respondents that commented on reading a plethora of black literature at an early age attributed this to her parents. “As a child, my family bought books by African American artists so that I would be exposed to their work. So, as a teenager, I read Gwendolyn Brooks, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and other noted writers.” She goes on to illustrate the important role these books had on her development. “Having access to this literature definitely shaped my identity, especially since my K-12 teachers at school only assigned books written by black people on ‘special’ dates, like February.” Her statement elucidates the largest reason why so many of us are not exposed to black literary writing until adulthood (minus the occasional obligatory honorable mention). Perhaps our educators simply never considered them as relevant; they did not see the value in understanding black life. Quite possibly the mere thought of addressing black people’s adversity, struggle and pain was too uncomfortable to even consider presenting narratives of black perseverance, resilience, and pride. Perhaps the Establishment knew giving black girls and boys that type of knowledge gave us power and the capacity to fully realize ourselves; and that would make us dangerous. With that in mind, the opportunity for black girls to read about black women in school was even more unlikely; limited to stolen moments with their mother’s books. As young adults, discovering black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Angela Davis, we were empowered to challenge the feminist borders and reinterpret the tenants of a woman-centered identity for our own lived experiences as women of color. As a result, women of the Golden Era redefined a woman-centered identity which can be

described as a more free-spirited, home-grown approach. One that comes closer to—like Ananda Leeke’s welcoming statement—racial and ethnic diversity, womanism, “the right to choose who they want to be,” and the opportunity to exist “without the labels.”<sup>251</sup>

With the introduction of Joan Morgan’s memoir, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, black women were introduced to a conceptual framework articulating ways to embrace feminism and Hip Hop culture unapologetically. While the idea of loving (openly) these two, often times, contradictory ideals was not novel, articulating it as a black female-centered mode of analysis which left room for the incongruences of being pro-woman on a sexist and misogynistic cultural landscape was. Hip Hop feminism was seen as a feminism that reflected the realities and complexities of post-civil rights, post-Black Power women. It sparked a whole new subfield of study within academia, activist circles and classrooms everywhere. Morgan asserts, “The manifestos of black feminism, while they helped me to understand the importance of articulating language to combat oppression, didn’t give me the language to explore things that were not black and white, but things that were in the gray... And that gray is very much represented in hip-hop [culture].”<sup>252</sup>

Black women have been using music and its ideals to bridge gaps since time immemorial. First there were slave songs, then negro spirituals and then gospel and blues. Hip Hop is not doing anything new in this respect. It is simply another vehicle for communicating and bridging the gap. The blues and negro spirituals gave birth to civil

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<sup>251</sup> Ananda Leeke, Sisterhood the Blog, <http://sisterhoodtheblog.wordpress.com/> (accessed on November 12).

<sup>252</sup> Akoto Ofori-Atta, “Is Hip Hop Feminism Alive in 2011?” Th Root website, <http://www.theroot.com/views/hip-hop-feminism?page=0,1> (Accessed May 17, 2011).

rights songs and groups like Sweet Honey in the Rock. The songs of the 1960s and 1970s (protest songs—Nina Simone, Miriam Mekeba and others) are the birth songs of Hip Hop.<sup>253</sup> As a historical movement that spans more than thirty years, we have a transgenerational love for the music and the culture which provides a bridge from one generation to the next. Hip Hop provides a frame of reference when we talk about issues like mysogyny, sexism, beauty, black female representation, and black female empowerment. It provides a common ground for browngirls like “Shequanna up on 142nd street” to connect with “Samantha at Sarah Lawrence.”<sup>254</sup>

Though cyberwomanism is a relatively new and loosely defined term, its basic function is to provide a feminizing influence to the digital world.<sup>255</sup> Cyberwomanism is in theory “without definition, so that it is without limits,” and potentially more inclusive of women of color.<sup>256</sup> This definition, while leaving room for interpretation, is perhaps too vague. Alex Galloway believes that the cyberwomanist movement has come to a halt due to the lack of a clear definition, goals and leadership. In Jessie Daniels’ article “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender and Embodiment” she argues “lived

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<sup>253</sup> Michael Gonzales, “Generation Soul: Nina Simone,” in H2C2 Hip Hop Cultural Center in Harlem, <http://h2c2harlem.com/2010/04/05/generation-soul-nina-simone/> (accessed on March 15, 2012) and Mark Anthony Neal, *Nina Simone: She Cast a Spell—and Made a Choice*, in *Seeing Black*, [http://www.seeingblack.com/2003/x060403/nina\\_simone.shtml](http://www.seeingblack.com/2003/x060403/nina_simone.shtml) (accessed March 15, 2012).

<sup>254</sup> Morgan, 76.

<sup>255</sup> Cyber feminism was coined in 1991-1992 in different parts of the world. Nancy Paterson wrote an article names “Cyberfeminism” while at the same time in Australia four girls started the Cyber Feminist Manifesto to add females and political consciousness into electronic documents and sites on the internet. During the same time period, according to Wikipedia, Sadie Plant also used the term cyber feminism to define the “feminizing influence of technology on western society and its inhabitants.” Sadie Plant seems to think of technology as inherently female and hence the term Cyberfeminism.

<sup>256</sup> According to The Women’s and Gender Studies Blog, no one school of feminist thought prevails in cyberfeminism, theoretically allowing for a free exchange of ideas in words and art. Ideally, cyberfeminist are more about the delivery of the message rather than the actual message itself.

experience and actual Internet practices of girls and self-identified women reveals ways that they use the Internet to transform their material, corporeal lives in a number of complex ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race.”<sup>257</sup> For the aims of this project, my interest is not in cyberwomanism as movement. Instead, I would like to think about cyberwomanism as a methodological approach for producing and analyzing black women’s cultural work on the Internet—from a woman-centered, politically conscious space. Although real life social hierarchies are always present and in play, the Internet provides a highly accessible public space for black girls and women to explore issues that are important to black female selfhood and engage in cyberwomanism. As previously stated, regardless of black women’s inclusion in white feminist cyberspaces, it is critical to continue to create and maintain browngirl (cyber) spaces. In these spaces, framed by a decidedly black female and political consciousness, the moments and occurrences in the everyday lives of browngirls can be examined in a way that is both useful and accessible. Much in the way enslaved black women reimagined the hostile space of the master’s kitchen as a safe space in which to create strategies of survival against white supremacy, black female centered cyberspaces serve as discursive communities responding to a similar reification of hegemony.

### **Cultivating Browngirl Positive Spaces & Social Support Communities:**

This blog is a safe space for talking about these and other related issues. Safe spaces need to be protected. Not from people who disagree, but people who abuse. I won’t tolerate abuse here. Because I’m angry.

—THE ANGRY BLACK WOMAN<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Jessie Daniels’ article “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender and Embodiment,” 101.

<sup>258</sup> The Angry Black Woman, “About,” The Angry Black Woman blog, <http://theangryblackwoman.com/about/> (accessed April 2011).

I definitely feel blogs can be a form of social support for women of African descent. You get to see someone else's point of view and the responses to that point of view, all of which help you look at things differently or see another side of something.

—TAMMI\*<sup>259</sup>

What is a “safe” space and how can we guarantee any public space such as the Internet to be safe? Patricia Hill Collins defines safe spaces as “social spaces where black women speak freely”<sup>260</sup> such as front porches, black beauty salons and kitchens. In her article, “In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy Through Safe Spaces of Resistance,” Olga Davis identifies the importance of the ‘kitchen’ as a safe space being fundamental to black women’s development in the antebellum South. The kitchen space, because it was in the ‘big house’ of their white masters, was regarded as a hostile space for enslaved African women. According to Davis, the black women working in the kitchen found numerous ways to transform this hostile space into a ‘positive’ space.<sup>261</sup> Within this adapted space, black women were able to “develop, articulate, and teach performative and rhetorical strategies for navigating the white supremacist system in which they were entangled.”<sup>262</sup>

The spaces brown girls of the Golden Era fashion on the Hip Hop landscape serve as a continuance of the long tradition of transforming hostile spaces into positive ones. However, in cyberspace particularly, this does not come without complications. It is

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<sup>259</sup> \*Pseudonym, a respondent to my online survey.

<sup>260</sup> Collins, 101.

<sup>261</sup> Davis, Olga Idriss. 1999. “In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance.” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 3. p. 369

<sup>262</sup> Reid-Brinkley, Shanara. “The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women’s Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video” p. 240

important to approach these seemingly positive cyberspaces with a healthy skepticism. The Internet has created opportunities through blogging and social media sites for black women to construct and nurture the sort of safe spaces Patricia Hill Collins identifies. However, we must keep in mind there is no guarantee the interlocutors inhabiting these spaces are black or even women. One of the distinguishing differences between the physical spaces of front porches, beauty salons and churches and the virtual spaces of the Internet, are the participants ability to “create” themselves or rather, an avatar that allows them to shape-shift. The avatar<sup>263</sup> (in the context of this dissertation) serves as a metaphor for self-creation or self-definition but wields a double-edged sword. In her essay, “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,” Lisa Nakamura uses a cartoon to illustrate the complications of self-definition in cyberspace. Nakamura describes a dog sitting in front the computer, busily typing away with a caption overhead reading, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog!” She goes on to explain, “Users of the Internet represent themselves within it solely through the medium of keystrokes and mouse-clicks, and through this medium they can describe themselves and their physical bodies any way they like; they perform their bodies as text.”<sup>264</sup> The allure of “disembodiment”—disassociation with the physical body—is attractive to many who participate in blogging, micro-blogging, social networking sites,

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<sup>263</sup> In Hindu mythology the avatar is believed to be the descent of a deity down to earth in an incarnate form or some manifest shape. This virtual avatar serves as a surrogate and allows them, ironically, to be themselves in a way that is not otherwise allowed free of judgement.

<sup>264</sup> Lisa Nakamura, “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,” *Race in Cyberspace*, Routledge (2000), 15.

and other forms of Internet communication.<sup>265</sup> With this in mind, it is important to consider the ways in which disembodiment can affect potentially safe spaces.

Much in the way kitchen spaces of the antebellum South were transformed from hostile to positive spaces, online spaces must be manipulated to operate in positive ways. “New media allows us to suspend existing cultural figurations of the self—race, class and gender are able to forge new cultural forms”<sup>266</sup> that can potentially change the existing cultural paradigms. In regards to browngirls, this gives us the ability to challenge the existing cultural representations of ourselves and replace them with more accurate depictions of how we see ourselves and/or want to be seen by others. Conversely, it also allows for the possibility of one misrepresentating themselves at the risk of turning a positive space into a potentially hostile one. Nakamura reminds us, “This utopian vision of cyberspace as a promoter of a radically democratic form of discourse should not be underestimated.” For instance, in June of 2011, it was revealed a lesbian blogger and executive director, Paula Brooks, of the lesbian and gay new site, LezGetReal, was in fact

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<sup>265</sup> In her article, *Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender and Embodiment*, Daniel’s asserts, “The absence of the physical body in electronic space and the anonymity this offers have a liberating effect on repressed social identity, as ‘electronic identity’ becomes a tool for the design of freely chosen identities” (111). However, disembodiment becomes a slippery slope in a conversation about black women; while it allows one a certain amount of anonymity to speak more forthright than in physical spaces, black women cannot easily divorce themselves from their black bodies as these bodies have and continue to be sites of trauma, contestation, objectification, celebration, and demonization among other things. Much like women dealing with breast cancer or disability, the black female body is a marked body and these women are more likely to “seek out internet spaces where they can explore and reaffirm the bodily selves” in an effort to embrace self-love and to achieve self-actualization. Daniels maintains that the “allure of disembodiment” for many feminists navigating the Internet alongside the “valorization of self-identified women and girls’ engagement with Internet technologies suggests an inherent contradiction within cyberfeminism” (112).

<sup>266</sup> Hansen, Mark B. “Digitizing the racialized Body or the Politics of Universal Address,” *SubStance*, Vol 33, No 2, Issue 104: Special Section: Contemporary Novelist Lydie Salvayre, pp 10 7-133.



Bill Graber, a man posing as a gay woman.<sup>267</sup> Only a day earlier, Tom MacMaster, a 40-year old American doctoral student studying at Edinburgh University confessed to posing as a lesbian woman who was kidnapped by Syrian security forces. While these are extreme examples, they illustrate the ways in which cyberspaces can be manipulated and compromised and encourage us to inhabit these spaces with caution.

While the dangers of disembodiment and identity tourism are not my primary concerns in questioning black female blogs as safe spaces, I feel it is necessary to point out. My major concern in questioning the safety of black female authored blogs germinates more from the contentions inherent in discussions centered around a raced and gendered dialogue. Invariably, the space is at risk of becoming contentious whenever systems of power such as race, class and sex are at play with one another. Tami, author of the blog, *What Tami Said*<sup>268</sup> posed an important question: “What would a safe online/offline feminist space look like?” It is important to note she is referring particularly to feminist sites run by white women that are inclusive of (some) women of color topics. However, with issues of identity tourism and disembodiment always at play, one can never assume a self-identified “woman of color” space is any more safe than a “white” space on the Internet. What happens when this safe space is compromised? Inevitably, everyone will not share the same politics and ideologies and the comment section has the potential of becoming a hostile environment. For Tami, to ensure a safe online feminist space, editors of the site and the blog community (readership) would also be well-versed

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<sup>267</sup> Paula Brooks, executive editor of the US-based lesbian and gay news site *LezGetReal*, was exposed on Sunday as being a fake identity created by Bill Graber, who now says he is a 58-year-old from Dayton, Ohio.

<sup>268</sup> Tami self-identifies as a black female however, it is important to keep in mind the possibilities of identity tourism.

in theories of interlocking systems of power. (I would add that if the readership is not “well-versed” at least very invested in learning.) This tenant is critical in maintaining a safe space because often times it is the readers/commenters, not the blog authors, who create the hostile environment. The blog would “proactively seek to showcase a diverse group of voices,” because multiplicity in women’s experiences must be represented. The comment section would be well moderated and the editors would be active participants in the dialogue as to diffuse any potentially threatened readers. In my interview with Demetria L. Lucas, she spoke to blog author moderation being a key tenant to ensuring a safe, positive space:

I think something the better bloggers do, like I regulate...well starting out, I used to regulate in the comments. So if people were just nasty or vindictive or something like that, I’d erase the comments or I’d go into the comment and say, this is not acceptable. Like, if you don’t agree attack the argument, not the person. Jamilah [Lemieux] also does the same thing on her blog. You really want people to be able to come and express and feel safe. You kind of set the tone. Like I was never, I never wrote about anything nasty or like personal attacks on people. I’ll critique what you do all day but I’m not going to call another woman or another person out [of] their name. You set the tone as a writer for what’s acceptable and expected of people trying to have that sort of discourse.

While in Lucas’ case, where her readership is predominantly black and the nasty comments are typically written by (arguably) black women, Tami explains that those women of color who read the larger feminist blogs will always have “those days and those conversations that leave us feeling alienated and frustrated.” She believes until that changes, “for the foreseeable future” women of color will need their own safe spaces to talk about gender *and* race.<sup>269</sup> I would adjust that to say, *regardless* of the cultural climate, women of color, in this case women of African descent, need to have those safe

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<sup>269</sup> Tami, “Feminists, Womanists and Safe Spaces,” What Tami Said website, <http://www.whattamisaid.com/2010/04/feminists-womanists-and-safe-spaces.html> (accessed June 26, 2011).

spaces, to which they can retreat. Unfortunately, no matter how progressive the feminist blogosphere may become in the future, safe woman-centered (cyber)spaces that cater to our specific needs as black women allow us to release and reflect upon our daily lives outside of the blogosphere. A space that *is* often hostile and alienating for black women.

It is also important to point out that while the safety of an Internet space cannot be guaranteed, virtual communities can be safer than physical interaction in regard to self-expression. Pertaining to women in general and women of color in particular, anonymity serves as an important layer of protection when navigating highly politicized, raced and or gendered spaces. Our placement in cyberspace—particularly in using social media—ensures our ability to be tracked, particularly for women of color because we must keep in mind the ways in which social media is dictated by race, gender and sexuality—the anonymity of cyberspaces has often unleashed new levels of sexist discourse, cyber sexual harassment and other problems. With technological applications such as the iPhone’s location services<sup>270</sup> and Facebook Timeline,<sup>271</sup> this same information that allows us to learn about each others lives and cultures can also be used to threaten marginalized bodies. “In a society organized by and for men, we need to be mindful of how technology in general, and social media in particular, impacts different bodies differently.”<sup>272</sup> A public archive of a woman’s history such as Facebook Timeline leaves her vulnerable to

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<sup>270</sup> Location services tracks your location allowing you to get directions, check yourself into a location on websites such as Facebook and Foursquare, locate businesses of interest, in addition to numerous other services.

<sup>271</sup> Facebook Timeline is an application which when activated gives Facebook members ability to now create virtual life autobiographies online.

<sup>272</sup> Renina Jarmon, “On the Racial and Gender Implications of Facebook’s ‘Timeline’,” New Model Minority blog, <http://newmodelminority.com/2011/09/27/on-the-racial-and-gender-implications-of-facebooks-timeline/> (accessed August 20, 2011).

violence and explains why many bloggers may feel more comfortable blogging anonymously.

Assuming that all of the inhabitants are who they claim to be—black women—another issue that needs to be addressed is the ways in which policing and exclusionary tactics can compromise positive browngirl (cyber)spaces as well. In her article, “The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women’s Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video,” Shanara Reid-Brinkley discusses the notion of black female safe spaces being “free of surveillance of dominant group members,”—white people and black men. She warns us against “romanticizing subjugated people, as efforts to resist are implicated in the very spaces of power they act against.”<sup>273</sup> In other words, there are theoretically no spaces completely free of policing, therefore all spaces are potentially hostile and “can serve as exclusionary even within the internal confines of black women’s communities.”<sup>274</sup> Reid-Brinkley goes on to provide a more detailed explanation:

Some women are excluded from these safe spaces based on their failure to perform what is considered appropriate femininity by the standards of the black community, in general, and of other black women in particular. Those women who step outside the boundaries of the construction of femininity within black culture can be excluded from these “safe spaces” as a means of reinforcing the normative practices of black femininity.<sup>275</sup>

As Reid-Brinkley asserts, in the Golden Era, a time before the Internet, it was critical for browngirls to “accede to the process of normalization” because unfortunately, in comparison to the alternative—silence—it is far less constraining than the spaces

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<sup>273</sup> Reid-Brinkley, 244.

<sup>274</sup> Reid-Brinkley, 241.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

controlled by the “the black community” and dominant society at large.<sup>276</sup> The ability to write our stories into existence leads to a cathartic and healing process for brown girls who have been previously rendered voiceless and invisible; no longer silenced or waiting to read that book, see that movie or hear that song that speaks to us, speaks *for* us. Culturally specific blogs, e-zines and social media applications can provide a healing space, a growing space, an introspective and thoughtful space. As Daniels’ articulates, “Many individual women outside any formal political organization experience the Internet as a ‘safe space’ for resisting the gender oppression that they encounter in their day-to-day lives offline.”<sup>277</sup> Additionally, it has the potential to serve as a ‘safe space’ where black women can find social support and learn from one another’s experiences. I received varying responses from my survey respondents about their feelings on blogs and social media sites as a means of social support. However, most of the women felt it was, in fact, a good means of finding support. One respondent stated, “I think it's a fantastic vehicle through which to provide additional support to sisters.” Feeling similarly, another wrote, “I definitely feel blogs can be a form of social support for women of African descent. You get to see someone else's point of view and the responses to that point of view, all of which help you look at things differently or see another side of something.” Demetria L. Lucas speaks to the ways in which blogs offer a more realistic form of social support for everyday black women than other mediums such as television:

I mean you can't, it's hard to turn on the TV and see a positive image of black women. And as much as the reality shows might be entertainment or like The Game on BET. It's not very positive. Those are not the type of women you

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Daniels, 108.

relate to. The type of woman, her stories are dramatic and you're waiting to hear duh, duh, duh, dooo...what happens next?

But the blogs are really a place women have had to express their voice. I understood pretty early on that my blog, you know I just started writing about my life, my observations and my thoughts but things happened, like these cultural moments. Like for instances when Whitney Houston died, I wrote about it on Essence. People just wanted a place to go, like a safe space they could go and express their thoughts and someone else, felt how they felt. Like it reflected back to them that their feelings were normal. These are the same experiences all people go through, they're not alone in the world. And here is this other place you can come back, if you come back you can discuss on a regular basis with the same people, the same issues, like-minded people. Or at least if they don't agree they're at least respectful or have an opinion that makes sense. You don't have to agree with it but you understand where they're coming from. But it provides this social arena...exchange ideas and build upon one another and also just to share your craziness, your randomness. Other people are doing it too.<sup>278</sup>

Black women are able to connect with other black women around issues that affect them and find comfort and validation in knowing these are shared experiences. The call and response nature and the interconnectedness of the Internet “draws participants into ongoing discourses on issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics, and the textual process of self-expression without the prohibition or limitation of physical space” and “offers new possibilities for women’s agency and empowerment.”<sup>279</sup>

Keeping issues of identity tourism and policing in mind, at their best, these spaces serve in some capacity as respites—places to recover strategies for coping, healing and sharing. The rules previously in play regarding sexuality, class, color, religion or ethnicity no longer have to serve as a “means of distinguishing appropriate and inappropriate performances of black femininity.”<sup>280</sup> The focus on the “disciplining of black women’s identity”<sup>281</sup> is de-emphasized and with this, comes real talk and truth-

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<sup>278</sup> Lucas, interview.

<sup>279</sup> Fereshteh Nourai-Simone, *On Shifting Ground: Middle Eastern Women in the Global Era*, The Feminist Press at CUNY (2005), 61-62.

<sup>280</sup> Reid-Brinkley, 242.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

telling—open, honest, and many times cathartic dialogues around issues that we have previously sequestered and suppressed. Additionally, culturally and gender specific blogs “construct discursive communities within ‘safe spaces’ and through their interaction with masculinist, racist, classist and heteronormative American society.”<sup>282</sup> This role of “interrogating the normative discourse of black femininity” previously played mainly by black feminist critics can now be negotiated and reimagined by any black women with computer access. By rejecting the normalized notions of black female sexuality and acknowledging and confronting the “taboo” black women are adding dimension and fluidity to the static notions of black female sexuality.

An example of this freedom to speak our minds without the fear of being ostracized occurs on the blog *Zora & Alice*. The author of *Zora & Alice*, Arielle Loren, has a section titled “Sexuality” where she invites readers to ask her anything on sexuality. In her opening post announcing the new topic she states,

There is no question too outrageous, weird, or “stupid” for this column. I hope to discuss everything from homosexuality and polyamory to sex tips and masturbation. As black women, I find that a lot of our sexuality curiosities go “unspoken” and run rampant through our imaginations without a tangible answer. I want this column to be your outlet.

Her commitment to take seriously and answer *anything* is reinforced in her honest and candid approach to a question regarding “fisting,” also referred to as “handballing,” the sexual act of inserting a hand into the vagina or rectum.<sup>283</sup> The question: “How would you suggest preparing for more intense sexual play like fisting? Also, how should I talk about this type of kink with future partners? The issue tends to ostracize a lot of

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Wikipedia, “Fisting,” Wikipedia website, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisting> (accessed Nov 22, 2010).

people at first.” I quoted this response at length because it reinforces her commitment to answering anything:

I’m not going to even front like I have an answer to this question. I had to call in a renowned kinkstress for this one. May I introduce, Aura Dynamo, the blogger behind The Domme Diaries and a certified Bondage Dominance/ Discipline Sadism (BDSM) expert. When it comes to kink, I couldn’t think of a better person to weigh in on this question, so Aura take it away...

*Although I am a Domme, there are some areas of play that I don’t engage in. It just doesn’t move my “jazz hands” in this case. BUT far be it from me to say that you should or shouldn’t get into it. When I think of fisting, I do happen to think of BDSM first and secondly, the LGBT realm where it is not that taboo. However, all genders and lifestyles are openly and increasingly expressing kink, whether they are doing it or not. Despite who may be the players in this scenario, SAFE, SANE and CONSENSUAL communication and doing are the first steps to kink and any other sensually fun play.*

*“How should I talk about this type of kink with future partners?”*

*I can’t tell you what to say in regards to a verbal introduction, but you could begin the dialogue by watching adult inclined cinema (porn) together that contains such elements of excitement (although most adult movies miss the element of sensuality but that’s another topic). That could be one route you could take in handling this delicate subject (polite pun intended).*

*As far as preparation goes, whether it’s vaginal or anal, I would strongly suggest a lubricant and some latex gloves. (Side tip: if anal play ensues, I’d suggest introducing an enema prior to play or not eating for at least 4-5 hours prior, so there will be “less mess”) For the lubricant, USE LOTS OF IT, water-based or silicone contingent upon your body chemistry. Some lubes actually can irritate. For the gloves, black or dark purple are very sexy colors as opposed to the standard white, but this protection measure isn’t necessarily about “fashion,” it’s about being safe. Also, discuss a “safe word” between you and your partner, a word that is NOT commonly used in your regular discussions.*

*To start, engage in sensory play (e.g. caressing the body, becoming intimate on that frontier, dirty talk or whatever gets the sensual juices flowing). Once you reach an optimum sensual position with your partner, you could begin the moment by inserting one finger at a time all the while paying attention to your partner’s body language. YOU DO NOT WANT TO FORCE THE SITUATION. After you get all the fingers comfortably inside, you can “duck bill” your hand SLOWLY into a fist all the while still observing your partner’s body language (keeping the sensuality in play throughout). Overall, communication is the comment credo to this kinky realm of play (and all others as previously stated).*

Arielle speaking again...when I said ask me ANYTHING on sexuality, I meant what I said. You can read more about what inspired me to start my weekly Q&A column [here](#) and submit your questions anonymously for future posts [here](#).

NOW I KNOW Y’ALL LIKE TO BE SILENT IN THE COMMENTS ON “TABOO” SUBJECTS LIKE THIS. I heard crickets on last week’s post on [anal sex](#). Since you can comment anonymously in the same way that you can



submit questions, let's get the conversation going! Whether you think kink is cool or gross, drop your thoughts!<sup>284</sup>

By reinforcing her commitment to answering anything on sexuality and reinforcing this commitment at the end of her response, she establishes a level of trust from her readers and participants. As one can see from the reference to “hearing crickets on last week’s post,” this is indeed still taboo and often times foreign terrain for many women. This section of the blog was just initiated September 27, 2010, less than two months before this question being posted. While there has been few responses by blog followers, it is most important to note the presence of a space which *strives* to be “safe” and open to those women who step outside the hetero-normative boundaries of black femininity within black culture. So while more physical spaces force us to police our own thoughts, actions and participation in browngirl community building, a platform such as cyberspace allows for more freedom of uncensored expression, whether that be prompted by ourselves or others. Women of the Hip Hop generation are just beginning to embrace their sexual identities without apology. Many of my friends have experienced an arrested exploration of their sexuality only to experience a sexual awakening in their thirties and forties. As grown women they are acknowledging their needs and allowing themselves to experience feelings of sexual liberation rather than shame or dissemblance. These are not new thoughts rather, through the bravery of a select group of black female representatives, the less bold are given license to express their sexuality without fear of rejection by the majority.

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<sup>284</sup> Arielle Loren, “Ask Arielle,” <http://zora-alice.com/2010/10/ask-arielle-how-do-you-prepare-for-more-intense-sexual-play-like-fisting/> Zora & Alice blog (accessed November 22, 2010).

Kortney Ryan Ziegler explains the ways in which browngirls can use the Internet as a storytelling space; tell their own truths of negotiating gender, race and place in their everyday lives:

I thus encourage women from all backgrounds to tell their own stories. Whether one decides to create a blog, write an essay, direct a film, or engage in academic research, the possibilities for retelling “the hunt” are endless. Every paper I write, film I produce, or academic work I create represents an act of self-definition—giving me power to define my politics, my beliefs, and my sexual identity, while demonstrating that black women and other women of color are intellectually capable of reflecting upon our own experiences. Indeed, expressing oneself is one of the most powerful forms of freedom and activism—and the Web is one of the most powerful public forums for that expression.<sup>285</sup>

Blogging is a wonderful and revealing way to piece together fragments of the browngirl’s thought processes, experiences and reflections on life. Lana Dawes, a contributing editor to the Race and Ethnicity section on Blogger.com believes that there are still spaces for newcomers to fill. “In terms of a critical narrative on socio-political issues, we’re seeing a lot of good writers, [but] I’d like to see more alternative voices. Black women bloggers are getting out of the ghettoization of black gossip sites, and are finding other things in the world that are really of importance and that we need voices for.” Gena Haskett of the blog Out on the Scoop, believes that black women especially can benefit “emotionally and materially from the interconnectedness, community, and authority offered by blogging.”<sup>286</sup> I am interested in the ways in which black female memoir and personal blogs can guide readers towards a consciousness about the multiplicity of black women’s lives. How do we see ourselves? How do we feel about

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<sup>285</sup> Kortney Ryan Ziegler, “From Where I Sit: Academic Blogging as Cultural Exchange,” Association of American Colleges and Universities website, [http://www.aacu.org/ocww/volume36\\_2/fromwhereisit.cfm?section=2](http://www.aacu.org/ocww/volume36_2/fromwhereisit.cfm?section=2) (Accessed November 1, 2011).

<sup>286</sup> Mandisa Washington, “The State of Black Women in the Blogosphere,” The Griot website, <http://www.thegriot.com/news/the-state-of-the-black-womens-blogosphere.php>, (accessed October 31, 2010).

the way others see us and how they portray us? What are the definitive contributing scripts to the person we have become? It is a space “to name and create her own image of herself.”<sup>287</sup> Brown girls are rendering themselves seen and heard on their own terms. Creating themselves. This is the future. The base broadens the nature of the communication network and continues to complicate it with each new technological innovation. In turn, all black women have authority to tell our stories on our own terms, challenge negative images and replace them with positive ones. Additionally, they are given the opportunity to actualize black woman-centered and empowered spaces in a way that is not currently possible in the corporeal world.

### **A Blog of One’s Own: Brown girl’s in the Blogosphere:**

Because this is MY space. I create it, I cultivate it, I grow it, it is mine. Well, really it is both mine and ours because I share with you all.<sup>288</sup>

—RENINA JARMON, *The Model Minority*

I just started writing about my life, my observations and my thoughts but things happened, like these cultural moments.... People just wanted a place to go, like a safe space they could go and express their thoughts and someone else, felt how they felt.... And here is this other place you can come back, if you come back you can discuss on a regular basis with the same people, the same issues, like-minded people.... it provides this social arena...exchange ideas and build upon one another and also just to share your craziness, your randomness. Other people are doing it too.

—DEMETRIA LUCAS, *A Belle in Brooklyn*

In this section I look at several blogs authored by women who came of age during the mid-1980s and 1990s including Jamilah Lemieux’s *The Beautiful Struggler* and Demetria L. Lucas’ *A Belle in Brooklyn*, locating salient themes across black

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<sup>287</sup> Esturoy, 137.

<sup>288</sup> Renina Jarmon, “Blogging + Social Media + Dating as a Black Feminist,” *The New Model Minority* blog, <http://newmodelminority.com/2011/10/11/blogging-social-media-dating-as-a-black-feminist/> (accessed August 19, 2011).

women's blogs. Viewing the blogs through the lens of the bildungsroman allows us to understand them as narratives of self-discovery. These blogs serve as yet another medium through which to gain insight into the important moments, cultural events, and scripts coloring the lives of black women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. First, I will discern between "feminist" blogs and lifestyle blogs then the discuss the interesting phenomena in which black women seem to gravitate towards a hybrid of the two—allowing for nuanced critiques of everything from popular culture, economics and politics. Intersectionality is a critical component coloring all of the blogs, even in cases where it is not explicitly stated. Other salient themes include black female representation, black female sexuality and black women and love relationships.

Where I seemed to find a disconnect is with what I will discern as black cyberwomanist blogs and black female lifestyle blogs. Again, mimicking real life, there seems to be a division among the browngirls who frequent the overtly feminist blogs and those frequenting the lifestyle blogs. Overtly black feminist blogs seem to operate on the fringe, whereas the most popular lifestyle blogs focusing on beauty, fashion, celebrity gossip, and entertainment seem to dominate the black female blogosphere. The suggestion of such was reiterated by my survey respondents when asked to name their favorite and most frequented blogs. While only one of them named a cyberwomanist site, an overwhelming number of them listed lifestyle blogs The Young, Fabulous and Black, Concrete Loop and Bossip as their favorites. As a result, instead of widening the one-dimensionality of black female images, in many online spaces, we are reifying these representations much in the same way it occurs in the physical world. And much like in

the real world, we return to the question, How do we cultivate a black female centered frame work in the lives of everyday women?

Interestingly, although feminism was only mentioned by six percent of the survey respondents, the majority of the interests were black, woman-centered and imbued with political undertones. However, when asked if there were any topics currently misrepresented, underrepresented or not represented at all, just under half of the respondents (47%) answered yes and the majority of the topics they mentioned had a female and political consciousness. For example, one respondent wrote, “Probably STD's. They are common among all groups, but I've noticed that black women are underrepresented when it comes to this topic. I've been blogging about my experiences with this recently, so I hope I can fill some of that void.” Another respondent wrote, “I need to see more blogs on women in Hip Hop or with women writing as aficionados of Hip Hop.” Statements such as these reinforce the notion many post soul, post-civil rights black women do not necessarily embrace the feminist label but value feminist concepts such as female centeredness, empowerment, and equality as central to their life scripts.

Blogs authored and managed by black women that privilege discussions around the intersections of race, gender, and class among other systems of power, illustrate cyberwomanist practices and their abilities to create and foster alternative browngirl spaces. It is within these cyberwomanist spaces interrogating black female lived realities and using an intersectional approach, where we can begin to construct a practical black woman-centered framework. The Crunk Feminist Collective, a multi-authored blog, serves as one such example of women of color (predominantly of African descent)

creating a positive woman-centered space. Indicative of its name, while the blog focuses on popular culture, there is no mistaking its political and feminist consciousness. Being multi-authored illustrates the blogs emphasis on collaboration and community.

Additionally, a collaborative, multi-authored blog such as the Crunk Feminist Collective indicated the possibilities of facilitating a transnational woman-centered network throughout the African Diaspora.

Racialicious, is another multi-authored blog defined as and dedicated to the “intersection of race and pop culture.”<sup>289</sup> The blog was founded by Carmen Sognonvi and Jenny Chau, although the current owner/editor is a black female, Latoya Peterson. Peterson, a self-described Hip Hop feminist, has been published on several online sites such as Clutch Magazine, Vibe, Spin and TheRoot.com and regularly speaks on topics of race, gender, and social media. While the blog is dedicated to issues of race, gender, and sexuality, it is not specific to black women and features a multi-cultural staff.<sup>290</sup>

However, most of the topics are relevant to women of color and many black women more specifically. Andrea J. Plaid, also a black female, serves as the blog’s sexual correspondent, “explor[ing] the crucial nexus of race and sex in popular culture.” While Andrea does not write solely on black female sexuality, her perspective is colored by her positioning as a black female.

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<sup>289</sup> Racialicious, “About This Blog,” Racialicious blog, Racialicious.com (accessed March 3, 2012).

<sup>290</sup> Both of the founders identify as multi-racial. Carmen Van Kerckhove-Sognovi’s mother is Hong Kong Chinese and her father Belgian while Jen Chau’s mother is white Jewish and her father Chinese. Unlike any of the other blogs discussed, multi-cultural staff is comprised of both men and women. Latoya Peterson (Owner/Editor) is a black woman, Arturo R. Garcia (Managing Editor) is of Latino descent, Andrea J Plaid (Sexual Correspondent) is a black woman, Jessica Yee (Special Correspondent) is Asian, Fatemah Fakhraie (Special Correspondent) writes on issues from her perspective as an Iranian-American woman on Islamic feminism, Islam, and race, Joseph Lamour (Fashion Correspondent) is a black man.

A few of the sites I researched approach topics like fashion, popular culture, and love relationships from a female and political consciousness—a sort of cyberwomanism discussed earlier on in the chapter. It is in this border space I see the black woman-centered discourse of Salt-n-Pepa, MC Lyte and Queen Latifah that we grew up on, being enacted. Additionally, this space is critical to the cultivation of a brand of black female empowerment speaking not only to those of us who grew up in the Golden Era but also serving as a bridge to reaching the next generation of browngirls and women. Currently, there are several online sites that have responded to this Internet void. Such spaces include online magazines like Clutch and Parlour and blogs such as The Crunk Feminist Collective, Curly Nikki (a natural haircare blog geared towards women of African descent), The Beautiful Struggler and A Belle in Brooklyn among others. Clutch, describes itself as “Ushering in the New Era for Young, Contemporary Women of Color”<sup>291</sup> and provides critiques on love relationships, politics, black female representation and popular culture. With titles such as “The D\*ck Recession,” “Feeling Bad: Why We Hate J. Hud’s Weight Watcher Commercials,” and “The Gender Politics of Aaliyah,” Clutch appeals to contemporary, politically conscious black women. It is an interactive website allowing its’ readers to store, “tag” or share links through Facebook, Twitter and Yahoo. As a collaborative space, Clutch’s relationship with social media allows black women to establish and maintain rich connections with other black women throughout the Diaspora via their site. Many of the writers for the Internet magazine such as Jamilah Lemieux and Demetria L. Lucas, also host blogs of their own and contribute

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<sup>291</sup> Clutch Magazine, “About Us” Clutch Magazine website, [www.clutch.com/aboutus](http://www.clutch.com/aboutus), (accessed at September 8, 2011).

to other blogs focusing on black women's issues. Another online magazine, serving as a metaphor for a space where people can sit back, talk and relax, Parlour describes itself as "an online destination for women seeking the best in global culture, news, style and music." Parlour describes the black female writers of the blog as "progressive women with a thirst for knowledge, a passion for new ideas and impeccable style." Additionally, the online space they have created is a "place for them to share their viewpoints, talents and discoveries."<sup>292</sup> They are clear to describe this space as comfortable and homey and inclusive of women throughout the blackDiaspora.

Curly Nikki is another site with a cult following of black women in need of hair support. In conducting my research on black women's knowledge and use of blogs, several of the women listed hair care blogs as types of blogs they visited regularly. Curly Nikki provides useful information and allows for readers to engage in a conversation around different textures of hair in a non-divisive environment. Hair is an important issue for black women and Curly Nikki provides social support to women of color who are currently or transitioning to natural hair. In addition to Nikki's daily posts, the site includes product reviews, styling techniques, personal narratives and a community forum where women can post questions about natural hair and share their hair stories.

This is just a small representative sampling of all the sites in the blogosphere catering to contemporary black women. Though we are seeing a plethora of black female bloggers, many of them are in their late-Twenties and early Thirties—placing them on the cusp of my age range. This age marker, while not substantial is interesting to mention for

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<sup>292</sup> Parlour, "About," Parlour Magazine website, <http://parlourmagazine.com/about-2/> (accessed September 8, 2011).



a couple of reasons. I can attest that the difference between my 29 year old self and my 35 year old self—a mere six year difference in age—is huge in terms of my growth, experiences and outlook on life. For me, it was the difference between beginning a family and raising a family and being a newlywed and being one of few friends who have not experienced divorce. So while I am seeing a (relatively) abundant group of diversified black female Twentysomethings (perhaps it is the full boom of digital media for Generation Y-ers) popping up all over the blogosphere, popular blogs documenting the experiences particular to black women well into their Thirties and beyond, parenthood—with or without a partner, the politics of being a stay at home mother vs. a working mother, surviving divorce/cancer/infidelity/etc, dating after divorce or the myriad of other life experiences that inform our life scripts is much harder to come by.

Quite possibly for those of us who came of age earlier in the Golden Era are at a slight disadvantage when it comes to achieving computer literacy. As an example, one of my closest girlfriends who is 36 asked me what exactly an iPod is and a few others have just recently “stepped up their cell phone games” because the 12 button keypad just was not meeting the requirements of a busy life. I realize these examples fall far from center however, I make this point to show you, as a generation of black women dealing with busy work schedules, children, household duties, among other things, staying hip to the latest technological breakthroughs is often times reduced to texting, Facebook status updates, the occasional Tweet, and a thrice weekly perusing of our favorite websites and blogs. Reading, commenting, and engaging in thought provoking conversations online is time consuming enough, much less creating, maintaining and monitoring a blog of ones’

own. This may also contribute to why many of the more popular black female blogs are penned by late-Twenty and early-Thirty something women. For example, Jamilah Lemieux, creator of the blog *The Beautiful Struggler* and contributing writer to *Clutch* describes herself as being in her late twenties, Demetria L. Lucas of *A Belle in Brooklyn* recently celebrated her 32nd birthday and Helena Andrews, creator of the blog, *Bitch is the New Black* is in her “very early thirties.”

Andrews is a blogger who recently released a book, *Bitch is the New Black*, which is comprised of a collection of her blog posts from her blog of the same name. Andrews explains, “What I am trying to say about single black women in any urban environment is, you don't know them as well as you think you do. They may not know themselves as well as they think they do.” Andrews, like many other black female bloggers are shattering the stereotypical and one-dimension depiction of modern-day browngirls. “Everything is together. 'I'm fine. Perfect. Don't worry about me. Keep it moving. That is the trend,” Andrews says. “Put on new stilettos. Put on a mask of bitchiness.” But that image—prevalent in both the media and the workplace, Andrews believes—is “one-dimensional.”<sup>293</sup> Additionally, it only speaks to a segment—however large—of black women who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop. Demetria L. Lucas, known as “the black Carrie Bradshaw,”<sup>294</sup> and creator of the blog, *A Belle in Brooklyn* and book *A Belle in Brooklyn: The Go-To Girl for Advice on Living Your Best Single Life*, is a relationship guru for single black women empowering them by helping to redirect their

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<sup>293</sup> The Buzz, “Black, Successful and Lonely,” *The Root* website, <http://www.theroot.com/buzz/black-successful-and-lonely> (accessed September 3, 2011).

<sup>294</sup> A single thirty something journalist who wrote about being single in New York City on the HBO original series, *Sex in the City*.

focus from finding Mr. Right and their ticking time clocks to enjoy single life.

Interestingly, all three women are single and have no children and as a result, represent a specific dimension of contemporary black womanhood. I make a point to mention this because while this project is about black women who came of age during the Golden Era of Hip Hop, it is necessary to identify and understand the ways in which our life scripts shift as we move from one life stage to another, resulting in new intricacies and dimensions of black womanhood. As a result, locating black female lifestyle blogs which spoke to black motherhood in addition similar issues of (black) female representation, platonic and love relationships and fashion and beauty from a black female centered, politically conscious standpoint remains difficult. There are blogs such as MochaMothers.com (a website with a blog component), cocoamamas.com, a self described “mommy blog” and *My Brown Baby*, a multi-authored blog which speaks to the “nuances of parenting, pregnancy and managing personal time.” Unfortunately, for the purposes of this project, blogs such as these operate much more heavily through the lens of motherhood, while adding an important layer, giving little insight into the dimensionality of black women *outside* of her role(s) as a mother.

While there is a plethora of blogs authored by black women from which to choose, I had to narrow down the qualifying characteristics in order to conduct a detailed analysis while still getting a solid idea about what is most important to black women of my generation. As I mentioned earlier, the blogs topics my survey respondents mentioned being most interested in were mostly lifestyle based: black (natural) hair, entertainment and celebrity gossip (both black and general), black love relationships and

marriage, race, culture, fashion, health and beauty. I wanted the bloggers to be as similar to my respondents as possible, so I chose two blogs based on the age of the blogger, the blogs' content (post topics and reader comments) and popularity. It was important that the blogs had enough popularity to garner a faithful readership and substantial interaction in the comment areas. Lastly, the blogs needed to have a socio-political component as well. While I am all for my fashion and celebrity gossip "fixes" (and I think their popularity with my demographic certainly says something about other black women as well), this study is particularly interested in how the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality and age in the lives of Hip Hop generation black women shape their ideologies and life choices, ultimately revealing a more comprehensive picture of who they are as a group. Unfortunately, fashion and celebrity blogs do not typically or consistently complicate the larger discussion of who black women are or how they became that way. The idea of raking through months, and in most cases years, of blog posts seemed overwhelming so instead I chose ten blog posts from each blog and conducted a content analysis of each to determine the salient characteristics and themes from each of the entries looking for consistencies and incongruencies. The two blogs I chose were *The Beautiful Struggler* and *A Belle in Brooklyn*. Black female relationships—platonic and love—in addition to black female representation and personal narratives of becoming take precedence in both of the blogs researched. Creative (in group) language, call and response, humor, cultural coding, signifying, and "real talk" are all intrinsic components of their blogging styles as well. Additionally, within this rubric, an intersectional politically and female empowered consciousness remains consistent.

## **The Beautiful Struggler: Culture. Love. War.**

Remember: Being a Black girl is sometimes very trying and wrought with strife...but it is also beautiful and multi-faceted and marked with occasions such as this and shaped by networks of women who support one another so lovingly. Don't let anyone paint us with one shade, especially not if that is the color of pain.

—JAMILAH LEMIEUX<sup>295</sup>

The Beautiful Struggler is a blog authored by Jamillah Lemieux, formally Sista Toldja.<sup>296</sup> Lemieux self-describes herself “the spiritual daughter of bell hooks and Wendy Williams—interested in Black power and happy hour, freedom and five-inch heels,” and describes the blog as giving readers, “an up close view of all the stunts, pratfalls, and revolutions of this artist/Earth mother/barfly/scribe.” Touching on everything from sex, love and romantic relationships to race, feminism, politics her language is infused with browngirl sensibilities serving as a model for the browngirls of the Reagan and Hip Hop eras now grown-up. Lemieux’s style is a delicate balance of discussions around serious cultural and political issues and black female musings that are reflective of Generation X and Y’s propensity to embrace theoretical frameworks steeped in everyday realities. “Toldja is a rising and rousing voice of the modern woman: no longer struggling to fit all her parts in a box and living beyond boundaries.”<sup>297</sup> This is a woman who can seemingly negotiate her feminism, penchant for all things fly and world politics.

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<sup>295</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, “Emergency HBGD: Black Girls Rock,” The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/2010/11/emergency-hbgd-black-girls-rock/> (accessed July 21, 2010).

<sup>296</sup> Jamillah has gone by the moniker Sista Toldja since 2005 but recently announced on October 19, 2011 she will be dropping the moniker and going by her real name, Jamilah Lemieux. Jamilah Lemieux, “The Death of Sister Toldja,” The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/2011/10/the-death-of-sister-toldja/> (Accessed November 21, 2011).

<sup>297</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, “About,” The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/about> (accessed November 16, 2010).

Created in April 2005,<sup>298</sup> Jamilah did not start posting regularly until October of 2006. The blog had three posts in November of 2005, one in December of that same year and a couple here and there sporadically through September of 2006 with October being the beginning of consistent posting. Over the course of the last 5 years, Lemieux's blog has gone through growing pains which are reflective of her own growth process. During this time, she went from being a leisure blogger to a professional blogger/writer whose numerous works can be found on Clutch.com, Essence.com and Jezebel.com among others. Lemieux falls on the younger end of my browngirl narratives age range, coming of age in the 1990s. However, in her biography she describes herself as "a Hip-Hop Denise Huxtable, who dreams of growing up to be Claire," placing her squarely in the Golden Era of Hip Hop timeframe.

The blog is set up in a user friendly way which allows you to scroll down through the post chronologically from most recent to oldest. Using the sidebar, you are able to view posts based on what is most popular, most current, readers' comments and related "tags" (keywords). Additionally, if you scroll down further on the sidebar, there is a list of categories—subject headings like Dirty Pop Culture, Feminist Fight, Mars/Venus, Politics/Politriks and Race Matters—which give the reader an understanding of the blogs content and focus. In analyzing the 10 random posts, I surmise The Beautiful Struggler's most salient themes are black love relationships, sexuality, and representation from a black female centered standpoint.

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<sup>298</sup> The blog was actually created in 1999 but only one post was written in 1999 and the next was not written until April of 2005 which Lemieux titled, "My First Blog" and begins the with, "Welcome! I'm all excited about having a blog! And while I should use my first post to introduce myself..."

Everything is viewed through a black female lens because Jamilah interjects herself fully into her posts we are able to catch a glimpse of her dominant scripts in conversation with other women of color with similar scripts. As a result, through a close reading we can piece together a portion of the browngirl narrative. If those posts are an accurate indicator, and I believe they are, Lemieux's most salient scripts are those informing black love relationships, tropes and stereotypes, feminism, the black family. Her self-identification as a black (political) woman pervades every entry. Her blog posts are very raw and exposed, self-reflexive and oftentimes reads like a diary revealing snippets of Jamila's coming of age narrative. In a recent post, on the day of rapper Heavy D's passing, Jamila wrote:

I often joke about being stuck behind a decade or two when it comes to Hip-Hop and well, I am. Much of the music I hold dear from 'back in the day' makes me feel good in ways that few contemporary artists can match. More than most other rappers from any time or sub-genre, Heavy D made songs that were loving and affirmative for women. Black women, specifically. I didn't know him personally, we never met, but I really do feel that he had a genuine love and appreciation for sisters and that matters to me. A lot.

I almost entertained the notion that Heavy paved the way for Drake because he was one off the first performers to have major success making Rap songs about girls. However, there is a stark difference between the two. Drake's "emo" thing is all about himself: his feelings, his insecurities, his pain as it relates to women. He's occasionally appreciative of women in ways that transcend simply "I like your body and I want to sleep with you" messages, but that's not so much the norm. Drake's sensitivity is to himself, where as Heavy was very bold in saying "I got nothing but love for you" to our women. Where in Hip-Hop do you go to find that these days? The past, more often than not.<sup>299</sup>

Situating herself as a black woman and part of a particular generation of Hip Hoppers, Jamila makes a comparison between rap from "back in the day" and what is being produced presently. She waxes poetic about the ways in which the Hip Hop community embraced black women and how Heavy D's music serves as a reflection of that. In

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<sup>299</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "Eternal Glom of the Cluttered Mind," The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/2011/07/Heavy-D-Dead-at-44/> (accessed November 14, 2011) (since removed).

doing so, Jamila speaks to the ways in which black women who came of age in the Golden Age experienced Hip Hop culture differently than brown girls and women do today.

Lemieux's self-reflexivity is best described as what Blogger refers to as "dirty little streams of consciousness." Her entry "Eternal Gloom of the Cluttered Mind"<sup>300</sup> on July 20, 2011 is a good example of how she takes a moment to pause every now and then to reveal a little of herself. This entry has a personal narrative quality and reads much like a journal entry. Additionally, it is a great example of the ways in which her blackness and femaleness is so central to her identity and dominant in her life scripts. However, what seems Lemieux seems to do best and sets her apart from other black cyberfeminist blogs is her ability to engage in a conversation around black female sexuality that is both sex-positive and bold without being too racy. It allows for even the most bashful of women to engage in the conversation.

In her October 16, 2010 post, "Let's Talk About Sex Positive 3: And Doing It Well" Lemieux discusses the importance of locating what you think about yourself is sexy. This is an exercise in practicing self-affirmation and becoming comfortable with your own body. Lemieux states, "If you can't disrobe for yourself without focusing 100% of your attention on what's wrong with you, then you will project that same lack of confidence to your partner."<sup>301</sup> This is an important step in achieving any sort of sexual

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<sup>300</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "Eternal Gloom of the Cluttered Mind," The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/2011/07/eternal-gloom-of-the-cluttered-mind/> (accessed November 14, 2011) (Since removed).

<sup>301</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "Let's Talk About Sex Positive 3: And Doing It Well" The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/2010/10/lets-talk-about-sex-positive-3-and-doing-it-well/> (accessed October 4, 2011.) This entry was a repost which originally appeared on November 5, 2009. (Since removed).



liberation and many women—black, Latina, Asian and white alike lack this self-confidence. Lemieux exposes herself to make her readers comfortable with a sex positive discourse focused on the secrets of good sex. Lemieux, however, does not approach this as a Cosmopolitan article on “How to Give Your Partner the Vapors,” but rather as a mature, informed sexual woman. In doing this, she takes us through her own process of self-discovery such as her initial realization sex is a “skill” she had to “learn,” a few jaunts through magazines, books and pornography, real talk about communicating with your partner and asking the difficult questions like: “*What is your favorite part of...*” and “*What can I do do make this better?*” Lemieux plunges into a useful conversation about communicating your needs, wants, likes and dislikes to your partner. Lemieux speaks to contemporary women who are looking to enhance their sexual lives when she simply states, “To better understand what turned my lovers on, I asked them.” However, this post is about more than quick fixes for an unfulfilled sex life. It speaks to the ways in which communication, in and out of the bedroom, fosters healthy, meaningful and satisfying relationships. Unfortunately, a history of silence, dissemblance, and misrepresentation around black female sexuality makes real talk about *our* sexuality a taboo topic. This inability to embrace our sexual selves and harness our erotic power is a manifestation of the ways we see ourselves in relationship to white standards of beauty. It is also a contributing factor to our identity formation process, sexual exploration and ability to self-actualize. Lemieux jumps right in, rationalizing us to, “Think about it this way: if you can open up your mouth to someone’s penis, you can open it to say, ‘You know what I would really like?’” She is able to interject humor much in the same way as

you and your girlfriends' do during your best heart to hearts. When things get a little heavy she interrupts the conversation with a captioned photo reading: "I didn't want it on my face and he should have just KNOWN that! Now I've gotta wash my hair and I'ma be late for work." As humorous as it may be, this statement speaks to our own inabilities to speak out about the things that we need and want from the relationships we manage daily. The fact that we are unable to ask, "What do you need?" and say, "This is what I need" is telling of our lack of stress on concepts such as reciprocity,

What I personally enjoy most is sharing a mutual experience: two people focused on both their personal pleasure and the pleasure of their partner. It doesn't matter if love or lust brought me to that bedroom ~~parking lot or playground~~, I'm bringing my A game and I feel that the person who gets the pleasure of my time should do the same. One of the highest compliments I ever got from an ex-lover was that he felt like sex with me was a give and take, whereas in the past, he always felt like he was either f\*cking or being f\*cked.<sup>302</sup>

Blog post titles like, "Bitter Little Pea: Wil.i.am's Bad Condom Policy,"<sup>303</sup> "Let's Wait Awhile," and "How Feminism Did Not Kill My Sexy"<sup>304</sup> are evidence Jamilah Lemieux's most salient theme is black female sexuality. There are few places we can see black female sexuality discussed and complicated in this way on the internet. Lemieux's use of a black feminist framework alongside matters of popular culture seems to flow easily and effortlessly.

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<sup>302</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "Let's Talk About Sex Positive 3: And Doing It Well."

<sup>303</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "Bitter Little Pea: Wil.i.am's Bad Condom Policy," The Beautiful Struggler website, <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/> (accessed March 9, 2012). (Since removed).

<sup>304</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "How Feminism Did Not Kill My Sexy," <http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/> July, 15, 2010 (accessed March 9, 2012) (Since Removed).

**A BELLE IN BROOKLYN: The Unintentionally Hilarious Adventures of a Southern Woman Living Way Too Far above the Mason Dixon Line.**

As mentioned throughout this chapter, Demetria L. Lucas, a.k.a “Belle” is the creator of the award winning blog, *A Belle in Brooklyn*.<sup>305</sup> Lucas recently released her first book which is based off of her blog is titled, *A Belle in Brooklyn: Your Go-To Girl for Advice on Living Your Best Single Life*. Lucas is a life and relationship coach and contributing writer to several online websites and magazines including TheRoot.com (Ask Demetria), Essence.com (Real Talk), VibeVixen.com and Uptown Magazine.com.<sup>306</sup> Additionally, she has worked as an editor and columnist for *Essence* Magazine and done freelance work for People, VIBE, XXL, Black Enterprise and ESPN the Magazine. What began as a blog is turning into a powerful business and brand for Lucas. As the creator of the ABelleinBrooklyn.com, Lucas, 32, has branded herself as the “go-to girl” on women’s issues such as relationship and female representation. While her female empowerment dogma and positive take on being “fabulously” single female transcends race, making it relatable for women of all colors, Lucas unfalteringly approaches her writing from a black female standpoint. When asked why she started blogging, Lucas responds,

I was looking for a place in the media where my friends and I were represented and I wasn’t finding it... I really liked Sex & the City and it had a big impact on me; I felt like so many of the issues that those four women were going through were things that I could relate to but it really bothered me that there were no Black women featured. It was like only White women have these lives and then you start talking about Black women and dating and it becomes something daunting and tragic instead of fun and adventurous and light... I was waiting around for another show, or a book, or a blog... something to give voice to what I

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<sup>305</sup> She was awarded “Best Personal Blog” by the Black Weblog Awards in 2010 and selected as one of the best blogs in the blogosphere by BlackEnterprise.com in 2011 among others. Lucas was also named in 2011 as one of “30 Black Bloggers You Should Know” by TheRoot.com and “The Best of Brooklyn” by Brooklyn News 12.

<sup>306</sup> All online magazines.

was feeling and it wasn't happening so I just started blogging and people started reading, and I kept on writing.<sup>307</sup>

Demetria L. Lucas interjects her own brown girl narrative into her blog posts similarly to Jamila Lemieux. This personal narrative style of writing is consistent with many of the other black female bloggers blogging on topics that inform our everyday lives like love relationships, black female representation and misogyny in Hip Hop culture to name a few. Glimpses into her girlhood give her readers a better understanding about the ways in which growing up in the Golden Era of Hip Hop informs her identity as a grown black woman. Additionally, many of her readers who came of age during the same time period find her relatability refreshing. In late 2006, when Lucas started *A Belle in Brooklyn*, there was not really anything else out there like it. Lucas believes, it was her ability, “just to be very honest about my experiences as a black woman, not to sugar coat things, not to throw guys under the bus.” She goes on to explain,

That was really important to building a male readership. Just be very honest about, you know, what was happening in my life and not being afraid to sort of use the cultural markers. To not be afraid to sort of use slang and the way that we actually talk to each other. Not to try and clean it up because “white” people were reading or something like that. I was very much talking to an audience who mirrored who I was. So, someone who was about my age, came up about the same time I did and had the same cultural markers. Like they saw *Boys in the Hood* or *Juice* or *Love Jones* around a certain age and was all of a sudden going to like, poetry clubs in college...<sup>308</sup>

It is within a space such as the one Lucas' has created black women are given permission to speak freely as black women uncensored. Additionally, the blog allows her readers validation as black women with similar experiences, a space to be self-reflective, and the opportunity to better understand and articulate their selfhood. Ultimately, Lucas' blog

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<sup>307</sup> Anslem Samuel, “Black Blogger Month: A Belle in Brooklyn, Making Relationships Work,” NonAmos website, <http://nonamos.com/black-blogger-month-a-belle-in-brooklyn-making-relationships-work/> (accessed Sept 30, 2011).

<sup>308</sup> Lucas, interview.

serves as a springboard for a larger more meaningful conversation to occur around issues that are essential to our existence as women of color.

In a recent post about the 1990s sketch comedy show, “In Living Color,” making a comeback in an updated form in 2012, Lucas shared her own memories about how the television show impacted her own girlhood:

“In Living Color” was my guilty pleasure, literally, in high school. I had to sneak to watch it with my bedroom door closed and the volume turned down because my mother thought it was crass. But how could I miss it, when everyone would be quoting or re-enacting all the memorable lines and characters? Or even better, when everyone was talking about what singer or rapper or group—Mary J. Blige, Tupac, Jodeci—would be performing on the show.<sup>309</sup>

She then goes on to explore what the show, a meaningful cultural moment for many of us, signifies for her as a grown black woman:

Back then, I didn’t realize just how good “In Living Color” was. So there’s a Black cast of comedians, and they’re funny? Great. Why wouldn’t they be? And who knew we were watching the work of Hollywood’s next A-list every Thursday night? “In Living Color” featured Jamie Foxx (a future Academy Award winner) and Jim Carrey, and the whole Wayans clan and Jennifer Lopez and choreographers Laurie Ann Gibson and Rosie Perez. It would take the ten years between “In Living Color’s” ending and the beginning of “The Chappelle Show” for me to realize what I had taken for granted.<sup>310</sup>

It is jaunts, such as this, down memory lane that allow browngirls, all grown up, to reflect back on girlhood with a renewed sense of understanding; to make sense of their life scripts as browngirls and women. While many of her readers are Thirtysomethings, Lucas’ identifies her readers to fall primarily between 21-35. During our interview she explained to me, “It’s skewing heavier from the 21-27 age group. But there’s a significant number of ‘older,’ 65% college educated. Most of them are either pursuing or have an education. [They are] scattered all over the United States...predominantly the

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<sup>309</sup> Demetria L. Lucas, “In Living Color Returns,” A Belle in Brooklyn blog, <http://www.abelleinbrooklyn.com/blog/?currentPage=3> (accessed November 22, 2011).

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

Northeast and other big cities. However, there is a strong following in London, Paris, Japan, and Africa—Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa.”<sup>311</sup> These statistics speaks volumes to the ways in which cyberwomanist blogs not only serve as spaces of social support but also a medium for the sort of bridge building from girlhood to women I have been speaking of throughout this project. What better way for younger and older black women to engage in an intergenerational dialogue?

The salient themes in Lucas’ blog, similar to Lemieux’s, revolve heavily around issues of black female representation. Setting herself apart from *The Beautiful Struggler*, *A Belle in Brooklyn* situates itself as more of a dating and relationship blog. As a relationship guru and trained life coach, Lucas’ background as a single, Thirtysomething black female expert on dating and relationships dictates the tone of the blog most heavily. Additionally, Lucas’ blog is constructed in such a way that her posts are heavily reliant on reader comments. She often times presents a topic for discussion and leaves the conclusion open-ended, ending the post with a simple, “Discuss.” This mindful approach works well because her blog is established and has a large reader following. Additionally, the reader comments are not just an afterthought but rather, an essential component to the conversation, giving valuable insight to the psyches of these black women. She does not come off overbearing or too opinionated, typically allowing the conversation to be dictated by readers’ thoughts and experiences, rather than critiques or attacks on their ideologies.

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<sup>311</sup> Lucas, interview.

Touching on a hotly debated subject, one example of the ways in which Lucas' presents a matter for discussion and encourages her readers to dictate the dialogue is her October 14, 2010 post, "What Black Men Think."<sup>312</sup> Here, Lucas' simply posts an entertaining YouTube.com video entitled, "What Black Men Think About How Women Think." In the cartoon, a black man and woman sit across the table from one another. The black woman begins, "Sisters, are you tired of being alone? Well, I am." To which the black man says, "What are you talking about? I'm right here." Completely ignoring his presence, the black woman asks, "Where are all the good black men? I just can't find one." Continuing to ignore the man sitting across the table from her, she goes on to list her credentials: "A Bachelor's degree from Spelman College and a JD/MBA from Wharton." When asked by the black man what she is looking for, she runs off a list of qualifications:

A man who earns six figures, a man who had integrity, good character, good credit and loves his mom.... A man who will pay all the bills but recognize I'm an independent woman.... A man who can take charge, lead and direct his household at least until I disagree with his direction. Then he must turn over his balls and give them to me because I'm a strong professional womanist. If he doesn't do this, I will take him for 25% of his gross income in the divorce settlement... A man who can make me laugh, who's a thug, that can fit in with the boys in the boardroom. A man who can kick it in the neighborhood and on the golf course. A man who can deal with all this energy and passion.... I want someone who is supportive and not threatened that I have a career and that I am a strong independent woman. A man who knows I don't need a man and will open doors and pay for every date we go on.... A man who won't bug me for sex more than four times a month.

The video highlights the contradictions inherent in being a contemporary professional black women, caught between the crosshairs of negotiating a feminist sensibility while enjoying many of the tenants of patriarchy. In a similar vein, Joan Morgan speaks to this

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<sup>312</sup> Demetria L. Lucas, "What Black Men Think," A Belle in Brooklyn blog, <http://www.abelleinbrooklyn.com/blog/?currentPage=28> (accessed November 14, 2011).

conflict when she asks, “Can you be a good feminist and admit out loud that there are things you kinda dig about patriarchy?”<sup>313</sup> It is this sort of forthrightness that allows us to embrace a black female-empowered view while realizing we are all a work in progress.

Touching upon the complexities of Hip Hop generation black women, like many of A Belle in Brooklyn’s readers, I could identify with much of the video. One reader wrote,

1:00 min mark \*dead\*

‘Then he must turn over his balls and give them to me...’

Uh ladies who would like to keep up this ‘woe is me, I need a man, want a man, don't need a man, can't find a man...I'ma go get a white man...’ You see what a fool we look???

Others left comments such as, “I think if you tried to argue that this isn't the funniest thing I've ever seen, I would respectfully disagree” and “Wow this is hilarious but oh so true. Black women can be all over the place at times.” The comments show the ways in which in a black woman-centered space such as this, women are able to speak freely and uncensored. As Lucas previously stated, “the blogs are really a place women have had to express their voice... [They] reflect back to them that their feelings were normal.”<sup>314</sup> As complicated as our feminism is, sometimes by simply being a black women immersed in contemporary culture, some topics just do not require nearly as much massaging.

While most readers could find the humor in this video clip, the single black female phenomenon remains be a touchy subject. I asked Lucas, as a relationship expert, what her thoughts were on the discourse around being single, black, and female to which Lucas responded:

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<sup>313</sup> Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 57.

<sup>314</sup> Lucas, interview.



Um, I have mixed feelings about that. Only because I feel like the topic is treated like, you know, single women are mass murderers or something. How we are entirely dysfunctional. How could this happen? And then it's also a very one-sided conversation. You know, people are wondering why single women, or heterosexual women are not marrying heterosexual men. The whole conversation is geared at what's wrong with women but it's not encouraging marriage among men. We're not talking to the guys about, you know, not wanting to wait until they're 40 to get married. We're not talking to them about getting their finances right, getting their house in order. We're just talking to women about here are the different ways you can jump through hoops and become a different person so that this man will accept you. When at the end of the day you can do everything right but if your partner is not working on himself as well then it's still destined for failure either way.<sup>315</sup>

Similar to the ways in which black men are not often part of the conversation in the Single Black Mother discourse, they are overwhelmingly absent in this conversation around the Single Black Female phenomenon.

Additionally, I asked Lucas how she felt about the notion of black women having unrealistic expectations as a factor in (some) women's inability to find a man who meets all of these contradictory requirements. Lucas agreed there are women with extraordinarily unrealistic expectations; "Things that are completely contradictory."

Women who don't want that guy that's going to be that alpha male but then we also want him to be sweet and compassionate. Those things don't exist well in the same person, you kinda have to choose which personality type works best for you. In my book I sort of call them A/B hybrids which are extraordinarily hard to come by.

She goes on to explain that in responding to over 17,400 questions in the last two years, she has found women to be "putting up with outrageous behavior" in the name of keeping a man. She goes on to explain,

So while these people are saying, you need to lower your expectations and change your standards, blah, blah, blah. I'm coming from the other side saying, on the ground level, talking to people being a life coach. I'm more encouraging people to raise their standards and to expect better treatment.

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<sup>315</sup> Lucas, interview.

Lucas throws out some statistics, “I think like 42% of women, black women being single, 60-70% of black women with higher education like MA, PhD or law degree or something are supposed to be single.” She comes to the conclusion that, “A lot of women have listened to those statistics and they’ve bought into them. It sort of makes a few people—a lot of people actually, crazy.” She goes on to detail the findings of an interesting study stating, “And for all of the conversation about it there was a study that came out of Howard and Moreouse that found that at the end of the day 75% of African American women are getting married at least once by the time they’re 35. So we’ve whipped all these women into this crazy panic and at the end of the day, 3 out of 4 people are going to walk down the aisle.”<sup>316</sup> It is important to make people aware of statistics such as these in an effort to gain an accurate depiction of the true realities of black women. Lucas’ makes it a priority to challenge these negative stereotypes about contemporary black women.

Tackling controversial topics regarding black female representation such as the Single Black Female phenomenon head on is common practice for Lucas. In another post from April 17, 2011, “Befriending While Black,”<sup>317</sup> Lucas addresses another common trope, The Angry Black Woman. She discusses black women’s discourse around befriending other black women. Lucas touches on the ways in which we, as black women, buy into stereotypical descriptions of ourselves such as “bitchy” and “ghetto” and challenges the depiction stating,

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Demetria L. Lucas, “Befriending While Black,” A Belle in Brooklyn [website, http://www.abelleinbrooklyn.com/blog/?currentPage=19](http://www.abelleinbrooklyn.com/blog/?currentPage=19) (accessed October 11, 2011).

Despite the negative images of grown Black women that are blasted all over our flatscreens ... I am yet to see Black women en masse behaving as TV ... depicts them. Of course, there are some people that act that way ... but I'd argue Black women who flip out, rudely confront, or ice-grill strangers are in the vast minority. Girls? Maybe. That's less about race/culture and more about teenagers (of all colors) testing the limits of social skills (see the all-white cast of *Mean Girls*.) But women? Eh...

Interestingly, Jamilah Lemieux wrote an article on the same topic for *Essence.com*, similarly challenging the Angry Black Woman syndrome stereotype we see all too often depicted on reality television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives*. In her article, Lemieux asserts,

Typical TV fare paints Black women's relationships as marked by bickering, hollering and backstabbing... you just might become convinced that Black women are one bottle of Moscato away from turning loud and mean, even with those we've known for years. These aren't the experiences I have when I get together with my sisters. My girls have dried my tears, moved me across state lines, helped me pay the bills, and taken care of me when I was sick. The beatdowns on reality TV aren't what I notice as I walk the streets of Brooklyn, where I see Black women laughing, living and loving one another.<sup>318</sup>

Another example of how Lucas' approaches black female representation in popular culture is her in her interrogation of the label "wifey." In her September 13, 2011 blog post, "Are You a 'Wifey'?"<sup>319</sup> she discusses the word "wifey," a street-slang term frequently used in rap and R&B lyrics. It was first introduced in 2000 by the group Next in their song "Wifey" and has become so common, it's oftentimes negative connotation is rarely considered. Yet another contemporary black female trope, Lucas describes it as,

some sort of superwoman/porn star hybrid who cooks and cleans, rides or dies, and keeps a book open and her legs closed (except for her man, of course). She's also street smart (would never snitch, important to note as this is a street-term somehow gone mainstream), and loyal even to her own detriment... In essence, wifey is a pseudo-social rank for an important woman in a man's life, allegedly of greater importance than just another girlfriend. She's similar to a fiancée, but

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<sup>318</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "Don't Believe the Hate," *Essence Magazine*, April 2011, 155.

<sup>319</sup> Demetria L. Lucas, "Are You a Wifey?" A Belle in Brooklyn blog <http://www.abelleinbrooklyn.com/blog/?currentPage=14> (accessed November 14, 2011). Reposted by Lucas on A Belle in Brooklyn from Real talk: *Essence.com*

notably without the pending promise of a marriage or legally binding commitment, i.e., all the expectations/duties of a wife without ever being one.

Examining the term through a black female-centered lens, Lucas articulates the ways in which the word “wifey” has been adopted into the urban lexicon and contemporary black culture. Lucas draws attention to the concept being normalized in popular culture and encourages her readers to interrogate the male-centricity of the term.

So while Lemieux’s seems to take a sex-positive stance and her blog relies much more heavily on exploring sexuality and sexual expression, Lucas’ blog does not approach sex quite as forthright, focusing more on heterosexual romance and building healthy, positive relationships with ourselves, other women and the opposite sex. The juxtaposition of Lemieux’s sexually liberated, “I do not care who know knows” with Lucas’ “on a need to know basis” persona, speaks volumes to the range of diversity in black women’s views on and approach to black female sexuality and womanhood in the face of hypersexual mass media imagery surrounding black women.

Both women address black female representation head on, interrogating the ways in which black women are portrayed and perceived in popular culture. Lemieux’s “A Right to Be Hostile” and Lucas’ “Befriending While Black” both address the Angry Black Woman Syndrome—the bitchy, neck-rolling, finger-pointing, caricature with which we are all too familiar. Additionally, they address black female tropes such as “wifey,” which comes out of contemporary black music and the negative connotations inherent in The Single Black Woman Syndrome. These are just a few examples of how black female-authored blogs re-imagine black female representation permeating the Hip Hop landscape and the larger public imagination.

In closing, I asked Lucas how she thinks the new wave of reality shows alongside the content of Hip Hop and R&B these days will affect the identity formation of young black women of this new generation. Lucas maintains a positive mindset stating,

Umm, ya, sometimes they do internalize the messages they hear. I don't think it's the vast majority of women. I think the women who do crazy things and respond to Chris Brown's win at the Grammy's saying, 'Chris Brown can beat me anytime' like that's very salacious and very interesting. And so that's a new story. But I do not think that's the vast majority of women that are buying into that. Because yes, we grew up in the golden age of hip hop but we also grew up in the age of gangsta rap. The way things are right now—the bitches and hos is very much what came out of our generation—N.W.A., Ice Cube. Doggy Style came out when I guess I was a sophomore in HS. You know so it's like we have those influences as well. But I think, as young women, of course they're going to make mistakes. They're not going to do the smartest things. I mean just like every batch of women that came through and became fully grown women. But I don't think they listen to Nicki Minaj and think, 'I am a stupid ho, stupid ho, stupid, stupid ho.' I don't think that they internalize that image. They like her lipstick or the way she dresses or something like that. We had crazy people back in the day. They're not any crazier now.<sup>320</sup>

Lucas makes an important point about how many of the hypersexual, sexist, and misogynistic discourses, images, and musical lyrics present on the Hip Hop landscape today grew out of very specific cultural moments in the 1980s and 1990s. The largest difference I see is the ways in which we as young women coming of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop had the opportunity to counter those negative images with the pro-woman, sex-positive politics of black female artists such as Salt-n-Pepa, MC Lyte, Monie Love, Queen Latifah, Yo-Yo, TLC and others. While I believe there are political statements to be made in the fashion and musical hybridity of black women like Janell Monae, the fashion statements of Nikki Minaj, sexual prowess of Rihanna, and the “girls run the world” mentality of Beyonce, I find the spaces in which they exist a little more grayed, a little more difficult to interrogate. Quite possibly this is emblematic of yet

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<sup>320</sup> Lucas, interview.

another shift in the fourth or fifth wave of feminism. Just as Lucas asserts, I too feel young women currently are no better or worse off than we were during our golden age. Furthermore, with a place for young black girls and women to go and have these intergenerational conversations such as Lemieux's, Lucas,' and the number of other blogs mentioned in this chapter, they may be able to navigate the transition from girlhood to womanhood with more ease. Perhaps, as I mentioned earlier, if we had a (cyber)space such as these when I was coming of age—a space Lucas' describes as populated by “women who [are] in college, women who are seeking out information ... looking for who's the woman who's ahead of me, who has done what I'm trying to do and how can I get information from her,”<sup>321</sup>—our transition from girlhood to womanhood may have been a much smoother journey.

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<sup>321</sup> Lucas, interview.

**Chapter 5: Conclusion—Performing Moments, and Capturing Memories:  
But There is Still Work to Be Done**

‘I was doing every- and anything to it—putting in wads of gel and brushing it to the next century, and just thinking I was so cute,’ she says. ‘I always thought I had an eye for that stuff.’ She also had a philosophy: Hair allowed you to reinvent yourself, which was perhaps particularly critical to a little girl with big dreams and a troubled reality. ‘I had done something I thought was really, really, really cute, and I showed my neighbor,’ she says. ‘She was like, Why’d you do that to your hair? And I never forget what I said: I’m someone new in this hair.’

—NIKKI MINAJ interview with *Allure Magazine*<sup>322</sup>

I’m a total control freak, with my music. I write all my songs, if I don’t produce, I have a big hand in production and all of the music. And it’s because there’s really nothing freaky about controlling your own image.

—ERYKAH BADU<sup>323</sup>

Shapeshifting. Dream-walking. Border-crossing. Re-imagining, re-covering, re-writing. Browngirls have been doing this work to become “someone new in this hair” and to control our own images for quite some time now. *for colored girls who have considered suicide| when the rainbow is enuf* does it. Erykah Badu does it. Black girls blogging do it, too. The stories presented throughout this project illuminate some the ways in which black women are re-imagining themselves on the Hip Hop landscape and in the public imagination. Whether it be colored girls taking on the varied hues of the rainbow, the multiple personas Badu possesses—allowing her to operate as deejay, doula, black girl from the future, or the intimate details and moments revealed in secluded corners of cyberspace, black women of the Golden Era of Hip Hop are constantly showing us “someone new.”

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<sup>322</sup> Judith Newman, “Nicki Minaj: Her Allure Photo Shoot,” in Allure.com website <http://www.allure.com/celebrity-trends/cover-shoot/2012/nicki-minaj#slide=2> (accessed March 14, 2012).

<sup>323</sup> YouTube, “Rehearsal Space: Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e\\_NBxA8Xy0s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_NBxA8Xy0s) (Accessed June 14, 2011).

You might wonder why I chose these particular quotes to conclude this project. When I read the Nikki Minaj article in *Allure*, I could not help but think about my own struggle to (re)invent myself; create myself outside of the small white town in which I grew up. The statement: “I am someone new in this hair,” was something I could relate to. Growing up, my hair served in many ways as a marker of my own self-identity formation—the little black and Asian girl with unruly hair and a spitfire spirit; the defiant pre-teen struggling to “tame” my hair and fit in; the Afro rocking young woman embracing blackness or; the mother, sister, wife who has learned to embrace her hair in any state along with the intricacies and contradictions of being a grown black woman in the new Millennium. Self-definition is an important first step to empowerment, whether it be through hair, clothing, attitude or whatever inspires you to say, “I am someone new.”

The little girl in Nikki Minaj’s quote professing, “I am someone new in this hair” is the precursor to the grown woman in Badu’s asserting, “There is nothing really freaky about controlling your own image.” They have both located ways to subvert the established image of themselves as black women and as a result, the monolithic quality of black female images. Nikki Minaj discovering a way to re-invent herself through her hair and taking on multiple, often times contradictory characteristics not only illustrates the ways in which black women are learning to self-define on their own terms, it also shows the breadth and depth of black female multiplicity. Badu’s explanation of the role she plays in her music production is a fitting metaphor for the way we can approach our story telling regardless of the medium—music, video, photographs, blog entries. Badu provides us with a refreshing way to view our lives: “I am a total control freak with my



music,” encourages us to say, I am a total control freak with my stories, with my life, with my image and with the way they are told, interpreted, recorded in history. Because “There is nothing really freaky about controlling your own image.”

Approaching black female subjectivity with a black woman-centered, framework allows us to understand our placement in larger society and it holds us accountable for the ways in which black female sexuality and eroticism among other things, is understood in our own lives. A black woman-centered framework gives us the language to articulate eroticism without it being defined strictly through a male lens and on sexist terms. Also, it commands accountability for how you are being portrayed; “controlling your own image.” The brown girl texts, scripts, stories and moments shared here illuminate the diversity of identities and experiences for black women who came of age in the Golden Era of Hip Hop. Through the (re)consideration of texts moving beyond the pages of a book, we are able to discover a bountiful number of resources from which to piece together a brown girl narrative.

This project all began because I was enamored with words, “brown girl narratives.” It was as simple as that. I knew I wanted to do something with those words. Grouped together they had a sort of musical cadence to them. They glide over my tongue and rolled off as if the two words belonged together. However, on a much less superficial note, in my mind, those two words spoke to all that was missing in Hip Hop culture’s master-narrative—a collection of black women’s stories and experiences. Also, the idea of being a brown *girl* versus a brown *woman* took me back to childhood; to thoughts of New Edition and Whitney Houston, *What’s Happening!?!* and *The Jeffersons*. Then I

began to question, Where are all of these stories and experiences of brown girls and women of my generation documented? Where do you see accurate and nuanced depictions of black women between the ages of 28 and 42? Who exactly are these women who came up in the 80s and 90s? What are their scripts? Are the images of black women we see in the media and popular culture accurate portrayals of everyday women's lived realities? And so I began the search.

Several books about black women and Hip Hop culture have been written. Many have also been written on black girlhood but none really speak to the particular coming of age stories of post-soul, post-civil rights black women. What I have done with this project is illustrated some of the ways coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s impacted the behavior, socio-political ideologies, and identity formation for a particular group of black girls. I was interested in discovering if, in fact, salient themes and scripts existed among the women researched. If there were salient themes and scripts, What role did they play in their lives and their sense of selfhood, black female representation, sexuality, love relationships, friendship and motherhood?

The things that drove Demetria Lucas to start a blog was the same things that motivated me to write on this subject: Who was telling the stories of black women who came of age with Hip Hop? No one was really speaking to the experiences of "someone who was about my age, came up about the same time I did and had the same cultural markers," says Lucas. She goes on to point out the person who had that voice when she was coming of age was Terri McMillan but "she's like our mothers age." Referring to McMillan and Sister Souljah, Lucas goes on to explain what they did that made their

stories relatable. “They just, they speak how they talk. They talk about their experiences and are very honest. They weave their stories with the markers of their time. And that’s what people relate to. You remember the first time you heard a certain song or the first time you smoked weed at a party or the first time you got stood up or anything like that.”<sup>324</sup> This is a little bit of what I was trying to capture in the last two hundred some odd pages. I wanted the preceding chapters to speak to what sorts of collective feelings, memories and fears, this particular group of black women have as a result of their placement on the Hip Hop cultural landscape. Additionally, I knew it was necessary to consider the less thought about spaces where these stories might exist. I wanted to think beyond the traditional notion of a text to incorporate mediums such as digital media, video, film, music and the words of every day black women.

I looked to websites, music videos, and television featuring black women but most of these images were the same stereotypical representations I was trying to complicate. I asked myself, Are those stories and experiences revealed by black women in beauty salons and around kitchens tables the same stories we are seeing hearing on television and music videos? In my experience, what I see on television on reality shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Basketball Wives*, and *Love and Hip Hop* are not a reflection of most of my experiences as a black woman. While I cannot speak for any of my black female friends, I do not, to my knowledge, know of any of them having similar experiences either. In Chapter Four, Demetria Lucas echoed this same sentiment when she stated, “It’s hard to turn on the TV and see a positive image of black women.

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<sup>324</sup> Lucas, interview.

And as much as the reality shows might be entertainment or like *The Game* on BET. It's not very positive. Those are not the type of women you relate to."<sup>325</sup> While they serve as entertainment, they are by no means strong representations of contemporary black womanhood. This led me to the Internet. I wanted to better understand how every day black women were talking about these representations. For example, by looking at the social commentary around Tyler Perry's film adaptation of Ntozake Shange's classic, we gain a much more encompassing view of the way the choreopoem and film reflect real women's experiences. Without these valuable comments, we would have little way of knowing on such a large scale, how black women felt about their truths being told by someone else or how closely the characters in the movie came to mimicking black women's real lives. In perusing the cyberwomanist blogs discussed in Chapter Four, we can gain a clearer understanding of how black women really feel about the "harmless" nature of black female images portraying us as victims of angry black woman syndrome or the single black woman phenomenon. These are the sorts of places we can gain accurate depictions of what contemporary black women deem relevant. The conversations are being had. The stories are being told. The moments being performed. The narrative is scattered among the musical lyrics, the status messages, the blog entries and comments, and the everyday conversation of black women.

As I have demonstrated, the stories are out there and by piecing them together we are a step closer to fully realizing a collection of post-soul, post-civil rights black women's stories comprising a browngirl narrative. These are the stories that needed to be

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<sup>325</sup> Melissa Reddy "Interview with Demetria Lucas"

uncovered in order to create a balance to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's single story. As Adichie warns us, "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." If black women do not see themselves reflected in the stories that are being told by us and about us, it is our responsibility to be so empowered and create ourselves outside of male-defined models. In doing so, the erotic can exist in black women's lives in a way that moves beyond their sexuality.

Along the way I discovered that there needs to be an intergenerational dialogue occurring among black women. This may seem obvious but it was not something I realized until after I wrote the chapter, "Searching for a *for colored girls* of Our Own: Building Bridges from Girlhood to Womanhood." I was here that I had an "A-ha!" moment. It was writing this chapter that reconfirmed for me why I needed to write on black women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. Given my placement on the historical continuum, my experiences as a black woman speak to a particular period of time bridging the past (memoirs and Hip Hop feminist manifestos) and the future (blogs, web series, online magazines) of Hip Hop culture. Spanning over thirty years, our shared experiences with Hip Hop creates a deeper connection and provides a critical bridge to the women of future generations. I wanted to know, How can we create an intergenerational dialogue that speaks across different spaces to create a layered, multi-dimensional story?

Numerous ways to facilitate and foster intergenerational dialogue around issues of sexuality, black female representation, dating and relationships and motherhood among others are demonstrated throughout this project. *For Colored girls who have considered*

*suicide*| *when the rainbow is enuf* and Tyler Perry's film adaptation *For Colored Girls* sets the stage for an intergeneration conversation to occur. While we saw a no connections from girlhood and womanhood in the film, there is much to be said about what lies in the silences. By analyzing what was *not* being said, allowed a conversation to take place around what *needs* to be said. Most of the blogs highlighted in, "Brown girls Be Blogging: The Future of Browngirl Narratives and Spacemaking," also operate transgenerationally. This is best demonstrated by A Belle in Brooklyn, where we see a transgenerational readership spanning from 21-37.<sup>326</sup> Additionally, we see cultural continuity in the musical style, lyrical content and personal life of Erykah Badu. She performs a way of being a contemporary black woman which acknowledges and pays reverence to her ancestral African past while navigating the lived realities of a cosmopolitan present; all this, while remaining relevant.

We have heard stories of sneaking into the Adults Only section of the public library to liberate *for colored girls who have considered suicide*| *when the rainbow is enuf* and we have encountered meaningful cultural moments such as my own first experience with double dutch and hand-clapping games, Ruth Nicole Brown's memories of a girlhood marked by biker shorts, hoop earrings, asymmetrical haircuts and Salt-n-Pepa, and Jamilah Lemieux's reflection on what rapper Heavy D meant to her and to a generation after his untimely death. Additionally, we have witnessed numerous ways of performing black womanhood. It can be seen in the black female critiques of Tyler Perry's *colored girls*; Erykah Badu's subversion of the male-defined erotic in her video

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<sup>326</sup> Lucase, interview.

for “Window Seat”; Zora & Alice’s blog post on “fisting” and sexual exploration outside of hetero-normative practices and; in Demetria Lucas redefinition of Single Black Female as something to embrace and enjoy.

Ultimately, what each of these stories teaches us is controlling our own image(s) and telling our lives in our own words allows us to counter stereotypical tropes of browngirlhood and womanhood and leave in its place progressive, nuanced images of “someone new.” In Chapter One, I briefly touched on what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as “the dangers of the single story.” She explains, “The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” By taking control of our own images—writing our own songs and having a big hand in the ways they are produced—we are holding ourselves accountable. We are doing what so many women in this project articulated needs to be done in an effort to be fully realized. Do not wait around for someone else to tell our stories. As Joan Morgan encourages us to do: *create a for colored girls of our own*.

Performing is like creating a moment and recording is like perfecting a moment. They’re both very important to me.

- ERYKAH BADU<sup>327</sup>

There is one last reason I felt this project needed to be done. I wanted to do this project not only because I, even as a scholar, have a difficult time locating stories about brown girlhood and womanhood that is relevant to my selfhood but because these snippets of conversation, images, interviews, magazine clippings, song lyrics, blog

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<sup>327</sup> YouTube, “Interview Erykah Badu,” YouTube website, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZi1nfEcUy8> (Accessed June 13, 2011).

entries, YouTube videos, online articles and the like are scattered and disconnected. Currently, they exist independent of one another as what Badu refers to as “performances,” small moments that need to be recorded and archived. “Recording is like perfecting a moment.” Badu’s words serve as a constant reminder to me there is still much work to be done.

I cannot stress enough the importance in capturing and documenting these moments. Without this evidence, the stereotypes about black womanhood and femininity will continue to stand in as the real thing. As Adichie warns us, some black girls and women will believe the stereotypes to be not only true but also complete depictions of who we are. As a result, they begin to understand these ways of performing black womanhood as normative practices. Alternatively, many black girls and women will feel Othered, as though they are an anomaly, an aberration. If we were to look back at a time capsule filled with media images of black women fifty years from now I do not believe we would get an accurate idea of what black women were like in 2012. There are so many other resources from which to gather valuable information about black women’s lives. Unfortunately, without an archive, many of these artifacts will be nothing more than a historical memory.

As digital media becomes increasingly advanced and normalized as a part of our everyday interaction, black women’s placement in cyberspace becomes more critical. Our presence in cyberspace becomes more important because it is a highly accessible space to (re)write our truths, replace stereotypical tropes and images with multi-dimensional, diverse representations while engaging in an intergenerational conversation.



Just as important, without the preservation of browngirl spaces on the digital landscape, the continuous advancement of technology ensures our stories will eventually be all but urban legends. It is the capturing and archival of those snapshot, moments, and stories that concerns me most. So, it remains a priority to find ways to not only document but archive these stories. Our historical documents become the only way of passing down this information for future generations.

Even as I was finishing this project, I found in my fact checking, many of the interviews I acquired from YouTube.com were removed and some of the blog formats or platforms changed, making it difficult to locate specific posts by their original links. A few of the Erykah Badu interviews posted on YouTube.com and Bossip.com were removed due to copyright infringement. On National Public Radio's (NPR) "Wake Up Call with Esther Armah," Armah conducted a round table discussion with Tricia Rose and dream hampton and a couple other women a couple days after Tyler Perry's *For Colored Girls* was released. I was fortunate enough to download it and transcribe it within a few days of its airing. However, a few months later when I went back to listen to the recording in my iTunes library again, the mp3 was no longer there. I thought it was something I did wrong. I was able to see the recording saved in my iTunes library but it would not play. I went back to the NPR site to download it again but I could not find it there either. After digging a little deeper, I discovered NPR purges their audio files after ninety days. I panicked. It was not so much that I needed to hear it again to write the section but that I was not able to recover this valuable artifact. I emailed Esther Armah, who is one of my Facebook friends, and I asked her if she had a copy of the show or

knew how I could locate it. It was her radio show, surely she had a copy of the talk or would know how I could get my hands on it. She told me that she did not have a copy of it and once an audio file was deleted from the NPR online archive it is gone for good. How could this be? I assumed the file would be there when I went back to look at it. If only I had burned the audio file to compact disc. All I had as evidence that the conversation ever existed was my cryptic transcription.

The most devastating occurrence was the hacking of Jamila Lemieux's blog, *The Beautiful Struggler*. March 18, 2012, on her new Tumblr microblog, Lemieux wrote, "Unfortunately, on two occasions, a hacker has used my site to attack my host's server with malware. So not only was the *Stuggler* taken down, other sites were as well."<sup>328</sup> This was just 9 days after the last time I retrieved several of her posts from the blog. Seven years of documented brown girl history is gone. For all I know, the posts I copied and saved from Lemieux's blog are the only documentation that these valuable brown girl stories ever existed. So as you can see, already in less than one year, many of the stories I have collected for this project are vanishing in cyberspace. "To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories." It is quite eerie to think these words of Avery Gordon's, which I included in a footnote on page 122 almost two years ago, would illustrate so powerfully my whole purpose for undertaking this project: the importance of collecting, documenting and archiving black women's truths. Not only are our stories being "disremembered and unaccounted for,"<sup>329</sup> they are being disappeared;

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<sup>328</sup> Jamilah Lemieux, "What Happened to the Beautiful Struggler?" *jamilah LEMIEUX*, <http://jamilahlemieux.tumblr.com/post/19517758642/what-happened-to-the-beautiful-struggler> (accessed March 27, 2012).

<sup>329</sup>

erased. We must write ourselves into existence or risk our realities becoming nothing more than ghost stories.

I needed to do this project, if not for grown black women, then for all the little brown girls dealing with the trauma of being black and female and trying to become “someone new.” I wanted to provide them with language to talk about black girlhood and womanhood in positive and endearing ways. I wanted to capture images, stories and events which allow them to understand themselves as layered and multi-dimensional and encourage them to think of their black bodies outside of the sexual and within a realm of the erotic. Ultimately, I wanted to empower them to write themselves into existence; not only perform the moments but to *perfect* the moments.

## Appendix I

Conducted on SurveyMonkey.com (382 RESPONSES)

### BLACK WOMEN IN THE GOLDEN ERA OF HIP HOP SURVEY

- 1) Do you identify as a woman of African descent? (If no, thank you for your time)
- 2) Were you born between 1968 and 1982?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No(If no, thank you for your time)
- 3) What year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) In what region (predominantly) were you living between the ages of 14-18?
  - a) Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, Delaware, Washington D.C., Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania)
  - b) Southeast (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia)
  - c) Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin)
  - d) Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas)
  - e) West (Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington)
  - f) U.S. Territory (Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, U.S. Minor Outlying Islands)
  - g) Outside of the U.S., U.S. territories and Outlying Areas (please name).  
\_\_\_\_\_

5) What genre(s) of music were you predominantly listening to between the years 1986-1996?

- a) World music
- b) Hip Hop/rap
- c) Rock and Roll
- d) Heavy Metal
- e) Rhythm and Blues
- f) Blues
- g) Jazz
- h) Reggae or Ska
- i) Top 40

6) Which artists were you listening to from ages 12-15? (Please list at least 3)

\_\_\_\_\_

7) More specifically, were you listening to black female artists? (If no, please skip to question 9)

yes

no

8) (If Q 7 was yes)What black female artists were you listening to?

\_\_\_\_\_

9) What artists were you listening to from ages 16-20? (Please list at least 3)

\_\_\_\_\_

10) More specifically, were you listening to black female artists (If no, please skip to question 12)

yes

no

11) What black female artists were you listening to?

\_\_\_\_\_

12) Please rank in order which artists' music you identify with most strongly. This list only includes black female musical artists who were recording before 1998. (1 being Strongest 10 being least. Survey monkey has an option to rank a list)

Lauryn Hill

MC Lyte

Mary J Blige

Queen Latifah

TLC

Erykah Badu

Bahamadia

Janet Jackson

Salt-n-Pepa

Missy Elliott

Lil' Kim

Missy Elliott

Yo-Yo

Meshell Ndegeocello

Someone the survey missed

\_\_\_\_\_

13) When you were growing up did you watch television shows with black characters?

yes

no

14) Can you recall any TV shows you were watching between ages 12-20 that had Black female characters? If so, please list them.

15) Did you watch:

<b>Watched Daily</b>	<b>Watched Weekly</b>	<b>Watched Reruns</b>	<b>Watched Occasionally</b>	<b>Didn't watch</b>
21 Jumpstreet			Living Single	
A Different World			Martin	
Family Matters			New York Undercover	
Girlfriends			The Cosby Show	
Good Times (re-runs)		What's Happening?! (re-runs)		

16) Are there any other television shows you were watching between the ages of 12-15 that were not mentioned? Please list.

17) Are there any other sitcoms were you watching between the ages of 16-20 that were not mentioned? Please list.

18) Did you grow up with books in your home?

a) Yes

b) No

19) Did you have access to a public and/or school library?

a) Yes

b) No

20) How often were you reading books for pleasure between the ages of 12-15?

Frequently (weekly)

Occasionally (Monthly)

Infrequently ((every 3-4 months)

Rarely (1-2 times per year)

Never

- 21) Where there any books or authors you enjoyed reading between the ages of 12-15?

\_\_\_\_\_

- 22) How often were you reading for pleasure between the ages of 16-20?

Frequently (weekly)

Occasionally (Monthly)

Infrequently ((every 3-4 months)

Rarely (1-2 times per year)

Never

- 23) Where there any books or authors you enjoyed reading between the ages of 16-20?

\_\_\_\_\_

- 24) Can you name any books with main characters with whom you identify?

yes

no

If yes, please specify

- 25) Did you go to the movies between the ages of 12-20

yes

no

- 26) Did you primarily see movies that focused on black characters?

yes

no



27) What films do you recall seeing in the movie theater that focused on black characters?

28) Did you have cable growing up?

yes

no

29) Did you have a video rental card growing up?

30) If so, which films with characters of color, do you recall watching more than once?

31) Please mark which of the following movies you recall seeing between the ages 14 and 20. (Think high school and early college years)

Loved It   Liked It   Disliked It   Haven't Seen It

Poetic Justice (1993)

She's Gotte Have It (1986)

Set It Off (1996)

School Daze (1988)

The Color Purple (1985)

Friday (1995)

Love Jones (1997)

Waiting to Exhale (1995)

Eve's Bayou (1997)

32) If there is any other texts—poetry, essays, memoirs, musical/performance artists, specific songs/music videos and/ or films you feel have informed your identity that have not been mentioned, please feel free to add your comments here.

33) If you are interested in participating further in this research project please supply me with as much or as little information makes you comfortable. I can be reached at [mkchaereddy@gmail.com](mailto:mkchaereddy@gmail.com) with any questions, comments, concerns.

Name:

City/Town

State:

Country:

Email Address:

Phone number:

## **Appendix II**

Questionnaire emailed to survey respondents who indicated they were interested in further participation

### **SOCIAL MEDIA QUESTIONNAIRE**

- 1) Do you use social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace? If yes, please specify those you use most frequently. (If no, skip to #4)
- 2) What are your main reasons for participating in social media? (networking, keeping in touch with friends/family, entertainment, love relationships, support, etc)
- 3) How active of a participant would you consider yourself? (check it several times a day/ never look at it, post frequently/never post, etc)
- 4) What are your feelings on using social media as a form of social support (physical, mental and/or emotional support given to us by a particular community) for women of African decent?
- 5) Are you familiar with the concept of blogging? (If no, please stop here)
- 6) Do you read any Internet blogs regularly? If yes, how often?
- 7) What blog topics are you most interested in?
- 8) Regarding women of African decent, are there any topics you would like to see that are currently misrepresented, underrepresented or not represented at all in the blogosphere?
- 9) What is your main reasons for reading blogs?
- 10) Do you actively interact (post, respond, etc) with the author and other members or do you consider yourself a reader only?
- 11) Do you have your own blog or microblog (such as tumbler)?
- 11) If so, what is the subject matter and what prompted you to create the blog?
- 12) What are your feelings on using blogs/blogging as a form of social support (physical, mental and/or emotional support given to us by a particular community) for women of African decent?

### Appendix III

Questionnaire emailed to survey respondents who indicated they were interested in further participation.

#### FOR COLORED GIRLS QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) Are you familiar with Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*? (if no, please skip to #5)
- 2) How and when were you first introduced to the text/play?
- 3) Written in the 1970s, do you believe the text is still a relevant for black women today? Why or why not?
- 4) What are your general thoughts about the text?
- 5) Have you seen Tyler Perry's film adaptation, *For Colored Girls*?
- 6) Did you see it in the movie theater or on dvd? (opening weekend, Netflix or another video rental, purchased the DVD, etc)
- 7) What prompted you to see the film?
- 8) Have you seen *for colored girls* performed in any other capacity? (on/off-broadway, theater company, high school or college performance)
- 9) Did the film spark further interest for you in Ntozake Shange's other work?
- 10) What were your initial feelings after seeing the movie adaptation? (happy, sad, uplifted, depressed) How were these feelings different/the same as your feelings about the original text? Please explain.
- 11) Did you identify with any of the characters in the film?
- 12) How well do you feel Tyler Perry did with representing black women's lived experiences?
- 13) Did you find any of the characters problematic?
- 14) How do you feel overall about the ways in which women of African decent are represented in the media?

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