

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: FINDING LOVE IN A HOPELESS
PLACE: BLACK GIRLS' TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY SELF-LOVE LITERACIES
Autumn Adia Griffin, Doctor of Philosophy, 2020

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This dissertation analyzes how nine adolescent Black girls enact their twenty-first century literacies (i.e. critical media, multimodal, and digital literacies) to develop and depict self-love. Building on bell hooks's (2000) definition, I define self-love here as the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing, celebrating, preserving, or protecting one's own or another's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual growth. Through the adoption of Black Feminist, Black Girlhood, and Black Girls' Literacies I employed qualitative case study methods and integrated Participatory Action Research methods to answer the following questions: (1) *How do adolescent Black girls articulate the ways they engage their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love?* and (2) *How do adolescent Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally through a range of artifacts?* I designed and executed weekly sessions that facilitated space for the girls to talk through and write about ideas pertaining to identity and digital media with regards to self-love for adolescent Black girls. Data from these sessions include introductory survey results, interview transcripts, partner artifacts and weekly reflections.

Analysis of the data indicates that with regards to question one adolescent Black girls explained that they (1) manipulate algorithms; (2) spam the internet; and (3) use digital tools to support their future goals. Further, the girls employed their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally by engaging such design elements as color, shape, and spatial location to design a digital homeplace where they could (1) name themselves and (2) claim space in the digital.

This dissertation serves two purposes: (1) it provides pedagogical tools for educators of Black girls seeking to facilitate spaces where they can develop their identities and literacies simultaneously and (2) it details the ways contemporary Black girls engage their twenty-first century literacies to extend the literacy practices of their foremothers who used literacy to negotiate and challenge public perceptions about Black women. The findings from this study contribute not only to the field of education, but also gender studies and sociology, as they offer insight on adolescent identity development and formation.

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CENTURY SELF-LOVE LITERACIES

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the girls of Black Self Love. Thank you for joining me on this journey. Thank you for being fearfully, wonderfully, and unapologetically you. And thank you for teaching me about self-love as a defiant and radical act.

**Black
Self
Love.**



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CHAPTER 1: INTRO

“I wish they taught us to love ourselves.”

-Ariana, 16

In the fall of 2017, I sat with six Black girls to talk about how they were interacting with computers, cell phones, and other digital tools both in and out of school. I listened intently as they explained to me all the ways they used their school-provided computers and how they engaged with various social media platforms - like Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat - on their cell phones. They explained how their intended uses for digital tools were at odds with the ways teachers required them to engage their technology in classrooms and how they wished they would learn both skills and content better suited to prepare them for life outside of school (Griffin, forthcoming). Towards the end of our time together, one of the girls looked to me and said, “I wish they taught us how to love ourselves.” Initially, I was taken aback. I couldn’t understand how or why the topic of self-love would come up in a conversation about digital literacies. However, after some research and reflection on my own Black girl¹ experiences, I came to understand *exactly* why a conversation about self-love was relevant to a discussion on Black girls’ digital literacies.

Thus, to move towards an understanding of the relationship between Black girls’ twenty-first century literacies and self-love, this dissertation employs qualitative case

¹ I employ Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) definition of Black girlhood, which suggests that Black girlhood is not about age, but rather about becoming in bodies marked as Black, female, and youthful. Thus, I use the terms “Black girl/girls” and “Black woman/women” interchangeably throughout this project.

study methods and borrows from Participatory Action Research (PAR) to answer the following research questions:

1. *How do adolescent Black girls articulate the ways they engage their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love?*
2. *How do adolescent Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally?*

Purpose of the Study

The physical, emotional, and psychological violence to which Black girls in America are subjected on a daily basis is both tremendous and ubiquitous. Our current society, dominated by twenty-first century tools, including smartphones and laptops, has encouraged the exponential circulation of racist and sexist media and the digital witnessing of Black death (Chouliaraki, 2015; Tanksley, 2016). This challenge is particularly trying for Black girls who are continuously faced with (mis)representations of and violence against Black girlhood in both the physical and digital worlds. From inordinately high suspension and expulsion rates, to videos of Black girls being dragged out of classrooms by school security, to stereotypical images of Black girls on social media, to news of Black girls being suspended and Black women being fired because of their hair, society in general and media, in particular, perpetuate the false narrative that Black girls are worthless, hyper aggressive, hypersexual, incompetent, and unworthy of love and care (Tanksley, 2016).

Historically, however, Black women and girls have used their varied literacies as powerful tools for resistance. In *Rhetorical Healing*, Tamika L. Carey (2016) explores the ways Black women use and have used reading, writing, and discourse to move from

pain to healing. Similarly, Toni Cade Bambara (1992) used her book *The Salt Eaters*, to grapple with Black women's traditions of healing through her own writing. In the book, Velma Henry, an activist who tried to take her own life, experiences the ancestral healing work of the Black women healers in the community. Further, academic research suggests that empowering spaces of literacy learning can support Black girls in enacting their literacies for the purposes of *self-love*² (Muhammad, 2014; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Price-Dennis, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz et al., 2016; Staples, 2012; Winn, 2010; Winn, 2011).

Because spaces for literacy learning uniquely position educators to “interrupt the violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations against Black girls in schools” (Sealey-Ruiz et al., 2016, p. 294), inquiries of literacy education are ripe for opportunities to explore the ways Black girls enact their digital literacies to develop self-love.

Grounded in this understanding, this dissertation centers the voices and experiences of Black girls¹ (Decuir & Dixon, 2004) to expand the extant and burgeoning literature on Black girls' twenty-first century literacies³. Importantly, I do not intend that my findings suggest all Black girls consciously or purposively use their literacies for these expressed purposes. However, twenty-first century literacies may have a mediating function, given the ways some students choose to engage digital technology. My hope is that this work will inform our understanding of how literacy education can be used by teachers of Black girls and researchers interested in the wellbeing of Black girls to facilitate self-love for a population often pushed to the margins of society.

² Throughout this dissertation, I define self-love as the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing, celebrating, preserving, or protecting one's own or another's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual growth. I define this term in greater detail later in this chapter.

³ The term twenty-first century literacies encompasses digital, multimodal, and critical media literacies and is explained in greater detail in chapter two.

Through the lenses of Black Girlhood (Brown, 2009, 2013), Girls' Literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) and self-love (hooks, 2000) I explore how Black girls' digital literacies empower them to use digital tools and technologies in ways that allow them to teach themselves and others about sustainable self-love practices. It is my hope that this analysis will inform the ways both practitioners and researchers can develop pedagogical practices and scholarship that allows Black girls to protect themselves from the onslaught of racism and sexism they encounter on a regular basis.

Significance

The technological savvy of Black girls and the historic and contemporary use of spaces for literacy education by Black girls undoubtedly speak to the potential for twenty-first century tools to facilitate the development of self-love for Black girls. Although in recent years some scholars have begun to take up the work of understanding Black girls' literacies, Muhammad and Haddix (2016) found that as of 2016 there are only four pieces of published academic, peer-reviewed scholarship dedicated to the study of Black girls' digital literacies.

Although much of this literature speaks to the ways Black girls enact their literacies to resist stereotypical portrayals, none of it speaks explicitly to the concept of self-love, especially as a form of resistance against gendered racism. Further, scholarship that studies teens' digital use and consumption fails to capture the nuances of youth experience based on raced *and* gendered identities. For instance, the Pew Research Center (PRC) (Lenhart et al., 2015), which conducted an analysis to understand internet usage trends of teens in the U.S., found that among teens, Black adolescents in the are the most likely group to have access to a smartphone (85 percent compared to 73 percent of

the entire population) where they access the internet regularly. The researchers also found that while the majority of boys reported playing online video games (84 percent), girls tend to dominate social media and gravitate towards more visually-oriented platforms, including outlets like Instagram⁴, Snapchat⁵, online pinboards like Pinterest, and Tumblr⁶ (Lenhart et al., 2015). Importantly, their study - the only of its kind to date - failed to disaggregate the data based on teens' multiple identities (e.g., race *and* gender), demonstrating a gaping hole in our understanding of the frequency with which Black girls are engaging online and the purposes for which they use digital tools.

Consequently, I argue that my study is significant for two reasons: (1) it provides pedagogical tools for educators of Black girls seeking to facilitate spaces where they can develop their identities and literacies simultaneously and (2) it details the ways contemporary Black girls engage their twenty-first century literacies to extend the literacy practices of their foremothers who used literacy to negotiate and challenge public perceptions about Black women. The findings from this study contribute not only to the field of education, but also gender studies and sociology, as they offer insights into adolescent identity development and formation. In the sections below, I detail the urgent nature on scholarship about Black girl self-love as it pertains to twenty-first century literacies

The Urgency of Black Girl Self-Love

Both media and spaces of literacy learning often frame Black girls from a deficit-based perspective, which impacts their self-image and predicates a need for spaces of

⁴ a photo and video-sharing social networking site

⁵ a visual multimedia messaging application

⁶ a microblogging and social networking site

literacy learning that support the development of self-love. Such framing dismisses the important literary traditions and contributions of Black women and girls. In the following sections I provide an overview of the general discourse on literacy achievement, spaces of literacy learning, and Black girls as they are represented in the media and digital spaces, as well as an overview of how Black women and girls have used literacy to resist and (re)write disparaging narratives.

Racialized Discourses Pertaining to Literacy Achievement

To begin, when conversations of Black students and literacy are had at all, Black girls are often misrepresented or excluded completely. Conversations of literacy achievement generally misrepresent the historical and contemporary ways Black women and girls have engaged with literacy. Further, research about literacy achievement is often based on standardized assessment practices that do not consider the rich racial and cultural literacy practices of diverse groups of students (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). This standardization based on White, middle class norms works to marginalize and devalue the literacy practices of Black students (Au, 1998; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010), marshalling literacy as a good - or property right (Harris, 1993) - withheld in order to disenfranchise Black people (Green & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Greene, 2008) and dismiss their contributions.

A Focus on Black Boys

Secondly, when Black students' literacies are placed at the forefront of conversations about literacy, the conversation is often dominated by an overwhelming focus on Black boys' literacy achievement as it relates to policy (e.g. *10 Boys* in Boston, Massachusetts, *The Young Men's Initiative* in New York, and former President Barack

Obama's *My Brother's Keeper* initiative) and research (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Haddix, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). While such initiatives and research are both noble and necessary, the erasure of Black girls is "neither politically nor morally significant" (Crenshaw, 2014). In fact, this type of neglect has led to the daunting truth that "over the past decade less than 1 million philanthropic dollars have been spent to support the educational improvement of Black and Brown girls and women" (Neal-Jackson, 2018, p. 509). Contrastingly, in 2014, President Obama announced a \$100 million dollar expansion for *My Brother's Keeper* (Henderson, 2014), a single program for boys and young men of color. It is not my goal to diminish or call into question the need for attention to Black men and boys, but rather to highlight that like their male counterparts, Black girls are worthy of both attention and support.

Unwelcoming Spaces of Literacy Learning

Furthermore, some spaces for literacy learning have proven to be particularly unwelcoming for Black girls. Literature that centers Black girls' experiences in literacy classrooms reports that they are deprioritized, silenced, or ignored by their teachers (Carter, 2007; Greene, 2016; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Muhammad, 2013; Muhammad, 2012; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). For instance, Sharina, an eighth grade Black girl in a case study (DeBlase, 2003) was told she could not continue to read the Greek myth she had written for a class assignment aloud because she mentioned that one of the characters became pregnant. The teacher deemed the content of the student's text unsuitable for the classroom and therefore, silenced any further discussion, despite the student's use of her own lived experiences as a critical frame.

Moreover, literature on Black girls and literacy suggests that Black girls' identities are largely omitted from literacy classrooms through both the selection and discussion of texts. For instance, in a case study of how two Black girls drew on their social and cultural frames to respond to British literature texts, Carter (2007) explained that in-class discussions of literature (specifically Shakespeare's Sonnet 130) neglected the identities of the participants. Specifically, the teacher proclaimed that "some of us are white" when referring to the poet's conceptions of beauty, but failed to acknowledge the identities, and therefore beauty, of those students who did not identify as white. The girls in the study explained that they felt the conversation classified them and other non-white students as ugly, causing them to disengage from the class discussion.

Disparaging Depictions of Black Girls in the Twenty-First Century

While media presented from a majoritarian point of view has historically positioned Black women and girls as mummies, Jezebels, and Sapphires (Collins, 1991), modern-day digital media assists in the perpetuation of deficit-based and disparaging narratives about Black girls. As stated by Tanksley (2016), "from Vine videos to podcasts to blogs, the social media landscape is virtually saturated with demeaning images of Black womanhood" (p. 246). Black girls continue to be portrayed as "hypersexual, hyperaggressive, and wholly incompetent" (Tanksley, 2016, p. 247) in digital spaces. Web shows like *P.O.P. That Pussy* and *The Slutty Years* position Black female bodies as items of commodification while misappropriated memes perpetuate stereotypical views of Black women (Tanksley, 2016). Major search engines like Google assist in the perpetuation of these narratives with racist algorithms that return searches for "Black girls" with "Black Booty on the Beach" and "Sugary Black Pussy" (Noble, 2018).

Moreover, in 2018 alone (a year, which at the time of my writing is not complete), a 65 year-old Black woman was dragged out of her car by police; a white woman suspicious of two Black women staying at an AirBnb in her neighborhood called the police on two Black women who were shortly thereafter surrounded by police cars; a graduate student at Yale was reported to police for suspicious activity while sleeping in a student study lounge; a Black girl was stabbed to death on public transportation by a white supremacist; an undergraduate student at Smith College was reported by a white employee as a “suspicious person”; the president of the United States publicly referred to a Black woman as “that dog”; and a Black girl was expelled from her middle school for wearing braids. Such images are shared en masse on various digital websites for mass public consumption, contributing to the problem of violence against Black girls in digital spaces. In the words of Chloe x Halle (2017), “all this way too much for me. Giving me anxiety.”

Adolescent Engagement in and Consumption of Digital Media

The growing rate at which teens consume digital media only works to exacerbate this problem. In one study, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that children between the ages of eight and 18 years old consume 7.5 hours of non-academic media per day, seven days per week (Rideout et al., 2010); children spend more time consuming digital media than they do in schools (Tanksley, 2016). For Black girls, this means that in addition to the deficit narratives they are taught about themselves and their ancestors in schools (Carter, 2007), they are also constantly bombarded with images that not only perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes about them, but also with images of racial violence against them. Research has proven that repeated exposure to such stereotypes and traumatic

events can negatively impact an individual's physical and mental well-being, resulting in feelings of depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, poor concentration, irritability, racial battle fatigue, and stereotype threat (Bryant-Davis, & Ocampo, 2006; Comas-Díaz, 2016; Smith, et al., 2007; Solórzano, et al., 2000; Turner & Richardson, 2016; Yosso, et al., 2009). When Black girls are bombarded with multimedia images of their sisters - other Black girls - being beaten, dragged, or harassed on social media, they are forced to engage and (re)engage with these traumatic experiences on a regular basis. The treatment of Black girls both in and out of schools combined with the viral digital dissemination of their experiences is psychologically traumatizing and calls for immediate attention and action in the areas of emotional healing and justice.

Black Women and Girls' Literacy Legacies & Contemporary Practices

Despite narratives that might attempt to convince us that Black girls' literary futures are doomed, our roots run deep and our trunks grow high. That is, Black women and girls have a rich history of employing our literacies to write back against disparaging narratives to recast, reshape, and redefine our images, our narratives, and our futures. As early as the 1800s, Black women like Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells wrote against the social landscape to amplify the racialized experiences of Black folks, generally, and the racialized *and* gendered experiences of Black women, in particular. They used their pens and turned to their sistas to push for social change. Forming organizations that allowed them to practice their critical, collective and restorative literacies, these Black women resisted racist and sexist stereotypes as well as violent acts of oppression against Black women's bodies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Staples, 2017).

Recently, some scholars have taken up the work of understanding how contemporary Black girls are following this tradition and the role that literacy classrooms play in facilitating spaces for Black girls to practice their literacies. Researchers have found that spaces of literacy education do in fact have the potential to facilitate conversations that examine, critique, and dismantle violence against Black girls (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013; Muhammad, 2014; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Price-Dennis, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz et al., 2016; Winn, 2010; Winn, 2011). Today, in our world of ever-expanding technology and rapidly spreading information, twenty-first century tools have the potential to facilitate similar spaces of literacy learning and sharing for adolescent Black girls to protect themselves against the ails of society and teach them to love and care for themselves as a form of resistance.

For instance, creative Lauren Ash has cultivated a digital community with her project *BlackGirlInOm*, a (mostly digital) space dedicated to holistic wellness and inner beauty for women of color. Through her blog and podcast as well as her Instagram and Twitter accounts, Ash has created a digital community for women of color to “breathe easy.” She uses these multiple modes of literacy to teach women of color how to maintain their wellness through nutrition, fitness, meditation, and other self care practices. Others, like Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and Marley Dias, founder of the #1000blackgirlbooks campaign, use their digital tools as resources to read the political and educational landscapes and create platforms that mobilize communities behind their respective causes. Still others, like Marsai Martin, perhaps most well known for her role as Diane on *Black-ish*, use their media influence to depict affirming representations of Black girlhood that resist stereotypical narratives. The potential for

Black girls to engage their twenty-first century literacies as a defiant act of self-love is endless. As researchers and educators, we need only to seek to better understand this process. My dissertation seeks to do just that.

Organization of Chapters

In Chapter 2, *Black Girls' Literacies: Then, Now, and Forevermore*, I draw from New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003), sociocritical (Gutierrez, 2008) and critical literacies (Freire, 1983; Morrell, Duenaz, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013; Nyachae, et al., 2019; Willis & Harris, 2000) to explicate the definitions of literacy that foreground this dissertation. I then discuss Black women's historical literacies and the ways contemporary adolescent Black girls' draw from the traditions of their foremothers to practice their literacies with new technological tools. Finally, I draw on the work of Black Feminist scholars, writers, activists, and knowers to define self-love.

In Chapter 3, *How We Made it Over: Methods and Methodology*, I offer my own positionality in relation to the study followed by my theoretical orientations towards Black Girlhood and Literacy. I then detail my research roots at the participating school, Northwest Charter School⁷ (NCS), and provide a descriptive overview of the school. After describing each research partner in detail, I offer insight into my data collection and analysis methods for this project, focusing closely on my analytic framework for analyzing Black girls' multimodal texts.

In Chapter 4, *That's Not Me Everyday: Rewriting Narratives of Black Girlhood*, I offer findings from my first research question (see Figure 1.1). Analysis of the data revealed that Black girls (1) manipulate algorithms; (2) spam the internet; and (3) use

⁷Throughout this dissertation I use pseudonyms for all people and places to protect the identity of all who participated.

digital tools to support their future goals. Chapter 5, *Black self-love: A Digital Love Story*, explicates the ways the Black girls in my study designed a digital homeplace where they could name themselves for themselves and claim space online.

As we continue to explore the literacies and literate lives of Black girls, it is important that we begin to make sense of how they employ their literacies in ways that protect them from a world that seeks to do them harm (Cooper, 2018; Richardson, 2002). Even more so, as twenty-first century technologies continue to develop and students continue to engage them, we must begin to ask what role these technologies play in how Black girls make sense of the messages they receive and how they resist and (re)write their own narratives. In doing so, we create more meaningful spaces of literacy learning where Black girls can simultaneously engage in literacy and identity development, equipping them with tools they will use far beyond the walls of the classroom.

CHAPTER 2: BLACK GIRLS' LITERACIES: THEN, NOW, AND FOREVERMORE

The definition of the term literacy is contested, especially as it relates to people from historically marginalized communities. Historically, literacy research has functioned “to serve ongoing narratives of superiority/inferiority, citizen/alien, intelligent/unintelligent, and human/inhuman” (Ladson-Billings, 2016, p. 2). With regards to policy, literacy has been used to marshal power and exclude marginalized groups of people, legitimating autonomous westernized forms of literacy and devaluing all others (Hamilton, 2010). In educational settings, this delegitimization of some forms of literacy is often done through the standardization of literacy curriculum and a staunch focus on the acquisition of skills with little to no regard for critical thinking or cultural wealth (Griffin & James-Gallaway, 2018; Muhammad, 2018; Yosso, 2005). For Black folks, specifically, however, literacy has never been solely a matter of skill development and text comprehension, but rather functioned as a tool for liberation, self determination, and empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Muhammad, 2018). Further, for Black women and girls, literacy has included “vernacular resistance arts and cultural productions that are created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom, the streets, the workplace, or the airwaves” (Richardson, 2002, p. 678). While I do not seek to argue that foundational literacy skills are unimportant, I believe that for Black women and girls, literacy has served as so much more. Their literacies have historically been critical and multimodal in nature, allowing them to write and create spaces in opposition to the oppressive worlds in which they live. Black girls’ literacies live far beyond the confines of any page.

Thus, in order to understand the literate lives of Black girls, I draw my understanding of literacies from scholars who theorize literacy as expansive and multiple rather than restrictive and singular, allowing me to center Black girls' voices and knowledge. Like Street and Martin-Jones (2000) I employ the term "literacies" in opposition to the concept of a monolithic literacy that imposes western conceptions onto other cultures (Street, 2003). As Street (2003) explains in his work on New Literacy Studies (NLS), literacy is a social practice and is bound to notions of space and time. NLS asks whose literacies are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. Therefore, considerations of literacies must seek to understand how one's uses of literacies are rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. In studies of Black girlhood or Black girls' literacies, that means critically examining the intricate connections between literacies and race, gender, class, time, and space to understand how Black girls' literacies are influenced by the ways they are being and becoming in their Black girl bodies (Au, 1998; Brown, 2013; Butler, 2018; Gutierrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Richardson, 2002; Street, 2003).

Lastly, I take up notions of sociocritical and critical literacies that allow room not only for critiques and examinations of power in students' social worlds, but also historicizations, resistance, and the imagination of possibilities for Black girls' futures (Turner & Griffin, under review; Vasquez, 2014). Gutierrez (2008) explains that sociocritical literacy is "a historicizing literacy that privileges and is contingent upon students' sociohistorical lives" (p. 149). That is, sociocritical literacy allows students to "situate their own lived experience in historicized understandings" (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 153), effectively linking the past to the present and future. In doing so, students come to

understand the role of literacy throughout history and thus in their own lives. With respect to Black girls, this means examining the literacy practices of their foremothers to understand how literacy has historically functioned for Black women and girls. I discuss these historic practices in greater detail below.

Further, I contend that reading and writing do not merely consist of decoding the written word and putting pen to paper, but also involves developing knowledge of - or reading and writing - the world in order to both know and create (Freire, 1983). Critical literacy views practices of language and literacy as political acts (Morrell, Duenaz, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013; Nyachae, et al., 2019; Willis & Harris, 2000) and helps students to “re-read and ultimately re-write their [worlds]” (Morrell et al., 2013, p. 5). Through this process of re-reading and re-writing students are able to transform their worlds by addressing issues of oppression and power and use literacies to enhance their everyday and future lives (Comber, 2001). Taken together, these scholarly orientations inform my understandings of Black girls’ literacies both historically and contemporarily.

Twenty-First Century Literacies

The New London Group (2000) posits that new communication channels call for even broader notions of literacy. In accordance with this assertion, I argue that as technology continues to grow and expand, we must consider students’ uses of new tools and technologies (i.e. computers, laptops, smart phones, music streaming services, social networking websites and applications, etc.) both in and out of schooling environments with specific regard to literacy learning and development. The study of digital literacies focuses on the way people engage in the reading and creation of texts using multiple media technologies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Tangential to, but distinct from,

digital literacies are studies of multimodal and media literacies. Multimodal literacy encompasses multiple modes of communication simultaneously. As Serafini (2014) explains, a multimodal text is “a type of text that combines written language, design elements and visual elements” (p. 2). For instance, it can make use of both traditional forms of writing (i.e. paper to pen) as well as “contemporary forms of writing which include digital texts such as Prezi and Pinterest” (Muhammad and Womack, 2015, p. 9), which can incorporate words as well as images, videos, and songs. Similarly, media “includes such mediums as radio, television, magazines, newspapers, print ads, popular culture, and new technologies” (McArthur, 2016, p. 465). Given that students live in a media-saturated world, it is irresponsible for educators to ignore the educative effects of media (Kellner & Share, 2007). Thus, media literacy, and critical media literacy, in particular, allows students to “use media to create new and innovative ways to engage in social justice as twenty-first century citizens” (McArthur, 2016, p. 466). Through the employment of critical media literacies, students not only develop their literacies as learners in a digital age, but also learn to carefully read, critique, and write media messages.

Acknowledging this legacy of scholarship that has come before mine regarding this topic, I extend the concepts of digital literacy, multimodal literacy, and media literacy and take up the term “twenty-first century literacies” to encompass all three. Given that K-12 students of this day are digital natives who regularly engage with multimodal media and print texts simultaneously, I find it appropriate to employ this all-encompassing term to describe their contemporary reading and writing practices. As

such, throughout this dissertation, I take up the term twenty-first century literacies to describe the literacy practices of the Black girls with whom I worked.

Black Women's Historical Literacy Practices

Although technology has been rapidly advancing since the dawn of the new millennium, I argue throughout this dissertation that the literacies in which contemporary adolescent Black girls engage are not new. Rather, the twenty-first century literacies of the girls with which I worked for this project are an extension of the literacies of historical Black women; the only thing that is new are the tools with which they engage. I posit that Black women have historically engaged their literacies by (1) reading the social landscape, (2) creating community, and (3) writing towards liberation (see figure 2.1); for the purposes of this dissertation, however, I focus most closely on the aspect of writing towards liberation.

Figure 2.1 Framework for Historical Black Women's Literacy Practices



Historically, Black women have employed their literacies as means of social critique, engagement, resistance, and healing. As early as the 1800s, Black women used their pens and their voices to rage against a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1992). For instance, Maria Stewart, a Connecticut born Black woman who is often regarded as U.S. America's first Black woman political writer, wrote for abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's journal, *The Liberator*, and gave lectures at the African American Meeting House in Boston in the 1830s (Waters & Conaway, 2007). Stewart believed that for Black women, formal education was "a matter of the greatest political urgency. For Stewart, the pursuit of literacy was a sacred quest at this period when laws passed in the South made it a crime to teach slaves to read or write" (Richardson, 2007, p. 27). Her pursuit of education for Black women was grounded in a fundamental belief of literacy as a tool for social and political transformation.

Stewart went on to become one of many Black women who formed literary societies in the 1830s in the antebellum North. Aware of the power of the pen for traditionally "powerless" groups, a group of free Black women in Philadelphia formed the Female Literary Association in September 1831 (Garfield, 2007). Although reading and writing was illegal for enslaved Black people in most southern states, free women in the North who established these literary organizations had often received substantial schooling. They understood that literacy could serve as a tool and, if sharpened, a political weapon. The establishment of literary societies allowed Black women to transform their literary tools into powerful weapons:

In these societies, black women were not only establishing themselves as writers who were often published in the anti-slavery and black press, but they were

establishing themselves as intellectuals. The literary societies of the 1830s laid the foundation for a black female intellectual tradition in the United States. (Garfield, 2007, p. 117)

Through their writings, these women were not only challenging dominant discourse, but also elevating their voices and rendering themselves visible in a society bent on ignoring their existence. Their scholarship spanned topics of abolitionism, gender equality, and education (or intellectual advancement) for Black people.

The work of the women in these literary societies laid the foundation for a U.S. Black female intellectual tradition. Anna Julia Cooper, who earned her PhD from the Sorbonne, University of Paris (Waters & Conaway, 2007), was an educator and essayist whose major work *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892) is one of the earliest written recordings of Black Feminist Thought (Washington, 2007). In the text, she challenges ideas about Black women and criticizes Black men for securing higher education for themselves without fighting for the same opportunities for women:

While our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic...I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worthwhile that women aspire to higher education. (Cooper, 1892, p. 75)

Challenging the hypocritical and patriarchal views of Black men, Cooper's writing embodies Black feminist thought, which considers not only racism, but other forms of oppression including (but not limited to) sexism and patriarchy. Cooper committed her scholarship and pedagogy to the "education of neglected people" (Washington, 2007, p. 25).

Likewise, in 1900, motivated by the lynchings of her friends, Ida B. Wells, an investigative journalist born in Holly Springs Mississippi, was the first writer to document the lynchings of African Americans (Jenne, 1997). Throughout her life Wells, who was also an educator and owned her own newspaper, dealt with issues of race and politics in the South. Her 1900 speech entitled “Lynch Law in America,” chastised the United States government for their silence on the brutal lynchings of African Americans in the south. Using her pen, Wells challenged the U.S. political climate, demanding justice and humane treatment for Black folks.

These women and so many more, including those whose names we may not know, set the stage for Black women writers, including The Combahee River Collective, Toni Morrison, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Cynthia Dillard, and Brittney Cooper. Their writings paved the way for Black women and girl writers of today and gave voice to the unique experiences of grappling with the intersecting oppressions of race and gender.

Black Girls’ Twenty-First Century Literacies

As a continuation of the work of these historical Black women, contemporary Black girls, are engaging in the work of Black Feminist literacies using twenty-first century tools. Research related to twenty-first century literacies and Black students generally suggests that Black students use digital spaces to mobilize digital protests (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) and focus on the themes of liberation, empowerment, and self-determination (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Although research that focuses on Black girls’ twenty-first century literacies is still in its early stages, there are a few scholars who have taken up the work of understanding how Black girls enact their literacies online. In the

sections below, I review scholarly literature that explores how Black girls employ their twenty-first century literacies and for what purposes.

Digital Tools

Scholarly literature explores how Black girls engage various digital tools in educational spaces. Digital tools include the technology to manage, gather, evaluate, or synthesize information and include such things as research databases, cameras, and voice recorders.

Hall (2011) used practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) as a methodological approach to understand the co-construction of a narrative script produced by three Black girls who were middle school students in a summer writing course. Specifically, Hall (2011) set out to answer the question: *What happens when we bring together what we know about African American women as knowledge producers with what we know about writing, technology, and critical literacy and, more specifically, how are the contemporary digital literacy practices of African American youth informed by their historical legacies?* The three teens in the study used the Internet⁸ “to search for African American literature and narratives rich with cultural and linguistic history, storytelling steeped in black folklore and rhetorical rhythm, sermons and speeches” (Hall, 2011, p. 11). Three teens in the study used the internet, an important digital tool, to digitally author a narrative script. They then performed their script as a public service announcement about a community-based intervention for teens who face emotional stress.

Likewise, Kendrick et al. (2013) used ethnographic techniques, including

⁸ Specific search engines were not provided in the article.

observation, online and conversational interviews, a focus group interview, questionnaires, and artifact collection, to understand what happens when digital tools are (re)positioned in an after school journalism club in a rural all- girls, government-supported rural school in Kenya for thirty-two 14-18 year-olds. Upon joining the club, participating students received an introductory course on how to use cameras, voice recorders, and laptops (with Internet connectivity) to learn the skills of the craft of journalism. The authors found that the girls used digital tools and literacies to do the “identity work” of a novice journalist. The girls employed both the tools and their writing to develop confidence as they negotiated their identities as journalists and make sense of their lives. Though the definition of digital tools was not explicitly defined, the findings of this study have implications for educators and researchers interested in the critical use of technology in literacy studies, specifically around the ways digital tools are used to “enrich and empower students to empower themselves” (p. 18).

Outlets/Modes of Communication

Studies that focus on outlets or modes of communication often seek to understand the varied platforms Black girls used to engage their digital literacies. These platforms included social media outlets (i.e. Facebook or Twitter), email threads, and digital bulletin boarding and presentation websites (i.e. Pinterest and Prezi respectively).

Greene (2016) examined the language and literacy practices of six adolescent Black girls (ages 12-17) in a six-week, out-of-school street literature book club using critical discourse analysis. Girls in the study read the novel *PUSH* by Sapphire (1996) and contributed 3-6 posts each on a closed Facebook group. Greene then conducted semi-structured interviews with each girl and two focus group interviews at an urban public

library to supplement the online discussions by providing opportunities to clarify responses and ask follow-up questions. Greene (2016) conducted a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) of book club responses and interview transcripts to understand how context (i.e., the out-of-school digital space and the face-to-face space) influences the ways Black girls construct their identities when reading and discussing street literature. She found that Black girls use multiple modalities to re-imagine representations of themselves that are grounded in a collective Black girl experience and society's neglect of them.

Similarly, girls in Kynard's (2010) study found solace in a "secret" email thread that provided them an opportunity to process and communicate authentically about their experiences dealing with racial stress, trauma, and oppression at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Kynard conducted an autoethnography to understand how digital technology (an email thread not associated with university email addresses) offers hush harbors for Black female college students' social and critical literacy practices.

Historically, hush harbors were the secret meeting spaces of enslaved Black people where Black narratives were centered and privileged (Nunley, 2006; Sawyer, 2017; Williams, 2007). Even after slavery was abolished, Black people continued to meet in secret, beyond the purview of the dominant gaze, where they could critically discuss pertinent matters related to race and racism. In *From Candy Girls to Cyba Sistas*, Kynard (2010) explained how the email thread served as a hush harbor, allowing the girls to secretly engage in critical discourse about the overt and covert racism they experienced on their college campus. Importantly, she noted that "the notion of a hush harbor rather than the in-school and out-of-school dialect allows for a kind of political location that does the

work of challenging the racialized policing of language and being in school” (p. 35). That is, the notion of hush harbor allows for an understanding that the girls exist in both spaces and often the predominantly White school space encroaches on their out-of-school life. As a member of the online email thread where 12 college students (19-23 years old) engaged critically about their lived experiences at a PWI, Kynard engaged in critical discussions with the girls about their experiences. Participants used the email chain as a space to engage their critical literacies by examining and critiquing class discussions and interactions with white faculty, staff, and peers on campus. Likewise, Kelly (2018) used Black Feminist theories as a lens to understand how Black girls resist marginalization in the context of their school communities. Using qualitative research methods, Kelly conducted two focus group interviews and seven individual semi-structured interviews with seven adolescent Black girls. During interviews Kelly asked the girls questions about their engagement with digital and social media and development as a Black girl both in and out of school. She found that girls used Twitter as a space for critical/social analysis and to develop a sense of solidarity and shared culture with other Black girls that was unavailable to them in schools. The platform not only introduced the girls to social issues they felt they did not have an opportunity to learn about elsewhere, but facilitated opportunities for them to find and interact with “people who have the same kind of mindset as I do” (Aaliyah in Kelly, 2018, p. 382).

Muhammad and Womack (2016) sought to understand how multimodal writing allowed for two adolescent Black girls (15 and 19 years old) to both “pin” against and “(re)pin” public representations of themselves on digital platforms. In this autoethnographic study, participants met the researcher (Womack) in a reserved section

of a library in a large, metropolitan city for ninety minutes once every week for a year to read, write, and speak about their relationships, school experiences, future goals, and identities. Womack took field notes, recorded videos of the weekly meetings, conducted weekly interviews, and collected participant artifacts. The girls in the study used Prezi – a digital presentation software - and Pinterest – a digital bulletin board website - to collect digital literacy artifacts. They then created digital projects to share the ways they “[repinned] alternate expressions of young Black woman- and girlhood” (p. 18) with family and friends. Using Gee’s (2005) theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Womack found that Black girls used multiple modes of communication to pin against dominant representations of Black girls’ physical beauty and health, sexual images, and education. The girls in the study chose to (re)present themselves in a wide variety of ways, focusing on images that made sense of their cultural, ethnic, and gendered community, economic, intellectual, kinship, religious, personal, and sexual identities.

Studies that focused on outlets or modes of communication paid particular attention to the varied ways Black girls use various digital platforms to communicate their lived experiences. Current research on Black girls’ digital literacies has explored three digital mediums for communication: Facebook, Prezi, and Pinterest.

Curriculum

To date, only one published academic piece explores the potential for curriculum development with specific regard to Black girls’ digital literacies. Price-Dennis (2016) conducted a qualitative case study to understand both the affordances of designing curricula that engage Black girls’ digital literacies and how Black girls enact critical literacies in digital spaces. In the study, she worked with an award-winning teacher

dedicated to social justice education in a multilingual and multicultural fifth grade classroom. Price-Dennis worked with a doctoral candidate over the course of two years to plan and discuss ideas for instructional units. The data, taken from a larger study of fifth grade students in a language arts classroom (N = 60), focuses on the nine Black girls. Price-Dennis analyzed interviews, participant observations, field notes, instructional unit plans, and audio/video recorded lessons. She found that curricula that engaged Black girls' digital literacies created space for learning across modalities and promoted the exploration of social issues, encouraging students' agency and confidence within digital literacies. Furthermore, the units provided the girls with the opportunity to enact critical literacies across modalities, allowing them to re-imagine what it meant to be a learner and draw on digital tools to "reshape how they demonstrated their thinking about social justice, power, and activism" (p. 348). Price- Dennis's (2016) piece highlights the potential of literacy curriculum to facilitate spaces for Black girls to develop their digital literacies.

(Re)presenting Self

In both Greene's (2016) and Muhammad and Womack's (2016) studies, Black girls engaged the digital literacies to (re)present themselves. Black girls who exist at the intersection of at least two marginalized identities —Black and girl— are by no means a monolith. However, dominant discourses about Black women and girls have privileged stereotypical and monolithic representations of Black women and girls in American culture and society (Hine, 1989; White, 1985). Girls in both studies resisted these representations, choosing to use their digital literacies to dismantle and re-imagine damaging representations.

Greene found Black girls are able to use multiple modalities to re-imagine representations of themselves. That is, in the Facebook group girls expressed a personal connection with the protagonist of the book by using images from the movie *Precious*; they simultaneously used three modes of representation (the book and the Facebook group) to re- imagine their own experiences. For instance, Vanessa, an 11th grader in Greene's (2016) study drew on the experiences of the protagonist in the book, *PUSH*, to co-construct the similarities in their experiences, which highlighted the oppressive nature of obstacles both the character and the participant faced at school. In the same study, Tammy (a tenth grader) used her Facebook post to offer an outlook on Black motherhood that focused on society-created oppressions teen mothers face. In her Facebook entry, she alluded to a "cycle of dysfunction" that both the main character and her mother faced.

Tammy wrote:

The story of *Precious* makes me sad. I wanted to jump in the book, scream, and try to save her. How can so many people in her life, *in society* [emphasis added] watch this girl slip through the cracks. *The question becomes our issue* [emphasis added] when tax payers say they have to help our teen moms who have to get on public assistance. So I say it takes a village to raise a child (Greene, 2016, p. 283)

Here, Tammy engaged the book and the Facebook group to critique the very system that perpetuates violence against Black girls by vilifying rather than assisting them in breaking through the barriers of oppression. She uses her literacies to subvert the narrative of Black women as willing participants in their own oppression and disruptive forces in the exploitation of Black communities, and instead critiques the structures that uphold such conditions for Black women and girls (Morris, 2016).

Similarly, Muhammad and Womack (2016) described how Black girls used their digital literacies to “pin” against representations of themselves rooted in hegemonic discourse. For instance, the researchers described how Nikayla (19 years old) used Pinterest to counter the hypersexualization of Black women. Nikayla wrote:

What the society would say about Nikayla well let's see the society would say Nikayla sneaky under handed a hoe she not going to be nothing she's not in school she always around males she's a bad person to be around she think she better than everybody... I even got people in my family and people close to my family that says that but they don't be around me they don't know the life I live I have a cousin she young so I understand the things she would say about me so I just let it go... (Muhammad & Womack, 2016, p.28).

Like Tammy, Nikayla recognized how Black girls are represented in societal images. Also similar to Tammy, Nikayla chose to reject such a narrative, instead using her Pinterest board to include “quotes/messages of inspiration...a YouTube video featuring Jessie J's ‘Nobody's Perfect,’ an image of water, and also images that represent the kinds of work Nikayla produced in [her] sessions” during her year with the researcher (Muhammad & Womack, 2016, p. 28). By centering her lived experiences and highlighting her assets in spite of her circumstances, Nikayla made the deliberate choice to (re)present herself in ways that move towards liberation.

Building Confidence and Competence

The work of both Kendrick et al. (2013) and Price-Dennis (2016) has implications for how the development of Black girls' digital literacies builds confidence and competence.

Kendrick et al. (2013) explicitly highlighted how engagement and practice with digital tools while learning the skills of journalism grew both confidence and competence within the girls: "...the girls went from strength to strength; as they (their constructions of self) grew in confidence, their interviews became more accomplished and more politically engaged, and their writing grew in competence" (p. 405). In particular, Asha (a girl in the study) interviewed prominent local and national figures in Kenya (something she had never done prior to her participation in the study) and confidently asked them pointed and controversial questions about local and national policy. Later in the study, girls spoke about the changing nature of the social access given their use of digital resources:

Maureen: You are now welcome at sports events and I have seen you, you walk up to boys with the tape recorders. Could you do that before?

All: No!!

Maureen: No, why, what gives you the confidence to walk up to a boy and "tell me about the game"?

Rose: Okay for me, the devices give me the confidence because I can simply go to my colleagues the students [i.e., their male counterparts] because I am unique. I cannot be compared with a journalist from another school. I have the devices and I have the badge now. (Kendrick et al., 2013, p. 408)

As evidenced in their response to the researcher, the uptake of digital tools and accompanying identities as journalists facilitated the development of confidence that allowed the girls to fully participate in social and political life.

In a similar fashion, Price-Dennis (2016) explained the ways digital tools have the

potential to promote agency and confidence for Black girls to act as change agents on digital platforms. During the #BlackLivesMatter unit of the curriculum, students grappled with questions like: *What do you think needs to happen to make sure all people are safe? Why did the violence occur in Baltimore? and Who do you think took this photo and why?*⁹ Black girls in the study responded with posts on Blendspace¹⁰ that addressed themes of safety, equality, advocacy, and solidarity.¹¹ Importantly, Price-Dennis asserted that allowing Black girls to engage on a social-media type platform helped them to understand how to engage in online spaces as future public intellectuals while simultaneously developing their argumentative writing skills.

Though confidence building was not the main focus of the findings for the other researchers, they did indirectly refer to confidence building through the use of digital tools. For instance, Muhammad and Womack (2016) and Hall (2011) both make mention of the ways Black girls use digital tools to create content that allows them to (re)write their narratives in direct response to those that are disparaging and untrue.

Building Kinship

Hall's (2011) and Kynard's (2010) work detailed how Black girls engage their digital literacies for the purposes of building kinship. Among studies of Black girls' literacies and studies that center Black girls' and women's epistemologies, kinship refers to relationships with family or fictive kin (Muhammad, 2012). With specific regards to digital literacies, the literature described the ways Black girls coauthor narratives that depict kinship relationships or develop kinship within shared digital platforms.

⁹ The author did not include student responses to these questions.

¹⁰ Blendspace is a "platform for creating interactive digital lessons" (Price-Dennis, 2016, p. 352).

¹¹ Direct quotes from students were not included in this publication.

Hall (2011) found that through digital co-authoring the girls used computers and the internet to engage in historically Black practices of resistance and kinship writing to represent their lived experiences. He detailed how the research and coauthoring of digital texts facilitated opportunities for Black girls to engage in the practice of resistance and kinship writing. The girls in the study used his research of historical writing to create digital narrative scripts about the cultural recovery process: pain, healing, and community affirmation and transformation. Their script, a public service announcement directed towards teens who face emotional stress, included the story of a fictional character, Yolanda, a teen who struggles with depression. Throughout the script, Yolanda's friends, Sophie and Kay, engage her in historical African American practices of communal healing and regeneration by diagnosing, treating, and working towards wholeness with their friend. In this way, Sophie and Kay take on the role of Yolanda's kin, caring for her in a loving and familial way.

Similarly, Kynard (2010) explicitly detailed the role of kinship and deemed the women on the email thread members of a "sista-cypher." In doing so, Kynard commented on the sisterly relationship the girls developed as they offered solace, loving critique, and support during their journey at the PWI. Throughout the thread, girls were able to ask questions, receive advice, and vent their frustrations with other members of their particular "in group" (Black, college-aged girls). For instance, Kynard explained:

There were also rigorous discussions of how far to make their politics when completing assignments for their classes. The group came to a consensus that, for example, the racially charged issue that one education major was having with her high school history students was not something she should tell the instructor of

her student-teaching seminar.

This is where I will reveal my own involvement, since I was not a researcher or a professor in these digital exchanges but a *sista* in the cyber cipher...I supported the student's decision either way and confirmed that, yes, there would be consequences; lying or sugar-coating were not an option in the cypher (Kynard, 2010, p. 39).

Here, we see the trust the girls in the digital group developed for one another, sharing sensitive information they did not feel comfortable sharing in class. Additionally, this excerpt from Kynard's piece illustrates the familial relationship she plays in the girls' lives, serving not just as a confidant, but also a mentor. The privacy of the email thread provided an opportune space to build such a relationship.

Likewise, Kelly (2018) discusses the varied ways Black girls build kinship on Twitter. She details the ways the girls explain "finding sisterhood" with Black girls on the digital platform:

As Layla explained, finding sisterhood through collective identification required a reevaluation of her existing friendships: 'I still do have my white friends, but it's different now ... 'cause they'll never understand you the way that my Black friends do, and there's nothing wrong with that, but it is what it is.' While this distance may be more ideological than racial, as many of the other participants discussed maintaining close friendships with students who are not Black but who share similar ideologies and whom they see as allies, the girls all discussed the power of collective identification in building community and spaces for healing. (Kelly, 2018, p. 382)

Her explanation details how Twitter provides opportunities for Black girls to build authentic and necessary relationships with other Black girls who share similar ideologies. Importantly, the digital allows for greater opportunities for kinship as it expands beyond the walls of the school building where Black girls may or may not interact with other Black girls regularly (Anderson & Martin, 2018).

Self-Love

Because scholars have yet to explore how contemporary adolescent Black girls use self-love alongside their varied literacies as a form of resistance, there is a need for scholarship that seeks to understand the relationship between the two. How do Black girls employ their twenty-first century literacies to resist controlling images and (re)write their narratives? How do their twenty-first century literacies inform their self-love practices? Black girls in k-12 schools deserve scholarship, policy, and pedagogical practices that seek to answer and honor these questions and others like them. Furthermore, it is especially important to understand what self-love means from a Black Feminist epistemological stance. How have Black women written about self-love and how can their wisdom and knowledge inform our understandings of self-love for adolescent Black girls? In the following section, I draw from Black Feminist scholarship to provide the definition of self-love that informs this study.

To begin to understand self-love as it pertains to the lives of Black women and girls, I first turned to the work of bell hooks. In her book, *All About Love* (2000), hooks cites M. Scott Peck to define love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (hooks, 2000, p. 4). This definition implores us to consider love as an action rather than an idea or feeling. The word *will*

suggests that love is an action that requires both intention and resolve. While it may not always be something one *feels* like engaging or enacting, it is the *will* to love that pushes someone beyond herself to love in spite of herself. Likewise, the word *extend* calls us to engage with the idea that the choice to love often pushes us beyond what we believe to be our own limits or boundaries. Though hooks's notion of love is foundational to my own understanding of self-love, I seek to extend her definition by turning to several other Black women scholars.

I believe that for Black women, self-love must be about more than nurturing alone. While nurture is indeed an important facet of love, Black girls have historically been expected to take roles as caretakers to the extent that they have become “mules of the world” (Hurstons, 1937, p. 14) neglecting, often, to nurture themselves. As such, to rely on nurture as the sole aspect of self-love is insufficient. Instead, I argue that for Black girls, self-love must be not only about nurturing, but also about celebrating (Brown, 2009), preserving (hooks, 2015), and protecting (Richardson, 2003) through affirmations, gatherings, activities, and discourse. Furthermore, I depart from hooks's premise that love is solely for the purpose of nurturing spiritual growth. In fact, I believe that while nurturing the spiritual is of the utmost importance, it is a particularly privileged statement to suggest that one must *only* be concerned with the spiritual. When all other needs are met - those that are physical, emotional, and mental - it is easy to focus on the spiritual. However, when as a Black girl you face the constant tormentors of racism, sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, classism, ableism, ageism, or any other number of intersecting oppressions, it is not enough to only concern yourself with the spiritual. Only those not concerned with multiple isms or physical, mental, or emotional security - typically elite

white men - have the luxury of focusing solely on the spiritual. As such, self-love's purpose for Black girls must also engage the physical, the mental, the emotional, *and* the spiritual (Brown, 2009; Christian, 1988; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984).

Given these departures, I adapt hooks's definition of love to define self-love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing, celebrating, preserving, or protecting one's own or another's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual growth." I intentionally chose to include the phrase "or another's" when defining self-love because for Black girls to honor our collective histories and reject the notion of the westernized *I* (hooks, 2002; James-Gallaway, Griffin, & Kirkwood., forthcoming; Minnet, Owens, James-Gallaway, 2018; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). That is, we can only truly come to love ourselves when we love our sistas as well.

Examples of Self-Love in the Work of Black Girls

Self-love, as defined above, has traditionally guided the work of Black women and girls who have historically stood at the forefront of movements as they've extended themselves to nurture, celebrate, preserve, or protect, their own or another's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual growth. In the following section, I draw on Black feminist epistemology, (Collins, 2009) - which reminds us that much of Black women's intellectual work is archived outside of the academy - to include the work of Black women who have shown self-love through their work both scholarly and otherwise. In particular, I focus on the literate efforts of Black women as they write towards and about self-love.

Nurturing

The word *nurture* implies the act of caring for or encouraging growth, as is the case in hooks's (2000) definition of love. As such, the concept of nurture requires one or more individuals to be present to engage in the act. Historically, the act of nurture has been commodified in the form of mandated labor that required Black women and girls to take care of everyone but themselves. Today, this same nurture is often co-opted by white supremacy and capitalism in trendy self-care initiatives that suggest caring for the self requires inordinate amounts of capital in order to drink mimosas and engage in spa days (Lizzo, 2019). However, for Black girls, nurture has never been simply about labor or finances, especially as we have historically not had access to financial wealth (hooks, 1993). Rather, it is a practice that occurs in community with other Black girls and women to facilitate healing and growth. For instance, during enslavement Black women communed with one another in order to strengthen their will to live. In spite of the treacherous conditions of slavery, enslaved Black women formed networks that provided them with a sense of family or kinship (White, 1985).

Toni Cade Bambara's (1992) *The Salt Eaters* provides us with another example of this phenomenon. Burdened with her political struggles and fresh off a suicide attempt, protagonist Velma Henry, a political activist in her community, suffers a nervous breakdown and is brought to community healer Minnie Ransom's local infirmary. It is at this infirmary, under the care of several Black women that Velma finally lets go of her trauma and begins to heal. The care, compassion, patience, and love of the community she meets allows her to release what she has been holding onto in order to nurture herself and eventually become well.

Scholars have spoken of similar communal nurturing practices among Black girls and women in Black churches (Butler, 2007; Eugene, 1995), hair salons (Banks, 2000; Gill, 2010), neighborhoods and playgrounds (Gaunt, 2006), and in contemporary digital spaces (Kelly, 2018; Sawyer, 2017). Black women understand that the concept of nurture cannot take place in isolation; it requires a collective, and therefore must always happen in community (hooks, 2002) and most often with other Black women or girls.

Celebrating

Scholar of Black Girlhood, Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), speaks to the necessity of celebrating Black girlhood in a culture that simultaneously “loves and hates Black girls’ and women’s bodies, talents, and intellect” (p. 2). In doing so, she highlights that Black girls are not monolithic, but rather that we have intricate and nuanced stories that deserve to be shared. Furthermore, she suggests that celebrations of Black girlhood are not about policing or polishing those stories deemed undesirable by a capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative society. Instead, Brown argues that we ought to create spaces that allow for dialogue to understand the varied stories of Black girls. Thus, celebration is not only about extolling what majoritarian narratives dictate as worthy about Black girlhood, but rather about reverencing the lived experiences of *all* Black girls and their stories. To that end, while we celebrate musical artists like Jill Scott and India.Arie who provide us with examples of Black girlhood that speak to softness, joy, and light, we must not discount the experiences and voices of women like Cardi B., Leena Waithe, and Big Freedia who represent populations of Black girls that are often penalized, marginalized, or silenced for being outspoken in public spaces or not submitting to white femininity and heteronormativity.

This type of celebration has been exemplified in monumental historical works like Maya Angelou's (1994) *Phenomenal Woman* and Lucille Clifton's (1993) *Won't You Celebrate with Me?* Angelou's poem celebrates the physicality of Black women, naming everything from "the arch in [her] back" to "the bend of [her] hair." Her celebration of Black female bodies is particularly important considering the historical and contemporary representations in media that seek to portray Black women's bodies as animalistic and hypersexualized (White, 1985). For instance, during enslavement, white men, including P.T. Barnum, paraded Sarah Baartman around like a zoo animal because of her large breasts and buttox. Recalling such dehumanizing moments and stereotypes, cartoonist Mark Knight recently drew and published a caricature of Serena Williams jumping on a racket in bouts of temper tantrum befitting children - a gross misrepresentation of her behavior and the entire situation (see Figure 2.2). Rather than throwing a tantrum, Williams was following a tradition of Black women speaking up for themselves in the face of injustice (in this case unfair calls by the referee during her tennis match) and was met with harsh criticism about her actions; actions for which white male athletes are often applauded. The cartoon depicts Williams as significantly larger than her opponent and includes stereotypical caricature-like representations of her nose and lips.

Figure 2.2 Mark Knight's Controversial Rendering of Serena Williams



Contrastingly, Angelou's celebration of Black women's beauty seeks to (re)claim the narrative surrounding Black women's beauty and label them as "phenomenal" and worthy of praise and adoration. Similarly, Clifton's poem asks its readers to celebrate the life of the speaker, someone "both nonwhite and woman." Importantly, she celebrates that every day "something has tried to kill [her] and has failed," most likely referencing the structural and institutional racism and sexism so familiar to so many non-white women of the world.

Works like Browne et al.'s (2018) edited book of poetry entitled *Black Girl Magic* continue this tradition of celebration. The poems and poets highlighted in this collection shed light on the multiple lived experiences of Black women, paying homage to everything from "jumping double dutch until your legs pop" (p. xvii) to experiences transitioning into womanhood. Further, women like Beverly Bond have worked to create award shows like *Black Girls Rock* to celebrate Black girlhood in affirming spaces where Black girls can see reflections of themselves being centered and honored. Lastly, young Black girls like ten year old Ghanaian disc jockey, DJ Switch, use the gift of music to switch the mood of her audience. Switch's practice of using music as a way to change

and lighten moods exemplifies celebration, as it helps to sustain listeners' joy during trying times.

Preserving

Black feminist scholars have often spoken of the nature of preserving and sharing our stories. In *Talking Back*, bell hooks (2015) explains that there has never been a calling for Black women and girls to share their stories publicly. Thus, she argues that in order for our stories to be preserved Black women must speak about their experiences both in public forums and through their writing. Often, preservation has taken place in the form of sharing lived experiences. For example, in *Sister Outsider*, Lorde (1984) wrote:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been. (p. 40)

Her comment suggests that for Black women, especially Black women who encompass more than two marginalized identities, it is of the utmost importance to speak, to share, to preserve our stories and experiences. Lorde later goes on to explain that to remain silent is futile because “your silence will not protect you” (p. 41), explicating the importance of speaking for Black women involved in the work of preservation.

Often, however, the preservation of our stories has often come at a cost. For instance, Black female activists of old like Ida B. Wells faced death threats for the work she did to unveil and dismantle white supremacy. Today, activists associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have been called terrorists by both white

supremacist groups *and* the FBI. In her memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist*, activist Patrisse Khan-Cullors (2018) explains the feelings accompanied with such accusations:

Even still, the accusation of being a terrorist is devastating, and I allow myself space to cry quietly as I lie in bed on a Sunday morning listening to a red-faced, hysterical Rudolph Giuliani spit lies about us three days after Dallas¹² (p. 7).

Her choice to speak against racial injustice cost her emotional and reputational strain.

While necessary for liberation, the work of preservation has never been safe or easy for Black women.

Despite the danger of speaking out, however, Black girls' and women's choices to continuously share have allowed for personal healing (hooks, 2015) as well necessary work towards social justice. For instance, during her bout with cancer, Audre Lorde (1988) used journaling as a way to write herself towards healing; to write herself well. Her book of edited essays, *A Burst of Light*, shares her deepest thoughts and feelings of her fight for her life, even as she continued in the work of Black feminism. Teen activist Marley Dias started her #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign in an effort to publicize books with Black girl protagonists so Black girls could see themselves in books and stop reading books that centered "white boys and their dogs." Similarly, 11-year-old Naomi Wadler spoke prolifically at the 2017 March for Our Lives rally in an effort to raise awareness about the effects of gun violence on Black women and girls. Further, musical artists like SZA, Solange, and Jamila Woods have recently begun to popularize the trend of including Black women's oral histories on their albums in order to share the stories and the wisdom of elder Black women. Their work is tangential to that of Monique

¹² "Dallas" refers to the sniper who opened fire and killed five police officers during a Black Lives Matter protest on July 27, 2016.

Morris (2019) who discusses the power and importance of Blues Women who are able to “[bear] witness to contradictions and then [work] through them to bring about critically, intellectually responsible thinking and action” (p. 7). By incorporating stories into their musical projects, these women are continuing the work of a long line of Black women who have leaned into the healing power of music for Black women. Lastly, young Black actresses like Yara Shahidi and Zendaya have begun to use their platforms and popularity to combat injustices of all kinds by raising awareness and choosing roles that allow them to critique social norms through their artwork. Each of these Black girls and women follow the tradition of preservation by either speaking directly back to oppression through their words or actions or providing platforms for other Black women to do so. They, like their foremothers, engage in the act of preserving as an act of self-love.

Protecting

Lastly, for Black women and girls, notions of love and protection have always been bound. Elaine Richardson (2002) explained that, in particular, Black women’s literacies have served as a method of protection:

With an aura so critical to the personhood of the Black female, her literacies have, by necessity, developed to fulfill a quest for a better world. And so, Black females, Sojourners and Souljahs, have special knowledges and develop language and literacy practices to counteract White supremacist and economically motivated stereotypes conveying subhuman or immoral images (p. 677).

That is, Black women have historically employed their literacies in ways that allow them to critically examine and challenge a world that values Whiteness, patriarchy, and capitalism. I argue that in doing so, they enact self-love by contributing to a world that

will be better for themselves and their sisters. Countless historical figures are included amongst those who have enacted their protective literacies for the purposes of self-love including Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and many others. Aretha Franklin's song *Respect* serves as one example of this type of protection. Franklin, recognizing her own humanity and worth, demands respect from her listener. Likewise, the Combahee River Collective (1982), mentioned earlier, demanded recognition for *all* of their identities simultaneously. Songstress Lauryn Hill provided warnings - "keep your eyes on the final hour" and "girl, you know you better watch out" - to her sistas, perhaps attempting to protect them from potential dangers.

Contemporarily, Black women have continued this tradition in their activism, poetry, and song. Perhaps one of the most recent examples of this type of protection in the popular media is Solange's work *A Seat at the Table* (2016). Of particular import is Solange's repeated use of the word "don't" throughout the work of art. Her statement "don't" can perhaps be seen as a proclamation of her agency physically (Don't Touch My Hair), temporally (Don't Wait for Me), and even with regards to her wisdom ("don't know where to go"). On the interlude *I Got So Much Magic*, Solange tells her audience, presumably Black women and girls, "don't let anybody steal your magic." To use the word "don't" in this particular phrase is to (re)claim your power or to help someone else to see or (re)claim their own. Like other Black girls and women who came before her, Solange understands the power of her literacies to protect both her and other Black women and uses her platform to follow in their footsteps.

Suggestions for Future Research

Above I have presented a review of the literature on Black girls' twenty-first

century literacies and self-love. However, because this area of study is still in its infancy, there is much to be explored. As such, Black girls' twenty-first century literacies, as they pertain to self-love, warrants a closer look.

For instance, Muhammad and Haddix (2016) suggested that Black girls' literacies are, among other things, collaborative. Thus, scholars should note how Black girls' twenty-first century literacies can be creatively collaborative, and as Kelly (2018) explored, expand beyond collaborating with Black girls in the same room or at the same institution. Future studies should seek to utilize digital tools to their fullest potential, exploring the broader possibilities technology provides for connection and community. They should begin to explore how Black girls can and do take up their twenty-first century literacies in ways that allow them to collaborate and create for the purposes of sharing with other Black girl peers in digital realms beyond the bounds of space and time. Not only will such studies assist researchers and practitioners in understanding the ways Black girls employ their twenty-first century literacies to support one another, but also to build expanded kinship.

Moreover, Muhammad and Haddix also (2016) stated that Black girls' literacies are tied to their identities. Currently, the majority of the literature on Black girls' digital literacies centers two identities: race and gender. While both race and gender are vital identities to explore in the lives of Black girls, Black girls are not monolithic in their experiences. As such, future research on Black girls' twenty-first century literacies should seek expand the lens of Black girlhood to generate a deeper understanding of how identities like age, sexuality, class, religion, and nationality influence Black girls' literacies generally and Black girls' twenty-first century literacies and experiences with

self-love in particular. Exploring these varying identities allows for richer and more nuanced understandings of the varied experiences of Black girls and opens research up to questions that seek to understand varied aspects of identity.

Furthermore, while literature about Black girls' twenty-first century literacies unanimously acknowledges the violence and oppression Black girls face both in and out of schools, there is not much research that addresses how twenty-first century literacies can be used to interrogate or share theories and practices of self-love that counteract and protect Black girls against the physical, psychological, and emotional violence to which they are subject given their race and gender. Given the incidents in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray showed what happens to Black students when they learn to be critical but are not protected by society, it is important to teach Black students to use digital tools in ways that can facilitate their own protection.

Lastly, my review of the literature indicates that there is currently a need for scholarship that explores both Black girls' twenty-first century literacies and self-love in tandem. Although Black girls exist in a society that does not value them or their wellbeing, Black girls' twenty-first century literacies have the potential to move them closer to love for self and community and thus wellbeing; we, as researchers, have a responsibility to understand how that can happen. In turn, researchers and practitioners, as well as those genuinely invested in the wellbeing of Black girls can better understand how to support Black girls as literate beings resisting racist and sexist messages in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 3: HOW WE MADE IT OVER: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Associate Professor of English Education at Teachers College, explains that if, as researchers and practitioners of education, we are to do right by students we must interrogate our “archaeology of the self” (2018). She explains that in order for us to be open to the stories and lives of the students we teach and work with, we have to become deeply aware of who we are, our own biases and experiences with various oppressions, and how our varied identities influence our interpretations of our interactions with students. Failing to do so, she argues, exacts and perpetuates harm for already marginalized groups of students. Likewise, scholars who engage humanizing and anti-deficit research understand that to engage with any population of people from historically marginalized communities requires intimate familiarity with both the research population and context (Brown, 2009, 2013; Player, 2018). Critical researchers have noted the importance of interrogating one’s own positionality (Milner, 2007). Taken together, these sentiments suggest that humanizing research requires truly *knowing* both self *and* the communities with which we work deeply.

Thus, I begin this chapter by first detailing my own archaeology of the self in an effort to situate my positionality within this research project. I then detail my theoretical orientations, which inform every part of this dissertation. Next, I describe my research roots and the demographic, academic, and cultural context at Northwest Charter School (NCS). I then provide detailed portraits of my research partners so as to depict them as fully human and co-constructors of this project. Finally, I explain my qualitative data collection and analysis methods, explicating how I coded and systematically examined a range of data.

My Journey Towards Self-Love through Twenty-First Century Black Girl Literacies

At the root of my desire to embark on this project are my own experiences as a Black girl. I was born in Livingston, New Jersey to two Black U.S. American parents and raised - for most of my life - in Easton, Pennsylvania. Although I grew up in schools that were predominantly white and was often one of the only - if not the only - Black student in my class, my mother raised me to love every aspect of my Black girl self. Our home was meticulously decorated with Black art and photos of family members with warm smiles. As far back as I can remember, my mom would write to my teachers each February to ask if she could come to my school during Black History Month to give the class a lesson. Although she was not a teacher, my mom was an expert in her own right. She had a depth of knowledge about and a wealth of love for her own culture and desired to pass that on to her children. Contrary to what majoritarian narratives suggest about Black mothers (as welfare queens who generally do not care and are uninvolved in their children's lives), her care for her children's identity development and sense of self motivated her to play an active role in our schooling, especially when she believed our teachers were unfit or unable to do so.

When we moved to a suburb of Rochester, New York, my mom sought out a Black adolescent girl as a babysitter for my brother and me and took me and my best friend to the Sprite Step Off each year. The hair salon I frequented as an adolescent was called Nappy By Choice, and they specialized in treating and styling natural hair. Every choice my mother made in raising me was an intentional decision to help me to embrace my Black girlhood, especially in the midst of so much whiteness. Her messages of pride

and celebration surrounding Black girlhood were starkly contrasted with the messages I received at school.

In the second grade, Justin Smith called me a nigger on the school bus. When I came home crying, my dad made me look up the word in the dictionary. “An ignorant person,” I read aloud. “Do you know what ignorant means?” He asked me. I shook my head no, and he waited patiently while I looked up the word. “Lacking knowledge or awareness. Uneducated,” I read. “Does that define you?” he asked me. I shook my head no again and held my head down. He gently lifted my head, looking me square in the eye and said, “No, it doesn’t. You are brilliant. Don’t you ever let a white boy call you that ever again.” The depth of his words settled into my soul where they still lie today. Little did I know at that moment that they would serve me well as I continued my schooling.

In the ninth grade I took an honors history class. Mr. Mohap, my teacher, was new, inexperienced, and generally unengaging. I often found myself asleep in his class, and eventually, as a result, my grade began to suffer. When my parents met with him for my annual parent teacher conference, he told my mom that my grades were an accurate reflection of my ability. “To be honest,” he said, “I don’t know why she’s even in this class.”

“Her grades are not a reflection of her ability. Have you ever considered that she finds you and your class boring and that’s why she’s sleeping?” she asked him plainly. “To be honest,” she continued, “*I find you boring.*” Although I have not quite mastered the art of the clapback (Kaler-Jones, Griffin, & Lindo, in press) as well as my mother, her quick and witty responses served as the foundation for how I would eventually learn to engage in classrooms when she was not able to be a present advocate.

In the eleventh grade, I was a member of our school's chapter of the National Honor Society. Arriving late to a meeting from a tutoring session with another teacher, the advisor of the club eyed me suspiciously as I walked in. When I sat down, she approached me and asked, "What are you doing here? This is an Honor Society meeting," insinuating that I did not belong. I turned my head slowly until my eyes met hers. "I'm *in* the Honor Society," I replied and then flashed her a million-dollar smile. The color drained from her face as she huffed, turned on her heels, and walked away flustered.

My schooling experiences were laden with racialized and gendered violence from administrators, teachers, professors, and students alike. Although popular discourse attempts to position the U.S. educational system as the "great equalizer," my experiences depict quite the opposite. The schooling system was not created for me to thrive or even survive. I did not - and arguably still do not - matter at school (Love, 2019). Many of my peers saw me as unfit to learn alongside them. My teachers often publicly questioned whether I "belonged" in certain classes. Fortunately, my parents provided me with a solid foundation of self-worth and -love and were often able to help me in the work of healing the wounds the educational system had inflicted upon me. However, the more I fought the more fatigued I became. Eventually, I turned to technology to create my own spaces on my own terms and to begin to engage in the process of collective healing.

I came of age at the dawn of the new millennium. During my adolescence, computers and digital technology were developing at rapid speeds and becoming an integral part of our everyday lives. In middle school, I spent a great deal of time in chat rooms with teens from across the country, creating my own sense of digital community; I began streaming music and creating mixed CDs for myself and my friends; and I received

my first camera phone that allowed me to take and post pictures of myself to my MySpace page. In the chat rooms, I formed a community with other Black kids who didn't call me names or make fun of the way I spoke/typed. They identified with it. We had a shared language. The CDs allowed me and my friends a touchpoint to music that "got us" in a school that was a microcosm of a world that didn't. We shared music that made us groove, music that made us think, and music that made us feel. My camera allowed me to shape my narrative, posting pictures of myself and my friends as beautiful, joyful, and childlike - because we deserved to be seen as childlike (Epstein, et al., 2017). These digital practices were the genesis of my own experiences with twenty-first century literacies. They provided space to work through my own identity development, determining what affinity groups I wanted to be a part of, how I could use Black music as a form of healing, and how I could control my own narrative using words and images simultaneously to show the world varied, nuanced, and humanizing depictions of Black girls. In contrast to school, the digital space allowed me to feel a sense of belonging and connect with others who shared my experiences and ways of seeing the world.

My intrigue with the digital continued through high school and into my college years. As an undergraduate student, I spent time with friends in our dorm rooms and apartments watching YouTube videos of hair tutorials, comedy sketches of the experiences of Black college students, and Issa Rae's *Awkward Black Girl* web series. Digital spaces provided my friends and I a place to write ourselves into the world as we saw ourselves and understood our experiences through tweets, videos, and Facebook and blog posts. They allowed us to read representations of ourselves and each other not included in syllabi or represented in the physical campus space. When any event took

place on campus that concerned the lives, livelihood, or safety of Black students, we would turn to Twitter to engage in critical dialogue and offer commentary on the events at hand. The digital became a space for us to commune and dialogue away from the overwhelmingly white population and culture of our campus. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas said in a recent tweet, “Many of us turn to broadcast social media for respite from the words being snatched right out of our mouths” (2019, October 25). As Black students on a predominantly white campus, the digital offered us a space to be brave *and* safe; a place to lay our words down carefully before they could be so violently snatched from us. It offered us chances to build and find solidarity, even as the campus denied us what we were due. It provided a space for relief from the white gaze, a space of hope, of joy, even if only for a moment. The digital was our third space (Gee, 1998), our homeplace (hooks, 1990).

Digital spaces can and should be used to share and celebrate our stories, work through our own experiences with oppression and marginalization, and disseminate our content to a larger audience who is likely facing similar issues. Thus, *Blackademia* was born. In August of 2016, one of my homegirls, Tiffany, and I birthed our own digital platform, *Blackademia* to discuss our own experiences as Black women in various sites of the academy. Tiffany and I met when in my freshman year she served as a peer mentor to my two best friends; I invited myself into the fold. After graduation, we continued to communicate, transitioning from a mentorship to a friendship. When I moved to Atlanta to teach, we kept in touch through regular phone calls, FaceTime appointments, check ins, and visits. What began as a series of phone conversations where we realized that although we had transitioned to different levels of education (i.e. undergraduate and

graduate student, teacher, data analyst, administrator, graduate assistant, etc.) we continued to have similar experiences. No matter at what level we served, we faced the same racist patriarchal trials, microaggressions, and institutional hardships. Jokingly one day, I said “we should host a podcast to talk about all of this.”

We decided to start small and began with a blog. In our second year, we expanded to include a podcast, quarterly digital book chats on Twitter, and collaborations with a larger network of Black women graduate students who have come to be known as the Digital Divas. Through this network of digital projects, we seek to celebrate and highlight the work of people of color - especially Black women - in all academic spaces, interrogate our experiences, and provide a place for us to engage in scholarly discourse about *our* scholarship.

To me, this project has been a continuation of my practice of self-love and liberatory literacies in digital spaces. It has been a return to my mother’s early impartation of my love for Black girlhood and my father’s declaration that I am brilliant. Constructing Blackademia and working alongside my *sista* friends has been a practice in reminding myself of the value of Black scholars, Black Feminist scholarship and praxis, and community building in a world that perpetuates the myths that we are not knowledge bearers and rugged individualism is the only route to success. It has taught me the importance of extending myself beyond myself - even when it is most frightening - to nurture, celebrate, preserve, and protect my own growth and the growth of other Black women scholars. Thus, I approach this dissertation not simply as a researcher exploring a phenomenon, but as a practitioner of self-love employing my own digital literacies in meaningfully liberatory ways.

Further, I acknowledge my stance as both an insider and an outsider in this project. As a Black girl who spent my formative years in public schools, I identified with many of the experiences of my research partners. As such, my “multiple and varied positions, roles, identities are intricately and inextricably embedded in the process and outcomes” of this dissertation (Milner, 2007, p. 389). Our shared identities and experiences offered me almost effortless access to the research site and genuine relationship with my partners. They trusted me almost immediately because, to some extent, we shared a language, all acknowledging the racialized and gendered nature of moving through the world in a Black girls’ body and with a Black girls’ eye. With the girls’ help I was able to curate sessions where we tapped into topics important to Black girlhood and Black womanhood and engaged in conversations that often do not take place in class. In a lot of ways, my own positionality supported me in successfully conducting the entirety of this project.

Simultaneously, our stories diverged in multiple ways. Not only are my Black girl experiences different than theirs, as an adult, an educator, and a researcher, I function as an outsider whose life has been significantly different from that of my research partners. I grew up when computers and the internet were just being introduced, and they do not know life without them. In their school I functioned as a member of the administrative staff and have formerly served as a secondary educator. My experiences as an educational researcher who has done extensive reading on the experiences of Black girls in schools and literacy classrooms inherently shaped my views and our time together. Although I do not claim objectivity in this work, as a researcher of this dissertation I had a responsibility not to share my own story, but rather to share the girls’ stories. Thus, in an effort to tell

their stories, I engaged in the process of “continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation” of my positionality (Berger, 2015, p. 220). I kept a log, memoing my thoughts after each session. I chatted with my sista-friends often, to ask for assistance in interpreting my data to be sure I wasn’t trippin. Again, I do not claim that this type of reflexivity (Berger, 2015) protected my work from subjectivity - as I do not believe any work that deals with the topics of race and gender can or should claim neutrality - but rather that it checked me when and where I needed to be checked, ensuring that I was not solely engaging in autoethnography, but focusing on the case study at hand.

Theoretical Orientations and Grounding

As I conducted this dissertation study, I was guided by my own beliefs in Black girls as geniuses - as knowers, as beautiful, and as worthy of their own love - to make meaning of my interactions with the girls and analyze my data (Brown, 2009). Thus, I employed theoretical frameworks that engage their brilliance, criticality, and resistance, to understand their development and depiction of self-love through an affirming rather than deficit lens.

To begin, I draw on the work of Ruth Nicole Brown, a leading voice in Black girlhood studies (2009), who defines Black girlhood as “the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” (p. 1). To be and become in a Black girl’s body means to hold a specific social position in the world (Butler, 2018). Because Black girls’ experiences are inextricably tied to their racialized and gendered identities, they readily experience both racism and sexism simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1995). I take up Collins’s (1991) notion of controlling images and acknowledge that Black girls face four interrelated and socially constructed

controlling images that “[reflect] the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black [girls’] subordination” (p. 266): (1) the mammy; (2) the matriarch; (3) the welfare mother; and (4) the Jezebel. Given the technology of the twenty-first century, such images are reified on digital platforms and disseminated widely for broad consumption, perpetuating racist and sexist discourse about Black girlhood. These lived experiences are inseparable from Black girlhood and it is against this social landscape that Black girls are expected to thrive.

To *be* in a Black girls’ body means to exist while simultaneously taking up space in a world that loathes your very existence. As such, the very act of being, of existing, is an act of resistance. Becoming, then, is what “allows for a thinking and imagining outside of the ‘stuckness’ of race and gender...toward...different potentialities where Black girls can be shifting, fluid, and multiple” (Franklin-Phipps, 2017, p. 385). To be clear, the notion of becoming does not dismiss the very real experiences of Black girls that are tied to racialized and gendered oppressions. In fact, when mapped onto the unique racialized and gendered experiences of Black girls, it provides a lens for understanding how Black girls experience childhood and adolescence in ways that are unique to their Black male and white female counterparts. Further, understanding the notion of becoming from a racialized and gendered perspective allows for imaginative, creative, and critical discourse to take place as a form of resistance so that healing and self-love have room to grow and flourish.

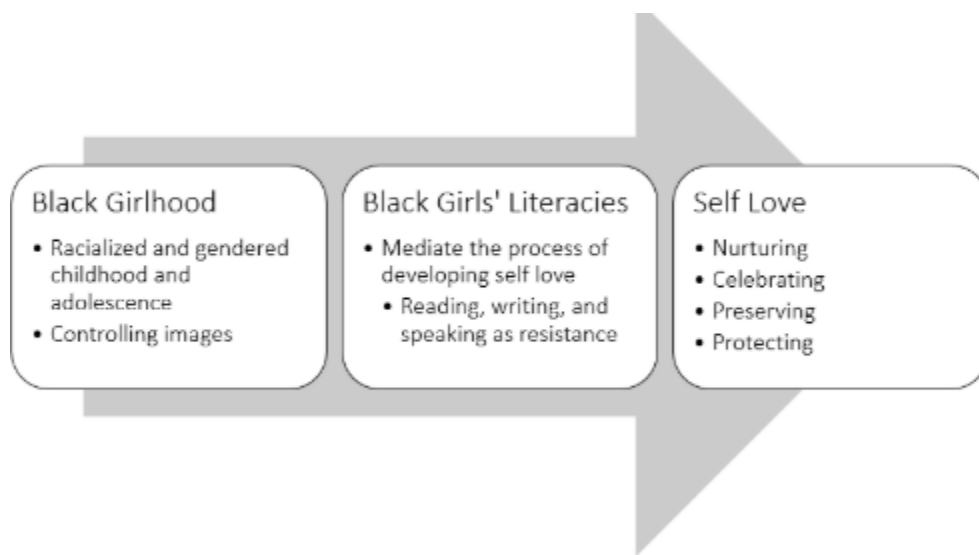
This fluid and malleable process of becoming is integral to understanding how Black girls develop self-love through the use of their twenty-first century literacies. Returning, then, to Brown’s (2009) notion that Black girlhood is defined by “being and

becoming,” (p. 1) I argue that Black Girls’ Literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) facilitate the process of being and becoming for Black girls. That is, Black Girls’ Literacies allow Black girls to make sense of their Black girlhood experiences through the processes of reading, writing, and speaking to and about their worlds and social realities. Because Black girls have and continue to use their literacies as one tool of becoming, I also take up Muhammad and Haddix’s (2016) Black Girls’ Literacies framework to assist in my understanding of how literacies facilitate the development and depiction of self-love for adolescent Black girls. In their groundbreaking literature review, Muhammad and Haddix concluded that Black Girls’ Literacies are (1) multimodal; (2) tied to identities; (3) historical; (4) collaborative; (5) intellectual; and (6) political/critical. That is, Black girls employ their multiple literacies in ways that allow them to develop and explore their multiple identities as they draw from the collaborative and political/critical practices of their foremothers. Grounded in critical, historical, and Black Feminist theories, the Black Girls’ Literacies framework (1) privileges Black girls’ ways of knowing as they engage their literacies, (2) acknowledges them as literate beings, and (3) highlights the restorative nature of Black girls’ literate practices.

In essence, it is the employment of Black Girls’ Literacies that allow Black girls to critically examine, resist, and talk back to (hooks, 1989) the oppressions unique to Black girlhood in order to develop and depict their self-love. Through this process Black girls come to love themselves in a world that hates them and has taught/is teaching them to hate themselves as well (Cooper, 2018). Black Feminists have written about this act of becoming as an act of resistance against white, patriarchal notions of Black women and girls. For instance, hook’s (1989) book “Talking Back” describes the way Black women’s

speech allows them to speak against the silencing of Black women's discourse. Black women authors like Toni Morrison both wrote and encouraged Black women to write themselves into texts. And most recently, modern technology has provided opportunities for Black girls - like Marley Dias and DJ Switch - to create digital mediums that allow them to curate books, music, and other texts by, for, and about Black girls. Figure 3.1 visually depicts the aforementioned process.

Figure 3.1 Theoretical Framework: Black Girls' Development of Self-Love



To privilege Black girls' ways of knowing, especially with regards to literacy, is to decenter the knowledge associated with whiteness and patriarchy and privilege the knowledge, interests, and standpoints of Black girls and women (Collins, 2000). Thus, I turn both to academic scholars and those located outside of the academy because U.S. American society has historically excluded Black women and girls and thus much of our knowledge is archived outside of academic spaces (Collins, 2000). As such, I not only draw on notable scholars such as Brown, Collins, hooks, and Morrison to define Black girlhood, but I also turn to the knowledge of women who are not only scholars in their

own right, but also artists, poets, singers, and songwriters. I borrow from the tradition of Black women of old who demanded R-E-S-P-E-C-T (Aretha Franklin), were determined to “get up from the table when love [was] no longer being served,” (Nina Simone), and declared they were phenomenal women (Maya Angelou). I draw from Black girls who used their literacies to support one another in becoming well (Toni Cade Bambara), defined themselves for themselves (Audre Lorde), and found God in themselves and loved her fiercely (Ntozake Shange). These women not only wrote, sang, and danced their narratives, they shared them with us so that we may also understand what it means to journey towards self-love (Lauryn Hill). To privilege Black girls’ multiple literacies and ways of knowing in this way is to acknowledge the multiple ways Black girls have historically and continue to practice their literacies. It highlights the ways that literacy extends beyond the purposes of reading and writing for academic purposes into the realm of creation, resistance, and healing (Carey, 2014).

Emerging theory about Black girls’ twenty-first century literacies, however, is under researched (Ellison, 2017). As Ellison (2017) discusses in her explanation of Black Feminist Digital Literacies, “within this age of new technologies, literacies, and practices, it matters to explore Black women’s digital narratives and practices in research because it humanizes our stake in the world of who we are” (p. 91). That is, by attending to the twenty-first century literacies of Black girls, we both acknowledge and honor their humanity and lived experiences. In taking these theories - Black Girlhood, Black Girls’ Literacies, and Becoming - together, my work builds on the extant literature about Black girls’ twenty-first century literacies by exploring the ways Black girls uniquely employ their literacies to develop and depict self-love.

Methodology and Research Design

This dissertation employs qualitative case study methods and borrows from Participatory Action Research (PAR) to answer the following research questions:

1. *How do adolescent Black girls articulate the ways they engage their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love?*
2. *How do adolescent Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally?*

For this dissertation I conducted a qualitative case study and borrowed methods from the traditions of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Importantly, I do not make the claim that this is a PAR study, but rather than I borrow methods from that tradition as they align with my specific theoretical orientations. In the following sections I define both qualitative case study and PAR as they are used throughout this dissertation and explain how I employed each. I then describe my research partner selection criteria and process and provide humanizing descriptions of each of my research partners. Next, I detail my roots at my research site, Northwest Charter School, and describe the context of the school. Finally, I conclude by explaining my data collection and analysis methods.

Qualitative Case Study

A qualitative case study is a bounded, descriptive, non-experimental research design (Barone, 2011; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). A bounded study is one that defines both what is included and what is excluded (Barone, 2011). Barone (2011) explains that in one example of a bounded study, “one first-grade class may be the focus of the study by a researcher who is studying a first-year teacher in a high-poverty school. However, the neighboring first-grade class would not be

considered for participation because the teacher has taught in the school for several years” (p. 8). In this bounded study, I have chosen only to include girls who identify as Black - across the diaspora - because I am interested in the ways *Black girls* use their digital literacies to enact self-love. As such, any student at NCS who does not fall within that population was ineligible to participate in the study. Additionally, case studies are traditionally qualitative and descriptive. The qualitative nature of this study allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of a single case (Creswell, 2013). In this instance a qualitative case study allowed me to explore how Black girls employ their twenty-first century literacies to develop and depict their self-love during one semester at NCS. Choosing to collect and analyze qualitative rather than quantitative data allowed me to gain a rich understanding of a specific process through words, visuals, and audio recordings in a way that numbers alone would have been unable to capture. Further I chose qualitative methods because I was interested in the girls’ articulations of self-love and twenty-first century literacies. Employing these methods allowed me to elicit responses from and engage in learning with the girls while collecting data that focused more on experiences than numbers.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a method of research used to empower “people to take effective action toward improving conditions in their lives” (Park 1993, p. 2). PAR emphasizes the value of local knowledge and puts research in the hands of people from historically marginalized communities so that those involved may become more aware, critical, assertive, creative, and active in the change-making process. Furthermore, derivatives of PAR, such as Black Emancipatory Research (BEAR)

“[challenge] traditional paradigms and theories used to explain the experiences of Black people” by focusing on transformative solutions and community capacity building” (Akom, 2011, p. 121). In my dissertation I draw on PAR in four distinct ways. First, I rely on the local knowledge of community members, specifically with regards to participant selection. Because the principal of the school has been a member of the community since its inception in 2014, I deferred to her to select participants who she knew fit the research partner criteria I developed, and which are discussed below. Second, I allowed the girls in the study to guide our time together. Although initially I intended to conduct a collective case study with three focus groups for each case, the girls articulated that they wanted to spend more time together and that they wanted to explore specific aspects of self-love. Thus, in the tradition of PAR, we worked together to take action that would improve our lives. I centered their knowledge and needs to conduct a project that was even greater than anything I could have imagined on my own. Third, throughout this study I intentionally use the term “partners” to name the girls rather than “subjects” or “participants” (Player, 2018). Borrowing from the traditions of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), I acknowledge and wish to emphasize the co-constructed nature of the knowledge generated from this project¹³ (Daymond, et al., 2006; Mirra, et al., 2015). Because I believe Black girls are experts on their own lives and lived experiences, their needs, desires, and knowledge influenced data collection as much as, if not more than, my own. Lastly, as much as I could, I employed PAR’s notion of reciprocity, which I describe in the following section.

¹³ While I borrow from the traditions of PAR and YPAR, I do not make the claim that this is a PAR or YPAR study or that I employed PAR or YPAR methods.

Reciprocity

The nature of research has historically been one-sided and admittedly benefits university researchers more than any other party. While I acknowledge that there is no equal reciprocity in academic research, PAR places a distinct focus on giving back to research partners both during and after the research process. Therefore, in an effort to offer my research partners a fraction of what they gave me during this process, and to show appreciation for their time, effort, and dedication to my project, each girl received the following:

- \$20 Amazon Gift Card
- Continued mentorship, including sessions on time management, guidance on navigating the college application and selection process, and any other partner-stated interests

Lastly, I have continued to keep open lines of communication with all partners. They have and have used both my cell phone number and email address. As well, I continue to return to the school roughly three times each month to continue the work we started through this project.

Research Partner Criteria, Selection, and Descriptions

In order to build upon the initial study about Black girls' digital literacies (Griffin, forthcoming), I kept the criteria consistent with the first study. These criteria included that partners must: (a) be between the ages of 14-18 years old in grades 9-11¹⁴; (b) be identified as female on all official school documents¹⁵; (c) self identify as Black, African

¹⁴ NCS currently only serves grades 9-11. Therefore, students in the study will be in these grades.

¹⁵ Given that IRB requires participants had to have a permission slip signed to participate, this choice was made to protect any students who may identify as trans or gender non-conforming at school, but may not have come out to their parents or families at home.

American, West Indian/Caribbean American, African, or Afro-Latinx. In addition, to better understand how Black girls engage their digital literacies to develop and depict self-love, I added one additional criterion: partners must currently regularly engage with one or more digital (including social media) platforms. Again, drawing from the traditions of PAR, which relies on the knowledge of experts in the community (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Park, 1993; Willis, 2008), the high school principal at NCS, a millennial Black woman, assisted me in selecting the research partners for the study using the above stated criteria due to her established and reputable relationships with her students. Thus, she chose nine girls who met all of the above stated criteria and articulated interest in engaging in discussions about self-love in community with other Black girls. Importantly, I asked her not to consider records of behavior or academic achievement when selecting research partners to create space for girls who may be positioned as deviant or academically struggling. Recruitment resulted in a total of nine adolescent Black girls across the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades¹⁶. The chart in figure 3.2 depicts the age, grade and self-identified racial and ethnic identity of each girl as noted on the introductory survey. In the following section I provide a more detailed description of each research partner to provide insight to their positionalities and personhood as Black girls and practitioners of self-love and twenty-first century literacies. To protect the privacy of all research partners, each girl chose a pseudonym by which she would be referred throughout this dissertation.

Figure 3.2 Demographic Descriptions of Research Partners

¹⁶ As the school is a build up charter school only in its third year as a high school, there are currently only three grades, 9-11. By the 2019-2020 school year, the school will be functioning at full capacity and will graduate its first class of high school seniors.

Name	Age	Grade	Race/Ethnic Identity
Asia	17	11	black [sic]
Chyna	15	9	Afro-Latina
Filia	15	10	African American
Hart	15	9	Black
Kaylee	15	9	Black
Monica	16	11	African American
Samantha	15	10	African-American
Summer	15	10	African American
Vanessa	14	9	Black/African-american [sic]

Asia

Asia is an eleventh-grader who aspires to attend an HBCU and eventually pursue a degree in clinical psychology or legal studies. She is firm in her love of all things Black girls and Black women, often donning t-shirts with positive affirmations about Black girlhood, including “Black Girls Are Lit.” When asked what she loves most about herself, Asia simply answered “being [a] black girl.” Asia is also the old soul of the group. Her favorite album is Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, a musical fave she says that was passed down to her from her mother and aunties. No stranger to digital tools, Asia denoted that she spends between 75-100 percent of her time online and that Snapchat is her medium of choice.

Chyna

Chyna, a freshman, is Afro-Latina and identifies as Dominican. She is a strong defender of her closest relationships and loves warm weather and the beach. Although

she is quiet, she has a strong presence and dreams to one day become a cosmetologist and own her own beauty salon. Chyna reported spending most of her time on Instagram looking at hair and makeup tutorials of Black girls.

Filia

Filia, a sophomore, is quiet and observant. An artist at heart, her interests span from writing to acting, to music. Though she is not yet sure of what she wants to major in, she has dreams of one day attending the University of Maryland. She reports that her favorite thing about herself is “[her] personality” and that YouTube is her favorite digital platform.

Hart

Almost always deep in thought, Hart is never too busy to stop for a hug or to discuss the happenings of her day. Hart is both an artist and a scientist. She loves visual art and coding and hasn’t yet discovered how she wants to think about the two in tandem. What she is sure of, is that she wants to attend an ivy league school and travel the world and that she has “good influence” and “[loves] helping people.” Hart reported regularly engaging on Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest.

Kaylee

Kaylee, a ninth grader who is ecstatic to no longer be one of the “babies” in the school, is an empath. Kaylee loves to engage in dialogue, both as a listener and speaker, and has mentioned on several occasions that for her, the space feels like therapy. Shortly after we began meeting, Kaylee started to seek me and her other sistas outside of our time together to get career and general life advice. Although she hasn’t told her parents (because she’s nervous they’ll be disappointed in her) Kaylee hopes to be an editorial

photographer someday. In alignment with her desires for her future, Kaylee reported spending most of her time on digital platforms on Instagram both exploring curated Instagram pages and curating her own.

Monica

Monica is going to run the world someday. A junior, she is a tech genius who is fluent in Mandarin and loves her family deeply. Monica was often a leader in our group, pushing the girls to think through challenging dialogue together. She often took the lead on tasks that involved organization and the younger girls often turned to her for guidance. Monica reported using Twitter and Instagram more than any other platform.

Samantha

Although Samantha, a freshman, started off as one of the more quiet members of our group, it was clear from the beginning that she had a strong sense of self. She didn't talk often, but when she did, it was powerful. In one of our first meetings, Samantha articulated that she was not a fan of rap music because of the way it often contributed to stereotypical images of Black women. When her comment sucked the air out of the room, Samantha did not recant her remarks, but rather stood firm in her statement. Outside of school, Samantha is a volleyball player and model and has dreams of traveling the world as a photographer. Ever the reflective and self aware student, Samantha says her favorite thing about herself is that she is "independent because it allows me to make better choices and be able to not be codependent." Samantha reported that the majority of her time on digital platforms is spent on Snapchat and Instagram.

Summer

Summer is my reminder that Black girls can be both silly and powerful, and that together the two are perfectly beautiful. A sophomore, Summer is 15 years old and currently works as a shampooer in a hair salon. She has hopes to someday attend either Spelman College or Florida State University - both HBCUs - and pursue a career in international relations. A social butterfly and self advocate, Summer has a strong sense of what she wants and needs and is not afraid to ask. When asked what she loves most about herself, Summer stated “I love how I can be myself around others and I also the characteristics that comes with me :).” She reported using Instagram and Snapchat most of all social media platforms.

Vanessa

Vanessa is unapologetically authentic. Almost every week Vanessa came into our group with a new look, which makes sense given that her favorite thing about herself is that she doesn’t “look like most girls because it makes [her] unique.” Vanessa is also a conscious eater, regularly reminding the group that she is a vegan and sometimes urging other girls to try some of her modifications (rarely to her avail). She dreams of attending either Spelman or Harvard, traveling the world, and becoming a doctor. Vanessa reported that she uses both Snapchat and Instagram daily.

My Research Roots at Northwest Charter School

My project design builds upon and is shaped by my partnership with and commitment to the Northwest Charter School (NCS) community since August 2017. I first came to work with some of the adolescent Black girls at NCS in the spring of 2017 when I began researching Black girls’ articulation of their digital literacies. The amount of time I have spent with the NCS community over the years has allowed me to develop

relationships with students, teachers, staff, and administrators to more deeply understand the context of the school and the digital literacies of the girls with whom I partnered for this project. Over time and through the cultivation of trusting relationships, I have come to understand some of the needs and desires of the community in general, and the girls with whom I work, in particular. Thus, collecting my dissertation data in a place with which I was familiar and where the community was already familiar with me assisted me in developing unique insights that would not have been unearthed had I chosen to do this work in a less familiar context.

Since 2017, I have been involved at NCS in various capacities, serving as a researcher, a mentor, a long-term substitute teacher, an SAT prep teacher, and an administrative assistant. My work began in a previous research project where I was the principal investigator. During this project I conducted three focus group interviews with a group of six adolescent Black girls to understand their articulation of their digital literacies (Griffin, forthcoming). Upon completion of the study, the principal (then assistant principal asked me to supervise the second-year cumulative projects - a requirement of all students in the school - of two sophomore girls. Once the projects had been successfully completed, she then asked to join the teaching staff at NCS as a long-term substitute teacher for the spring of 2018 and then as an administrative assistant for the 2018-2019 school year. My time at the school and conversations with students, staff, and families helped me to see the need and desire for spaces in which Black girls can be and become together, apart from their peers, and where their literacies and ways of knowing and understanding are privileged. Thus, we formed our group within the walls of NCS, a place I was coming to know well and would get to know better.

Context at Northwest Charter School

NCS is a charter middle and high school in an urban, mid-Atlantic city. The school is situated in a rapidly gentrifying area and students commute from all over the city to attend. Housed in a former military medical center, NCS focuses on language immersion in Chinese, Spanish, and French as well as inquiry-based learning. NCS's mission statement reads as follows:

Northwest Charter School inspires inquiring, engaged, knowledgeable and caring secondary students who are multilingual, culturally competent, and committed to proactively creating a socially just and sustainable world.

Their goals for the 2017-2018¹⁷ school year included the following:

1. Create a consistent, positive culture throughout the building
2. Establish common vision of effective teaching
3. Define curriculum for grades 6-12, including ATL (approaches to learning), subject area courses, and interdisciplinary units
4. Help all students see themselves as respected parts of the NCS community
5. Ensure students end the year ready to move to the next academic level
6. Achieve milestones in the life of the school

NCS offers the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Program for students in sixth through eighth grades and is an authorized IB school for students in ninth through twelfth grades. NCS prides itself on its three pillars, including: (1) advanced language learning in Chinese, Spanish, and French, (2) IB curriculum and programs for all students, and (3) 1:1 technology ratio. With regards to their first pillar,

¹⁷ 2017-2018 is the academic year in which this data was collected.

51.8 percent of students are on the Spanish track, 32.5 percent of students are on the Chinese track, and 15.7 percent of students are on the French track. In support of their third pillar, the school provides each student with a laptop at the beginning of their NCS career.

NCS is a racially, economically, and linguistically diverse urban public charter school with 1,068 students in the sixth through eleventh grades (see figure 3.3 for a percentage breakdown by grade level). The student population is made up of 39.3 percent Black students, 37.6 percent Latinx students, 15.6 percent white students, 3.2 percent multiracial students, 3.3 percent Asian students, .8 percent Indigenous American students, and .3 percent Hawaiian students (see figure 3.4). Forty-eight percent of students are identified as male on school documents and 51.2 percent of students are identified as female. Roughly eleven percent of students receive reduced lunch, 38.5 percent of students receive free lunch, and 51 percent of students pay for lunch each day.

Figure 3.3 Percentage of students by grade level at NCS

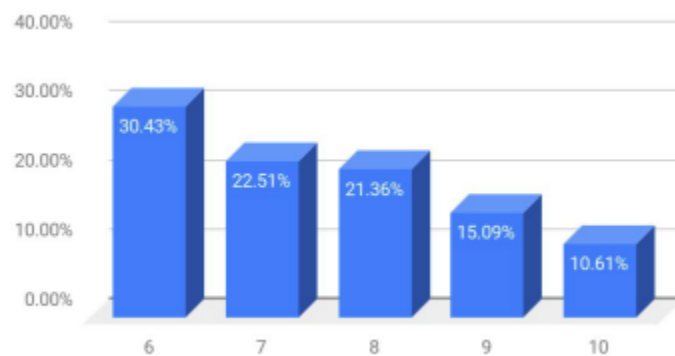
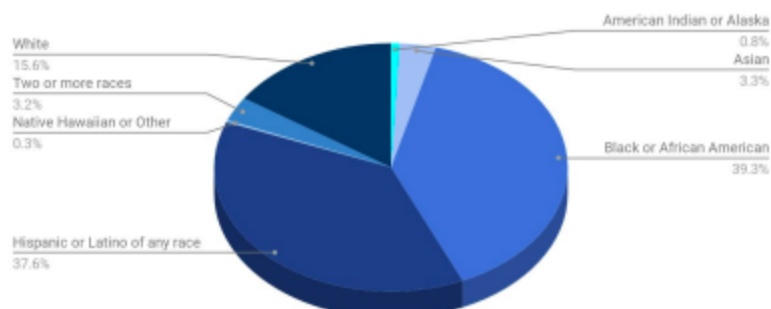


Figure 3.4 Percentage of students by race/ethnicity at NCS



Academically, students at NCS outscored the district on English Language Arts (ELA) PARCC for the 2017-2018 school year. Fifty five percent of NCS students received a 4 or above, while 31 percent of students scored similarly citywide. Although the data was not reported using an intersectional lens, the trend is duplicated for both Black students and female students at NCS. Over half of Black students and female students outscored the citywide average for these same populations on the 2017-2018 ELA PARCC exam (see figure 3.6). However, within the school, Black students tested well below their white counterparts (see figure 3.7).

Figure 3.6 2017-2017 ELA PARCC Results at NCS Compared to Citywide Trends

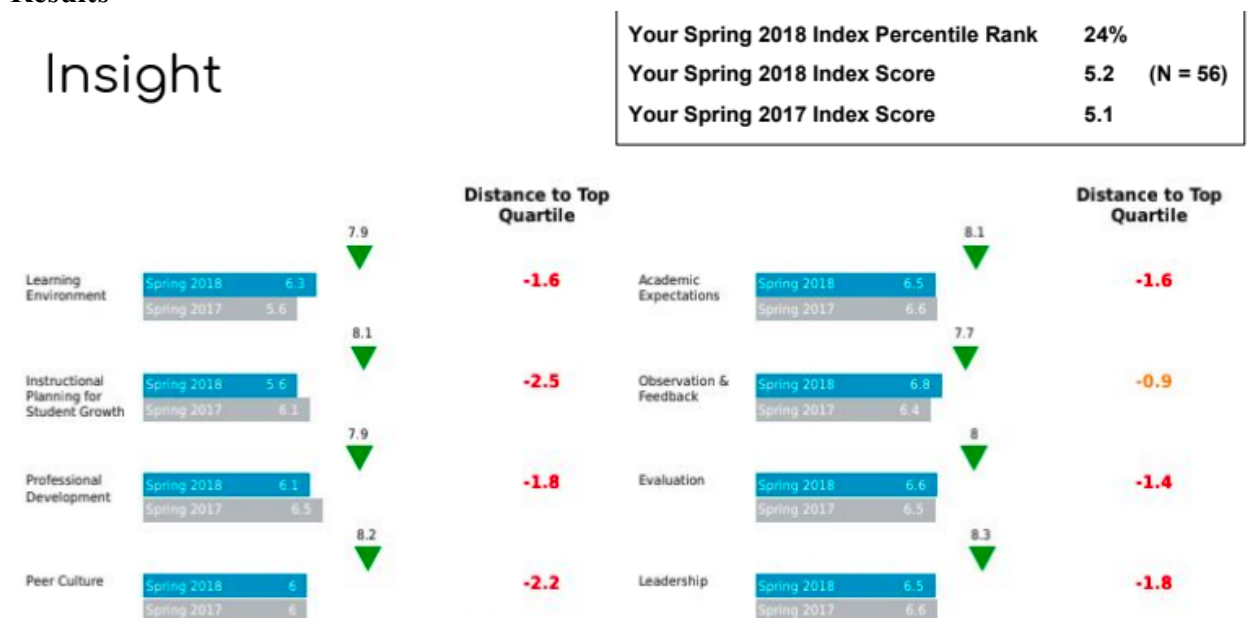


Figure 3.7 PARCC Performance Level by Demographic

PARCC 17-18		Grade 6				Grade 7				Grade 8				HS (IM2 and English 10)				All			
Demographic Breakdown		Below 3	3	4	5	Below 3	3	4	5	Below 3	3	4	5	Below 3	3	4	5	Below 3	3	4	5
English	All	18%	21%	45%	16%	19%	24%	30%	27%	18%	31%	33%	18%	35%	22%	35%	9%	20%	25%	37%	19%
	Female	13%	18%	44%	25%	11%	27%	28%	34%	12%	31%	35%	22%	37%	16%	37%	11%	15%	23%	37%	25%
	Male	23%	25%	45%	7%	27%	21%	32%	20%	24%	32%	31%	13%	33%	28%	33%	7%	26%	26%	37%	12%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%	0%	0%	25%	0%	25%	50%
	Asian	0%	0%	43%	57%	20%	20%	40%	20%	25%	50%	25%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	12%	18%	41%	29%
	Black/African American	17%	28%	43%	11%	20%	30%	26%	23%	20%	31%	45%	4%	42%	16%	34%	8%	22%	28%	38%	12%
	Hispanic/Latino	31%	26%	36%	7%	29%	21%	31%	19%	20%	38%	25%	17%	38%	28%	31%	3%	29%	28%	31%	12%
	Two or More Races	0%	13%	44%	44%	0%	0%	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	13%	35%	52%
	White/Caucasian	3%	3%	67%	28%	0%	20%	34%	46%	8%	19%	23%	50%	0%	27%	45%	27%	3%	14%	44%	39%
	Active English Learner	70%	20%	10%	0%	67%	22%	11%	0%	70%	30%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	74%	20%	6%	0%
	Monitored English Learner	58%	25%	17%	0%	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	63%	21%	16%	0%
	Active or Monitored Special Education	44%	33%	20%	3%	52%	22%	13%	13%	59%	30%	11%	0%	73%	27%	0%	0%	54%	29%	13%	4%
	At-Risk	35%	26%	39%	0%	40%	17%	30%	13%	36%	36%	28%	0%	57%	17%	22%	4%	40%	25%	31%	4%
	Homeless	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%

Students at NCS take a yearly Panorama student survey, a measure developed by researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) to assist teachers and administrators in better understanding student perceptions of teaching and learning. NCS scored a 52 percent on measures of school belonging, which inform teachers about student perceptions about students' sense of value as members of the school community. With regards to school climate, NCS scored a 61 percent, and on classroom engagement, 42 percent. Between spring 2017 and spring 2018, NCS's score rose on measures of learning environment and observation and feedback; all other measures declined (see figure 3.8). None of this data is disaggregated by race, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, or any other identity, however, research suggests that Black students, especially Black girls, overwhelmingly report feeling like they neither belong nor matter at school (Love, 2019; Morris, 2016).

Figure 3.8 Measures of Student Perceptions According to Panorama Student Survey Results



Lastly, NCS's student handbook includes the following statement regarding personal electronics:

Students are not allowed to use cell phones or other personal electronic devices, such as Nintendo Switch, within the school building except under unusual circumstances. Once students have entered the NCS building in the morning, these devices must be kept turned off and concealed except during these times. Any devices in violation of this policy will be confiscated.

Parents/guardians must come to school to retrieve student devices that have been confiscated.

The contents of an electronic communication device may be searched to determine ownership or to identify emergency contacts. Upon reasonable suspicion that a school rule or the law has been violated through the use of such a device, an administrator may also search for evidence of suspected wrongdoing. Any refusal on the part of a student to comply with a request to surrender the device may result in disciplinary action. (2018-2019 NCS Student & Family Handbook, p. 24-25)

Additionally, the school uses blocking software to enforce "appropriate student technology use" during classes. This software disallows students from accessing content they deem as inappropriate.

Data Collection

The different phases of this research, which I describe below, took place in various places throughout the building during the students' "family" time each Friday morning. At NCS family time is a structure similar to homeroom that is intended to build

community and long-lasting relationships within groups of students. NCS's family time borrows from the POSSE (Harper & Griffin, 2010) model, which groups historically underrepresented groups of students with a cohort of their peers during their years as undergraduates as a means to offer support. Unlike POSSE, families were built across grade levels, not markers of identity. Students do, however, remain within the same family for their entire four years of high school. These meeting times take place for 45 minutes every Friday morning.

The data collection process began in January of 2019 and concluded in May of 2019. I met weekly with the girls for fourteen weeks. Each week we communed around a table and over breakfast to read, write, and discuss ideas related to self-love and literacy (Haddix et al., 2016). Data collection for this project took place in six phases, including (1) rapport establishing; (2) focus group interviews; (3) self-love (4) exploration; (5) digital creation; (6) member checks. In order to develop rich and nuanced understandings of how the girls developed and depicted self-love, I drew from multiple data sources, including a brief informational survey, semi-structured focus group interviews, researcher field notes and memos, and partner artifacts, such as the partner-created website, reflections, and other multimodal pieces of work (see figure 3.9).

Figure 3.9 Summary of Data Sources

Data Source	Description/Rationale
Introductory Demographic Surveys	Demographic survey designed to understand the background characteristics, internet use habits, and definitions of self-love of each research partner.
Semi-structured focus group interview	Semi-structured interviews designed to explore the various ways research partners develop and enact self-love through the use of twenty-first century literacies. The semi-structured nature allowed for fluid conversation guided by the girls.
Audio and Video Recordings	Recordings allowed me to: (1) be fully present with the girls during our time together so as not to worry about what I may have been missing (2) transcribe the data for later analysis, and (3) rewatch and re-listen for further analysis and triangulation.
Researcher Field Notes and Memos	Field notes allowed me to: (1) keep record of social interactions as well as the setting and context; (2) make inferences regarding words and actions; (3) keep track of my own thought processes, including developing themes; and (4) make my own biases visible as I think through the data. Note: I chose to take field notes after, rather than during each session to allow myself to be fully engaged with the girls and so as not to make them feel like they were being watched.
Participant Artifacts	<p>Reflections - written on Google Docs through Google Classroom designed to map the ways participants' conceptualization of self changes throughout the study.</p> <p>Multimodal Artifacts - throughout our time together the girls created several multimodal artifacts that expressed various aspects of self-love.</p> <p>Website - the girls created a final digital product in the form of a website that was a multimodal depiction of self-love to them. Analyzing this website helped me to understand how they depicted self-love multimodally.</p>

Phase One: Background Information

During our first meeting (week 1), I met with all nine girls in the high school principal's office. The space was small and barely fit all of us, but it was in this meeting that we began our work together. After briefly introducing myself and my work I asked

each of the girls to create a self-love collage, where they multimodally depicted what self-love meant to them. They used these collages to introduce themselves and their own theoretical orientations towards self-love. After familiarizing ourselves with one another, we then engaged in a brief discussion about how they saw their engagement online and what depictions they saw of Black girls online. The girls then took a brief demographic survey that asked them to report their name, age, grade, definition of self-love, and the digital platform they engaged most (see Appendix A). Finally, we ended our first week together with a brief reflection on Google Classroom - a platform with which all students at NCS are already familiar. During the reflection period, research partners took the time to write any remaining thoughts or questions from our time together. These reflections provided weekly insights into the girls' thoughts and directions for where we might go next. Reflection prompts centered around three major themes: (1) time in the day's session; (2) participants' state of mind during and after the session; and (3) what participants learned about self-love in the day's session.

Phase Two: Focus Group Interviews

During the second phase of the study, I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews by grade level to gain a deeper understanding of each girls' employment of twenty-first century literacies and self-love (see Appendix B). In my initial study (Griffin, forthcoming) I found that younger girls were quieter and less willing to engage when the older girls were present. Thus, in order to encourage engagement, I decided to develop groups by grade level. However, after my first meeting with each grade level, I learned that in *this* group, girls preferred to meet together as one large group. Thus, I revisited my initial plan to meet their needs.

Borrowing from the tradition of Brown (2013), each meeting began with a brief check in on the mental and emotional wellbeing of our “homegirls” (participants) in the group. Questions to prompt these check ins included:

- How am I showing myself-love today?
- How am I showing others love?
- What things are contributing to how I love myself?
- What things are hindering me from loving myself?

Next, we engaged in a short literacy primer where girls read and discussed Maya Angelou’s *Phenomenal Woman*, a text that was included - at least in part - on multiple self-love collages. I then prompted partners to scroll their favorite social media platform, taking note of various representations of Black girlhood. This time spent scrolling served as the foundation for our discussion during the focus groups. As with our first meeting, we closed this time together with written reflection.

Phase Three: Self-Love Exploration

Initially, I planned to keep the focus group structure throughout the entirety of the study. However, in several instances, the girls articulated that they were interested in meeting with greater frequency and for an extended number of weeks. Thus, we regrouped to reorient ourselves. Together, we established norms for our group and decided what topics we would explore as they related to self-love and our varied literacies (see Appendix C). Research partners expressed interest in discussing topics related to communication, civic engagement, financial literacy, career dreams, food health and body positivity, relationships with others, and mental health. Each week, I brought in a Black woman who was a member of the local community who saw herself as

an expert in one of the aforementioned areas. Together, research partners learned about self-love from various vantage points alongside their sistas.

Phase Four: Digital Creation

In our final three weeks together, research partners used their reflections and artifacts to create a website as a multimodal representation of self-love. Given all that we had discussed as well as the focus of this dissertation, I prompted the girls to create a digital product that depicted self-love. After engaging in discussions about which medium they thought would best suit their purposes (i.e. website, Instagram page, Tumblr, podcast recording, etc.) the girls selected to create a website. As a group, they chose a template, determined what they wanted to include on their site, and broke themselves into groups to complete their self-assigned tasks. They searched for pictures to include, wrote acrostic poems, wrote a blog post, created a list of tips, and interviewed peers to create a video about Black self-love. Upon completion of the website, I asked the girls questions about their choices in creating the website to gain deeper insights about their process and understanding of their product.

Phase Five: Member Checks

As the final stages of this research project, I conducted a member check to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of my interpretation and analysis of research partner responses. After my initial analysis of the data, I conducted one 30-minute meeting with six of the nine girls¹⁸ to clarify any lingering questions I had about any phase of the research project.

¹⁸ The other three girls were unable to attend this session due to prior academic commitments.

Data Analysis Procedures

My data analysis process was both iterative and reflective. I employed my theoretical frameworks, personal political commitments, and positionality as a Black woman who was once a Black girl in order to garner deep and nuanced understandings of the data. Using these three guiding sources, I attempted to allow “meaning to arise from the data, using extant literature, well-established theories, and my prior experiences to help develop meaning from my data” (Player, 2018, p. 96). Because this work is both deeply personal and political, I do not feel it is possible or necessary to separate it from my political orientations or personal beliefs. Thus, I do not claim neutrality or objectivity in my data analysis. In the sections below I explicate my coding and analysis processes for each question in detail.

Question 1 Analysis

To answer questions one, “*How do adolescent Black girls articulate the ways they engage their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love?*” I used the girls' written reflections, focus group interview transcripts, and research partner-created artifacts. I began my analysis process by employing thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013), looking through all the reflections the girls had written throughout our time together to see what salient themes arose after each session. These reflections represent the development of the girls' thoughts and attitudes towards self-love throughout the duration of this project and so were useful in helping me to understand how they described the development of self-love in their lives. I then selected additional data to code based upon the salient themes that emerged as I coded the written reflections. Thus, I chose to further analyze all focus group interviews, as they most closely answered

question one and included articulations of the girls' descriptions of their twenty-first century literacies and self-love practices. As suggested by Berger (2015) I engaged in a second round of coding at a later date as my understanding of Black girlhood and thus interpretations of the data began to change. Importantly, themes remained largely consistent between the first two rounds of analysis, suggesting that the reflections served as reliable sources of the girls' understanding of our discussions in each session. As well, I coded all artifacts mentioned in these interviews, including the girls' self-love collages and musical playlists. In my third round of coding I used deductive coding methods, employing codes from my theoretical frameworks (Black Girlhood, Black Girls' Literacies, and Black Feminist Thought) so as to triangulate the emergent themes with relevant extant literature. Figure 3.10 depicts the codes from each round of analysis.

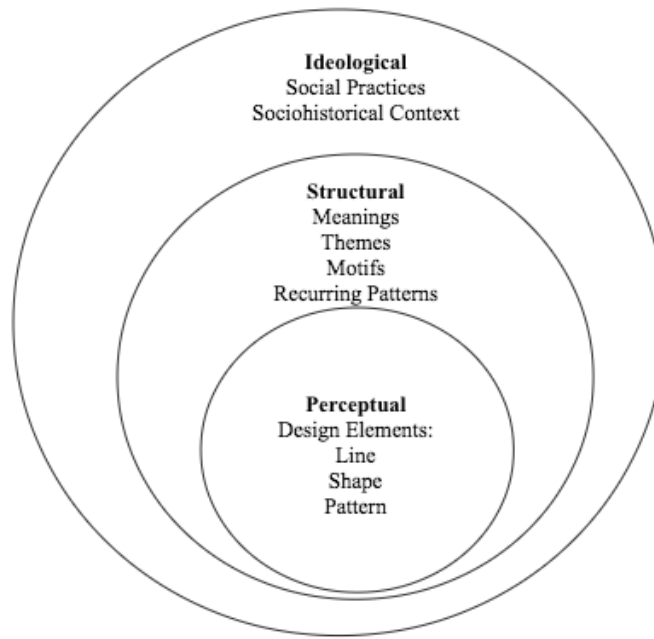
Figure 3.10 Research Codes from Each Round of Analysis

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Agency Authenticity External External Influences Goal Setting Internal Motivation Learning with and from Others Peace Performance Personal Discipline Physical Appearance Physical Wellness Self Definition Social Media Social Perceptions Supporting Other Black Girls	Affirmation Agency Authenticity Celebrity Critical External Influences Hair Internal Motivation Music Peace Physical Appearance Physical Wellness Social Media Social Perceptions Stress Talking Back	Black/African American Celebrity Collaborative Historical Intellectual Intersectionality Multiple Political/Critical Tied to Identities

Question 2 Analysis

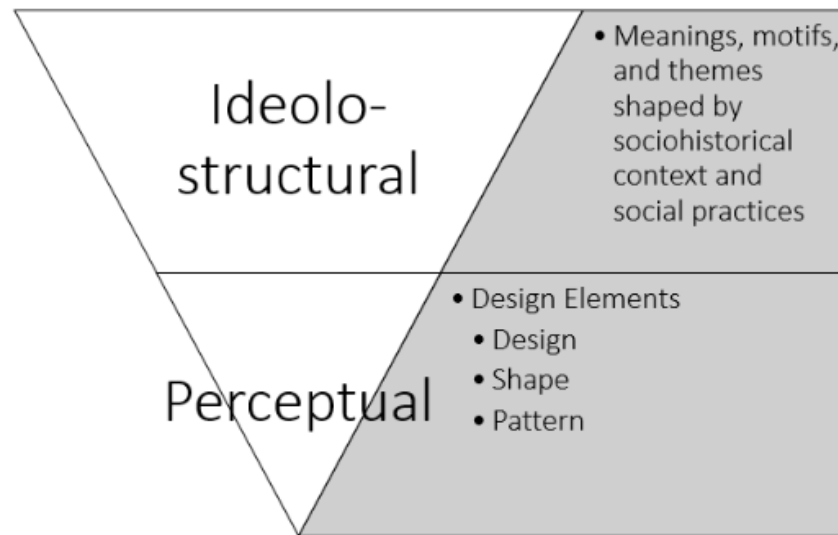
To understand how the girls employed their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally, I critically analyzed the website they created towards the end of our time together using Serafini's (2014) framework to develop a coding sheet for multiple levels of analysis. His "tripartite framework for analyzing multimodal texts" (p. 85) consists of three analytical perspectives (perceptual, structural, and ideological), which he conceptualizes as a set of three concentric circles nested within subsequent perspectives (Figure 3.11). At the center of the model is the perceptual analytical perspective that consists of the image or text itself. Here, readers notice the basic visual elements of composition, including line, shape, and pattern. The center circle, the structural perspective draws on semiotic theories of meaning; it requires that readers look for meanings, themes, motifs, symbols, and recurring patterns in a text or image. Lastly, the outer ring, the ideological perspective, focuses on the social practices and sociohistorical contexts of images and texts, considering both history and culture.

Figure 3.11 Serafini's (2014) Tripartite Framework for Analyzing Multimodal Texts



For my own analysis, however, I restructured Serafini's framework to account for experiences specific to Black girlhood. Because I believe it is irresponsible and dangerous to consider themes of Black girlhood without considering context, culture, and history, I combine the structural and ideological perspectives (ideo-structural) to understand how the elements of composition are related to themes of social practices and sociohistorical contexts specifically for Black girls. Thus, in order to understand the website through the lens of Black girlhood, I mapped my theoretical frameworks - Black girlhood, Black Girls' Literacies, and Black Feminist Thought - onto Serafini's structural and ideological perspectives to make sense of the website, asking myself the question, "How are the meanings, motifs, and themes represented on the website shaped by the sociohistorical context and social practices of Black girlhood?" Figure 3.12 is a visual representation of my aforementioned analysis process. To supplement the images on the website, I drew upon data from brainstorming sessions as well as the girls' descriptions of the website to verify and extend my interpretations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Figure 3.12 Framework for Analyzing Black Girls' Multimodal Texts



Limitations and Scope

In the paragraphs below, I detail the limitations of this study and acknowledge that this work is confined within a particular scope. That is, this work is bounded by context, school bureaucracy, and other considerations that limit what I was able to do for this particular project.

One limitation of this study is the limited amount of time I had with my research partners. We only met once a week for one semester. A longitudinal study would have perhaps helped me to work more closely with the girls, understanding their processes of developing self-love through the use of their literacies with a bit more nuance. Further, because of my own limited time and resources, the study was capped at nine research partners. While a larger number of girls would have perhaps made the study more generalizable, more importantly, it would have allowed a greater number of Black girls in the school community to engage in discourse around the topic of self-love. As students in

the school began to realize what we were doing when we met, more Black girls asked to join, but unfortunately were not able to do so.

Additionally, as with any study that takes place within a school there were specific structural limitations, such as limited time and challenges with regards to finding a location to meet. For instance, family time allowed us limited time to meet and the abrupt stop to the period often interrupted the flow of deep and rich conversations the girls were interested in pursuing further. This problem restricted not only data collection, but time for community development exclusively with and for Black girls. As well, the fact that the girls often did not want to leave to go to class or missed time with their school-designated families caused tension between me and the assistant principal, a white presenting Latina woman, who believed the girls' time would be best spent developing community with the families the school had chosen for them. With regards to space, the girls and I moved locations several times throughout the study (i.e., the principal's office, the library, and finally the classroom of a Black woman teacher) to find a space that would accommodate us in terms of size and privacy so that the girls could feel free to talk openly. Switching rooms so often, however, often caused confusion about where we should meet, making some girls late, or causing them to miss some sessions altogether.

Further, because this study did not take place in an English or literacy classroom and thus was a part of an unofficial curriculum, there are limited implications for practice in the traditional sense. However, I do point out the implications this study does have in the "Implications" section of chapter 6.

Additionally, because this study took place in a school, there were some topics and websites that were off limits for exploration or discussion. As mentioned earlier,

NCS uses blocking software to disallow students from accessing content they deem as inappropriate. As such, we had limited digital access to explore particular topics.

Lastly, although I borrowed methods from Participatory Action Research, I did not engage in data analysis *with* my research partners. Given time constraints for the study as well as the girls' schedule, doing so was not feasible. While such analysis may have proven beneficial, I argue that because I operated from an insider/outsider positionality I was able to rely on my own knowledge and experiences of Black girlhood to interpret the data and illustrate the stories of my young sistas.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an overview of my researcher positionality and the theoretical orientations that guided this project. I then explained the methodologies I employed. Using the aforementioned methods and methodologies, I uncovered several findings regarding how the Black girls in this study employ their twenty-first century literacies to develop and depict self-love. In the following two chapters, I distill these findings, exploring the girls' varied articulations and multimodal depictions of self-love. I believe that through this project the girls and I worked together to read, write, and create literature to move ourselves and other Black girls closer to self-love.

CHAPTER 4: THAT'S NOT ME EVERYDAY: (RE)WRITING NARRATIVES OF BLACK GIRLHOOD

Historically, Black women have engaged and employed their multiple literacies in varied ways that are tied to their identities. This has typically involved the process of first, reading the social landscape, then creating community, and finally writing towards liberation (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Historical Black Women's Literacy Practices



In Chapter 2 I explicated the literate acts of Black women of old, including Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells. In this section, I return to the historical act of writing as resistance, writing towards liberation, with a specific focus on contemporary adolescent Black girls' use of twenty-first century literacies as they explain them. Throughout this chapter and the next, I answer the first guiding question of this dissertation and present the themes I discovered during analysis of the data (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Research Questions and Thematic Findings

Chapter	Question	Thematic Findings
4	How do adolescent Black girls articulate the ways they engage their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Manipulate algorithms● Spam the internet● Use digital tools to support their future goals
5	How do adolescent Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Design digital homeplace where they could<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Name themselves for themselves○ Claim space

Thus, I begin by first detailing how the adolescent Black girls in my study articulated the ways they engaged their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love. Analysis of the data revealed that they: (1) manipulate algorithms; (2) spam the internet and (3) use digital tools to support their future goals.

Manipulating Algorithms

In her essay, *Education, Representation, and Resistance: Black Girls in Popular Instagram Memes* (2016), Tanksley posits that out of all teens in the U.S., Black youth are the largest consumers of media. As such, Black girls are regularly exposed to disparaging and stereotypical representations of Black women and girls, which are perpetuated through racist algorithms and digital programmers (Noble, 2018; Tanksley, 2016). Correspondingly, Steele (2016) suggests that through the use of blogs, Black women actively resist dominant ideology, subverting such discourse and recasting the narrative to portray a more accurate representation. Expanding upon this idea, I argue that the girls in my study use strategic engagement on digital platforms to control racist algorithms and thus resist negative images about Black girls.

In the ninth and tenth grade focus group interviews, I gave the girls time to scroll through their own Instagram timelines so they could critically analyze images of Black women and girls they came across. After about a minute of scrolling I asked them to report to me what they saw. Importantly, none of the girls reported seeing negative images on their timelines or on their explore pages. Given the research narrative about deficit images of Black girls, I was, at first, surprised and didn't know what to make of this. However, after listening to each of their responses, it became clear that the girls were making strategic choices to only engage content that aligned with their specific values, thus resisting negative characterizations of Black girls. As such, their interactions on Instagram told the algorithms how to respond and what to show them.

For instance, in my session with the tenth grade girls, the following conversation ensued:

Autumn: Is there anything you see that you feel is damaging or disrespectful?

Summer: Mmm. It depends.

Filia: Maybe. I'll dislike it but I probably won't say anything. Honestly cause I don't wanna interact with others--that sounds weird. But I don't wanna start a fight in the comments.

Samantha: I try not to look at like things I don't like because it's just, one it's a waste of time but two it doesn't really help me. Why would I look at it?

Summer: Um, I don't usually see--what'd you say, disrespectful stuff?

Autumn: Mhmm.

Summer: I don't really see that stuff. I mean if I do I probably I won't say anything because I don't, like Filia said, I don't have time to just start anything

with people. And if I say something I know for a fact someone's gonna like swipe and pull back "oh you, you're wrong dada" I don't have--I don't really have time for that. It's just my opinion. I don't wanna keep going back and forth with you. Cause, yeah. No, I just don't have patience for that, but I rarely see it though. If I see it it's either like one of those, tap it...it's on instagram. It's stuff they don't want you to see, but if you see it you have to tap it and then it has like a lil warning sign on it. That's probably like the only thing I would see.

Filia's initial comment indicates that while she may have seen (mis)representations of Black women and girls, she has chosen not to interact with those images by commenting because she doesn't want to engage in arguments in the comments. Similarly, Samantha points out that she tries "not to look at things I don't like." Not only does she believe they are not a productive use of her time, but she also understands that those images don't help her in her development of self-love or in any other area of her life. Finally, Summer, like Samantha, states that she doesn't often come across damaging images, but when she does, she has the choice of whether or not to engage them. Like Filia, she mentions that she chooses not to comment in order to protect her time from useless arguments. Summer also points out that she is often given a choice about whether or not to further engage a comment on Instagram by "tapping" on the content. By choosing not to engage that content and instead swiping past it, Instagram picks up on Summer's choices and as a result shows her less content that is unrelated to her interests.

Although a seemingly subtle move, the click of the girls' fingers holds immense power. In choosing to disengage disparaging representations of Black women and girls online, they are actively resisting deficit-based characterizations of Black girls,

effectively manipulating racist algorithms and demanding more asset-based content as consumers of digital media. In doing so, they not only play a role in impacting digital culture and consumer demand, they are protecting themselves against negative imaging and determining what is and is not an acceptable representation of Black girls.

In a similar vein, the ninth-grade girls reported seeing representations of Black girls aligned to their particular interests or curiosities. Chyna, who hopes to someday become a cosmetologist, stated that on her explore pages she sees “a lot of hair, makeup, but like natural hair...a lot of beauty stuff.” The images she engages are aligned with her desires for her future. Like Chyna, Kaylee reported seeing mostly images of Black girls doing hair, but began to critically question why she engages this content;

So, representations of Black girls. I saw those videos of girls doing their edges and stuff, which I think is good because Black girls are on timelines more often now. Or at least my timelines. But it's also...I don't know. They're not - and I do it, too, cause clearly my edges are done - but it shows that we always have to tweak ourselves to fit in even though like we shouldn't have to do that. But I do edges, too, so it's like, well why do I do it? Even though I'm saying this.

Anyways, so I'm just contradicting myself, but it's cool.

Kaylee makes several important points. First, she notices the trend of Black girls doing hair on her timeline and points out that she now sees more representations of Black girls on timelines than she has in the past. She assigns judgment to this, qualifying it as “good.” However, Kaylee begins to experience some cognitive dissonance as she comes to understand that while the more consistent representation of Black girls may be good, the quality of that representation may be disparaging to an extent. She questions the need

for Black girls to be seen online primping in an effort to “tweak ourselves to fit in.” Kaylee’s point raises questions about how seemingly “good” representations of Black girls can somehow have hidden messages about worthiness and respectability in the public eye. Relating back to her earlier comments about authenticity, Kaylee is hyper aware of perceptions of Black girls online and thus questions not only what she posts, but also what representations she sees of Black girls online.

“Spamming” the Internet

Further, the girls explained their practice of “spamming” the internet as one that was liberatory, allowing them to control their own narratives. In my focus group with the ninth-grade girls, Kaylee explained the differences in how she functions on two different Instagram pages: her “main” page, and her “spam” page:

Kaylee: For me I feel like my main page is for a persona...so it would be pictures of me really, really, really cute, but that’s not me everyday. And then my spam page is the everyday Kaylee. What she’s doing. What I’m doing and like stuff like that. So I feel like our spams - cause a lot of kids have spam these days - our spam pages are actually us and our real pages are just like what we - our persona. A facade.

In seeming irony, Kaylee refers to the first page, where she posts curated pictures of her ideal self, as her “main” page. She points out that although this is where she posts pictures of her when she feels “really, really, really cute,” this isn’t “the everyday Kaylee.” Those pictures, she says, are reserved for her “spam” page is where she posts her most authentic thoughts and pictures (Figure 4.3 explains the differences between the two types of Instagram accounts).

Figure 4.3 Types of Instagram Accounts

Spam	More consistent posting Authentic pictures	Limited number of followers <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reserved for family and close friends
Main	Post on irregularly or on holidays “Pretty”/curated pictures	High number of followers <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open to all followers

In all honesty, I was baffled by the idea of having to manage multiple Instagram pages and a bit confused about the function of each. Thus, in a follow-up interview with the girls, I inquired further about spam pages:

Autumn: I think what's confusing me is if your spam page is what's more, it feels real authentic, right? That's the one where you post who you actually are, correct? Why do you call that your spam or your Finsta?

Chyna: Cause we spam the...our real accounts have like two, three pictures and then all your spam, you have like 2,000/3,000.

Samantha: It's more like consistent posting.

Autumn: Oh, it's more consistent posting on your spam. So you spam the account.

All: Yeah!

Contrary to notions of spam associated with the internet, the girls' spam accounts are not where the “junk” goes. Rather, their spam pages are what they use to “spam” the internet, particularly their family and friends, with pictures of their most authentic selves. They use this account to regularly post uncurated pictures of themselves doing everyday things for the people they love and trust. Chyna explains:

Yeah, on my [main] page I only post myself on holidays where I actually dress up and stuff and then my spam is like everyday me. But I only -- only certain people follow my spam. Only people I'm comfortable with, so it's not like the whole world.

Chyna echoes Kaylee's sentiments that on her "real" page, she only posts pictures of herself that she deems as pretty or presentable to a larger audience. She then explains that there are few people that she allows access to her most authentic self, seemingly protecting herself from the white patriarchal gaze and other unsolicited feedback. Turkele (1995) notes that as students participate online "they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction" (p. 12). In strategically choosing who has access to which page, Chyna and Kaylee not only work to become authors of themselves, but control which narratives are told where. The girls reserve what they believe to be their most authentic selves for those they deem worthy of receiving that story. In addition, returning to the notion of protection as a form of self-love, the girls protect themselves from unsolicited racialized and gendered critiques that might demean them or seek to distort or destroy their self-image or -esteem.

Further, by curating their "main" pages, the girls contribute curated images of Black girlhood for the internet to see, thus controlling narratives about themselves and Black girls generally. In the same manner that they manipulate algorithms, the girls use Instagram to control search engine optimization (SEO) and the representations of Black girls displayed on Instagram. Search engine optimization is the process of maximizing the number of visitors to a particular website. Thus, by continuously uploading pictures

of themselves - adolescent Black girls - in their everyday lives, they contribute to what images Instagram users see when they look for images of Black girls.

Although neither girl went into detail about what they deem to be “pretty” or acceptable, it is a commonly accepted fact that U.S. American culture has neither historically nor contemporarily perceived Black women as beautiful, desirable, competent, or worthy (Collins, 2004). In fact, popular culture has historically used disparaging stereotypes to portray Black women and girls. Contemporarily, that same trend continues online where Black girls are portrayed as “hoes, divas, baby mamas, gold diggers, high school dropouts, and welfare queens” (Tanksley, 2016, p. 247). By creating two separate Instagram accounts, both Chyna and Kaylee not only actively resist these messages, they maintain control over public consumption and interpretation of their narratives. Their choice to share their true selves “only with people [they’re] comfortable with” allows them to maintain their sense of self without giving “the whole world” permission to offer critique or distort their narratives. Their intentional choice to protect their most authentic selves from the outside world, allows them to protect themselves mentally and emotionally and thus sustain and further develop their love for themselves without interference.

While the girls’ practice of self-protection was notable, I was troubled when I began to think about the idea that they feel they are unable to present their authentic selves online. Often, because Black girls face scrutiny in the public eye, they feel the need to appear “perfect” in public spaces, including social media. On a 2018 episode of their podcast *Still Processing*, hosts Jenna Wortham and Wesley Morris explain that throughout much of Beyoncé’s career, she has had to camouflage who she is to make

herself palatable to white audiences. Similarly, my research partners only present dolled-up versions of themselves to the public as to be deemed acceptable. My question, however, is what do Black girls think when all the Black girls look “perfect” on social media? How does that make them feel about themselves and their own self-worth? What does it mean that Black girls feel they have to get all dolled up or make themselves look “presentable” to post content for the world to see? How might these things impact their love for themselves? Although the notion of protection online is brilliant, it comes at a cost.

Using Digital Tools to Support Future Goals

In their 2018 study, Turner and Griffin (under review) explored the ways Black girls depict their dreams for their futures multimodally. Using the digital dream boards of two adolescent Black girls, they analyzed the ways the girls mapped race and gender onto their visions for their futures. In the study, they found that contrary to deficit notions of Black girls’ futures, the girls in the study employed their professional, aspirational auditory, and life literacies as well as critiqued digital (under)representations of Black women in careers to make sense of their future lives. Importantly, the girls used digital tools to depict and represent their dreams.

Similarly, the girls in my study used digital tools to plan for, think through, and support their goals for their futures. Specifically, they engaged strategically with social media in ways that aligned with their future goals, used Google Sheets to develop imagined budgets to learn about money management, and incorporated multimodal writing techniques to depict their own dreams for their futures. In doing so, they engaged in the radical act of self-love, not only by creating a plan that can support their future

selves, but also by declaring their intention to exist in the ways they want to in their future.

Strategically Engaging Social Media

Throughout our time together Samantha articulated how she strategically engages social media to support her future goals. In particular, she discussed regularly deleting her social media accounts when they no longer served her purposes:

so recently about a month ago I deleted most of my social media and created a new Instagram account that was really supposed to be like a meme account that just had stuff that would make me laugh or stuff that I would enjoy watching. And so, for my explore page, it was mostly like--you know the ones about people singing, or rapping and them talking about themselves or things they've been through.

Although Samantha doesn't explicitly convey that she deleted her page to be more aligned with her future goals, her new account is more closely related to her goals for her future. As a digital native for whom the internet will presumably always be a part of her life, it is important for Samantha to begin to understand how to curate her social media in a way that captures the attention of her audience and engages them in her content.

Although memes - humorous images with text meant for disseminating widely over the internet - are not quite photography, meme-ing requires an in-depth understanding of comedy, a particular subject matter, and the audience and is thus aligned to Samantha's future goal of becoming a photographer. As such, Samantha's decision to delete her initial account and create a meme-based account¹⁹ is more aligned with her plans for her

¹⁹ Samantha did not state whether she created the memes herself or pulled them from an online resource.

future. Her choice is reflective of her desire to foster and maintain an authentic sense of self - one where she trains herself to answer to and curate a digital persona that reflects who she “really” is or is striving to be.

Developing Imagined Budgets

In *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), bell hooks asserts:

Practically every black woman I know spends way too much of her life-energy worried and stressed out about money. Since many of us are coming from economic backgrounds where there was never enough money to make ends meet, where there was always anxiety about finances, we may have reached adulthood thinking this is just the way life is. Concurrently, in such environments we may have never learned how to manage finances. Even though many of us go on to make incomes that far exceed those of the families we come from, we may over extend through spending or sharing with friends and family and find that we do not have enough, that we are constantly in debt (which only intensifies stress). We need more black female financial advisers who can help sisters get it together and teach us how to use our money wisely. We need to know how to eliminate the stress around money in our lives. (p. 43)

hooks’s words highlight the contentious history U.S. Black women have with money. She begins by acknowledging that historically due to the ills of chattel slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, and present-day structural racism, money has been a cause of stress and anxiety for Black women. Given that for centuries in the U.S., most Black folks were legally forbidden from earning an income and then barred from obtaining many jobs, there have been few Black people, and especially Black women,

who were able to obtain wealth in the U.S. When hired at all, Black women were historically given jobs as maids, caring for white couples and their children while earning a menial income that barely afforded necessities for their own households (Collins, 2002). Thus, it was and continues to be rare for Black women to have accumulated wealth.

When I asked the girls what topics they'd like to explore as they relate to self-love, they requested a session on financial literacy. Working from my own social networks, I asked the only person I knew who could potentially speak about this topic. The speaker is a friend of mine, a first-generation Ghanaian woman, who self identifies as an expert on money management to come speak to the girls. Although she is not in a career that is related to finance, she owns two successful businesses, one of which was recently featured in *Essence* magazine, and credits her success to her money management skills. On March 15, the girls engaged in a session on money management. After the speaker's introduction, she shared her own budget and money management practices with the girls and allowed them an opportunity to create their own budgets. The girls were given a predetermined monthly income and tax rate and challenged to create their own budgets using Google Sheets, which she programmed to automatically do calculations for the girls. For about thirty minutes the girls used their computers to research the cost of living in various areas across the U.S. and crunched numbers to see how they could make their imaginary money work for them. In her reflection about the session on financial literacy, Kaylee wrote:

I think that budgeting your money the correct way shows that you can be organized. I feel like budgeting helps with decreasing financial stress which can

relate back to self love [sic].

I think that budgeting is important for self love [sic] because it shows yourself that you can manage your own life and it shows great strength in temptation and will power. (Reflection, March 15, 2019)

Kaylee highlights financial organization, specifically financial restraint, as an important aspect of self-love that “[decreases] financial stress” and allows you to “manage your own life,” suggesting that she understands looking out for your future self to be an aspect of self-love. Echoing Kaylee’s sentiment on their webpage entitled “17 Tips on self-love,” Asia and Summer wrote

15. Make sure you always save in case there's an emergency. Spend your money wisely; pay all your bills first.

Like Kaylee, Asia and Summer highlighted the importance of financial restraint and responsibility, to be prepared for an emergency. Such preparedness can contribute to one’s mental well-being. Thus, safeguarding for emergencies is perhaps one way to demonstrate love for future selves.

After her interaction with the adviser, Vanessa wrote:

I have learned that when I grow up, there will be a lot more than just Chick-Fil-A to pay for. I feel that budgeting my money contributes to my self-love because I am keeping a stable life. Budgeting is important because you have to take care of yourself and make sure you have everything and more. (Reflection, March 15, 2019)

Vanessa’s involvement in the budgeting activity helped her to understand the difference between a want and a need. While she may desire to eat fast food daily because it tastes

good, it may not be the best financial decision. Rather, managing her money in a way that allows her to live a “stable life” allows her to meet all of her material needs.

In accordance with hooks’s words, the girls associated money management practices with the alleviation of stress and anxiety. As such, they engaged both their twenty-first century literacies and written reflection to simulate a practice that has the potential to bring healing to an area that has haunted Black girls and women for centuries (hooks, 1993). Further, as hooks suggests, they learned from a “black female financial adviser” who has an expertise in money management and facilitated an opportunity for them to think through how to use the money they plan to earn in the future wisely and in ways that allow them to be financially well.

However, I do diverge from hooks (1993) in that I believe Black women’s financial stress comes from much more not using their “money wisely” (p. 43). As mentioned above, Black women’s financial strain is largely tied to issues of structural racism and sexism. Thus, I wonder if in their time with the financial advisor the girls came to understand the core reasons many Black women are stressed about money, rather than basic money management skills. While money management might be one small area in which Black girls and women can exercise agency in their lives, future financial literacy instruction for Black girls might consider Black women’s history and relationship to money and job opportunities in the United States.

Digitally Depicting Dreams for the Future

Finally, the girls planned for and constructed their own futures using their twenty-first century literacies to multimodally represent their plans for their lives. In one session, the girls used Google Slides to create digital dream boards that allowed them to visually

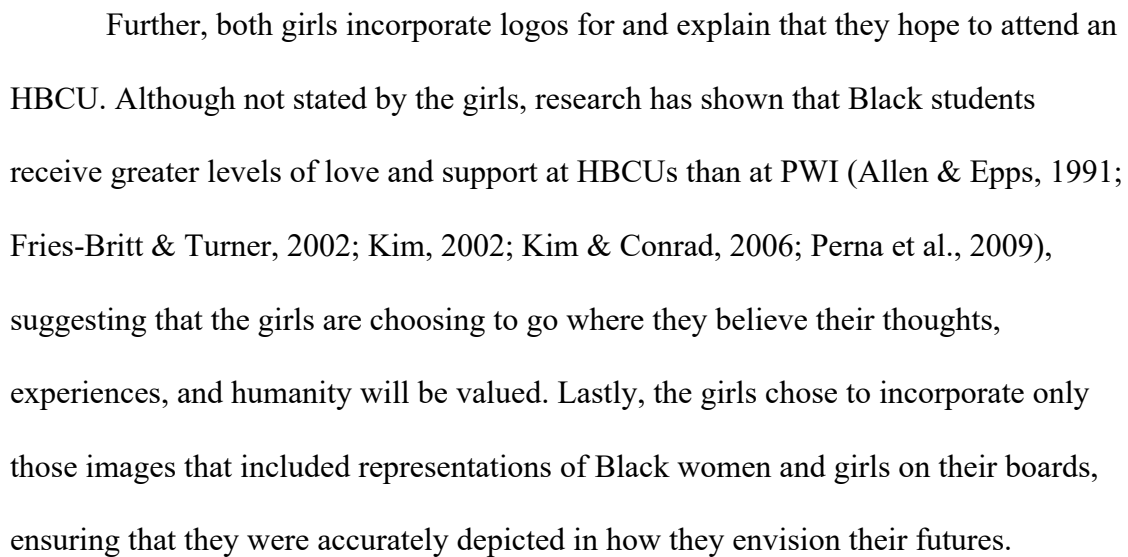
represent their lives in the future. For instance, Summer (see Figure 4.4) plans to become both a lawyer and an actress at some point in her future, deconstructing either/or notions of future (Brown, 2013), and asserting that both are possible for her. Through her board she also depicted that although she would like a career, she also plans to someday have a family, resisting the narrative that professional Black women are doomed to be lonely and childless in their adult lives. If seeing is believing, Summer's chosen images provide her with a roadmap to follow.

Figure 4.4 Summer's Digital Dream Board



Similarly, Asia incorporated images in her board of what she hopes to achieve both professionally and personally (see Figure 4.5). What's perhaps most interesting about her board is that her dreams are larger than the page can contain. If you look closely, you can see that several images are cut off from the slide due to space constraints. In creating a vision board that expands beyond the borders of the page, she is choosing to disrupt any boundaries that might contain her goals to a vision that is

Figure 4.5 Asia's Digital Dream



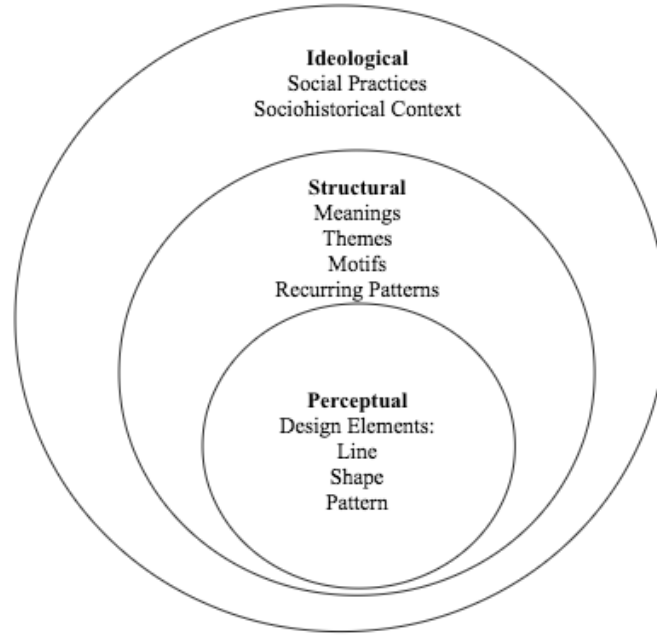
104

represented multiple aspects of their personhood and goals - academic, professional, and personal - is an act of self-love in that they are choosing to define their future selves for themselves and audaciously declaring their existence and liberation in the future.

CHAPTER 5: BLACK SELF-LOVE: A DIGITAL LOVE STORY

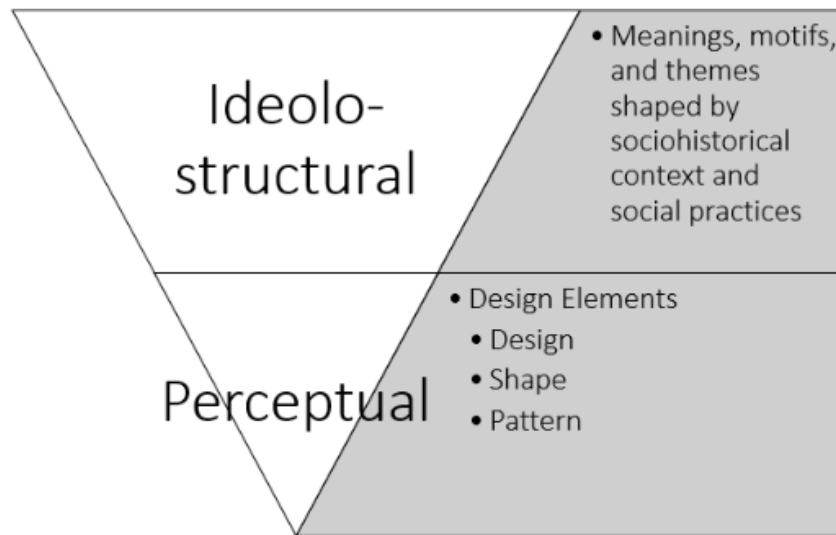
In this chapter I explicate the findings for my second research question: *How do adolescent Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally?* To answer this question, I analyzed the website the girls created towards the end of our time together using my own model of analysis, which I developed using Serafini's (2010) model of Perceptual, Structural, and Ideological Interpretive Dimensions. Serafini's (2010) "tripartite framework for analyzing multimodal texts" (p. 85) consists of three analytical perspectives, which he conceptualized as a set of three concentric circles nested within subsequent perspectives (Figure 5.1). The perceptual analytical perspective, situated in the middle of the diagram, consists of what is presented in the image or text itself. At this level, readers notice the visual elements of composition as well as the basic elements of design, including line, shape, and pattern. The structural perspective, located in the middle ring, draws on semiotic theories of meaning and requires readers to look for meanings, themes, and motifs, as well as symbols and recurring patterns. Finally, the ideological perspective, the outer ring, focuses on the social practices and sociocultural contexts of visual images of multimodal texts and considers such things as context, culture, and history.

Figure 5.1 Serafini's (2014) Tripartite Framework for Analyzing Multimodal Texts



I begin this section with a general overview of the website, looking carefully at each individual page. However, because any analysis of Black girls in the U.S. cannot consider themes and meanings without simultaneously considering context, culture, and history, I then combine the structural and ideological perspectives - ideostructural - to array the major themes of self-love and Black girlhood as depicted across the website. Thus, in order to understand the website specifically through the lens of Black girlhood, I map Black Feminist interpretations onto Serafini's structural and ideological perspectives (see figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 Framework for Analyzing Black Girls' Multimodal Texts

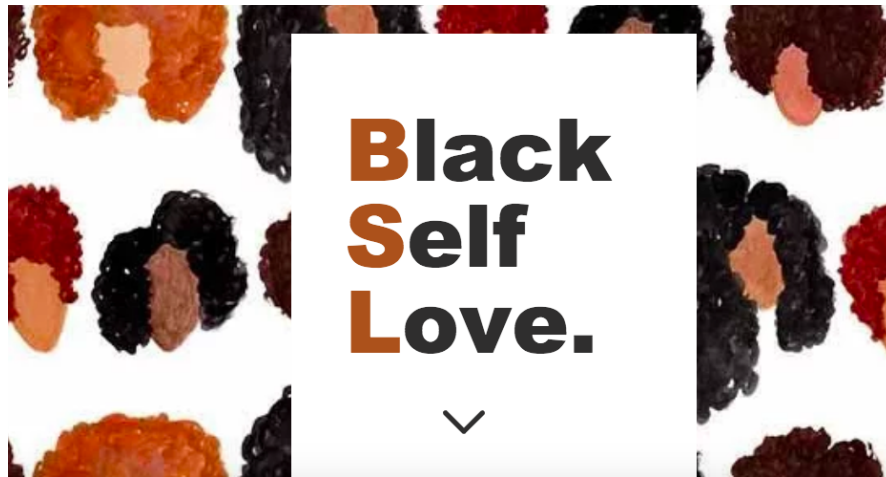


Black Self-Love: A Walk through The Website

Home

On the homepage (Figure 5.3) of the site, the girls mapped race and gender onto messages of self-love. The site is designed vertically with links to the various pages at the top, including a homepage, “About,” “How To Love Yourself,” “self-love Importance,” “Quotes/Shoutouts,” and “More.” “On our opening page,” Kaylee explains, “I wanted to feature different shades, different hair types, and even different colors. Because you know, some [Black girls] actually have red hair. So, I liked how it had a redhead girl, too, cause you don’t see a lot of that...and we should’ve probably incorporated some albino people, too. Cause you don’t see that either.” Kaylee’s comments reflect her thoughts around the inclusion of various representations of Black girls, specifically those that she believes often go unnoticed. Guided by this thoughtfulness, the girls designed a webpage that would speak to a range of Black girls.

Figure 5.3 Homepage



The backdrop of the homepage features faceless drawings of Black women of different skin tones and varying hair textures, colors, and lengths. The faces are inserted against a white backdrop, communicating a disturbance to the whiteness of the page. In the center of the page is a white square with the words

Black
Self
Love.

Using color as a key element of design, the girls chose for the first letter of each word to be capitalized and shaded brown and for the remaining letters of each word to be lowercase and written in black font, a tribute to shades of black and brown skin, on their site.

In her book *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (2009), Ruth Nicole Brown describes her student's use of the phrase "know that," explaining,

In this moment I hear her saying more than two words. I hear her telling it like it is, suggesting we better learn something; I hear her saying I'm here, and I can

teach you something. She's asking to be held accountable, and she is telling you she is going to hold you accountable. Know that. (p. 6)

Similarly, throughout our time together, the girls often ended their sentences by saying "period." A call of fans of the City Girls, "period" signifies the end of a conversation; that there is no need for discussion or debate, but that a point has been made and the listener can either accept it or not. The period at the end of "Black self-love." signifies just that. Returning to Dotson's (2013) notion of socio-epistemic spatiality, the girls' punctuation choices depict that this room is for us. This page is for Black folks. Period.

As you scroll down the page, the faces disappear and a short orange line comes into sight, denoting a transition in the page (Serafini, 2010). Below it, the word "SELF" slowly materializes from left to right (Figure 5.4). Underneath each letter is a word, so that it reads as an acrostic poem. The words that make up self are "SAFE," "EMBRACE," "LAVISH," and "FINE." Below each word is a word or phrase by, for, or about Black women, that defines the word they've chosen to represent the letter. For instance, beneath the letter S is the word SAFE; beneath SAFE is a quote by the late Dr. Maya Angelou that reads "YOU ALONE ARE ENOUGH. YOU HAVE NOTHING TO PROVE TO ANYONE." As Hart explained, "I hope the website lets people know that there's a community out there to support them...to let them know you have support, you have community." The messages - essentially love letters - the girls wrote in their poems offer a sense of assurance. Thus, ideas like you alone are enough is a calling in of Black girls to this site; a welcoming to them to let them know they are safe here and do not have to not have to perform a *version* of self that might be necessary for survival outside of this page.

Figure 5.4 SELF Acrostic



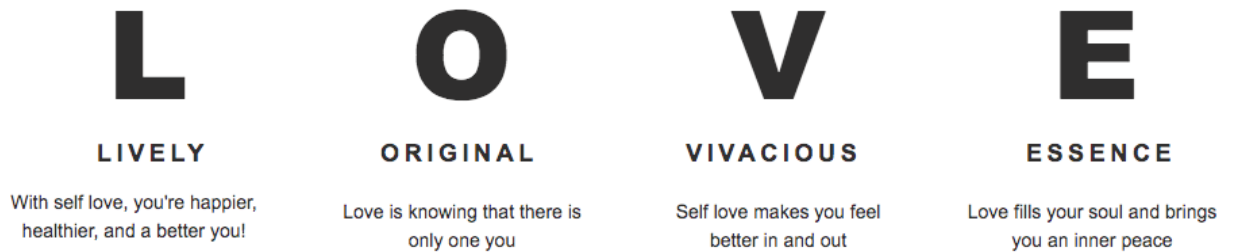
Nestled between the first and second acrostic is a video the girls created, featuring Black members of the school community, the majority of whom are women and girls (Figure 5.5). The girls worked together to develop questions and interview and record classmates and teachers about how they define self-love, what are steps they take to love themselves, and what challenges they encounter when trying to love themselves (see Appendix D). The recordings take place in classrooms and hallways decorated with brightly colored student artwork. Playing softly in the background of the video is an instrumental of Beyoncé's rendition of *Before I Let Go* from her live performance at Coachella.

Figure 5.5 Self-Love Video Freeze Frame



Further down the page is a second orange line, communicating a final transition. Below it, is the word LOVE, written in a similar fashion to SELF before it. The words that spell out love are “LIVELY,” “ORIGINAL,” “VIVACIOUS,” AND “ESSENCE” (Figure 5.6). What is different between this section and the earlier section on self, however, is that the girls have chosen rather than to quote other Black women, to write their own quotes, inserting themselves as experts into the discourse on self-love, especially as it pertains to Black folks. In doing so, they claim their stake as experts on this matter, asserting, valuing, and centering their knowledge.

Figure 5.6 LOVE Acrostic



Lastly, the page closes with a black strip at the bottom of the page. The girls use this space to situate themselves within their context. On the left are the words “BLACK self-love” in golden yellow lettering and on the right is the name of their school. In including this section, they are claiming a space as advocates of Black self-love within their school context²⁰.

About

Throughout our time together, the girls and I engaged in several conversations about the importance of naming and defining ourselves before we give society the chance to do so. Given that “African-American women have long struggled to find alternative locations and epistemologies for validating our own self definitions” (Collins, 2000, p. 269), naming identity in this way is a Black feminist act. In doing so, Black girls and women are “more accurately able to self-define and rebel in the face of often deficitizing, shallow, or one-note definitions of women and girls of color” (Player, 2018, p. 34). The “About” page of the girls’ website, then, is an act of self-definition. It is the space where

²⁰ This Black strip is included at the bottom of every page of the website.

the girls both present and define themselves for their audience, getting ahead of any (mis)representations.

Splayed across the top of the “About” page is a picture with seven of the nine girls (Chyna, Samantha, Kaylee, Asia, Summer, Monica, and Hart) and myself. The girls chose a brick wall on the school’s grounds as the backdrop for our picture; the rigidity of the wall contrasted by the warm smiles on our faces. We are wearing matching t-shirts designed by Monica. The shirts read

BEAUTI
FUL
IN
EVERY
SHADE

mirroring Kaylee’s sentiments in her vision for the website’s homepage. The t-shirts are black and include the same golden yellow lettering at the bottom of every page of the site. All of the girls in the front row sit with their legs crossed, right over left and their hands folded over their right knees.

Below the picture is the question “WHO ARE WE?” Rather than leaving the question open for interpretation, the girls included a brief statement on who they are and what it is they do:

WELCOME!

We are some of the young black women that attend NCS. We come together weekly to discuss self-love specifically relating to African-Americans. We've discussed colorism, texturism, eating healthy, body positivity, budgeting and more. We hope to share all of what we've learned and discussed with you all via our website.

Enjoy!

Their statement that they are “some” of the young Black women at their school highlights the idea that they are part of a larger community of young Black women. Their assertion that they discuss “self-love specifically relating to African-Americans” leaves no room for question about for whom they have created the site. They have chosen to center and proclaim Blackness in their discussions of self-love. Lastly, their proclamation that they “hope to share what [they’ve] learned” is a second calling in to other Black girls and to those who love Black girls like they do. The page concludes with the word “Love,” typed in red followed by a list of all of their names. Through the list, they establish ownership and give themselves credit for the creation of the website and as doers of the work.

How to Love Yourself

At the top of the page, sits the repeated image of a Black woman (Figure 5.7). She has a large Black afro, and thick red lips. Her eyes are hidden. We cannot see where she is looking, although we get the sense that she is staring directly at the viewer. She is wearing a white crop top and her legs are folded beneath her. The background of the image is a pale pink, representing love of self and others. Together, the woman and the background seem to welcome us to love ourselves, especially if we have features that are typically associated with Black women and girls (i.e. coarse hair, thick lips, wide hips) boldly, as we scroll through this page. The rest of the page, arranged vertically, is a list of tips to the audience about how to love yourself in your own life. Largely informed by Lizzo’s piece, *Self-care has to be rooted in self-preservation, not just mimosas and spa days* (Lizzo, 2019), on NBC News and our discussions throughout our time together, the tips range from advice about relaxation and positive messaging to walking courageously

and making informed voting decisions. They are written in a numerical list and centered on the page. The background is white, and the words are a dark grey, drawing our attention to the words in the center of the page.

Figure 5.7 How to Love Yourself



Self-Love Importance

At the top of this page in bold are the words “**The Importance of Self-Love**” followed by a short blog post. When the girls began this page, we had several conversations about how they might write the piece. “This part has to sound like a conversation, Ms. Griffin,” Kaylee and Hart said to me. “We want this to be relevant to our classmates. It can’t sound like it was written for school.” We brainstormed for some time about what might make this piece more appealing to their peers, skimming articles from *The Root* and *HuffPost Black Voices*. Importantly, their desire to write a piece with an authentic tone is related to self-love as it is an attempt to stay true to self in a space that they have claimed for themselves. They wanted to write a piece that not only touched on the issues of Black girlhood, but also was clearly written by Black girls *for* Black girls; for them to be seen, heard, and understood. The post begins by stating:

Due to the pressure of today's age, many black girls are constantly striving to achieve greatness (which is a good thing, so go us). Being such many black girls already have to deal with the pressure of oppression, colorism, racism and just about any other ism their [sic] is. Top that with the oversexualism [sic] of black women bodies [sic] and social media constantly stealing our style and then labeling it as "trendy" (*cue side eye)

To begin, the girls chose to highlight the "pressures" of today's age and contrast them with the achievements of Black girls, centering Black girls' resistance generally while also resisting deficit narratives themselves. In contrasting the two, the girls make note of Black girls' achievements *in spite of* the pressures of society. They go on to call out specific oppressions, naming "colorism, racism and just about any other ism their [sic] is." While both of these oppressions stem from whiteness, the girls do not name these as the only perpetrators of oppression. In their next sentence, they call out misogynoir (oversexualism [sic] of black women bodies) and cultural appropriation (social media constantly stealing our style and labeling it as "trendy"). The "side eye," a facial expression familiar to many Black girls, is a critical call out, denoting judgment and apprehension, in this case meaning, "I see what you're doing, and I don't trust you." The girls' use of the side eye here acknowledges a tense relationship between Black women and girls and those who would seek to do us harm through sexualizing their bodies and appropriating their style.

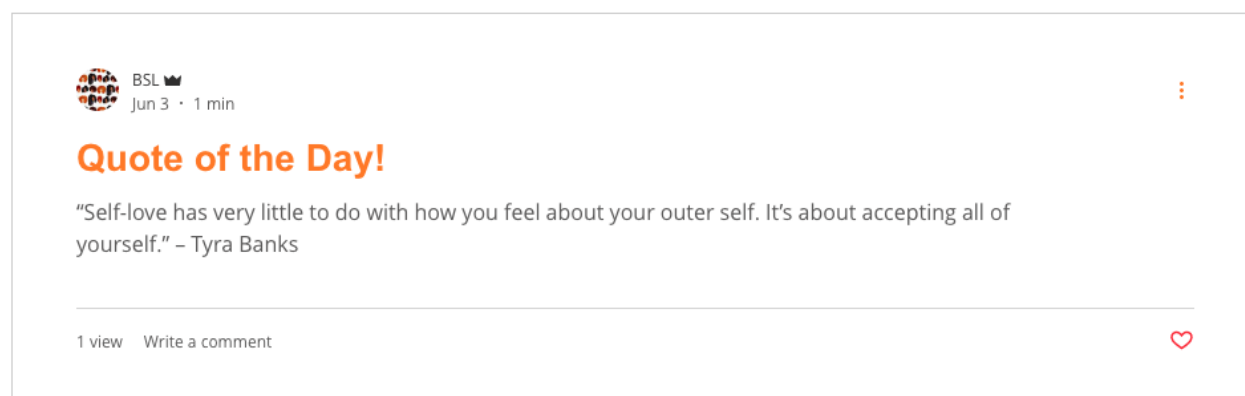
The girls then point to the specific importance of self-love for Black girls, stating "...black girls all around are constantly worrying and believing all the negative thing [sic] society has to say about rather than just loving yourself. Which is why learning and

practicing self-love and appreciation come into action. When one truly love themselves they...are able to not allow the negativity of other [sic] affect their view of themselves.” As if calling back to Monica’s statement on her self-love collage that “society makes it hard for you to love yourself,” the girls articulate that messaging about and lack of protection for Black girls often challenges their ability to love themselves. As the girls understand it, self-love positively influences self-esteem and diminishes the opinions of others. That is, when you love yourself, the [mis]representations of Black girls associated with the master narrative do not influence how you view yourself.

Quotes/Shoutouts

The final completed page resembles Twitter. It includes three rectangular boxes within grey lines. At the top left of the box is an avatar (a small image) with the picture from the home page. The words “Quote of the Day!” are written in Black, but when the mouse scrolls over them, the words turn orange. Inside of each box is a quote by a famous Black woman (see Figure 5.8).

Figure 5.8 Quote of the Day!



The first is by supermodel Tyra Banks, who has publicly discussed her own struggles with perceptions of herself as a curvy Black woman in the modeling industry. The quote reads, “Self-love has very little to do with how you feel about your outer self.

It's about accepting all of yourself." The quote, especially coming from a curvy Black supermodel, suggests that outer beauty is only a small part of self-love. The second quote, by Janelle Monae who is a queer Black woman and singer/actress states, "Even if it makes others uncomfortable, I will love who I am." Monae's statement suggests that as a queer Black woman, her presence is inherently uncomfortable for some people and that in spite of this, she loves herself completely and refuses to shrink herself to put others at ease. Finally, the last quote is by the late Dr. Angelou and reads "Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it," suggesting that self-love is tied to success, but not in ways associated with white, capitalist, patriarchal norms. Rather, success, for Black women and girls, is about self-love, passion, authenticity, and integrity. Together, the quotes express the importance of learning from others, bringing Black women outside of the group into the conversation to teach us something about self-love. As well, through their use of the quotes the girls expand notions of self-love, urging us to think beyond superficial notions that portend self-love as outer beauty alone. Rather, these quotes encourage Black girls to reconsider what we say, think, and feel about ourselves in spite of deficit messages from U.S. society because of its inherent discomfort with Black bodies. Further, they suggest that authenticity, and loving self for no other reason than that you are yourself is a part of self-love.

Below the quotes, the girls invite website viewers to interact with the content by "liking" or commenting on each quote, again calling in other Black girls and women as active participants on the site. In doing so, they call for Black women and girls, specifically, to engage and commune with them on their site. Their call contrasts with the earlier images of faceless Black women on the homepage, giving a face and voice to the

previously unseen and unheard. By liking and commenting, these women and girls make themselves seen digitally and make their presence known.

Taking Up Space: Multimodal Acts of Self-Love

In this section, I consider Serafini's (2010) structural and ideological perspectives of multimodal texts as they relate to the girls' website. Analysis of the website revealed that the girls participated in a three-part process to depict self-love multimodally. They designed a digital homeplace where they could name themselves and their website as an act of agency and claimed a space in the digital.

Designing Digital Homeplace

The girls used the digital space to design a digital homeplace for themselves and other Black girls where they could name themselves and claim their existence. For Black girls, self-love is not just for self in the traditional sense of the term, but it is a love that extends to Black girls' generally. Because oppression is not isolated to individuals, but rather is systemic in nature, Black girls - who share at least their gendered and racialized identities - share many of the same experiences of oppression. Importantly, I do not wish to argue that Black girls are a monolith or share monolithic experiences, but rather that given their Blackness and girlhood share some racialized and gendered experiences. Thus, it is necessary to find and create healing in community with others who share those same experiences. bell hooks refers to these communities as "homeplace." In speaking of the idea of homeplace, hooks (1990) explains:

This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe space where black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds

inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that “homeplace,” most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. This task of making a homeplace, of making a home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies. (p. 384)

The girls in my study used digital space to engage in the practice of creating a kind of “homeplace” for themselves and other Black girls. As digital natives (Vickery, 2017), the girls employed the rhetorical healing practices of Black women of old (Muhammad, 2013) and fused them with the twenty-first century practice of website creation. Because the girls are growing up in an age where technology is no longer new, but a normal part of their everyday lives, a website allows them to engage in the same rhetorical healing strategies once practiced in hair salons, at kitchen tables, and written in books. They combined multiple modes of communication (images, video, words, etc.) to carve out a digital space where they can “affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (hooks, 1990). Their page is a love letter to other Black girls; an effort to teach them to love themselves within a white supremacist and patriarchal society. It is both a site and an act of resistance and because of its digital nature, has the potential to be shared with Black girls and women globally.

The homepage is a visual love letter to Black girls, celebrating various phenotypes of Blackness. It celebrates the many skin tones as well as hair textures and types of Black women. Their acrostic poems, then, work in tandem with the images of

Black women to create a home in the digital. The words “self-love” welcome Black girls, engulfing them in the warmth and love of home; offering a love that can only be given from one Black girl to another. The first poem encourages Black girls to feel safe, embraced, lavish, and fine (both as in safe and beautiful) qualities associated with a homeplace for Black women and girls. Like quilts hung over houses during the time of the Underground Railroad, the word “safe,” tells Black girls that this site is a place they can freely lay their heads; a place where they will not have to fight the monster of white supremacy, but rather can rest in the “embrace” and love of other Black girls who see them and understand their struggle. The word “lavish” reminds them they are beautiful and deserving of their own beauty and acknowledgement of that beauty. The fact that they are “Still Black. Still breathing. Still Woman. [and] Still magical” is testament to the fact that they are *still* striving in a world where they were never meant to survive (Lorde, 1997) and *that* in and of itself is beautiful and worthy of celebration and admiration. Finally, the word “fine” is a reminder that their melanin is a gift; it is beautiful and should not be hidden. Rather, it should be celebrated “without apology,” in spite of disparaging narratives about Black women’s beauty.

Likewise, the second acrostic is a reminder of all of the things Black girls are free to be when they are home and wrapped in love of self and other Black girls. Home is where Black girls can be lively, original, vivacious and who they are at their very essence without fear of negative critique. To be “lively” and “vivacious” means to cast off their cares, throwing away the worries of being labeled a “loud Black girl” (Fordham, 1993) by those who might not understand that their voices are expressions of joy that is fully realized when they are “happier, healthier, and better.” To claim the word “original” is to

recognize and accept that Black girls are “unnatural” (Player, 2018); that to be uniquely different is to be lovable. Lastly, to embrace all of these elements of self is the essence of celebrating Black girlhood (Brown, 2009). The girls’ use of the word “essence” is a lesson in the idea that self-love as a Black girl means to allow “love [to fill] your soul and [bring] you an inner peace.” The fact that this word completes the two acrostic poems is no mistake. Rather, it is an expression of the truth that to be at peace with your Black girlhood, then, may be the highest expression of Black girlhood. To find a community of Black girls who affirm you, encouraging love for self, especially as it relates to racialized and gendered identities is the epitome of self-love.

Finally, like home, a website leaves little room for outsiders to invade. Although outsiders may have the ability to visit the site, other than the quotes and shoutouts page, they are not able to interfere with or create a disturbance on the page. Unlike Instagram, which allows followers to leave comments on posts, the website offers a layer of protection, prohibiting “trolls,” or those seeking to cause a disturbance, from offering unsolicited opinions and protecting Black girls from undue harm. Although the girls toyed with the idea of inviting resources for Black boys on their page, the website is clearly dedicated to Black girls, only including boys in the video. As I explain later, they chose to keep the digital and physical space for them. Thus, like homeplace, the website allows the girls to develop their identities under a layer of protection in a safe space.

Naming Self

Naming has historically been an act of self-identifying to claim agency and dignity for U.S. Black Americans. During enslavement, kidnapped African peoples were stripped of their names, their identities, and given names by white captors to force them

to assimilate them to their new surroundings (Smitherman, 1977). After emancipation, Black folks used opportunities to name themselves, roads, schools, and communities as a way to (re)establish agency over themselves. Often, they assigned schools names of prominent people in the community who did work to uplift African Americans (James-Gallaway, forthcoming) and gave children names that had spiritual or cultural significance in accordance with many West African naming traditions (Black, 1996). Naming practices, then, “are a cultural statement, an affirmation, and...carrying such a name imbues the bearer with a sense of specialness and uniqueness which, among Afro-Americans, is a positive thing” (Black, 2013, p. 115).

Naming plays an especially important role in the lives of Black girls. Because of their unique gendered and racialized struggle, self-definition for Black girls is a fight against stereotypes and attitudes that “limit opportunities, degrade our self concept, and render us invisible through dual subjugation” (Muhammad, et al., 2015, p. 26). Thus, as Black girls read, write, speak, perform, and create texts in ways that bring them closer to selfhood, they are resisting such subjugation through literate acts (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Likewise, Muhammad and Womack (2015) explained that during adolescence Black girls seek to establish selfhood amidst negative perceptions of Black girls as an act of self-love through resistance and agency. Thus, during our second meeting together as a group of nine, we talked about the importance of naming ourselves for ourselves and our work as a group. I felt it important that following traditions of Black naming practices and Black girls’ literacies the girls be able to name our group within the larger context of their school. Together we brainstormed names, thinking through what name might accurately represent who we are and the work we were doing as a group. Although we

did not decide on a name in that instance, we continued to think through possible names throughout our time together.

During the girls' brainstorming session about the creation of their website (May 17, 2019) Kaylee said, "We still have to name ourselves before we do this," seemingly revisiting our conversation about the importance of naming and defining self. At that moment, the girls paused from their website to creation to tend to the task of giving themselves a name. At that moment I disengaged to let them create and so as not to make them feel that the name they chose had to be approved by me. After a few moments of discourse Summer announced "we decided on a name! It's Black self-love!"

This name, "Black self-love" is displayed boldly across the landing page of the website. It is the thing page viewers see upon visiting, immediately signaling for whom the page was created. The girls used the multimodal design elements (Serafini, 2010) of color and framing to center and draw attention to the name of their group in the middle of the box. The black and brown lettering serve as visual cues that echo the words "Black self-love," highlighting a range of varying skin tones among Black folks. Further, the white box that frames the name is interrupted by the boldness of the Black and brown lettering, a disturbance in the center of the page that is representative of the way the website is also a disturbance to depictions of Black girls steeped in whiteness, patriarchy, and misogyny.

Not only does Black self-love appear at the top of the first page but is also written in yellow lettering along the bottom of every page. The color yellow, signifying happiness, caution, and warmth (Serafini, 2010), evokes positive and celebratory emotions for viewers, while simultaneously cautioning unwanted visitors against

participation in the website. By including their name at the bottom of every page, the girls provide viewers with a consistent and regular reminder of (1) who they are as designers, (2) for whom the website was created, and (3) who is welcome to the website (i.e. those who are willing and interested in engaging in their thoughts around self-love for Black folks and also love Black people).

Lastly, on their “About” page, the girls begin their welcome by telling readers they are “some of the young black women that attend NCS.” By immediately naming both their race and gender, they are acknowledging the multiplicity and complexities that are tied to their self-love given their multiple oppressed identities.

Claiming Space

In her 1891 article, “Woman vs. the Indians,” Anna Julia Cooper describes the tension and challenges of locating a space for herself as a U.S. Black woman. In the essay, she describes two rooms, one “for ladies,” and another “for coloreds.” Cooper explicates her confusion in deciding to which room she belongs, emphasizing the lack of a socio-epistemic space for interpreting Black women’s place in U.S. America, and highlighting a politics of spatiality (Dotson, 2013). As Butler (2018) explains

A.J. Cooper’s (1891) encounter with two rooms - one for “ladies” and one for “colored people” - reinforces Fannie Barrier Williams’s (1905) description of Black women existing “beneath, beyond, and outside of US social imaginaries.” Therefore, the rhetorical work of Black feminists who penned the Combahee River Collective Statement were grounded in a politics of spatiality, one that reasserted Black women’s presence in [U.S.] American physical and social landscapes. (p. 31)

Like Cooper, Barrier, and the women of the Combahee River Collective, the adolescent Black girls in my study employed a politics of spatiality, using multimodal rhetorical practices to map their love for self as Black girls “through the lenses of place, race, gender, and age” (Butler, 2018, p. 39) and to claim a virtual space for themselves in the digital. Informed by our discussions of self-love, the girls chose to design a website as a means of “spreading the word” (Kaylee, 24 May 2019) about self-love to other Black girls.

When the girls told me of the title they had chosen for their website, I smiled wide and said, “I love it!” Then I had a thought. “Is it Black self-love or Black Girls’ self-love,” I asked.

“Black self-love,” Summer responded. “We want to offer Black boys resources, too. It’s important for them to love themselves, too.”

“Well,” I asked, “does that mean that we’re inviting them into our space next year?” I asked. I received a resounding “No!”

“Black boys and men are the ones that disrespect us the most sometimes. They can have the resources, but *this space* is for us,” Asia stated.

This space is for us.

Although they recognize Black boys’ need space to heal and have chosen to provide them with resources, the girls have claimed the physical space for themselves. While both Black boys and girls face oppressive attitudes and behaviors Black girls “because of both their race and gender, [suffer] an intersection of oppression that lends itself to multiple marginalization and an experience in which she is treated in a way that marks her struggle persistent, insistent, and unique in the ability to attain

acknowledgement and respect in a world that deems her a raced, gendered, and cultural deviant” (Muhammad, et al., 2015, p. 25). Thus, the girls point out the harm that Black men and boys have done and can do to Black girls given a history of patriarchal domination, exclusion, and misogyny and have thus chosen not to include them in their physical space. They want liberation for their brothas, but not at the expense of their own (Morgan, 1999). This agentic decision serves as an act of self-love as the girls have made a deliberate choice to remove any obstacle that might perpetuate gendered oppression standing in the way of their fellowship and healing.

Moreover, although the girls stated that they hoped the website would provide resources for both boys and girls, the website clearly centers Black girls’ experiences, only briefly including two boys in the video. As mentioned earlier, the website includes drawings and images of Black girls as well as a blog post and quotes all written by, for, and about Black women and girls. As such, the website serves as a digital location in which the girls literally claim and take up space.

In Tamara Butler’s (2018) work on Black Girl Cartography about how and where “Black girls are physically and sociopolitically mapped in education,” she notes that “Black women’s liberatory practices have been, and will continue to be, rooted in the spaces that we demand, seek, create, and cultivate” (p. 29-30). Expanding on this notion, I argue that the girls’ decision to create a website is an act of digital geospatial resistance. As noted earlier, much of the digital content about Black women and girls perpetuates stereotypes of them as oversexualized, incompetent, and ugly (Tanksley, 2016). However, much like Black women of old used their pens to write against (mis)representations of Black women, the twenty-first century adolescent Black girls I

worked with created digital content as a means of resistance. This site, laden with positive depictions of Black girls, challenges dominant narratives about Black girlhood, serving as a digital counter-story. The girls on the site are represented as beautiful, innocent, and creators and bearers of knowledge. It is within this space they have created that they are able to map their own stories, resisting both erasure and (mis)representation.

CHAPTER 6: BACK, BACK, FORTH, AND FORTH: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, & FUTURE RESEARCH

This inquiry started from a place of love. From loving and wanting the best for Black girls; from loving the ways digital spaces have and continue to offer me a sense of security, community, and freedom; and from learning to love my entire Black girl self. The Ghanaian concept of *Sankofa*, a word from the Twi language that references the Asante Adinkra symbol, urges us to go back and get it. The image, often represented by the image of a bird with its head turned backward, its feet turned forward, and an egg in its mouth, suggests that in order to move towards the future, we must regularly return to and reckon with or reflect upon our past. In several ways, this project has required me to do just that. To begin, Ariana's initial sentiment that she wished she learned how to love herself amidst an educational, digital, and media landscape that urged her to do the exact opposite moved me to start this project not by looking forward, but by looking at what had been; at the ways Black girls have been depicted, talked about, and treated in schools and on social media platforms as well as in digital and popular media; at my own schooling experiences and the ways I've experienced community in and developed the audacity to write my own story because of the digital spaces I was and continue to be a part of; and at the ways Black women have historically used their literacies to write towards their own liberation.

This dissertation then required me to go back and get what schools and society at large told us our foremothers did not and could not do and to understand how they wielded their literacies to love themselves and each other fiercely and how we could do the same. Without looking back on what had been and the giants on whose shoulders we

stand; without taking the time to deeply understand the work of women past and what we could glean from them today and in our future, this project would not have been possible. Together, my research partners, the nine adolescent Black girls at Northwest Charter School, and I took up the tools of the twenty-first century to engage in the literacy practices of historical Black women as we read, wrote, dreamed, and laughed our way to self-love.

Defining self-love as the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing, celebrating, preserving, or protecting one's own or another's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual growth, I began from the questions in figure 6.1. My research was guided by my own positionality and experiences as well as my theoretical orientations towards Black Feminism, Black Girls' Literacies, and Becoming. Grounded in these understandings, I worked alongside my research partners as we learned about Black women's and girls' various self-love practices and invoked our multiple literacies to articulate what we discovered. We worked together over the course of a semester, employing qualitative case study methods, to learn with and from Black women in the community about self-love as it pertained to food health, body positivity, financial literacy, healthy relationships, colorism, texturism, and several other topics of interest to the girls. Throughout the process the girls wrote journal entries as reflections, created several artifacts (including imagined budgets, digital dream boards, etc.), and discussed implications for self-love. At the conclusion of our time together, the girls worked together to create a website, which they entitled "Black self-love" dedicated to celebrating, honoring, and encouraging Black girls' love of themselves.

Figure 6.1 Research Questions and Thematic Findings

Chapter	Question	Thematic Findings
4	How do adolescent Black girls articulate the ways they engage their twenty-first century literacies to develop self-love?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Manipulate algorithms● Spam the internet● Use digital tools to support their future goals
5	How do adolescent Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Design digital homeplace where they could<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Name themselves for themselves○ Claim space

In Chapters 4 and 5, I explained that analysis of the audio and video recordings, artifacts, and journal entries revealed that the girls in the study articulated that they use new technological tools to extend the practices of Black women of old. Specifically, the adolescent Black girls who participated in my study followed historical Black women's practices of reading the social landscape (in this case a digital landscape), forming and participating in community with other Black women and girls, and writing towards liberation.

Throughout Chapter 4 I explained how the girls employed their twenty-first century literacies by (1) manipulating algorithms; (2) spamming the internet; and (3) using digital tools to support their future goals. I discussed how their strategic use of social media platforms allowed them to manipulate the algorithms on their individual pages, effectively controlling the depictions of Black girls they see and engage online. Further, I explained the girls' strategy of "spamming" the internet in which they create multiple Instagram accounts to control their own narratives in the digital space. While

their main pages have high numbers of followers, they contain curated pictures and receive irregular posts. Their “spam” pages, however, are reserved for family and friends and house their more authentic pictures and selves. In creating multiple pages and determining who the audience is and what messages they receive, the girls control their narratives and limit access to and criticism of themselves. Lastly, I explained that the girls use various digital tools to learn about and support their future goals. For instance, Samantha deleted her initial Instagram account to create an account that was more aligned with her future aspiration of becoming a photographer. The girls also used their computers and online resources to develop imagined budgets that allowed them to plan for their financial futures. Lastly, they created digital dream boards that allowed them to imagine and depict their hopes for their futures on a digital platform where they can live forever.

In chapter 5 I articulated how my research partners employed their twenty-first century literacies to depict self-love multimodally. Using my own framework for the analysis of Black girls’ multimodal texts, I found that the girls designed a digital homeplace where they could name themselves and claim space for themselves. By creating their homeplace online, the girls nurtured themselves by engaging in rhetorical healing practice. I noted that this practice is familiar to Black women and girls; what is new are the tools they’re using to create these spaces. Within this space, they celebrate Black girlhood, nurture themselves, and protect themselves and others from hateful and vicious attacks against Black girls by determining how and when others can participate and who is worthy of participation in their space. In following Black naming traditions, the girls named themselves, the work they do, and the space they created in order to

define themselves and pen their own narratives. Finally, the girls claimed the space as their own; a space for Black girls by Black girls.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

This dissertation serves two major purposes: (1) it details the ways contemporary Black girls engage their twenty-first century literacies to extend the literacy practices of their foremothers who used literacy to negotiate and challenge public perceptions about Black women and (2) it provides pedagogical tools for educators of Black girls seeking to facilitate spaces where they can develop their identities and literacies simultaneously. The findings of this study have several implications for research, policy, and practice, which I detail in the following sections.

Implications for Research

Integration of Digital and Physical Spaces

To begin, the girls in this study attended carefully to the needs of themselves, the girls in the group, and the imagined community of Black girls for whom they were creating the website. In doing so, they expressed a particular type of care familiar of a Black Feminist politic (Bailey, 2015; James-Gallaway, Griffin, & Kirkwood, in press). In her essay on Black women's feminist ethics online Bailey (2015) states,

marginalized groups have often used media production to challenge dominant scripts within mainstream outlets, and the rise of digital platforms makes this task even easier. Black trans women's use of Twitter, an existing digital media platform, creates new and alternate representations as a practice of health promotion, self-care and wellness that challenge the ways they are depicted in popular culture.

Similarly, the girls in my study used both physical *and* digital platforms to challenge majoritarian narratives as a practice of self-love and -care for themselves and other Black girls. Through the use of images, words, videos, collages, and several other modalities, they authored digital narratives that reminded them of their worth and encouraged other Black girls to love themselves deeply and offer themselves the gentle care of which they are so deserving (Vasudevan et al., 2010). Although authors have begun to write about how adult Black women (Bailey, 2015; Sawyer, 2017) and Black men (Steele, 2016) engage such practices, little has been written about how adolescent Black girls engage in these same acts online. Thus, future studies should take up critical qualitative methodologies in both digital and physical spaces to dwell with and learn from adolescent Black girls as they create content online and understand their ways of being and knowing in the digital. In doing so, scholars create opportunities to learn about how power, racism, and sexism influence Black girls' digital acts of self-love and resistance. For instance, in my own study, not only did I create physical space to regularly interact with the girls, we centered our time together around matters of criticality, always seeking to understand the specific implications of self-love as we existed in our Black girl bodies.

Developing Culturally Relevant Methodologies

This research project has several implications for research methodologies. Specifically, the findings of this project cause us to think critically about where and with whom we collect research and how we analyze data in culturally relevant and affirming ways. I explain these implications further in the following sections.

Research Sites. To begin, this study has implications for where researchers collect data for educational scholarship (Butler, 2018). Contemporary Black girls are the

largest users of digital media platforms (Lenhart et al., 2015). They are content creators, space makers, resisters, readers, writers, and thinkers. They wield their digital tools in magical ways that allow them to continue to employ literacy as a method of resistance, healing, and imagination as their foremothers did. Like Asia's dream board (see figure 6.2), their creativity extends far beyond the bounds of any webpage, bringing in multiple modes of art and communication to make poignant statements about who they are and who they long to be. Similarly, educational scholarship regarding Black girls must reimagine where - other than classrooms - Black girls engage in meaningful literacy learning. In particular, future research should explore how Black girls learn in digital spaces. How do they make meaning of and author content online? Where do they go online to learn? The answers to questions such as these provide us with broader understandings of learning and how classrooms may sometimes serve as restrictive rather than expansive spaces of learning.

Figure 6.2 Asia's Digital Dream Board Flowing Beyond the Pages of Google Slides



Who is the Expert in Data Collection? Additionally, the findings of this dissertation have implications for who is the “expert” during the research process. In particular, this study causes me to ask what might it mean for researchers to take a back

seat as they partner with and learn from Black girls in their work? Throughout this study, I often found myself stepping back to allow space for the girls' expertise of their own lives. Although I had a plan, they ultimately dictated the frequency and content of our time together, allowing for the creation of richer data and an overall more robust experience. Their knowledge allowed me to gain insights I would never have known had they not partnered with me in this work. For instance, there would have been no way for me to know that they use digital tools to carefully imagine and craft their futures. I would have never been able to understand the depth and nuance they articulated about their spam and main Instagram accounts. As an outsider, a millennial Black girl who has long passed the stage of adolescence, there is so much about which I was not privy. However, by working *with* the girls and humbling myself in a way that allowed me to learn *from* them, we were able to create knowledge together. Research can and should be a fluid exchange of knowledge between parties that works to benefit the entire group. As such, I encourage future researchers to borrow from scholars of Participatory Action Research (Park, 1993) and Youth Participatory Action (Jones et al., 2015), researchers who resist hegemonic research methodologies that position the researcher as all-knowing and rather allow students to serve as leads on meaningful research projects. In particular, I encourage literacy researchers to elicit the knowledge and experience of Black girls in their work who have much to contribute about their own literate lives and practices.

Data Analysis. Further, in my data analysis I rejected ahistorical, colorblind analytical tools and created a method for critical multimodal analysis that helped me to understand how the girls' multimodal renderings were entrenched in a history of Black girls' racialized and gendered experiences in the U.S. By relating the meanings, motifs,

and themes the girls wrote about throughout the study to sociohistorical context and social practices of adolescent Black girls, I was able to more precisely analyze the data and articulate the findings of this study. Therefore, I encourage future researchers - particularly critical researchers - to both modify and extend existing analytical tools to fit their purposes and create their own tools for analysis.

Implications for Theory

Thus, this study directly informs theory in three ways: (1) it speaks directly to theories like Black Girls' Literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) and Black Feminist Theories of education (Evans-Winters & Love, 2015) that dispel the lies that Black girls' lives are not worthy to be drawn upon for academic purposes; (2) it challenges researchers to redefine digital and twenty-first century literacies to include the out-of-school digitally literate practices of all students, but particularly Black girls; (3) it suggests that theorists have a responsibility to seek to understand Black girl self-love and thus reimagine literacy curriculum to include the input of Black girls.

Building Upon Existing Theory

Throughout this study I relied heavily on the literacy and self-love practices of historical Black women to inform and guide my time with the girls to create experiences that would be fruitful and nourishing. Although few scholars have begun to look at how turning to the historical literacy practices of a community can be used for present-day literacy instruction (Muhammad, 2018), there is still much work to be done. Future studies would do well to investigate how returning to these practices and theoretical and conceptual frameworks might benefit students not only academically, but also socially and emotionally to inform our understandings of current educational contexts. For

instance, throughout our time together I noticed that as they used various tools to write about their own self-love, they came to speak differently about what it meant to love themselves. Their conversations changed from conversations about how self-love meant believing you were beautiful to knowing that as Black girls, their skin was beautiful in every shade despite society's preference towards whiteness. They began to have conversations about what foods they were putting into their bodies and how those foods would ultimately treat them in return. While the girls were able to come to these realizations through conversations amongst themselves, I am left to wonder how much more nuanced and rich their conversations may have been if they had read the work of Black women who have struggled and continue to work to understand these purveying issues in their writing. For instance, what if they had read excerpts from Morrison's (1994) *The Bluest Eye* to enrich their conversations of colorism and racism? Would they have come away with a greater knowledge about the connections between colorism, self-love as resistance, and literature? Further, I am curious about how a text like Audre Lorde's (1988) *A Burst of Light* would have caused them to think critically about how writing has historically been and can continue to be a healing ritual for Black women. How would reading this text discussing it along with the added layer of technology begin to uncover our knowledge about how Black girls use their twenty-first century literacies to write themselves well?

Twenty-First Century Literacies

Likewise, this dissertation expands how we understand twenty-first century literacies by blurring the lines of academic practices of digital literacy. Thus, it expands our understanding of who is capable and worthy of being deemed digitally literate. The

girls in this study demonstrated not only are they capable of using digital tools, but that they can do so by drawing on their *own* resources, knowledge, and lived experiences to create academically rigorous content. For instance, rather than using websites that may be considered traditionally academic to promote learning, the girls engaged social media platforms. They drew from their own knowledge of various aspects of Black history and culture and ultimately used that knowledge to build a website. Both on their personal social media pages and the website they created, the girls employed skills such as determining audience, critically analyzing texts, and developing claims to argue a point. Though they may not have been engaged in practices that seemed traditionally academic, they were certainly learning and employing their knowledge in meaningful ways. The skills they practiced aligned both with the goals of Common Core's writing standards and the National Council for Teachers of English's (NCTE) Twenty-First Century Literacy policy brief.

Black Girls' Self-Love

I want to point out that this dissertation has several implications for theory as it pertains to self-love. First, it challenges notions of who is considered a theorist or a knower. The girls in this study were theorists in their own right, constantly defining and redefining not only self-love, but also of their own narratives and how they used digital tools. For instance, they were extremely self-aware with regards to how they were engaging online and for what purposes, often explaining their processes in detail. They understood that as Black girls their content would be more harshly scrutinized than that of their white peers. They understood that their use of colors, patterns, and shapes communicated very specific messages to their audience. And, much more than many of

the adults they worked with - myself included - they knew how to wield their digital tools in critical and powerful ways. As a result of their knowledge and expertise, we worked together to create a theory of Black Girl Self-Love. In doing so, they are as much theorists as I am. It was our collective thought work, our regular discourse, and their curiosities that led us to this understanding of how self-love functions uniquely for Black women and girls.

As depicted by the various artifacts the girls created, this project centers the notion of Black self-love, and more specifically Black *Girl* Self-Love. This idea - this theory created together with my research partners - brings Black girls' experiences from the margin to the center and legitimizes their ways of being and knowing in the world, especially as they engage twenty-first century tools (Ellison, 2017; Morris, 2019). This theory of Black Girl Self-Love is a reminder to me, my research partners, other Black girls, and society at large that in spite of how they are treated or depicted, they can wield their pens to write their own stories and create spaces for themselves where none exist. It is a reminder that their voices and knowledge matter and that they have a right to love themselves fiercely. It is also a reminder that for Black girls, self-love is not a neat or linear process, but rather is often influenced by the racist, sexist, capitalist, and patriarchal history and present-day reality of the United States. It is a call to extend limited notions of self-love, and to think critically about how various aspects of our lives converge to interact with our treatment of and beliefs about ourselves. With regard to the digital, it is a reminder of the agency Black girls have to craft both their narratives and their futures online and to develop mechanisms that protect them - even if only temporarily - from racism and sexism. In theorizing self-love and twenty-first century

literacies in this way, the girls were able to express themselves freely, exploring multiple aspects of Black girlhood and their own wellbeing, drawing from their own knowledge to develop their literacies.

Next, this dissertation uniquely defines self-love for Black women and girls. Throughout history Black women have operated from a both/and perspective (i.e. both Black *and* girl or woman) rather than either/or. This same stance carries over into how they view and enact self-love, allowing them to simultaneously care for themselves *and* their communities. Through reflection of my own experiences and analysis of my data, I have come to remember (Brown, 2009) that for Black women and girls, self-love is not a matter of self alone. In fact, Black girls' love of self is inextricably tied to love for community. Despite westernized articulations of self-love that might suggest or enact narcissistic or superficial self-love, Black girls' self-love involves care for both self and community. Throughout my own childhood experiences, it was only through my communal interactions with others that I was able to come to more deeply know and love myself. I spent my time at hair salons, in church, with my mom and aunties, and at playgrounds and community centers learning about the wisdom and beauty of Black girlhood that the schools wouldn't dare teach me. It was in these spaces and surrounded by these women who shared some markers of identity with me that I learned what it meant to have a Black girl-centric worldview in which I rejected whitewashed ways of knowing and being and centered the knowledge, voices, and experiences of Black women and girls. Similarly, in my study, the girls not only interacted with me, but with elders in the community, other Black women who have their own knowledge and expertise about various aspects of Black girlhood. In each of our modules the girls learned about self-

love from these Black women as these women expressed their own self-love by loving and caring for the girls as they shared their knowledge. Through their varied topics, these women communicated love for themselves and the work they do, and also for the girls themselves. In turn, the girls learned what it meant to love others and self simultaneously. It was during these moments that the girls came to understand, like I learned so long ago and was reminded through this study, that self-love for Black women and girls isn't meant to be kept solely for ourselves, but rather to be shared with our sistas as we love and care for each other.

Lastly, this project complicated false narratives about self-love for Black women. I've often heard conversations of or tropes about how Black women love so hard and give so much that they leave themselves depleted; we don't leave any love for ourselves. The findings of this study challenge that notion. In particular, I'm reminded of Asia's statement that the space is "for us." I'm reminded of the yellow writing on the bottom of each page of the website that read "Black Self Love." These statements serve both protective and cautionary purposes. In stating that the space is uniquely for them, the girls are saving a bit of the love they share with the rest of the world for themselves. They are able to give, but also understand the importance of caring for self in the process. This type of protection was not something we talked about explicitly during our time together, but rather seemed to come naturally to girls, perhaps suggesting that adolescent Black girls who are becoming in the twenty-first century instinctively know that in order to love others, you *must* keep some of your love for yourself.

As a scholar, then, this project affirmed my belief in using a Black girlhood epistemological stance to inform my work with Black girls. While there is much research

that encourages objectivity at all stages of the research process, this dissertation taught me that if I am to work with Black girls in ways that are affirming and contrary to the whitewashed education they often receive in schools, I have no other choice. I must have critical discussions with them that consider their multiple identities - in particular their Blackness and girlhood - and allow them to engage their multiple literacies and creativity. Had I used a more traditionally school-based or teacher-created curriculum, I do not know that they would have been able to create such a beautiful website or talk so openly and honestly about their own transformations with regards to self-love. I do not know that they would have so effortlessly and brilliantly engaged with our literacy activities to create such thoughtful and rigorous work. Reaching and teaching populations of students for whom school was not created involves using methods and materials that may not be valued outside of the walls of the school.

Further, by conducting this research project, I engaged in acts of literacy pedagogy as self-love. Working in ways that felt authentic and organic, rather than scripted and predetermined allowed me to bring my whole self into the learning space with the girls. I did not feel confined by restrictions that valued one type of knowledge over another, but rather could pull from the wisdom of Black women scholars, artists, activists, and the girls themselves. Doing so allowed for even richer conversations and engagement with various literacy practices throughout our time together.

Thus, I call for scholarship that theorizes Self-Love Literacies and explores literacy as a mechanism to center the voices and experiences of Black girls as they come to understand what they deem to be most important for their well-being and liberation. Specifically, because we live in an increasingly digital world, I call for scholarship that

explores how the aforementioned happens in the digital. In my own study, the girls decided what topics were important for them to study as they related to self-love and together, we used our literacies to love on ourselves and each other. In doing so, the girls created resources that benefitted themselves and other Black girls and facilitated their own processes of beginning to heal from the traumas of racism and sexism. Thus, I wonder how continuing this work of merging self-love, the digital, and literacy might support and encourage Black girls and other students who suffer from the effects of racism, sexism, patriarchy, and other -isms to protect themselves from the ails of society? How might new technologies support them in these endeavors? Based on the findings of my study, I urge future scholars of this work to elicit responses from the students they work with about what -isms ail them; to explore how people have historically resisted using literacy; and how those same practices might take up new tools to work towards well-being for students. I believe we would benefit from understanding the role of new tools and technologies in facilitating opportunities for students to engage in wellness and self-love work. In doing so, we come to understand the innumerable possibilities for merging the past and the present to write meaningful futures.

Implications for Policy

In 2010, the National Council for Teachers of English published a policy brief concerning adolescent literacy. In it, they wrote:

Adolescent literacy is social, drawing from various discourse communities in and out of school. Adolescents already have access to many different discourses including those of ethnic, online, and popular communities. They regularly use literacies for social and political purposes as they create meanings and participate

in shaping their immediate environments.

Teachers often devalue, ignore, or censor adolescents' extracurricular literacies, assuming that these literacies are morally suspect, raise controversial issues, or distract adolescents from more important work. This means that some adolescents' literacy abilities remain largely invisible in the classroom.

They were correct. And unfortunately, a full decade later, the problem persists. Research continues to support the fact that students' literacies - especially those literacies of students from communities that have been subject to the violence of racism and classism - are largely devalued, ignored, and censored to prioritize using classroom computers to perpetuate old ways of learning (Kajder, 2010). All of these practices mirror the NCTE's sentiments and remain largely unaddressed.

Implications for Digital Policing

Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz (2012) explained that although digital tools empower students to be producers and creators of knowledge, these tools and practices are often policed and censored in urban schools. Similarly, Griffin (forthcoming) wrote about the varied ways Black girls' use of school-provided computers is surveyed in schools. The findings of this study, however, suggest that such technology can serve as powerful tools for learning and healing. Thus, school policies are due for a reckoning. Throughout my study, the girls proved that when given educational freedom, they can flourish and create work that is academically stimulating and rigorous. Their website and the varied multimodal artifacts they created draw on a variety of culturally and historically rich traditions that indicate their mastery of their varied literacies. Educational administrators must look at the ways their school handbooks, policies, and pedagogical practices prevent

students from developing their literacies to their full potential. What use is it to restrict students' use of these tools, especially when they have the potential to positively impact student learning? If we are to move away from restrictive - and often racialized (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012) - policies around technology use, we have no choice but to reconsider our policies and the purposes for them.

Wellness Standards

Comparatively, this study causes us to think carefully about the role of wellness in the classroom. Recently, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Information in Jamaica (2016) began looking into a Staff Wellness Programme for teachers and school administrators. While this program seeks to support the physical, emotional, and professional well-being of school staff, I argue that an adaptation of such a model should be considered for student wellbeing. Just as Teaching for Tolerance has adopted Social Justice Standards that serve as a guide for anti-bias K-12 instruction, how might we consider wellness standards, particularly as they pertain to literacy, that not only emphasize anti-bias education, but also center the unique needs of students from historically marginalized populations? Throughout this study, the girls indicated that they found the space to be useful for their own emotional and mental well-being and development, often referring to it like therapy. I argue that creating standards focusing on the continuation of such work would allow us to see increased mental and emotional well-being, specifically for Black children who are currently facing record suicide rates.

Rather than focusing solely on academics, these standards could consider how, in this age of social justice teaching and violence related to race, gender, sexuality, class, immigration status, and ability, we are carefully attending to the mental and emotional

wellness of students as they learn about and witness the violent and traumatic history and modern day acts of this country. These standards could provide teachers with guidelines for how to teach students in ways that facilitate an understanding of what it means to use your knowledge not only to resist oppression through action that is often exhausting and burdensome, but also to form community, celebrate themselves, and employ various forms of healing through the arts and technology in order to replenish themselves.

Implications for Practice

As mentioned in the “Limitations” section of Chapter 3, this dissertation did not take place in a traditional English or literacy classroom, and thus, some might argue that it does not address the “official” curriculum. With this in mind, I use the following sections to pose several implications that this study does indeed have for practice.

Revisiting Black Girls’ Literacies

I began this dissertation from the work of Muhammad and Haddix (2016), who revitalized discussions of Black girls’ literacies in research in their 2016 literature review. In chapter two I discussed their framework, which explains how Black girls’ literacies are (1) multimodal; (2) tied to identities; (3) historical; (4) collaborative; (5) intellectual; and (6) political/critical. I return to this theory at the conclusion of this dissertation to expand upon our understanding of Black Girls’ Literacies.

As previously stated, literacy for Black girls is not just about reading and writing what’s on the physical page. To be a Black girl and to engage in literacy means to engage in a body that is always both gendered and raced. It means to always be aware of our multiply marginalized bodies and to navigate the world in ways that reflect this kind of knowing. Such literacies come from a long history of Black women who read the world

around them and using their voices, their actions, and their pens, they fought to make political change for their personal worlds. For Black girls then, literacy is about reading our experiences in the world, our interactions with people, structures, and systems, and communicating those experiences in the ways we see fit.

The digital provided a specifically unique opportunity for my research partners to employ their varied literacies - multimodal, digital, and critical - to create a webpage that depicted how they came to love themselves in their Black girl bodies. As I mentioned in chapter three, it is not the literacies that are new, but rather the tools present-day adolescent Black girls are using. Further, that Black girls are the largest consumers and users of digital media is no small fact. Rather it depicts the evolutionary nature of Black girls' literacies, exemplifying that as our modes of communication change, Black girls take up new tools alongside their Black girls' literacies to write themselves into the present and future. Thus, in addition to the six tenets of Muhammad and Haddix's (2016) framework, I argue that Black girls' literacies are evolutionary, changing as they must to ensure their survival. As such, educators must begin to think more strategically about how they are incorporating Black Girls' Literacies into twenty-first century classrooms.

Literacy Curriculum

Although this study did not explore Common Core Standards with regards to literacy curricula, the girls did engage in literacy practices that are aligned with Common Core including, (1) critically analyzing digital media (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 & CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6); (2) critiquing and (re)write narratives of Black girls (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.B & CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.6); and (3) questioning, planning for, and constructing their own futures (CCSS.ELA-

LITERACY.W.11-12.5 & CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.6). For instance, the girls used digital tools to build a website where they spoke back against deficit narratives of Black girls and women. On the homepage, they actively resist narratives of Black girls and women as deviant, worthless, and unattractive with their acrostic declaration of self-love. Using the words “self love,” they intertwine their own words, quotes they found online, and those of Black women poets to resist and rewrite deficit narratives of Black girls. In doing so, they demonstrate an ability to both develop counterclaims to existing arguments and author digital narratives. They draw on their own knowledge of selfhood as Black girls to write claims that argue why they and other young Black girls are worthy of their own love. Importantly, the work the girls did during our time together was a result of their own articulations of what they wanted to learn. As such, the findings of this study have several major implications for curriculum.

Whose Work is Academic?

First, it calls for teachers to think critically about what they do and do not consider to be academic work. While the girls may have not been reading from textbooks or traditionally academic or news sources, they were able to use the knowledge they gathered to create content that is academic in its own right and should be considered as such. The findings of this dissertation call for teachers to think critically about whether they might move towards a Black Girls’ Literacies Pedagogy that values the full knowledge of Black girls. By drawing on what Black girls know from their own digital and physical social worlds - worlds that exist outside the walls of the school - educators are able to create learning experiences that are truly rigorous for *them*, as these practices allow Black girls to pull from their entire funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) rather

than limiting them to restrictive curricula based in dominant narratives. Doing so would require educators (both teachers and administration) to move beyond textbooks, worksheets, and business as usual - as I did throughout my study - for fear of loss of control (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012) to engage students' digital devices as part of the learning process.

Creating Curriculum Alongside Black Girls

Second, these findings have implications for how teachers create my curriculum. In my own study I began with a plan - as most educators do. When I realized my plan was insufficient for what the girls hoped to learn and imagined for our time together, I not only had to reconfigure my plans, but elicit the thoughts, opinions, and values of the girls to create a substantial curriculum from *their* schema. Thus, educators must consider what it would mean to solicit the input of Black girls in developing curriculum that seeks to assist them in developing their twenty-first century literacies while simultaneously engaging in important identity work that will serve them outside the walls of the school.

In this dissertation I co-created a curriculum by eliciting the girls' opinions about what we should learn and what methods we might go about using to learn this content. In a classroom, teachers might begin by sitting down with students - either from the previous or current year - to engage in discourse about what social, political, and ideological factors are influencing students' worldviews and lived experiences. They might then solicit responses from students about what aspects of their lives they feel have or are currently being left out of classroom discussion and curriculum, including but not limited to, those related to their varied identities and the tools they take up to communicate their stories. Next, teachers can take the time to revisit curriculum maps

and lesson plans to see where they can engage not only student interest, but also student experiences, and finally (re)present the curriculum to the students for approval before proceeding with a unit or lesson.

If writing is a communal process that relies heavily on the process of editing and peer reviewing, writing curriculum should be no different. Johnson, Jackson, and Stovall (2017) explain that the project of white colonialism was to center European knowledge as supreme above all other knowledge. Disrupting that requires educators to value students as knowledgeable in their own right and with their own tools to create curricula *alongside* them. Scholars (Itō, 2010; Turkle, 1995; Vickery, 2017) have written about the concept of today's students as digital natives who have never known a world without technology. This generation of students moves seamlessly from one platform to the next engaging in acts of community, literacy, and identity. Given this fact, many students know better than adults how to manipulate various technological tools and digital platforms. Why wouldn't we work with them to adequately plan rigorous and engaging lessons? While I worked alongside the girls in this study to create a curriculum honoring their contemporary and historical Black girl literacies about the topic of self-love, I encourage literacy educators to explore how curriculum co-creation can happen in ELA/Reading/Literacy classrooms to the benefit of all students.

Incorporating Technology

Likewise, this study calls for us to reconsider and reimagine what literacy instruction can look like for Black girls. Many educators have drawn to the practice of incorporating technology into their classrooms only to require students to engage in old ways of learning with new tools (Griffin, 2018; Kajder, 2007). In doing so, we not only

perpetuate antiquated ways of teaching and learning, but we de-race and de-gender technology and technological engagement (Coleman, 2009). Throughout this project, the girls employed their twenty-first century literacies in ways that were inseparable from their identities as Black girls. They wrote about their experiences with self-love as Black girls, depicted images of Black girls and women on their website and dream boards, and called for Black girls and women to commune and learn with them as they engaged their computers and cell phones. Their work required more than would a digital worksheet, allowing them to draw on a range of knowledge to produce powerful and purposeful writing.

Kajder (2007) calls for literacy teachers of adolescents to consider the new roles of teachers and students alongside these new tools. She urges teachers to move beyond word processors and multimedia presentations to include class blogs, podcasts, book trailers, and other forms of digitally literate interactions. Building on this notion, I call for teachers to incorporate these tools as a means of learning *as well as* content relevant to students' everyday lives. This content can take the form of the social media in which they already engage and have much to learn from, as well as young adult novels, news websites and media outlets, songs, poems, visual art, and more.

Leveraging Varied Forms of Media

Further, the girls demonstrated their abilities to leverage social and other digital media to create multimodal resources; identify dominant media forms for target populations; manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of information; and create, critique, and evaluate multimedia texts (Kajder, 2010; NCTE, 2013). Further, they did so using a range of tools that included not only their school-provided computers, but

their personal cell phones in ways that enabled them to author content that was relevant to their personal lives and multiple identities. They moved beyond the realm of using technological tools to complete digital worksheets and into the world of authorship, content creators, and knowers (Griffin, forthcoming; Kajder, 2007). This work, while deeply personal, was also academic in nature. As stated by Mahiri (2006) “traditional conceptions of print-based literacy do not apprehend the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices in people’s lives enabled by new technologies that both magnify and simplify access to and creation of multimodal texts” (p. 61). Price-Dennis (2016) urges us to consider the affordances of designing curricula that engage Black girls’ digital and critical literacies. Several affordances from this kind of curriculum making with the girls were revealed in my study. First, the girls were able to draw on their full funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), arguably allowing them to engage in more rigorous literacy learning. Because no topic or form of content was off limits, they were able to merge their personal and academic worlds, allowing them to effectively author a website about all they had learned. Second, as previously mentioned, the girls engaged in work aligned to Common Core’s literacy standards while reading, writing, and thinking about their own lives. Rather than drawing from content that perpetuated educational violence, they engaged in the process of curriculum making to learn about topics important to them while meeting important academic goals (Delpit, 2006). Third, the process of co-creating curriculum allowed for expanded possibilities for taking up digital tools. Because we worked together to determine what was important to learn and how we would learn it, we were able to learn across and from multiple platforms including Instagram, Google,

website creation platforms, and more instead of using more common - and often unengaging - ways of learning.

Reimagining Education for the Twenty-First Century

We live in an age where technology, literacy, and identity are intricately connected for our students. Thus, it is time for us to look into our practices as educators and interrogate how we may be policing students' learning and knowledge in restrictive ways. By silencing questions, deeming some content as inappropriate, banning cell phones from learning environments, and separating literacy and technology from identity, we constrict the creativity and brilliance of Black girls, creating cookie cutter replicas of students whose worlds revolve around majoritarian ways of knowing and perpetuating the colonial project of centering and elevating European knowledge. We dim the light of future policy makers, medical professionals, theorists, and artists. If we reimagine literacy instruction to include the historic and out-of-school literacies of Black girls in our classrooms, we create space for brilliant minds to flourish and develop the skills they need to design their desired futures.

The way forward, then, requires a changing of roles. In order for teachers to adequately integrate such aspects into their lessons, they must become familiar with how students spend their time online, with what interests them, and with what they believe they need to navigate a world that does not love them and teaches them to devalue themselves as well. Because the teaching force - dominated by middle class white women - does not see what students see when they look at themselves in a mirror, they need students to assist them in building curriculum - not just to choose books - that act as mirrors, reflecting their literate histories, legacies, esteem, and worth. Additionally, this

project would not have been possible without the assistance of several community members, all of whom were Black women, and some of whom have not ever worked as a teacher in a K-12 capacity. Even still, they brought unique perspectives and assisted in the cultivation of specific literacy skills that only they could have taught given their own expertise and positionalities. As such, we must also consider the role of community and collective education in our classrooms. How are we serving our students by working to make up for our own gaps in knowledge by first acknowledging them, and second, seeking out those who know what we do not?

Likewise, this dissertation has pedagogical implications for how we think about our own practices of teaching and learning. In order to engage with the girls around self-love, this process required me to constantly revisit my own self-love practices and rituals. To be clear, I'm not talking about commodified versions of self-love, like practicing yoga, taking bubble baths, and drinking expensive teas, that white women perform on Instagram. I'm talking about the work that was often hard and unglamorous. I was regularly challenged to think about how I was or was not loving myself and other Black women in the ways I was spending my money; in how I was communicating and engaging in relationships; in what ways I was or was not saying, thinking, or believing to be possible about my own future; and about the content I produced for my own blog and podcast. I had to not only interrogate my own thoughts, beliefs, and actions to determine whether they aligned with the Black Feminist praxis from which I claimed to be operating, but to hold myself accountable and redirect my actions when in fact, they did not. It was only in doing so that I was able to engage authentically with the girls, moving from a place of love rather than fear or perceived power, in ways that allowed us all to

grow together. As such, we must consider how teachers' love for themselves - or lack thereof - influences their work with students. How are teachers' beliefs about themselves and experiences in the world informing their pedagogy? What opportunities do teachers have to interrogate how the ways they nurture, celebrate, preserve, and protect their own mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth - or do not do these things - influence how they interact with their students on a regular basis? Allowing space for this to happen, alongside interrogating one's own archaeology of the self (Sealey-Ruiz, 2018) - especially around issues of identity - could potentially create opportunities for teachers to understand how their own feelings of self inform their interactions with students and thus engage in more loving and meaningful interactions.

Directions for Future Research

This work of exploring Black girls' self-love through the employment of twenty-first century literacies is by no means complete. It is my hope to continue this work in partnership with Black girls and women throughout my career as a literacy researcher. I hope to build community with Black girls and Black women who are willing to share their wisdom and knowledge. I hope to partner with teachers who are interested in and willing to co-create with Black girls. I hope to explore even greater possibilities for digital literacies in and out of classrooms. This dissertation is only the beginning.

Because this work was so deeply steeped in the context of Northwest Charter School, it largely depicts the experiences and voices of one community of Black girls. This is not to say that we cannot draw powerful and meaningful implications from this work, but rather to remind us that Black girls are not monolithic. Thus, this dissertation is only one example of how self-love and digital literacies interact for adolescent Black

girls. I have questions about how a similar project might provide different results in a different context and hope to continue in community and collaborative research with Black girls and researchers interested in anti-racist and anti-sexist scholarship to explore these questions.

Although this dissertation did explore the use of Black girls' twenty-first century literacies, I believe the data from this project could and should be used to inform the field of digital literacies generally. Through the use of their own digital literacies, the girls addressed such topics as racism and sexism, colorism and texturism, multimodal communication, video production, and graphic design, broadening our understandings of who is a digital composer and what digitally composed products can encompass. In doing so, they raised questions for me about how research on digital literacy has and has not included discussions of identity, namely Black girlhood. My future research, then, will explore how and where digital literacies and Black girlhood converge and what classroom educators can glean from such knowledge. As well, I have questions around what it might mean that the girls' creations live on platforms that were ultimately created and owned by white men for capitalist purposes. I think of the Black girl erasure that has existed on applications like Vine, Tumblr, and Tik Tok and how Black women and girls with access and resources might begin to create their own platforms as another form of resistance. In the future, I plan to explore this idea further to interrogate digital activism and resistance as it pertains to digital neoliberalism, whiteness, capitalism, and patriarchy.

Further, I was struck by *how* the girls' loved themselves. I was fascinated that as adolescent girls they instinctively engaged in the process of loving themselves and the

other Black girls in the group simultaneously; how they flawlessly took up the notion of both/and. I watched as they encouraged and challenged one another; fixed each other's plates; spent time together in the halls and outside of school; and grew more vulnerable with one another as time went on. I listened as they drew on their own schemas to communicate with one another through words, jokes, and song lyrics. I observed how they uniquely styled their hair and clothes, adorning themselves with words, phrases, and styles that reflected their love for their Black girlhood. In doing so, I became even more curious about the origins of their love for self and their practices of wellbeing and care. Moving forward, I hope to be able to further explore Black girls' wellbeing and self-love practices in the physical realm. I would be interested to see how the data from my dissertation - particularly the video recordings - could be used to further explore these ideas.

Lastly, this dissertation challenged me to regularly return to my own positionality as both an insider and outsider; as a Black girl and a researcher; as a mentor and an educator. Although I am not my research partners and have led a very different life than they are currently living, I am a Black girl, and there is power in one Black girl telling another Black girl's story. There is a certain care the girls trusted I would take when writing about their lives. I had a certain responsibility to tell their stories with love so as not to betray their trust. These reflections lead me to questions about insider/outsider researcher positionality specifically as it pertains to Black women writing about Black girls. In the future, I plan to write a piece addressing the specific noticings, dynamics, and lessons that came from my dissertation.

Forth and Forth: Where to Now?

At the beginning of this chapter I invoked the concept of Sankofa to make the point that this project could only move forward when I looked back to Black women of old to determine how they employed their literacies to nurture, celebrate, protect, and preserve themselves and each other and borrowed from their brilliance. So, the answer to the question “where to now,” can only be to look back. Black women and girls’ love for themselves is not new. Our resistance literacies are not new. However, in this age of ever-expanding technology, we sometimes forget what served us well in the past. There is much to learn from the giants who came before us to blaze trails that would lead us back to ourselves. Thus, as we continue to think about Black girls’ twenty-first century literacies and self-love practices, we should not forget these women. In remembering their names and their legacies we are able to craft educational experiences where Black girls are able to flourish, narrating their own stories, forging their own futures, and designing their own homeplaces.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Survey

Demographics

1. Name
2. Age
3. Grade
4. Ethnicity/Nationality
5. Do you receive free or reduced lunch?

Internet Usage

6. What percentage of time do you spend online each day?
 - a. 0-25
 - b. 26-50
 - c. 51-75
 - d. 76-100
7. What percentage of online content do you believe depicts positive images of Black girls?
 - a. 0-25
 - b. 26-50
 - c. 51-75
 - d. 76-100
8. What percentage of online content do you believe depicts negative images of Black girls?
 - a. 0-25
 - b. 26-50
 - c. 51-75
 - d. 76-100
9. What percentage of online content (that you encounter) do you believe encourages you to love yourself?
 - a. 0-25
 - b. 26-50
 - c. 51-75
 - d. 76-100
10. On a scale of 1-5, how much do you believe digital content influences your self image?
11. Which of the following platforms do you use most (rank 1-5)?
 - a. Snapchat
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Twitter
 - d. Facebook
 - e. Musicly
 - f. Other _____

Self Love

12. What is your definition of self love?
13. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rank your love for yourself?
14. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rank your love for others?

15. What do you love about yourself most? Why?
16. What do you struggle to love about yourself? Why?
17. What messages (from family, teachers, peers, media, etc.) contribute to your views of yourself?
18. Do you believe you can help others to love themselves?
19. If yes, how can you help others to love themselves?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Week 1:

- What images do you receive about Black girls via digital platforms like Snapchat and Instagram?
- How do these images affect how you love yourselves?
- How, if at all, do these images align with what you depicted on your collages?

Week 2:

Choose your favorite social media platform and scroll it for two minutes, taking note of what you see.

- What were some of the things you saw generally?
- What were representations you saw of Black girls?
 - Who is responsible for some of those representations?
 - I.e. who posted the things?
- What are your thoughts on those representations?
- Do you ever respond to things? What comments do you make? How do you talk back?
- What are some things you posted?
- Did you notice any popular hashtags? If so, what were they??
- How do you deal with those messages when you receive them whether positive or negative?
- How do you respond on social media?
- What do you choose not to say? Why do you choose not to say it? What's at stake in both situations?
- What's at stake when we don't love ourselves?

Week 3

- How can technological tools like your computers and phones help you to develop self love? To show love to yourself? To others?
- How can they help you amplify these messages?
- Which platforms are best suited to encourage self love and disrupt messages not aligned with self love?

APPENDIX C

Co-Created Curriculum Outline

Note: This curriculum was created in accordance with Black feminist and hip hop feminist pedagogy and is based on what girls stated they wanted to learn in the February 8, 2019 session for the duration of our time together. It moves from most broad to most personal in order to build trust and comfort within the group as we become more aware of each other as a collective. It should be noted that this curriculum served as a loose guideline for our fluid curriculum. Items were added or subtracted as determined by the group.

Daily Outline

- 5 min: Share out
 - What's been going on in your life? Current events?
- 30 min: digital exploration (this will serve as the “text” for the day)
- 10 min: sharing with the group
- 5 min: reflection

Weekly Plan

1. February 15: Teamwork/sisterhood & communication

- a. Top chef challenge
 - i. Students will be split into 3 groups of 3 students each. Groups will be allowed to use their laptops to find recipes or create recipes from their heads. They must work together to create a breakfast dish.
 - ii. Ingredients (note: ingredients were chosen based on suggestions from my cousin who is a Black woman chef in the White House): bread, canned fruits, eggs, jam, a meat, random ingredient (chips, ramen, or cereal), veggies, and gummy bears, milk
- b. How must we communicate with each other to be successful?
- c. What tools do we have at our disposal to help us be successful?
- d. *Reflection*: How did what I say help to fuel my sisters' success? How did what I say harm her? How will I restore our relationship?

2. March 1: Civic Engagement (potentially with Ms. White)

- a. This week students will meet with and learn from Ms. White²¹, an Afro-Latina lobbyist in the DC area; member of NCTE; She is also a teacher at DCI

²¹ The names of all facilitators have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

3. **March 8: Career Dreams/Career Literacy (with Dr. Townsend)**
 - a. What are potential future careers?
 - b. What do I hope to become someday?
 - i. Create a dream board on Padlet
 - ii. Use protocol from work with Dr. Townsend
4. **March 15: Financial Literacy (with Gee - confirmed)**
 - a. This meeting will be co-lead with Ms. Gee, a Ghanaian American Black woman and self-proclaimed financial guru who also works at DCI
 - b. The [budgetnista](#) - free guide ([here](#))
 - i. What type of income will the career I chose allow me to make?
 - ii. How much are DC taxes? How much will be coming out of my check each month?
 - iii. Suggestion: $\frac{1}{3}$ of income goes to rent or mortgage
 - iv. What can I expect to pay for rent? Bills? Groceries?
5. **March 29: Food health (with Ms. Copeland - White House Chef)/Fitness & Body Positivity (With Ms. Jones; yoga teacher)**
 - a. What are we feeding ourselves? How is it beneficial to us internally? Externally? How is it hindering us?
 - i. Podcasts: Food Heaven Podcast
 - ii. Cookbooks: Sweet Potato Soul
 - iii. Instagram: @karellevv, @uzosfoodlabs,
 - iv. Blogs: [Toni Tipton-Martin](#),
 - v. [31 days of Black women in food](#)
 - vi. [10 millennial Black women killing the culinary game](#)
 - b. Fitness
 - i. Ballerina Body - Misty Copeland (in school library)
 - ii. Instagram: @massy.arias, @rachelanara, @blackwomenfitness, @afrogrilfitness
 - c. Body Positivity
 - i. Instagram: @__olakemi__, @mynameisjessamyn
 - ii. Savage x Fenty
 - d. What did you learn from some of the sites you visited? How does what you saw inform how you might love yourself? What does it teach you about how to love yourself? What might be missing? Where do you come in?
6. **April 12: Sharing ME with others (relationships) (Nyatche, 2016)**
 - a. Familial, friendly, romantic
 - b. Giving and showing the 'good' within myself (through actions and words)
 - c. Acts of kindness
 - d. Charity and volunteerism

- e. Setting boundaries
- 7. May 17: Maintaining a positive relationship with me/mental health (Nyachae, 2016)**
 - a. Meditation, religious practices, & journaling
 - b. Rest & relaxation
 - c. Personal daily affirmations
 - d. Time management
- 8. May 24: Digital creation**
 - a. Research
 - i. How do we create a digital platform?
 - 1. What is even the importance of creating something in a digital space? (My logic, perhaps, not theirs)
 - ii. Which platform is best suited?
 - iii. Which will disseminate the information in the way we need it to be disseminated?
 - b. Planning
 - i. What will we include?
 - ii. What topics that we've discussed should we revisit?
 - iii. 1 big project or multiple projects? Will we break up into groups? Who will do what? How will we hold each other accountable?
- 9. May 31: Digital creation**
 - a. Completion of digital projects
- 10. June 7: Sharing, reflection, and celebration**
 - a. Share out our project(s)
 - b. Watch celebrations of Black girlhood:
 - i. [Yara Shahidi's Speech on Young Womanhood](#)
 - ii. [Lena Waithe Empowers Black Girls to Be Themselves](#)
 - iii. [Lucille Clifton's *Won't You Celebrate With Me*](#)
 - iv. [India.Arie's *Private Party*](#)
 - c. What have we learned during our time together? How has what we learned helped us to grow in our love for ourselves? How have we changed in the ways we love ourselves? What will we continue to do? What will we stop doing?

APPENDIX D

Black Self-Love Video Interview Protocol

1. Name?
2. Grade or grade you teach?
3. How do you define self-love?
4. What are some steps you take to love yourself?/How do you show yourself love?
5. Do you have any challenges with loving yourself? If so, what are they?
6. Has there ever been a time that you've struggled with self-love and how have you overcome?

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