Black Girl Genius: Theorizing Girlhood, Identity and Knowledge Production

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

Through a framework combining Black girlhood studies, hip hop feminism, and critical discourse perspectives, this qualitative research project explores the ways in which Black middle school girls intellectually apply their collective embodied knowledge and Black Girl Genius (gender and age specific language, art, performance and music) to enact freedom at a time of national anti-black girlness. In identifying and building upon the agentive discourse practices of Black girls, this works seeks to develop, excavate, and preserve the critical consciousness of Black girls, while also elucidating the self-care practices that emerge as a researcher working from girlhood. Implicated in self-care is the loving act of serving as a homegirl, which incites a unique methodological disruption that makes hip hop feminist ideology accessible to broader audiences, rather than being confined to the academy.
Dedication

I dedicate this scholarship to my daughter, Ryleigh Noelle King. While I began this project many years before your arrival, I now know you are the vessel through which God will allow me to continue speaking life into as many Black girls as I possibly can. You have given me a renewed passion for realizing the beauty we as Black girls possess, as you are my most cherished accomplishment. I promise to love you unconditionally each and every day. To fight for you. To sacrifice for you. To support you in all your endeavors. To make the best possible life I can for you. Despite only having been here a few short weeks, I can emphatically say that you are #BlackGirlMagic. Always remember, you are a child of God. Ancestor to great African kings and queens. I look forward to embarking on this journey called Life with you, and to see you blossom into the embodiment of Black Girl Genius that I write about here.
Acknowledgments

There were many times when I thought I would never, ever get to this page. This has been a long and arduous process that only the Lord could get me through. Therefore, I must begin by thanking God for a ‘right mind’ to author this project when I thought it impossible to write another page. I thank Him for mental fortitude, opportunity, clarity, passion and commitment. To my parents, Barbara and Richard, this would not have been possible without many decades of love, support and sacrifice. I thank you for instilling in me a love of music, which led me here. To my fiancé, Donald E. King, Jr., for encouraging me to keep moving forward. For understanding that my scholarship would sometimes take priority and ensuring that we had a strong foundation from which to build the next chapter of our lives together. To my cousin-sister Tiffany for making me laugh through the frustration and being one of biggest cheerleaders. To my Grandma Pearl. Although it has been 18 years since you passed, you never left my side. I hope I have made you proud of the woman I have become.

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Additionally, thank you for extending my OSU family network through time with your own family and children over the years. I hope I’ve made you proud as well.

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Vita

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Chapter One
INTRODUCTION: #BlackGirlMagic

In 2015, #BlackGirlMagic embedded its viral footprint on the social media landscape to convey the indescribable dopeness of being a Black girl. This very important cultural work comes at a time when their humanity is systematically degraded, both discursively and materially, in a host of contexts and institutions (Epstein, et al., 2017; Morris, 2016; Cox, 2015; Brown, 2008). First coined by feminist thinker Joan Morgan (1999) in her radical articulation of hip hop feminism as an ideological and material intervention for liberation, Black Girl Magic re-emerged in 2013 as #BlackGirlsAreMagic. This time, creator CaShawn Thompson conceptualized it as a movement to “illustrate the universal awesomeness of Black women and girls. It’s about anything we deem particularly dope, inspiring, or mind-blowing about ourselves” (Wilson, 2016). In other words, #BlackGirlMagic functions as a celebratory affirmation

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1 The pound or hashtag (visually represented as #) turns the word(s) immediately following it into a searchable term on social media, which is then categorized on outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. It increases the probability of statuses going viral by enhancing visibility from a select group of online ‘friends’ to hundreds of thousands of users. This digital communicative practice allows users to see who else exists in their communities of interest around the world.

2 Adjective used within the hip hop lexicon to describe a person, place, or thing that is popular, desirable, well-liked or wanted. In African American Language, it represents semantic inversion, defined as the reversal of the meaning of a term from one with historically negative connotations to one that is affirming (Smitherman 1997:18).

3 Throughout the dissertation, I capitalize Black as a proper noun to reference political and ethnic designation. Although it is used here to talk about women and girls in a US context, it refers to any person of African descent anywhere in the world.
created for and by Black women and girls that continues to build an unprecedented global digital community among women and girls. When asked “why magic?” in an interview with *The Times*, Thompson stated, “…because it’s something that people don’t always understand. Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other [B]lack women” (Wilson, 2016).

This wildly popular and timely form of celebratory affirmation continues the ideological footprint left by Morgan in her groundbreaking 1999 hip hop feminist book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. In speaking of her own magic, she eloquently and vulnerably tells of her experiences growing up a Black girl in the 1970s Bronx. This includes a deep and long-lasting engagement with Ntozake Shange's choreopoem “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf,” which chronicles the stories of several Black women struggling to survive the clutches of violence rooted in several forms of intersecting identity-based oppression under the harsh grip of white supremacy. Just as Morgan pays homage to the foremothers of Black feminist thought, such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and Pearl Cleage, it is necessary that proponents of the #BlackGirlMagic phenomenon cite the legacy from which their liberatory work in derived, particularly that which is created to be accessible.
to those outside of the academy. This project is squarely positioned within this very important cultural movement to uplift and celebrate Black girls in all their beauty and complexity by elucidating U.S. the structures and strictures that lead to anti-Black girlness and adultification (Epstein et. al, 2017), as well as the discourse practices Black girls strategically employ to resist resulting forms of dehumanization.

The term ‘indescribable’ is used very intentionally in the conceptualization of #BlackGirlMagic above. This is because #BlackGirlMagic eloquently represents such a politically powerful concept that defining it poses somewhat of an intellectual impasse. When the hashtag began gaining notoriety on social media, neither users nor cultural critics included a foot or endnote explaining what it meant, in what part of speech it should be used, or who it was applicable to, arguably, because it was not fundamentally necessary. Since its inception, I have tracked attempts to define it, particularly by the culture’s most highly respected news entities. For example, in a 2016 “The Huffington Post” article, writer Julee Wilson advises readers not to “bother trying to look up ‘Black Girl Magic’ in the dictionary, because it isn’t there—at least not yet.” CNN has also published an article titled ‘Black girl magic’ is more than a hashtag; it’s a movement,” in which no definition is given, only that it “allow[s] us to curate our magic and facilitate
new connections and discoveries” (Wilson, 2016). The looseness and fluidity of the term are the qualities that allow it to be easily applied to infinite incidences of multidimensional and varying Black girlhood.

To date, there are over two million Twitter posts in which #BlackGirlMagic is tagged that include Black women and girls proudly participating in the natural hair movement, showing off contemporary fashion and makeup techniques, trekking the globe and decorating the pages of their passports with their homegirls, graduating from institutions of higher learning en masse, composing and singing beautifully soulful music, volunteering with their sorors and sisters in greekdom to uphold the legacies of their respective Divine Nine Sororities, hitting the gym to preserve their physical health and proud physiques and aesthetics, loving on their Black daughters, mothers, aunties, grannies and friends, launching businesses, and making herstory in a myriad of ways. These tags are created by everyday women and girls (such as myself), and have also been applied to notable women such as First Lady Michelle Obama, US Senator Kamala Harris, Academy Award winning actress Viola Davis, rising young actor/activist Yara Shaidi, Olympic Medalist Simone Biles, and Daliyah Marie Arana, the four-year-old girl who has read more than 1,000 books (some of which include college level texts) and
recently served as “librarian for the day” at the Library of Congress in D.C. Each of these Black women and girls have made outstanding accomplishments in spite of discriminatory practices in their respective industries.

Merriam-Webster, who per their website is “America’s foremost publisher of language-related reference works” (Merriam Webster, 2016), does exactly what the American political structure has done to Black women and girls for centuries in this country in their non-recognition of this celebratory affirmation, which is to facilitate their erasure. When typed into the search bar, site visitors receive the message “words fail us.” Historically, dominant culture’s words fail Black women and girls—miserably (hooks, 1994; Hill Collins, 1990). Most often, the lives of Black women and girls are defined and articulated out of the context of their own voices and views, effectively thwarting their quest for self-definition (Richardson, 2013). This neglect and omission represent both a form of discursive trauma with dangerous emotional and material consequences, as well as contributes to the historical suppression of subjugated knowledge and ideas that protect elite white male interests and worldviews.

Of course, racism serves as an operative lens through which subjugation occurs and is more legible in public discourse than more complex concepts such as white supremacy, or white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Racial oppression can be defined
as “a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche” (Hardy, 2013: p. 25), and lends itself to a unique hermeneutic or epistemological lens through which Black women and girls make meaning of their experiences when combined with other forms of intersecting trauma (such as classism and sexism, for example). Trauma, as used here, not only signifies physical violence, but also psychological or emotional violence. Microaggressions, or covert forms of racism, form the sociopolitical backdrop in which individuals politically representing marginalized groups must learn to adapt to daily, are also applicable to my understanding of trauma. Because these experiences can be difficult to prove, hard to verbally recount, and are cumulative in nature, they are arguably just as detrimental as more overt forms. According to Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005), “[these] incidents are never far from one’s consciousness and require expenditures of cognitive energy, hypervigilance, and coping” (p. 575), and require the same caliber of treatments as other forms of trauma. Further, the authors argue that “the concept of race itself is a product of a racist world view,” and that race is one of the most powerful determinants of a person’s life course, opportunity, and health status” (p. 577).

In a Black feminist tradition, creator #BlackGirlMagic CaShawn Thompson channels what Hill Collins refers to as Black oppositional knowledge (Hill Collins,
Black oppositional knowledge is realized in a collective manner and functions to resist both varying forms of oppression and their erasure that occurs within the dominant culture to create a “distinctly Black and women-centered worldview” (p. 10). #BlackGirlMagic encompasses this in its principle mission: to affirm Black women and girls negotiating white supremacist capitalist patriarchy on an everyday basis.

Thompson’s conceptualization does critical cultural work by reclaiming Black feminist intellectual traditions for those outside of academia. Per Hill Collins, “without tapping these nontraditional sources, much of the Black women’s intellectual tradition would remain “not known and not believed in” (p. 16). The phrase #BlackGirlMagic itself challenges the very terms of intellectual discourse itself by prioritizing the experiences and narratives of self-definition for Black women and girls since “developing Black feminist thought as critical social theory involves including the ideas of Black women [and girls] not previously considered intellectuals” (p.16). The use of #BlackGirlMagic by Black women and girls elucidates not only their ingenuity and courage in the face of adversity, but also their intellectual creativity in defining themselves for themselves as authors and everyday theorists of counter-narratives that contribute to the lexical vanguard of a contemporary revolution for liberation. The discourse of #BlackGirlMagic
and the powerful counter-narratives it conjures leads to the criticality marked by what I have termed Black Girl Genius (BGG). It is the way Black girls read the world, which does not necessitate formal education because again, Black girls’ readings of the world can happen before formal schooling begins. #BlackGirlMagic presents the capacity for increased confidence, political self-efficacy and in some instances, social mobility. As one Twitter user emphatically remarks, “#BlackGirlMagic is a celebration of ALL Black women in my life. How my great great grandmother Rachel picked cotton in order to pay for her house and the surrounding land in Benton, Louisiana...that’s #BlackGirlMagic to me” (2017). In this example, a Twitter user applies her understanding of the concept to her grandmother’s material economic successes decades before her own existence to simultaneously show the timelessness and relevance of #BlackGirlMagic. Rachel’s great great grandmother read the world around her and deduced that despite the seemingly rare opportunity for land ownership for enslaved Black women or sharecroppers presented a chance for economic mobility. While it is fair to assume Ms. Rachel did not have a formal or prestigious education, she made a critical and advanced analysis rooted in the politics of white supremacy, sexism and class in the U.S south that disrupted the status quo. A legacy her great great granddaughter connects to #BlackGirlMagic generations
later. During the 2016 BET awards, actor-activist Jesse Williams delivered a powerful pro-civil rights speech about the importance and of effectiveness of the Black Lives Matter Movement\(^4\). While he praised millennial activists for their radical and unyielding determination, he also gave a very specific shout out to Black women and girls regarding the social responsibilities they are forced to shoulder at the intersection of race and gender in US society, within the Black Lives Matter Movement, as well as movements of decades past (specifically Black Liberation): “this is also in particular for the [B]lack women... who have spent their lifetimes dedicated to nurturing everyone before themselves. We can, and will, do better for you” (Brown, 2016). Williams went on to say “Just because we’re magic, doesn’t mean we aren’t real.” This statement corroborates my argument that #BlackGirlMagic is less about reifying tropes of tireless strength, but more about highlighting Black women and girls’ existence in a structure that was meant to break them psychologically, politically and economically. It is the contemporary manifestation of canonical Black female fictional character Celie of Walker’s The Color Purple’s (1982) powerful declaration that despite all of the injustices and hardships faced at the intersection of her identity (being born a Black female not far removed from

\(^4\) The international movement formed in 2013 by Black women activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi to protest state-sanctioned violence and systemic racism against Black people after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Black teen Trayvon Martin (Garza, Cullors and Opal, 2016).
slavery who suffered silently through the ills of molestation, rape, arranged marriage, domestic abuse, illiteracy and poverty, to name a few): “I’m poor, I’m [B]lack… but Dear God, I’m here” (Walker, 1982). #BlackGirlMagic unapologetically declares that Black girls are here. That their mere survival is a form of political resistance. It gives Black women and girls the courage and intragroup community needed to more fully embrace the notion of self-care in the quest to decolonize the mind and consciously engage in liberatory practices as they fight for political freedom in in varying contexts and institutional settings.

**BLACK GIRL GENIUS**

Through a framework combining Black girlhood studies, hip hop feminism, and feminist critical discourse perspectives, this qualitative research project explores the ways in which Black middle school girls perform instantiations of #BlackGirlMagic in an urban afterschool program. This lens allows them to think about their relationship to social structures through a feminist lens. This lens allows them to think about their relationship to social structures and intellectually apply their collective knowledge, resulting in advanced and critical analyses. I term these resulting analyses Black Girl Genius (BGG). I define BGG as gender, race, age and class specific language, art, performative arts and musical sensibilities used to enact freedom at a time of national
Black antigirlness. I very intentionally apply the term ‘genius,’ defined as one with “exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability” (Merriam Webster, 2017) to Black girls in thinking of them as advanced theorists in their ability to read the word as well as the world around them (Richardson, 2002; Freire & Macedo, 1987). According to Freire and Macedo, reading the world involves a deep criticality:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. As I suggested earlier, this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the world is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work (p.139).

It is significant that Black girls are able to apply this genius and offer such advanced oppositional analyses, particularly in contrived school sanctioned spaces, wherein processes and curricula are designed to produce conformity and status quo ideology. In fact, education scholar Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to these dangerous processes and curricula as “the white supremacist master script.” Here, education’s primary purpose is not freedom, but oppression through the maintenance of the social hierarchy and political disadvantage represented by gross imbalances of power. Following Freire and Macedo’s belief that individuals read the world before reading the word, we should not be so naive to believe that Black girls do not possess a type of epistemological knowledge as they
enter formal education, and that this knowledge does not continue to develop over time. I concur with Richardson that this type of literacy strategy has been employed (and undervalued) by Black women for centuries, notably former slave Harriet Tubman who stated “I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations” (quoted in Richardson, 2002: p. 38). This marks the type of criticality constitutive of BGG.

BGG illuminates a unique Black girl standpoint, which differs from the standpoint theorizing done by and for adult Black women in the field of Black feminist thought. This is significant, as girls experience intersections differently based upon race, gender, class youth, context, and engagement with hip hop and popular culture, wherein the latter become more salient. In identifying and building upon the agentive discourse practices of Black girls, this work seeks to develop, excavate, and preserve the critical consciousness of Black girls, while also elucidating the self-care practices that emerge as a researcher. Implicated in self-care is the loving act of serving as a homegirl (Brown, 2013), which incites a unique methodological disruption that makes feminisms accessible

5 “Ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, behaving, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities…they are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life; they are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social history” (Gee, 1996: 3).

6 A methodological technique specific to the theorizing of Black girlhood which “allows for entangled relationships that enable radical social change to become more than just a wish but a collective production” (Brown 2014: 64) Homegirling represents a more embodied and personal approach to research with and for human subjects than traditional qualitative methods.
Because BGG signals a particular epistemological and critical conscious, self-care becomes crucial. Black feminist thinker Audre Lorde (1988) once asserted “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” In other words, undertaking this type of social justice work, both for oneself and with others, creates the propensity for negative health outcomes as one constantly evaluates their positionality and marginality. Physiological responses to this type of burnout include 1) the deterioration of physical health, including headaches and chronic insomnia; 2) the deterioration of emotional health, including debilitating stress and anxiety that impacts daily functions and; 3) hopelessness (Chen & Gorski, 2015).

Additionally, Chen & Gorski argue that such work often contributes to a ‘culture of martyrdom,’ in which a perceived need for constant selflessness exists, and that being confronted with social inequality and exploitation on a daily basis frequently feel a heightened sensitivity to and experience tremendous self-pressure to seek justice swiftly.

Instantiations of #BlackGirlMagic and the possible transitional process to BGG can serve as one of many forms of activism that provides a psycho-emotional armor that threatens existing social hierarchies in a host of social, political and institutional spaces.

Another Black woman-centered popular culture-based intervention to emerge
after the #BlackGirlMagic phenomenon (and this study) is the 2016 Professional Black Girl series. A transmedia project created by Professor Yaba Blay, PhD, the series was created “to celebrate everyday Black Girl Magic, because yes, round-the-way girls got magic too” (Lawson, 2018). According to Blay, “By announcing ourselves “Professional Black Girls,” Black women and girls assert an unapologetic identity in a world that too often tries to tell us how we ‘ought to’ act. We know that ‘acting’ like anything other than ourselves robs us of our freedom, so instead, we choose, embrace, and celebrate ourselves” (Lawson, 2018). It represents another social media phenomenon that celebrates the everyday Black girl. This work is also in conversation with the Professional Black Girl movement, as it strives to keep the celebration of Black women and girls visible in popular culture, relatable and accessible. Like #BlackGirlMagic, this popular culture phenomenon is also indicative of a nonlinearity or timelessness that while not collapsing the experiences of adult Black womanhood and girlhood, allows for communal celebration and solidarity.

**Statement of Purpose**

This project focuses on how instances of #BlackGirlMagic can lead to the critical meaning making process I have termed BGG in an urban afterschool program. In the
study, the school site functions as a critical site of exploration, as it has long served as a space of that maintains and rewards status quo ideology rooted in white supremacy; the antithesis of BGG. Formal public schooling has officially been touted as “the great equalizer,” a site for developing human capital and remedying the harsh realities of poverty and inequity (Grow & Montgomery, 2003). However, critical scholars have cited inequities out of school as key to better understanding the achievement gap and feelings of detachment and disinterest. For example, according to Lee & Burkam (2002), schools serving low-income students receive fewer resources, encounter more challenges addressing students’ academic, social and mental needs, and receive less support from parents. They argue that the inequities children face before entering school should be at the center of intervention and reform strategies: “We should expect schools to increase achievement for all students, regardless of race, income, class and prior achievement. But it is unreasonable to expect schools to completely eliminate any large pre-existing inequalities soon after children first enter the education system” (p. 2). Further, Bowman (1994) argues that one of the most overlooked issues in the US public education system is how administration and teaching staff meet the educational needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. She suggests that should these trends continue, millions of
students (primarily poor African American, Asian, Native American and Hispanic) will not obtain the education necessary for full participation in the economic and democratic processes of the country.

While much of the scholarly intervention work done to break this trend among Black students has focused on the unique needs of boys, scholars have begun to interrogate the material and academic circumstances of Black girls. While this work is undertaken with a multitude of interdisciplinary lenses, many focus on how girls academic experiences are mediated by identity, culturally relevant instruction, and how they have already adopted a unique epistemological standpoint in reading the world around them (Morris, 2016; Cox, 2015; Brown, 2013; Lindsey, 2013; Richardson, 2013; Love, 2012; Evans-Winters, 2011; Brown, 2009). This work contributes to this scholarship.

Black girls face a variety of factors—historical, institutional, and social—that heighten their risk of underachievement and detachment from school (Morris, 2016; Crenshaw, Nanda & Ocen, 2015). Although Black feminist thought is an invaluable analytic (particularly concepts of intersectionality and standpoint epistemology) in thinking about the experiences of Black women, it may not be enough to simply apply these adult-centered frames to experiences of girlhood. Broadly defined, girlhood studies
aims to historicize discourses on the cultural dimensions of girls and girl culture to offer analyses and critiques of social norms in order to improve the material conditions of girlhood. Traditionally, the category ‘girl’ has meant white, middle-class, able-bodied and heterosexual. However, more recently, scholars writing in a hip hop feminist tradition have begun to challenge these static and essentialist definitions of girlhood (Richardson, 2013; Lindsey, 2013, Brown, 2013, Love, 2012, Brown, 2009). Writing from a plethora of disciplines and theoretical lenses, these scholars argue that how Black girls construct their identities is heavily mediated by youth, race, socioeconomic status and engagement with popular culture, as well as other factors.

In the same vein, I use the term ‘girl’ in a way that acknowledges this state of being as a social construction shaped by culture and discourse. These ideas are paramount in any analysis of girls’ lives because they play a crucial role in how girls experience what it means to be a girl. The broad field of girlhood studies’ whitewashing of girlhood overwhelmingly neglects the structural constraints that mark the lives of Black girls, offering a diluted, incomplete and essentialist notion of girlhood—which is the same critique Black feminist scholars leveraged against mainstream feminism in terms of Black womanhood, and the limitations of single-axis social justice frameworks. By utilizing a multi-axis, or intersectional framework to further define Black girlhood, this
work seeks to “make Black girlhood worth remembering” (Brown, 2013), rather than focusing on the “at-risk” and deficit-based discourses that mark their lives. In exploring the structural constraints that mark Black girlhood, Brown (2013: p. 111) argues:

Structural inequalities coupled with the material realities of Black girlhood make it necessary for many Black girls to grow up before their time, so much so that bearing responsibility for more than themselves at particularly young ages shapes Black girls’ activity around the needs, desires and well-being of others, instead of themselves. Implications abound and include the possibility of never experiencing a Black girlhood that was ‘care-free’ or innocent.

In many situations, Black girls bear the burden of institutionalized oppression. The American political landscape often necessitates the Black girls, particularly those from working class backgrounds, grow up before their time. This project centers the ways in which these burdens manifest within two specific institutions for Black girls—the media and education.

Research suggests that the media functions as a pedagogical tool which communicates messages about identity, while often dangerously reinforcing hegemonic ideologies that maintain the social hierarchy (Kellner & Share, 2007; Kellner, 1995).

Education is also a critical site of inquiry in this project, specifically for two reasons. First, because schools historically marginalize Black students and reify the status quo. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), “curriculum as a culturally specific artifact is
designed to maintain a white supremacist script” (p. 467). Education in schools does not always adequately train Black students to think critically about their oppression and seek liberation, but instead simply to be unknowingly complicit in their own marginalization—particularly by contributing to the capitalist workforce as non-critical adults. Further, Ladson asserts “the goal of education becomes how to ‘fit’ students constructed as ‘other’ by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure falsely citing meritocracy as a reason for underachievement or decreased life circumstances. It is unclear how these conceptions do more than reproduce the current inequities” (p. 467).

Unlike Ladson-Billings, I am not primarily concerned with academic achievement, but instead the discourse practices Black girls employ to protect themselves that are often misunderstood as deviant in school. For both girls and women, characteristics that lend themselves to patriarchal conformity such as submissiveness, docility and quietness are valued (Morris, 2016). Research also indicates that Black girls’ nonconformity to traditional gender role expectations may cause educators to respond more harshly to them, as they ‘fail’ to conform to these expectations in school settings. For example, Black girls are often perceived as being “loud, defiant, and precocious,” and are more likely than their white counterparts to be reprimanded for being
“unladylike” (Morris, 2016; Blake et al., 2010). This study attempts to foreground the experiences of Black middle school girls as they make meaning about issues related to identity in an afterschool program. In identifying and building upon the agentive discourse practices of Black girls (who are often read as disrespectful in mainstream culture, rather than as critical observers of perceived and concrete oppression), this works seeks to develop, excavate, and preserve the critical consciousness of Black girls.

**Significance of the Problem**

The school-to-prison pipeline represents a metaphor that describes the dangerously increasing patterns of contact youth have with the criminal justice system in this country. Historically, the focus for solutions have been aimed at Black males, creating yet another structural erasure of Black girls and the unique space they occupy in this narrative. In an attempt to widen and strengthen criminalization analyses, Morris (2016) refers to this phenomenon as *school to confinement pathways*, conceding school as an inherently unproblematic safe space. The African American Policy Forum released the following alarming statistics about the criminalization of Black girls in schools (Crenshaw, Nanda & Ocen, 2015):

- Twelve percent of all black girls in school were suspended, while two percent of white girls were subjected to that form of discipline.
In New York City’s public schools, black students made up 28 percent of the student body and white students were 14 percent. But black girls were 90 percent of all girls expelled, and no white girls were expelled that school year.

In Boston’s public schools, black students made up 35 percent of the student body and white students were 14 percent. Black girls were 63 percent of all girls expelled, and no white girls were expelled that school year.

Research also indicates that less explored disparities also exist within the school-to-prison pipeline epidemic, in which darker skinned girls are punished more harshly than lighter skinned Black girls. This is indicative of the valorization of proximity to whiteness in this country rooted in colonization (Harris, 2015; Vega, 2014). In interrogating this epidemic and Black girls’ engagement with popular culture simultaneously, Black girls can be equipped with critical consciousness around the politics of beauty and its implications not only in regard to their own self-concept, but also more material inequities that exist in their K-12 experiences. Thus, a connection between hegemonic beauty politics and BGG will be illuminated.

Research demonstrates that oppressive historical, institutional and social factors heighten Black girls’ risk of disengagement from school. The effects of institutionalized racism and poverty creates not only immense discrimination, but also personal vulnerability. This disengagement is also mediated by the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy, which is defined by Ladson-Billings (1995) as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 30). This is identified in this research as hip hop feminist pedagogy. Further, academic disengagement is also fueled by
exclusionary theoretical and programmatic practices. Black girlhood scholar Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) posits that “Black girls’ knowledge and presence have been excluded from and deemed unimportant in three surprisingly interrelated academic discourses: hip hop [studies], girls’ studies and girls’ programming…they are passive dupes” (p. 34). This research seeks to center their experiences and presence in all three of these areas, as research participants are heavily engaged with hip hop music and culture, using it as a site of meaning making.

**Theoretical Framework**

It has been argued that there is “very little humanistic [B]lack feminist scholarship specifically explores the unique site of [B]lack girlhood and adolescence” (Lindsey, 2013: p. 13). This research prioritizes the perspectives of Black girls in hip hop [studies], girls’ studies and girls’ programming, specifically as it relates to their engagement with popular culture and hip hop culture. Here and throughout the dissertation, I employ Wilson’s (2008) definition of hip hop culture in my analyses:

> A network of generations tied together by ethnic origin, spiritual orientations, geographic tendencies, kinship norms, and several other community-oriented practices including artistic expressions, communal traditions, philosophies, social values, and imposed social orders (p. 6).

Although hip hop culture and hip hop studies both represented male-dominated spheres at their inceptions, the increasing presence of women artists, activists and scholars provides
a point of reference for Black girls. This is critical in the creation of sites of political liberation, which was the goal of hip hop at its inception. Liberation, the absence of oppression, can be defined as the process of becoming physically, intellectually, financially, mentally or spiritually free from subjugation at the hands of others or larger systems that favor an imbalance of power and maintenance of the status quo. Liberation hinges on the critical thinking required for the process of BGG. Hip hop feminism, broadly defined, is a sociocultural political movement in which lovers of hip hop music and culture, both in the academy and the community, engage in discourses which seek to dismantle the pathologization of hip hop culture and music as a Black art form (Pough et al, 2007; Pough, 2004, Morgan, 1999). Although critiques of sexism are at the crux of the paradigm, hip hop feminist practitioners seek to conceptualize hip hop as liberatory—a tool for progressive social change against all forms of oppression, and institutional/structural inequality. Durham (2010) defines it as “a cultural, intellectual and political movement grounded in the situated knowledges of women of color from the post-civil rights or hip hop generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation” (p. 136). This is particularly important in theorization and activism concerning girls’ engagement with popular culture and commercial hip hop. The
qualitative analyses generated from these generationally specific and historically contingent iterations of contemporary social justice work unapologetically prioritize the lived experiences of Black girls (Lindsey 2015; Brown & Kwakye 2012; Love 2012; Brown, 2009). I argue that the unique amalgamation of Black girlhood studies, Black and hip hop feminisms, and critical discourse perspectives illuminates a Black girl standpoint, which does for Black girls what intersectionality and epistemology-based theorizing has done for adult women of the African Diaspora. This Black girl standpoint constitutes my theorization of BGG.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the study of the interrelatedness of power, dominance, discourse and social inequality. CDA focuses on the ways in which dominant ideologies are reproduced through routine text and talk at both the micro and macro levels (van Dijk 1993, p. 250). According to Lazar (2007), the aim of feminist critical discourse studies “is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts” (p. 142). Further, “the interest of feminist CDA is how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re) produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people’s social and
personal identities in text and talk” (p. 150). Like Gee (1990), Lazar argues that feminist discourse analysis prioritizes social justice and transformation. She, like other proponents of feminist critical discourse and sociolinguists, emphatically proclaims that the goal of CDA is not to be objective or neutral, but to expose one’s beliefs and values. Feminist critical discourse analysis represents an academic or analytical form of social activism, is part of an “emancipatory critical social science” that promotes a mind frame of critical consciousness, rather than a specific set of skills. Feminist critical discourse analysis is not recognized as a method, as there is no one, systematic way to conduct it.

**Project Design & Methodology**

For this study, I worked directly with girls age 11-14 in two official capacities over the course of three years. During this time, I had the pleasure of working with a core group of students through the duration of their middle school experience, gaining their trust and amassing an invaluable archive of primary source data about Black girls (for which there is a dearth of in the broader field of girlhood studies). My initial involvement in the #BlackGirlsOnFleek afterschool program began in a volunteer capacity, later expanding as I was promoted to co-primary investigator during my tenure as a graduate student tasked with creating my own research agenda.
The school at which #BlackGirlsOnFleek\(^7\) was housed is a part of a major Midwestern school district. Sessions were held weekly at the middle school, with extra meetings sometimes scheduled on weekends or other times outside of school hours. The school that sponsored the program served 520 students. 93.7\% were on free or reduced lunch. The school is 100\% Title I due to high poverty. The demographic makeup of the school community is 92.5\% African American; 3.5\% Hispanic; 2.5\% Caucasian; 1.5\% “Other.” The program explores identity making processes, social stratification, and popular cultural representations of Black girlhood and womanhood using various multimedia formats and creative performances, topics not typically explored within standard school curricula. In continued efforts to make this program accessible to as many Black girls as possible, there was no fee required to attend weekly sessions, and after-school transportation was provided by the school. The program provided a safe place for participants, for example, to critically consume music, dance, sing and use the colloquialisms and language most comfortable to them. In this case, the primary language was Black or African American English, which Smitherman (2006) defines as “a style of speaking words with Black Flava—with Africanized semantic, grammatical,

\(^7\) Urban Dictionary defines “on fleek” as “smooth, nice, sweet” (2003). While it is not recognized in the English language as a word, it is popular among speakers of Black language. Its origins have been traced to a Black teen, Kayla Newman, also known as Peaches Monroe, who is now looking to get the phrase trademarked.
pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns” (p. 3). According to Smitherman, Black English is born out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants and represents a tie that binds by providing solidarity with one’s community and giving one a sense of personal identity. This is critical in my attempt to define and illuminate a Black girl standpoint. To truly capture a Black girl standpoint, this qualitative research project will rely heavily upon primary data analysis, meaning that I have collected and analyzed many transcripts acquired through participant observation and semi-structured individual and group interviews.

Although we have much in common, I am constantly reminded of our differences, and my privileged position. I am 30 years old and the participants in the study range in age from 11-14. I did not grow up in the inner city, and for my entire life, lived a working middle class existence. I began my role as a researcher as an outsider within, connected by the homegirl code, and left just the same. According to Brown (2013), homegirling represents both an identity and a verb critical in understanding and appreciating the experiences and knowledge produced by Black girls, as well as the special familial bonds forged through this mentorship-like process:

The labor of making Black girlhood worth remembering, and the sacred work of creating Black girlhood as a space of attempted, even if now fully accomplished, celebration, requires the labor of others (Brown, 2009; King, 2005; Ladner, 1971; Sears, 2010) who often act in a way to honor those who came before them. The
act of making the space of Black girlhood exist outside of linear and Eurocentric understandings and practices of time (p.107)

*Homegirling* incites a methodological disruption that reinforces the notion that hip hop feminist methodology is truly accessible to broad audiences, rather than being confined to the academy. As a scholar-*homegirl*, my praxis-oriented research connects me closely to a community of girls and a faculty advisor whom I am indebted to for giving me the opportunity to conduct meaningful research, and simultaneously negotiate unresolved emotional scars from my own experiences of girlhood. Remembering these painful experiences serves as a means of honoring and healing myself, as well as practicing a form of selflessness required to honor and care for a new generation of critical Black girls.

This project also explores the struggle to create embodied hip hop feminist practice among a group of women and girls in an urban afterschool space. Conceptualizing the body as a political site (which includes clothing, hair, accessories and movements) lends itself to a different type of meaning-making for Black girls that is rooted in Black culture, politics and community. I argue that by employing an interpretive/theoretical framework combining Black and hip hop feminisms, Black
girlhood studies and feminist discourse perspectives, a unique Black girl standpoint is illuminated that differs from traditional Black feminist debates. This epistemological standpoint is rendered invisible in the broad field of girlhood studies, and in traditional conceptualizations of Black feminism and intersectionality. An epistemological standpoint rejects the notion of an unmediated Truth and grants members of socially marginalized groups epistemological privilege and authority (Harding, Collins, 1990; Harding, 1987). Per Collins (2000), it “investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (p. 252). By making evident and centering a Black girl standpoint (which is overwhelmingly not encouraged in school-sanctioned spaces), counter/alternative knowledges emerge which serve as a tool for feminist social change, pedagogy and praxis that has the potential to make formal education more enjoyable and critical. A Black girl standpoint, or BGG, upholds these principles, but is mediated by hip hop in ways that generations removed are not. I argue that although Black girls do experience race and gender in similar ways as Black adult women, that there are also complex key differences based upon a host of age-specific factors that result in girls experiencing these intersections differently. Thus, while intersectionality is extremely
useful in analyzing the lived experiences of Black girls, additional frameworks are required (in this case hip hop feminism, Black girlhood studies and feminist discourse perspectives) to enhance intersectionality’s utility by first illuminating instantiations of #BlackGirlMagic in popular culture, intellectually working toward BGG. This unique standpoint is constituted by three key factors: 1) generationally gender-specific language and discourse practices to articulate and negotiate one’s identity; 2) a youthful view of Black female sexuality, marked by competing respectability discourses and; 3) an emphasis on hip hop as an embodied practice and way of life—as an outlet for creative political expressivity and a site of critical discourse and community building through political solidarity.

**Research Questions**

The research consists of core and guiding research questions. The core research question is: what constitutes Black Girl Genius (BGG)? In taking up this inquiry, I will address three guiding research questions: (1) What does this standpoint illuminate; (2) How is it recognized; and (3) why is it unique and different from traditional understandings of standpoint epistemology? Additional guiding research questions interrogate how commercial hip hop and popular culture are implicated in the theorization of a BGG. That is, how do commercial hip hop and popular culture serve as

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a pedagogical tool in identity development processes? How are Black girls actively resisting white supremacy and creating oppositional readings of Black girl/womanhood in their readings of popular culture? In what ways is a politics of resistance a more useful analytic alternative than the politics of respectability when working from girlhood? By this, I mean centering the experiences of girls meaning making and knowledge work. Specifically, girls of the African Diaspora, for which there is a dearth of research. In adopting a politics of resistance, what theoretical and methodological possibilities are created? Conversely, what limitations are posed? 

**Overview**

The succeeding chapter reviews literature that aligns with the scope of this study. The literature review grounds the study among similar research that investigates how Black girls make meaning, particularly in an urban school space. Here, I will historicize Black feminist thought, specifically intersectionality and Black women’s’ historical challenges upholding the politics of respectability, in order to establish the argument that since these concepts were theorized with Black adult women in mind during a different historical context, major gaps exist in the theorization of Black girls living in contemporary America. Since hip hop music and culture are some of the project’s operative analytics, I will also historicize hip hop, and make the argument that it
continues to be a form of Black creative expression with the ability to promote critical consciousness, liberation and social change—despite the perils of capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy. I will then articulate the impetus for the birth of hip hop feminism to address the aforementioned forms of oppression, discuss some of its canonical texts, and map how the field has progressively expanded to specifically include both Black girls and those not working from within the Ivory Tower. Lastly, I will define and articulate the utility of feminist critical discourse analysis and explain how it represents a form of academic activism that moves Black girls’ voices from margin to center, illuminating a unique Black girl standpoint, or what I call Black Girl Genius (BGG). BGG is the meaning making processes and theorizing undertaken by Black girls as they experience the intersections of race, gender, class and youth differently than adults, with age and engagement with hip hop and popular culture being more salient identity categories in this specific historical moment/context.

Chapter three outlines the study’s research design and methodological orientation, which is important because it guided the data collection method, the procedures and the data analysis of the study. I also describe some of the study’s participants at length. Chapter four discusses the findings of the research, (re)centering the voices of Black girls as they demonstrate an intellectual shift in their awareness of the social media.
phenomenon #BlackGirlMagic, to the more critical discourse of Black Girl Genius (BGG). Chapter five reviews the findings of the study, discusses its implications and contributions to the fields of Black and hip hop feminisms and feminist critical discourse studies, as well as its limitations.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

This chapter examines and synthesizes literature that politicizes Black girls’
experiences, articulates some of the unique challenges they face related to representation
in popular culture, and historicizes hip hop to make legible its sometimes tenuous and
misunderstood relationship with feminism. To effectively execute this, I first define and
historicize Black feminist thought. Second, I map the points of conversion and departure
of Black and hip hop feminisms, which elucidates the rich utility of the latter school of
thought and its prevalence to the project. Lastly, I outline the theoretical framework that
guides the study, woven together from Black and hip hop feminisms, Black girlhood
studies, and feminist critical discourse perspectives. I will demonstrate the
interdisciplinary utility of each and identify theoretical gaps that require a critical re-
envisioning for Black girls. Much of the canonical and current research on these topics
are theoretical and qualitative in nature. In the studies cited, qualitative researchers
collect data by conducting semi-structured interviews, undertaking participant
observation, and doing artifact and document analyses in participants’ natural settings.
These studies are referenced because my project methodologically mirrors this
orientation. Rather than simply applying adult-centered analyses to narratives of Black girlhood, this research uses intersectional approaches to interrogate the role of popular culture, particularly hip hop, and how it mediates Black girls’ lived experiences in urban school spaces. While race, gender and class analyses are paramount in the study (as they are in most hip hop feminist projects focusing on survival and justice), my work reveals how youth becomes a more salient category in the theorization of Black Girl Genius (BGG).

Although academic wave models of feminism erroneously depict the delayed involvement or even absence of Black women in the early feminist movement (Ahmad, 2015; Gilmore & Evans 2008; Harnois, 2008). Black women and girls have and continue to be engaged in feminist politics. Despite the (re)visioning of priorities or political imperatives, the changing of the methods/strategies used to accomplish these imperatives, or even the introduction of new sects of varied Black feminisms, there is an unwavering commitment to improving the psychosocial and material conditions of an entire race via the social, political and economic liberation of women. In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper eloquently wrote in her Black feminist manifesto A Voice From the South, “I am my Sister’s keeper!’ should be the hearty response of every man and woman of the race, and this conviction should purify and exalt the narrow, selfish and petty personal aims of life into a noble and sacred purpose” (p. 12). This declaration provides a brief glimpse into intellect of Black women, as well as chronologically aids in the revealing of a rich legacy
of Black feminist thought. In being cognizant of and concerned about the plight of all Black women (despite differences in identity or ideological affiliation) and realizing that we, as a collective group (which speaks to the utility of strategic essentialism) are all sisters in struggle to some degree, the movement has been sustained to address and combat the evolving, unique and multilayered forms of our oppression. I cite Cooper primarily to dispel the myth that Black women were not active feminist intellectuals and advocates in the early 20th century, when history’s whitewashing of critical theory canonized and centered the writings of thinkers white men and white women of feminists movements, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft. To take pre-21st century Black women thinkers seriously, according to contemporary Black feminist intellectual Brittney Cooper (2017), we must trust them and their knowledge production. This is of intellectual importance because as an emerging academician, my choice to start with, center and build upon Black women theorists is very intentional and political. Cooper (2017) unapologetically argues:

If I were aiming to show (and was successful at showing) how Black women’s ideas dovetailed the ideas of Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari or Louis Althusser or Judith Butler, this book would be sufficiently rigorous and, dare I say, ‘original.’ I am for a different goal, namely to show that we should take Black women...as theoretically serious as we take the work of French white males (p. 2).

The trust to which Cooper refers is affectively undergirded by an ethic of care, which has been deemed a critical tenant of Black feminist thought by Black feminist sociologist
Patricia Hill Collins (1990). This demonstrates an interdisciplinary genealogy between two academicians from different disciplinary fields (with Cooper writing from a background representative of American Studies and Political Science) arriving at the same intellectual starting point. Further, Cooper (2017) argues that “Black women’s knowledge production has always been motivated by a sense of care for Black communities in a world where non-Black people did not find value in the lives and livelihoods of these communities” (p. 3). Similarly, Anna Julia Cooper (1892) argues that social justice should be understood as both a noble and sacred purpose that requires rigorous intellectual study. My study is inspired by this legacy.

**Mainstreaming, Recognition & Validity: The Emergence of Black Feminist Thought in Public and Academic Discourse**

Garnering attention in mainstream public discourse during the late 1960s in response to hegemonic white middle-class feminism that neglected the concerns of working-class women as well as women of color, Black feminism is broadly defined as a political ideology that theorizes and brings the lived experiences of Black women from margin to center (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981). Realizing that the essentialist notion of the universal woman, based upon the use of gender as a single analytical
category was inherently irresponsible, and racist and classist both theoretically and materially, Black feminists found it imperative to problematize the term ‘woman’. While popular second wave feminist slogans such as “sisterhood is powerful” were intended to function as a rallying cry to unite women on the basis of gender oppression, intragroup differences were largely ignored.

Modeled after ethnic studies departments (such as Black or Chicano studies), the interdisciplinary academic field of women’s studies also emerged in the 1960s to provide scholarly critiques of society, culture, politics, law, economics, history, etc…from an anti-patriarchal perspective. One of the primary imperatives of academic Black feminist thought is to discover, reclaim, analyze and (re)interpret the narratives of Black women thinkers (in a U.S. context), who had their ideas preserved via writing or oral histories (Hill Collins, 2000: p. 13). Social theories reflect a group’s realization that they occupy a marginalized place within the social hierarchy, as well as their negotiation of oppressions that plague them based upon their identity and lack of power that inform their material lives. According to Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000), “Black feminist thought’s status as ‘critical’ social theory lies in its commitment to justice both for U.S. Black women as a collective and for that of other similarly oppressed groups” (p. 9). As articulated by Cooper (1892), “to allow anything to halt or
stall our Black feminist visions of social justice is narrow and selfish”, as we should strive to educate and inspire new generations of scholars and advocates. It is evident through the work of Cooper (1892) and Hill Collins (2000) that there has been an enduring and undying intellectual tradition and dialogue between Black feminists across time and space about improving the life circumstances of Black women and the Black race, which includes Black girls.

**Theorizing Black Feminist Thought: Origins, Legacy and Imperatives**

*Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fur it tuh be different wid you. – Zora Neale Hurston (1937), Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

As critical social theory, Black feminist thought seeks to explore the ways in which women of the African diaspora have and continue to negotiate and resist imperialism, (neo)colonialism and other forms of structural inequality that manifest differently over time and space. Specifically, this gendered historical genealogy examines the role of identity-based politics and oppression in colonial and postcolonial processes.

As a critical social theory, Hill Collins (1900) utilizes this paradigm to locate three interdependent dimensions of oppression that impact Black women’s status in the United...
States. The first dimension is the exploitation of Black women’s labor as a critical component of the capitalist political economy. This is evident on a transhistorical timeline ranging from plantation work, to contemporary neoliberal practices that claim to uphold neutrality, but negatively affect Black women at disproportionate rates in a capitalist system. The second dimension is political and addresses the lack of rights and privileges Black women experience in relation to other sociopolitical groups. Due to a history of gendered, racialized, and sexualized colonization, Black women are forced to negotiate the construct of nationalism using Hill Collins’ “like one of the family” paradigm. That is, legally part of the nation-state apparatus, but holding second-class citizenship within it (p. 31). This is critical as Hill Collins and other Black feminist scholars and activists have conceptualized citizenship as not just simply an outcome, but a process involving civil, social and political rights (Marshall & Bottomore, 1950: p. 10-11). Although feminist critiques of rights and citizenship certainly exist due to citizenship’s exclusionary politics, realistically, it is difficult to conceptualize a social, legal or political system functioning outside of, or in absence of, the nation-state apparatus. While women of the African Diaspora “hold” legal citizenship in a U.S. context, their right to substantive citizenship must be problematized in order to analyze the State’s deployment of abject citizenship practices. According to Ruth Lister (2003),
who advocates a feminist reconstruction of citizenship:

…citizenship denotes the legal status of membership of a state, as symbolized by a possession of a passport. Substantive citizenship refers to the enjoyment of the rights and obligations associated with membership…At the legal and sociological level, inclusion and exclusion represent a continuum rather than an absolute dichotomy. Thus, members of a society enjoy different degrees of substantive citizenship according to their positioning on a number of dimensions including, class, gender, sexuality and race (p. 98).

A Black feminist reconstruction of citizenship theorizes how the suppression of power, agency and control diminish citizenry, which fosters the process of dehumanization. This theorization is undergirded by intersectional and epistemological analyses that seek to problematize hegemonic processes and disrupt the status quo. The epigraph that opens this chapter from Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, sans academic jargon, demonstrates how colonization processes and abject citizenship practices can inform the worldviews of people of the African Diaspora—particularly Black women. In this very sophisticated analysis, Hurston maps the social hierarchy of the U.S. South during the 20th century, in which Black women represent the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. She refers to this political group as the “mules of the world.” This hierarchy (which is still very much intact) valorizes whiteness, and supports the dangerous and pervasive ideologies of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2000), in which white men are the most powerful political group in.
U.S. society (followed by white women, Black men, and lastly, Black women). This is particularly powerful because as Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1981) and Angela Davis (1983) suggest, it is important to think not only about patriarchy and racism, but also their roots in colonialism and imperialism. Very simply put, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is a theoretical frame which examines the interconnectedness and simultaneity of oppression, rooting oppression in an ideology of deep seated hated and perceived superiority. When hooks coined the term, her intention was to elevate the criticality of which power is analyzed:

To me an important breakthrough, I felt, in my work and that of others was the call to use the term white supremacy, over racism because racism in and of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of color and it was always in a sense keeping things at the level at which whiteness and white people remained at the center of the discussion. In my classroom I might say to students that you know that when we use the term white supremacy it doesn’t just evoke white people, it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to…. (Garçonnière, 2016).

Hurston’s epistemological Black feminist analysis is significant for two reasons. First, because Their Eyes Were Watching God was written just 72 years after the ratification of the 13th Amendment (which legally abolished slavery) and because it speaks to the oppression Black women faced in the South at the intersection of race, gender, class and
geography in a specific context. By comparing Black women to mules (also commonly known as a workhorse and one of the most labored and abused animals in rural environments), this metaphor signifies Black women’s placement on the bottom of the social hierarchy. The Combahee River Collective (1977) makes a very similar analysis in “A Black Feminist Statement” approximately 40 years after the publication of Hurston’s novel. However, the Combahee River Collective advances the analysis by theorizing the implications of liberation for Black women on all of society, citing a paradigmatic disrupting of the imbalance of power: “We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression” (p. 215). As established in previous paragraphs, Black feminist thinkers, theorists, and activists from Cooper to Hill Collins and Hurston to the Combahee River Collective, boast a rich legacy of awareness and advocacy.

The third and last interdependent dimension of oppression that Hill Collins identifies and seeks to eliminate is the perpetuation and maintenance of the stereotypical controlling images that are used to justify subjection. The issue of representation continues to be a high priority agenda item for both “third wave” Black
feminists, as well as hip hop feminists. While the terms change to fit the lexicon, the root discriminatory ideologies in which they are framed remains the same. For instance, Black women who deviate from the politics of respectability have historically been called jezebels, among other more contemporary derogatory terms rooted in class, race and gender oppression. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, Black feminist scholar Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) conducts and analyzes interviews with Black women to explore the consequences of the internalization of controlling images, also known as stereotypes. Like Hurston, Harris-Perry utilizes metaphoric analyses to demonstrate this. According to Harris-Perry, when Black women confront controlling images, they are “standing in crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up” (p. 29). Instead of pathologizing Black women who seem complicit in their oppression, she argues that we must “recognize and understand the structural constraints that influence their behavior because “it can be hard to stand in a crooked room” (p. 29). This is crucial to Black feminist thought because although Black women are bombarded with misrepresentations of their humanity and may be able to critically analyze and problematize them, competing discourses may cause Black women to use these very same misrepresentations to develop their identities. It is my hypothesis this will be the case with the participants of the #BlackGirlsOnFleek afterschool program. It
is within the context of identity development that individuals negotiate hegemonic/dominant social discourses and stereotypical ideologies (Harris-Perry, 2012; Mullings, 1994; Hill Collins, 1990). For example, as an institution, the media constructs and perpetuates images of hypersexual and hypervisible Black womanhood (Willis, 2010; Hill Collins, 2005; Hill Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992). That is, lewdness and lasciviousness are always, already mapped onto the Black female body in a way that forecloses upon agency, pleasure, desire and/or sexual expressivity.

In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*, Hill Collins (2005) focuses more on representation by identifying a new form a racism. According to Hill Collins (2005), the new racism is the transnational dissemination of stereotypical representations of people of the African Diaspora in the age of technology (p. 54). This form of racism is dangerous and requires innovative interventions because it is not regulated by the state and relies heavily on the manipulation of the mass media to reinforce hegemonic ideologies that maintain the status quo. Although I do not explicitly use the term new racism throughout the dissertation, I am indeed concerned with the political nature of representations of Black womanhood, particularly developing critical discourse in Black girls that affords them the ability to offer advanced oppositional readings that illuminate instantiations of power and agency, rather than simple, perpetual
and dominant narratives of stereotypes and objectification that function to suppress autonomy, desire and limit potential for full liberation. This is precisely the space in my intellectual trajectory where I most fully experience and understand this limitation of Black feminist theory and adopt hip hop feminist analyses to work through the complexities of media representations of Black womanhood, as well as the dearth of representations of Black girlhood in contemporary popular culture.

In the next section, I offer points of conversion and departure among Black feminist thought and hip hop feminism and articulate more fully the utility of hip hop feminism in this project. Specifically, its intersectional and more expansive, liberal and oppositional readings of Black female sexuality, as well as its specific carving out of a space for the theorization of Black girlhood. This is a very different approach than Black feminist thought, in which adult-centered analyses are simply applied to girls, at best providing an incomplete picture of Black girlhood, and at worst completely negates the complexities of Black girls’ lives in the age of hip hop, unregulated accessibility to popular culture, and other cultural phenomena that heavily mediate their experiences.
From Black Feminism to Hip Hop Feminism: Black Women and Evolving Critical Social Theories

In conceptualizing Black feminist thought as a critical social theory, it is important to take into consideration the dynamic and shifting imperatives and methods groups identify and utilize across time and space to evaluate their social positioning. For instance, certain priorities, messages or strategies for change may become outdated, ineffective or inaccessible. Black feminist thought maintained an intersectional approach well into what some scholars refer to as the “third wave of feminism,” which gained notoriety in the 1980s. According to Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd (2012):

…intersectionality serves as a catch-all word that stand in for the broad body of scholarship that has sought to examine and redress the oppressive forces that have constrained the lives of black women in particular and women of color more generally. As an idea or an analytically distinct concept, intersectionality is a moniker, identified with Crenshaw (1989), meant to describe the ‘intersecting’ or codeterminative forces of racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of [B]lack women” (p. 4).

This “wave” came to public and leftist consciousness in the early 1990s as a movement comprised of new feminists voicing new concerns in a radically anti-racist manner, emphasizing coalition building, global awareness and diversity and inclusion. During this decade, hip hop feminism Joan Morgan authored *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (1999), in which she argues the need for a
new sect of Black feminism for the hip hop generation. Hip hop feminism serves as a race conscious space where men and women can simultaneously appreciate hip hop music and culture, as well as to critique it and use it as an agent for progressive social change (as it was originally intended).

**Historicizing Hip Hop**

Morgan’s (1999) philosophy of social change is critical to hip hop’s political imperatives. The music and culture originated in New York during the 1970s by Black and Latino youth as a political and artistic form of resistance against racism, capitalism, poverty and other forms of structural disadvantage. The urban underground movement arose from the ruins of a post-industrial and economically depressed South Bronx as a form of expression for Black and Latino youth, whom mainstream political discourse continued to push further into the margins (Chang, 2005). According to Jeffries (2007), themes of material wealth and social mobility function as “…structural starting points… the dog-eat-dog ethos of hip hop battles force listeners to recognize that modern capitalism creates winners and losers and fosters ideology that pervades both the material and non-material spheres of social life” (p.13). The “dog-eat-dog” ethos to which Jeffries refers reflects the harsh realities of capitalism and profit motive, undergirded by white
supremacy, which for centuries has oppressed Black and brown people in America. The poetic nature of rap is inherently political and deeply influenced by Afrocentric culture. Thus, it is important to understand the history of the art of rapping to further contextualize the liberatory politics of hip hop:

Rap music is rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin, the dozens/playin the dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices. The oral tradition itself is rooted in the surviving African tradition of ‘Nommo’ and the power of the word in human life. The rapper is a postmodern griot, the verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian in traditional African society. As African America’s ‘griot,’ the rapper must be lyrically/linguistically fluent; he or she is expected to testify to speak the truth, to come with it no uncertain terms (Smitherman, 1997: p. 4).

This analysis illuminates the ways in which hip hop’s genealogical roots long predate its existence in the U.S., and also explains its Diasporic and global popularity. While it is unclear exactly who is the originator of the term (which dates back to the 1970s), Jamaican-born Bronx resident DJ Kool Herc and Harlem-born DJ Hollywood are widely known as the founding fathers. According to DJ Kool Herc, “hip-hop is the voice of this generation. Hip-hop binds all of these people, all of these nationalities, all over the world together” (Chang 2005: p. xii). The term *hip hop* became popular with the release of the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979. On this track, the New Jersey-born trio raps: “I said a hip hop, the hippie, the hippie, to the hip, hip hop, and you don’t stop, a
rock it to the bang bang boogie, say up jumps the boogie, to the rhythm of the boogedy beat. Not what you hear is not a test, I’m rappin’ to the beat” (The Sugar Hill Gang, Sylvia Robinson, Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, 1979). The single sold over two million copies in the U.S and ranked #251 on Rolling Stone magazine’s 2004 list of “500 Greatest Songs of all Time” (Menoci, 2011). According to leading sociolinguistic scholar Geneva Smitherman (1997), hip hop was born out of the need to “‘disturb tha peace,’ or disrupt the status quo” and that “the United States Ghetto (USG) is a hotbed of unrest, disposition, and powerlessness; so for African Americans living on the margins, for this ‘underclass,’ there is no ‘peace.’ What is being disturbed is the peace of mind of middle-class White…America” (p. 4). Further, Smitherman asserts that hip hop is “not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon,” but also a “resisting discourse…against White America’s racism and Eurocentric dominance” (p. 5). Hip hop identity, therefore, implies an astute awareness of one’s social position.

Hip hop culture can be defined as “a network of generations tied together by ethnic origin, spiritual orientations, geographic tendencies, kinship norms, and several other community-oriented practices including artistic expressions, communal traditions, philosophies and social values” (Wilson, 2008, p .6). Conventionally, the art form itself is constituted by five key elements studied and practiced by scholars, practitioners, and
consumers alike: MCing (orality), breakdancing (movement/dance), DJing (turntablism), graffiti writing (visual artistry), and knowledge of self (intellectual/philosophical). MCing (also known as emceeing, rapping, or rhyming) represents a spoken-word type of communicative delivery that is typically performed over a beat (although this is not always the case, in which case the art form is known as ‘freestyling’). The ‘flow’ refers to the rapper’s ability to stay on beat during delivery, in which rhyme, pitch, volume and timbre are all paramount. Breakdancing, also known as breaking, b-voying or b-girlng (which signals the gender of the performer) is a form of street dance composed stylistically by moves called toprock (movement done in a standing position and typically serves as the performance warm up in which performers engage the crowd and gain physical momentum), downrock, power moves (acrobatic moves dependent heavily upon speed and momentum that often occur in the middle of performances), and freezes (stopping the body in motion in a seemingly gravity defying pose). DJing, or turntablism, is performed by a person who use equipment that allows them to simultaneously two sources of music and mix them together. The aim is seamless transitions through the aligning of beats. Headphones allow DJs to preview these transitions in real time before the crowd hears them. Graffiti art is the writing or drawing on walls and or other surfaces within public view, typically with spray paint, to mark geographical territorial boundaries.
within hip hop culture. Lastly, knowledge of self is rooted in identity and constitutive of cultural knowledge, pride, and awareness of one’s relationship to social structures that promote inequities and social stratification. The knowledge of self element exists as a similar construct as Black feminist standpoint epistemology, as it calls for a critical understanding of identity and the function of white supremacist ideology in the oppression of Black people:

The constituents of hip hop are directly concerned with the formulation and creation of knowledge… in terms of empowerment, what we have to do is look at what hip hop does in education systems because essentially what we do is we empower young people to control and use language to their benefit, so it’s both empowering and liberating because of the linguistic piece… What people need to understand is that we’re talking about a very full, robust culture that has empowered young people and liberated young people—liberated their minds for almost four decades now (Dr. James Peterson, ‘The Fifth Element’ of Hip Hop, 2012).

Hip hop educators, including Peterson (2012), encourage youth to understand the potential for their language to be used as a tool in the quest for liberation. Hip hop allows systematically disadvantaged youth who have not gained access to institutional power and privilege a blueprint for combating oppression. In 2002, a foundational hip hop studies text, Bikari Kitwana’s The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and The Crisis in African American Culture, was published, mapping a genealogy of the hip hop
generation. Very narrowly, Kitwana defines the hip hop generation as African Americans born between 1965 and 1984. Regarding this glaring exclusion, Jeff Chang (2005: p. 42) asserts:

Folks got bogged down once again in the details. How could one accept a definition of a hip hop generation which excluded the culture’s pioneers, like Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, for being born too early? Or one that excluded those who had come to claim and transform hip hop culture, but were not Black or born in America? Exactly when a hip hop generation began and whom it includes remains, quite appropriately, a contested question.

This definition not only excludes early hip hop pioneers or those who are not Black and American-born, it also excludes Generation Z (youth with birth years that range from the mid-1990s to early 2000s), which is the demographic focus of this project, as well as me as a student, researcher, and lover of hip hop culture. My work seeks to contribute to the expansion of this very narrow understanding of the hip hop generation and challenges the very need to define it at all: “So, you ask, when does the hip hop generation begin After DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa. Whom does it include? Anyone who is down. When does it end? When the next generation tells us it’s over” (Chang 2005: p. 2). This project is primarily concerned with this tenet of hip hop as it relates to illuminating a Black girl standpoint rooted in identity, critical discourse, and radical feminist politics.
Influenced by the tenets of Black feminism, hip hop feminism, broadly defined, is a sociocultural political movement in which lovers of hip hop music and culture, both in the academy and the community, engage in discourses which seek to dismantle the pathologization of hip hop culture and music as a Black art form (Pough et al, 2007; Pough 2004; Morgan, 1999). Although critiques of sexism are at the crux of the paradigm, hip hop feminist practitioners seek to conceptualize hip-hop as liberatory—a tool for progressive social change against all forms of oppression, and institutional/structural inequality. In speaking to the scholarship and activism hip-hop feminists are engaging in, as well as the tenuous relationship between rap music/hip-hop culture and feminism, hip-hop feminist scholars Brown and Kwakye (2007) assert:

…Hip-hop at its essence is the voice of people and a generation who have not yet had access to institutional power and voice. Too often, Hip-hop and feminism are positioned in diametric opposition to each other, through multiple points of cooperation, articulation, contestation, and convergence is much more of the stuff that gives meaning to its style, aesthetic, and commitments (p. 6).

As explicitly articulated by Brown and Kwakye, the relationship between hip hop and feminism is characterized by both contestation and voice. For critics of the
conceptualization, hip hop and feminism represents a contradictory or paradoxical pairing, primarily because our Black feminist foremothers have invested great intellectual and activist labor in condemning male rappers for sexism, misogyny, hypermasculinity, and violence, as well as the valorization of drug and alcohol use in hip hop music and videos after the commercialization, exploitation and appropriation of the culture by white capitalist forces. Per Morgan’s (1999) argument, hip hop feminism must be “brave enough to fuck with the grays” (p. 59) --meaning, it not only needs to be relevant for the hip hop generation, but also allow for spaces to identify and negotiate competing discourses rooted in respectability and white feminist politics8. In Check it While I Wreck It: Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere (2004), Gwendolyn Pough (2008) asserts that the aim of her project is to examine spaces where hip hop feminism can make interventions as possible starting points for a feminist agenda within hip hop culture. In terms of the tensions that arise in this pairing, she forewarns her audience that “[all spaces] will not all be feminist spaces or even have outright feminist messages. Instead, they are spaces where hip-hop feminists, activists, and thinkers can possibly evoke social change” (p. 88). This is imperative in developing critical discourse and the

8 White feminism is a term that refers to a faux feminist focus on the political interests and investments of White women. It is void of intersectionality and fails to address the oppression of those who are marginalized by forces other than simply gender.
ability to undertake oppositional readings among Black girls in their engagement with popular culture, particularly the visual. For instance, deriving pleasure from the visual, which may be accompanied by lyrics that uphold the principles of capitalism or sexism, does not mean that the consumer is uncritical or complicit in perpetuating racism, sexism and/or homophobia. In the words of #ProfessionalBlackGirl creator Dr. Yaba Blay (2018), Black women and girls disrupt a “good”/“bad” dichotomy rooted in respectability in that they are “professional code-switchers. [They] hold PhDs and listen to trap music. [They] twerk and [they] work.” Here, code switching refers to the embodiment and execution of a double-consciousness depending on context and setting. For Black women and girls, this is significant as code-switching represents a way of survival in the world.

In thinking about the stronghold of the politics of respectability addressed by both Pough and Blay that Black women and girls engaged in hip hop culture are disrupting, Blay also references twerking. Black and hip hop feminists have paid particular attention to embodied dance as a cultural practice that connects girls to the Diaspora, and challenges an intellectual move beyond the sociohistorical baggage and the policing of bodies to explore creativity and fun. Dances that have been theorized for Black girls include, for example, “the batty dance” (Brown, 2009), as well as twerking (Richardson,
that are often read in a stereotypically negative way that upholds stereotypes rooted in white supremacy. However, Black girl-centered programming can assist in the curating of a safe space in which to engage such dances for those who desire to. For example, while most of the girls in Richardson’s study dismissed twerking as inappropriate, “nasty” and “ghetto,” one participant stated that she twerks because she likes “to have fun” (p. 335). Further, the same participant found it important to note that despite liking to twerk, that she is knows what she is going to do the in the future, which includes college, because she “ain’t no ho” (p. 335). Here, we see the dichotomy that projects such as BGG and Professional Black Girl seeks to disrupt.

Per Pough (2004), Harris-Perry (2011), Blay (2018) and Richardson (2013), hip hop and feminism are not mutually exclusive. Consciousness and critical discourse, the use of Black language, and the performance of embodied dances can all coexist under the domain of hip hop feminism without making one complicit in their own oppression. Further, although the merging of feminism and hip hop can be messy, the result can be what Morgan (1999) refers to as “fucking with the grays.” One’s engagement with hip hop can simply mean she enjoys the Africanized stylizations of the work, or that it allows her to momentarily escape the hold of respectability politics or colonizing gazes to move in the world as freely as she so chooses--even if only momentarily.

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Scholars interested in Black women’s sexuality and social stratification have long employed a feminist hermeneutic in order to reconstruct the narrative accounts of Black women’s subversive attempts at decolonization throughout history in order to demonstrate the ways in which these captive bodies sought to protect themselves mentally and physically from racial and sexualized abuse, and sought to deflect negative and stereotypical iconographies with sociopolitical strategies such as the politics of respectability (Willis, 2010; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007; Hill Collins, 2005; Hammonds, 1994; Higgenbotham, 1994; hooks, 1992; Hill Collins 1990; Davis, 1983). Within Black feminist thought, the biography of Sarah Bartmaan has served as a conceptual starting point in understanding the unique sociohistoical genealogy of Black women’s sexual exploitation and perceived hypersexuality in contrast to European constructions of Victorian sexuality. Kidnapped and forced into a life of nonconsensual and exploitative sex work, Bartmaan epitomized hypersexual Black female sexuality due to her physique, which included a large buttocks that functioned as an evolutionary adaptation to store fat in harsh South African climates.

Of several documented attempts to subversively deflect the male gaze, one of the most notable occurred during a three-day examination in 1815 in which Bartmaan covered her private areas with a handkerchief while a team of naturalists, anatomists, and
zoologists attempted to study her genitalia, bribing her with candy and alcohol (Hobson, 2005). The pseudoscientific medical discourses generated by socially constructing race and pathologizing Black women’s sexuality supported theories such as “the great chain of being,” which positioned the Black race as antithetical to whites on the scale of humanity, genetically comparable to primates. Within these discourses, Baartman’s overall aesthetic represented unbridled Black hypersexuality. The results of this examination appeared in volumes dedicated to the study of mammals, in which Baartman was the only human. Baartman was unable to avoid the gaze even in death as her brain, skeleton, and genitalia were placed on display until the twentieth century. The pseudoscientific race and sexuality studies that represented Black women as not truly human at all, with their lack of virtue being one of the primary factors differentiating them from their white counterparts.

In a departure from traditional Black feminist theorizing, hip hop feminists continue to argue against the policing of Black women’s bodies and sexuality. To deflect sociopolitical misrepresentation and physical violence, Black women active in the Women’s Club Movement promoted the strategy of respectability, projecting an appearance of modesty and asexuality. However, scholars such as Evelynn Hammonds conclude that political strategies such as the “politics of silence” functioned as routine
practices meant to police Black women’s bodies in the name of racial uplift. As a result, Black women lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality” (Hammonds 1997: p. 115). To further illustrate this point, Hammonds eloquently states:

In one of the earliest and most compelling discussions of black women’s sexuality, literary critic, Hortense Spillers wrote, ‘Black women are the bleached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, mis-seen, not doing, awaiting their verb. For writer Toni Morrison, black women’s sexuality is one of the ‘unspeakable things unspoken....’ Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are always already colonized. In addition, this always already colonized black female body has so much sexual potential it has none at all. (p.111).

While hip hop feminists cannot afford to forget the history of colonization and exploitative bondage, it also cannot afford to ignore pleasure and desire in processes of decolonization that depend upon counter-hegemonic, subversive and resistant acts. Hip hop feminist scholars continue to interrogate the ways in which negative and controlling ideologies are always already mapped onto the bodies of Black women, while also carving out a unique space for the theorization of Black girls who are also impacted by these politics of representation. In theorizing Black female sexuality and social stratification, hip hop feminists invested in pro-sex or pleasure politics also advocate for a departure from the politics of respectability and traditional Black feminist theorizing that
portrays the expression of Black women’s sexual desires and pleasures as theoretically or materially illusory or non-existent (Lindsey, 2013). Similarly, hip hop feminist scholar Joan Morgan (2015) refers to Black feminist theory’s stronghold on Higginbotham’s politics of respectability and Hill Collins’ (1990) controlling images as intellectually stifling, contributing to a “methodological sluggishness” (p. 4). Moreover, she cites the pleasure politics in which hip hop feminists are engaging in as being met with polarizing resistance, specifically in digital spaces in which they are advised to stop talking about twerking and pleasure and turn their attention back to structural inequalities” (p.4). The linear thinking that disconnects or seeks to unhinge pleasure politics from structural analyses and the pervasiveness of contemporary popular culture and identity for Black women and girls is unsettling and deserves exploration. Although the approaches and methods through which this exploration takes place may differ to do issues of youth and consent, it nevertheless contributes to and builds upon the agentive discourse of Black feminist thought and hip hop feminism as a timely and relevant intervention.

According to Hill Collins (1990), “just as fighting injustice lay at the heart of U.S. Black women’s experiences, so [does] analyzing and creating imaginative responses to injustice characterize the core of Black feminist thought” (p. 12). Arguably, hip hop feminism functions as yet another imaginative response to fighting injustice. However,
hip hop feminism is not only limited to a U.S. context, but also transcends borders as hip hop culture represents a global phenomenon. Zenzele Isoke (2012) argues that “hip-hop feminism effectively challenges and transforms power structures, social order, and widespread cultural practices, and proves to be an efficacious intersectional strategy for understanding complex identities and difference” (p.134). Hip hop feminist ideology has the potential to reach a wider audience with its critiques of homophobia, sexism, capitalism, media hegemony, flawed educational systems, and other forms of oppression, as well as explores how these interlocking oppressions affect identity development and ways of being (Richardson, 2013; Love, 2012; Brown and Kwakye, 2012; Durham, 2012; Pough, 2004). Durham, Cooper and Morris (2013) define hip hop feminism as an “umbrella term to encompass creative, intellectual work regarding women and girls in hip-hop culture and/or as part of the hip-hop generation” (p. 721). Durham (2012) defines it as “a cultural, intellectual and political movement grounded in the situated knowledges of women of color from the post-civil rights or hip-hop generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation” (p. 136).

Thus, like Black feminist thought, hip hop feminism is also concerned with social stratification and power, and exists as a social movement, which utilizes and produces its
own relevant, timely and viable critical social theories. Hip hop culture and music provide the context for radical liberatory potential and offers a fruitful space for the engagement of young feminists and consumers of color. In addition to hip hop feminisms transnational appeal, which allows it to reach global audiences, its accessibility also allows for wider audience and activist engagement. Unlike Black feminist thought, hip hop feminist thought is regarded as in, but not of the academy. Thus, hip hop fans, heads activists, intellectuals, etc… are all understood to be valid consumers and producers of knowledge. In regard to scholarship and activism hip hop feminists are engaging in, as well as the tenuous relationship between rap music/hip-hop culture and feminism, hip-hop feminist and scholar Pough (2007: p. 79) asserts:

Some [activists] offer third wave feminist critiques that question how one can be a child of the hip hop generation, love the music and still actively speak out against the sexism…Most hip hop feminists believe that the needs of the hip hop generation require new strategies and different voices. They have a strong relationship to the ‘self’ and they connect their personal narratives with theoretical underpinnings and critique.

Pough’s statement demonstrates the importance of epistemological privilege in its quest to challenge the hegemonic production of knowledge by using lived experience as a criterion of meaning, which continues to be critical in the development and evolution of Black feminist thought. As a theoretical paradigm, form of activism and/or sensibility,
one of the strengths of hip hop feminism is that it creates a space specifically for post-
Civil-Rights generations to understand and apply (what may present as “outdated”)
feminist concepts to their lives. In this particular project, the focus is the
#BlackLivesMatter era. This is crucial since many may not have the luxury of theorizing
feminism in the academy. Furthermore, many hip hop feminist texts (such as Morgan’s)
are written in a style and format free of theoretical jargon and foreign concepts that can
be comprehended by wider audiences, therefore not excluding them from the critical
social and political discourses.

The accessibility of Morgan’s ideas meshes with songs of contemporary artists,
such as Janelle Monae, who exhibit hip hop feminist sensibilities. Monae’s song
“Q.U.E.E.N” from the album “The Electric Lady,” which appeared at the top of the
Billboard Chart is exemplary of hip hop feminist politics. An acronym for the identities
Queer, Untouchables, Emigrants, Excommunicated and Negroid, Janelle Monae makes it
clear that the song is dedicated to the marginalized and oppressed. In an interview with
Fuse HQ, the artist proclaims: “It's for everyone who's felt ostracized. I wanted to create
something for people who feel like they want to give up because they're not accepted by
society” (Benjamin, 2014). While Monae does not consider herself to be a rapper, she
asserts "I just like to communicate. If the lyrics call for something more urgent, which
that rap did, then I'll take that route. I wanted to make sure, just in case, if anyone had any questions about what this song was about that I was able to bring it home with the message” (Benjamin, 2014). As hip hop feminists have articulated, this form of socially conscious hip hop provides critiques of power and promotes critical thinking and liberation. Monae is resisting public discourse about younger generations being “lost,” or exhibiting political apathy. She also problematizes issues of citizenship and rights as Black feminists such as Sojourner Truth in her 1851 Women’s Rights Convention Speech, Anna Julia Cooper (1892), bell hooks (1981) Angela Davis (1983) and Patricia Hill Collins (2006, 1990) have done for centuries by questioning why the stealing of rights is not illegal, while also articulating that the hypothetical existence of rights for all does not make everyone equal citizens in the eyes of the American legal system. Of course, this question has been taken up at length by Black feminist legal scholars, such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, 1989). Janelle Monae then goes on to critique capitalism and poverty by seemingly referencing how women and people of color are devalued in global labor markets, and referred to as “needy,” lazy or unworthy when they protest social stratification resulting in unemployment, underemployment and/or wage inequities. Again, this is a topic that has been explored by countless Black feminist scholars (Harris-Perry, 2011; Hancock, 2004; Roberts, 1997; Hill Collins 1990), and is still relevant to hip
hop generation feminists.

**From Black Feminist Thought to Hip Hop Feminism: Building, Expanding, Departing**

The subtitle “From Black Feminist Thought to Hip Hop Feminism: Building, Expanding, Departing” by no means is indicative of the ineffectiveness of Black feminist thought. Both Black feminist thought and hip hop feminism exist as schools of thought which are, in many ways, informed by one another and prioritize the liberation of Black women, girls, and oppressed communities. Thus far, I have attempted to trace a genealogy of social justice created by and for Black women, from Sojourner Truth in 1851, to Janelle Monae in the present—a span of approximately 166 years. I have also attempted to show how intellectual dialogue has occurred among Black female activists and scholars, breathing new life into feminist causes overtime. This is not to suggest that Black women were not resisting inequities or were not social justice-oriented prior to 1851. According to Hill Collins (1990), “every social group has a constantly evolving worldview that it uses to evaluate its own experiences” (p. 10). Hip hop feminists have used Black feminism to evaluate their experiences over time, and have deemed some of
the theories, methods and strategies of Black feminist thought groundbreaking and revolutionary, but in need of critical revisioning. However, the personal is still political. Of Morgan and other hip hop feminists, Hill Collins (2006) commends the bypassing of traditional outlets for the dissemination of feminist knowledge, arguing that hip hop feminists “…express their feminist politics through mass media and popular culture venues of hip-hop culture…they may be transforming the core feminist ideology that the personal is political in response to the challenges that confront them” (p. 161-162). Hip hop feminism as public pedagogy can occur in the home, community centers, after-school programs, and a wide array of other places where “homegirls use the self-critiquing ‘keeping it real’ language from hip-hop culture to challenge” the status quo (Durham, Cooper & Susana 2013 p. 728). In “Under Construction: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms,” Whitney Peoples (2008) provides three recurrent critiques of Black feminist thought by hip hop feminists:

- Second-wave Black feminists’ preoccupation with hip-hop’s misogyny at the expense of exploring its potential; 2. The seemingly narrow and static conception of feminist identities emerging out of second-wave theorizing and activism; 3. The outmoded and subsequently ineffectual strategies for outreach to the empowerment of black women and girls employed by second-wave black feminists (p. 39).

While hip hop feminists do not to ignore, but readily identify misogyny in commercial
In regard to the narrow conception of feminist identities, hip hop feminists are striving to maintain a broad and more inclusive definition for feminism. This is evident in recent academic and public discourse about popular music artist Beyoncé, and her identification with feminism. On the 2013 track “***Flawless,” Beyoncé samples an excerpt from a 2012 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TEDx Talk titled “Why We Should All Be Feminists.” Many Black feminist thinkers view Beyoncé’s performative politics as lewd, lascivious and dangerous, and also argue that she appeals to unrealistic and hegemonic beauty standards rooted in white supremacy. For example, Black feminist
scholar bell hooks has referred to Beyoncé’s performative politics as anti-feminist terrorism which conforms to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and negatively influences young girls (King, 2014). Conversely, hip hop feminists have defended Beyoncé, and urge scholars and consumers alike to continue to problematize the white supremacist colonizing male gaze in order to highlight Black women and girls’ complex negotiation of competing and contradictory discourses and ideologies regarding sexuality (Durham, 2012; Richardson, 2007; Richardson, 2006; Emerson, 2002). Per hip hop feminists, agency and autonomy must be configured into the equation in a way that problematizes the notion that under every circumstance, the Black female body serves as a site of sexual capital for the benefit of white, western heterosexual gaze. In an effort to move away from the confines of controlling images rooted in the jezebel iconography, hip hop feminists want to convey the idea that in some circumstances, artists such as Beyoncé are able to exercise some degree of power in their articulation of sexuality. In terms of feminism and Beyoncé’s platform as an international superstar, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie offers, “Because of Beyoncé many young women are talking about feminism and hopefully young men because she has such a following” (Showbiz, 2014). When asked about the tensions and inherent messiness evident in some of Beyoncé’s performative politics in relation to feminist identification, Ngozi Adichie asserts “I
suppose there are different feminisms. I am all about bringing people to the party and having a good conversation, rather than saying you can't come in. I have had young people in Nigeria who probably would have never heard of my TEDx Talk without Beyoncé and who are now talking about feminism” (Showbiz, 2014). Similarly, acknowledging both the popularity and reach of Black women entertainers, as well as the messiness and gray areas of popular culture and feminism, Hill Collins (2000) points out that more Black women listened to Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith than were able to read Nella Larson; and that in the 1990s, more Black women listened to Queen Latifah and Salt ‘N’ Peppa than read literature by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Today, arguably more women and girls are listening to Beyoncé than are reading the work of Patricia Hill Collins or bell hooks. This point also speaks to the third recurrent critique of second-wave Black feminist thought as posed by Peoples (2008), that outdated strategies for effecting social change are ineffectual in fostering empowerment for contemporary women and girls. As Ngozi Adichie suggests, it is because of this song that many girls are being exposed to feminist ideology. While it is not my aim to prove or disprove Beyoncé’s feminist politics/identity, it cannot be ignored that “***Flawless” has at least reinvigorated feminism in popular discourse for Black women and girls.

I draw heavily upon Troutman’s (2011) conceptualization of feminist pedagogical
media literacy in analyzing what issues of sexuality and desire may look for girls, which also includes analysis of Beyoncé’s work. Although not theorized solely in terms of Black girls, Troutman argues for curriculum combining feminism and pedagogy and media literacy at the middle school level due to its potential to offer “important youth-affirming, creative outlets necessary for student identity negotiations and classroom learning in a heavily mediated, globally saturated cultural moment” (p. 137). In her intervention, Troutman proposes that feminist pedagogical media literacy (FPML) be incorporated into secondary school curricula because girls in middle and high school benefit from earlier exposure to feminism and media literacy. FPML is an important intervention because it “acknowledges (without penalizing) students’ agency, pleasure and desire in their uses of contemporary culture and its range of media tools” (p. 144). This point is critical to hip hop feminist approaches to media literacy, which challenges consumers (and scholars alike) to think beyond traditional controlling images of Black womanhood, as well as the politics of respectability, in analyzing popular cultural representations of Black female sexuality and hegemonic beauty standards, especially in the era of popular artists such as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, whom the girls in the study are fans of, or are greatly familiar with. An inevitable byproduct of this line of inquiry is the need to engage issues of maturity and consent with Black girls, since they are not yet
adult women. As a researcher, I grapple not only with a theoretical void, but also with the emotional push-pull involved in attempting to, with great care to material well-being, sketch what desire and pleasure look like for this demographic. According to Lindsey (2012):

Similar to black feminists, hip hop generation feminists often approach the experiences and representations of black females by focusing on adults. Hip hop generation feminist analyses tend to emphasize empowerment for adults. For example, hip hop feminism uses a sex-positive analysis when grappling with the role of sexual pleasure and sexual expressivity in empowering adult women and trans-people. This analysis shifts in application to children and adolescents. Although similarly sex positive, it must account for different age-specific issues of content, maturity, responsibility and agency (p. 24).

By centralizing the experiences of Black girls and exploring themes of power contested/alternative knowledges and truths, theoretically, methodologically and spiritually, I must in some ways, as Morgan (2015) suggests, work against respectability and controlling images to understand that this departure will foster honest (and tough) conversations about the messiness, complexities, competing discourses and grays (Morgan, 1999) that constitute our beings, and facilitate a heightened sense of consciousness for both the participants, and myself.
Theoretical Framework

Broadly defined, girlhood studies aims to historicize discourses on the cultural dimensions of girls and girl culture to offer modern day analyses and critiques of social norms in order to improve the materiality of girlhood. The concept of childhood, as an identity, and a period of time distinct from adulthood emerged as early as the fifteenth century. According to Skelton and Valentine (1998), “the mythical condition of childhood grew and became part of the collective consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as mas school was introduced in society” (p. 3). Per these scholars, adolescence has been created and manipulated for fit the interests of the dominant ideology and economic structure. While childhood is marked by ideas of growth and development, adolescence in contrast, was invented to create space between this innocence and the realities of adulthood. In a review of theorist Stanley Hall’s (1997) highly respected work on adolescence and subcultures, it can be argued that much of the research on adolescents began from a politics of fear. Specifically, this fear is demonstrative of class tensions that aimed to protect middle-class values by controlling the working class. This was said to protect and promote social responsibility. When using a multi-axis approach that accounts for race and gender complicates this problematic analysis even further.
Traditionally, the category ‘girl’ has meant that one was white, middle-class, able-bodied, thin, straight and cisgender. However, more recently, scholars writing in a hip hop feminist tradition have begun to challenge these static and essentialist definitions of girlhood (Richardson, 2013; Lindsey, 2013; Brown, 2013; Love, 2012; Brown, 2009) to situate girlhood as a social construct, rather than a biological fact. Writing from a plethora of disciplines and theoretical lenses, the aforementioned scholars argue that how Black girls construct their identities is heavily mediated by youth race, socioeconomic status, affinity to hip hop music and popular culture, among other factors. In the same vein, I use the term ‘girl’ in a way that acknowledges this state of being as social construction that encapsulates discourse. These ideas are paramount in any analysis of girls’ lives because they play a crucial role in how girls experience what it means to be a girl. The broad field of girlhood studies’ whitewashing of girlhood overwhelmingly neglects the structural constraints that mark the lives of Black girls, offering a diluted, incomplete and essentialist notion of girlhood—which is the same critique Black feminist scholars leveraged against mainstream feminism in terms of Black womanhood, and the limitations of single-axis social justice frameworks. By utilizing a multi-axis, or intersectional framework to further define Black girlhood, this work seeks to “make
Black girlhood worth remembering” (Brown, 2013), rather than focusing on the “at-risk” and deficit-based discourses that mark their lives. In discussing the structural constraints that mark Black girlhood, Brown (2013) argues:

Structural inequalities coupled with the material realities of Black girlhood make it necessary for many Black girls to grow up before their time, so much so that bearing responsibility for more than themselves at particularly young ages shapes Black girls’ activity around the needs, desires and well-being of others, instead of themselves. Implications abound and include the possibility of never experiencing a Black girlhood that was ‘care-free’ or innocent (p. 11).

In many situations, Black girls bear the burden of institutionalized racism and poverty. Similar to Brown, Harris (2004, p. 9), has identified and theorized a binary that defines Black girls as either “can-do” or “at-risk.” The “can-do” girl is “an uber productive self-made girl of the twenty-first century,” while the latter is rendered “unproductive” as a result of her race, gender, class, geographic location, and sexuality usually blamed on bad choices rather than the social structures and strictures she is forced to navigate. This project centers the ways in which the burdens of “at risk-ness” manifest within two specific institutions—the media and education. Research demonstrates that oppressive historical, institutional and social factors heighten Black girls’ risk of detachment from school (Crenshaw, Nanda & Ocen, 2015). This detachment is also mediated by the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy (which is identified in this research as hip hop
feminist pedagogy), as well as exclusionary theoretical and programmatic practices.

Black girlhood scholar Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) posits that “Black girls’ knowledge and presence have been excluded from and deemed unimportant in three surprisingly interrelated academic discourses: hip hop [studies], girls’ studies and girls’ programming…they are passive dupes” (p. 34). This research prioritizes the perspectives of Black girls in all three of these areas specifically relating to their engagement with popular culture and commercial hip hop. Although hip hop culture and hip hop studies both represented male-dominated spheres at their inceptions, the increasing presence of women artists, activists and scholars provides a point of reference for Black girls. This is critical in the creation of sites of political liberation, which was the goal of hip hop at its inception. I concur with Lindsey (2013) that “very little humanistic black feminist scholarship specifically explores the unique site of black girlhood and adolescence” (p. 23). This is particularly important in theorization and activism concerning girls’ engagement with popular culture and commercial hip hop. I argue that the unique amalgamation of Black girlhood studies, hip hop feminism and critical discourse perspectives illuminates a Black girl standpoint, also known as BGG which does for Black girls what intersectionality-based theorizing has done for adult women of the African Diaspora. It is an intervention that seeks to address what Black girlhood scholar
Cox (2015) refers to as “missing the middle” (p. 10). According to Cox:

Missing the middle is a statement about intersectionality, multiple jeopardy, and the peculiar position of Black girls in the United States. The missing middle is grounded in Black girls’ understandings of their rights as citizens and how other people abuse these rights. The missing middle is grounded in Black girls’ identification of the complicated interplay of external and self-evaluations fueled by the representational work of labels and tropes hurled at them from multiple points of origin. One of these points is the nexus of intersecting discourses erected around youth culture, girlhood, low-income Black communities, and social mobility in the United States (p. 10).

BGG does not represent a critique of intersectionality or its failures, but in a Black feminist tradition, represents the theorization of timely and relevant social interventions via the building of existing frameworks giving credit to the Black women scholars who came before. BGG is meant to highlight and attempt to fill a gap. In the after-school program, BGG helped Black girls address the richness of their lives without the sanctions of school rules, respectability politics or “at-riskness.”

**Critical Discourse Perspectives**

A wide range of academic fields of inquiry such as philosophy, sociolinguistics and women’s studies argue for nuanced understandings of truth and ways of knowing based on systems of power and identity. A large component of knowledge attainment occurs in routine text and talk. One of the major tenets of post-structuralism is the acknowledgement and appreciation of varied and multiple meanings derived by readers
of literary texts (written, visual, or otherwise signified). Rather than simply agreeing and identifying with the author or creator, post-structuralists argue that texts are mediated by the reader’s lived experience. This lived experience constitutes meaning making and supports feminist notions of the validity of multiple truths as opposed to a single truth.

Similarly, sociolinguist James Gee (1990) posits that words, which constitute discourse, have multiple meanings. According to Gee, “discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities…they are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life; they are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories” (p. 3). Similarly, from a women’s studies perspective, “feminist standpoint theories reject the notion of an ‘unmediated truth’ and argue that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an individual’s particular position in a determinate sociopolitical formation at a specific point in history” (Hawkesworth 2006 p. 56). Additionally, “class, race and gender necessarily structure the individual’s understanding of reality and hence inform all knowledge claims. Feminist standpoint epistemologists argue that although certain social positions (the oppressor’s) produce distorted ideological views of reality, other social positions (the oppressed’s) can pierce ideological obfuscations and attain a
comprehensive understanding of the world” (p. 56). As Hawkesworth suggests, counter or alternative knowledges can serve as a tool for feminist visions of social change, pedagogy and praxis. Scholars in the fields of hip hop feminism and Black girlhood studies have demonstrated the utility of hop hop feminism as a transformative social justice and praxis-oriented approach to urban education (Lindsey, 2015 p. 55; Love, 2012; Brown, 2008). This work adds to the literature on centering the standpoints of Black girls, as their experiences have not been fully incorporated into Black feminism, where the standpoint centralizes adult women.

Illuminating a Black girl standpoint is crucial for my use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Critical discourse studies is the study of the relatedness of power, dominance, discourse, social inequality. Critical discourse studies is concerned with how dominant ideologies are reproduced both written and verbally at the micro and macro levels (van Dijk 1993: p. 250). Fairclough and Wodak (1997: p. 271-280) summarize the main tenets of CDA as follows:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action
More specifically, I draw upon feminist discourse analysis, an approach to feminist inquiry which exposes and seeks to resist sociopolitical inequality, namely through nuanced critiques of sexism and patriarchy. I intentionally use the term ‘perspective’ rather than ‘method.’ Because there is no one systematic way to conduct a CDA since they are conducted across a host of vastly different academic disciplines and using a myriad of theoretical frameworks, it is best conceptualized as a perspective. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the study of the interrelatedness of power, dominance, discourse and social inequality. CDA focuses on the ways in which dominant ideologies are reproduced through routine text and talk at both the micro and macro levels (vanDijk 1993: p. 250). According to Lazar (2007), the aim of feminist critical discourse studies “is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts” (p. 142). Further, “the interest of feminist CDA is how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re) produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people’s social and personal identities in text and talk” (p. 150). Like Gee (1990), Lazar argues that feminist discourse analysis prioritizes social change and transformation. She, like other proponents of feminist
critical discourse and sociolinguists, emphatically proclaims that the goal of CDA is not
to be objective or neutral, but to expose one’s beliefs and values. Feminist critical
discourse analysis represents an academic or analytical form of social activism, is part of
an “emancipatory critical social science” that promotes a mind frame of critical
consciousness, rather than a specific set of skills (p. 146).

Contrary to popular belief, words do not have fixed meanings, and understandings
largely depend upon one’s lived experiences, position in society and the context into
which social interaction occurs. A word’s meaning can change over time and across
place. According to Gee (1990), “meaning is not something locked away in heads,
rendering communication possible by the mysterious fact that everyone has the same
thing in their heads, though we don’t know how that happened. Meaning is something we
negotiate and contest over socially. It is something that has its roots in ‘culture’…” (p.
13). Meaning making functions as a negotiation process that takes place between people
with different and/or competing interests. Power plays a critical role in establishing and
maintaining the routine use and understanding of words. Using a Marxist perspective,
Gee argues that the elite maintain power via intellectuals who endorse and promote the
views of the ruling class. In endorsing these views, the (incomplete) process of hegemony
occurs, by which those occupying lower status positions in the social hierarchy
unknowingly accept dominant ideologies. For example, one strategy of subordination is the *Othering* of less powerful groups. Additional strategies include the justification of oppression as “natural,” or to completely deny it all together. Language and literacy are crucial in understanding ideological hegemony. Gee argues “…people with power have a vested interest to use language and literacy in their own favor, to express the views of the world that support and validate their power” (p. 28). I also draw upon Richardson’s (2007) conceptualization of hip hop literacies in gaining more nuanced understanding of a Black girl standpoint. According to Richardson, hip hop literacies:

> Foreground[s] the ways in which Hiphoppas (those who actively participate in hip-hop culture) manipulate, as well as read and produce language, gestures, images, material possessions and people, to position and protect themselves advantageously…discourses are ways of being a certain type of person using available resources to present oneself in ways that validate a certain way of being. People internalize or appropriate images, patterns and words from the social activities in which they have participated (p. 43)

As expressed by Gee (1990) and Richardson (2007), the words used to express viewpoints do not operate outside of discourse since “nobody looks at the world other than through lenses supplied by language” (Gee 1990: p. 29). These words are “always
connected to negotiable, changeable, and sometimes contested stories, histories, knowledge, beliefs, and values encapsulated into cultural models (theories) about the world” (Gee 1990: p. 29). The studies and literature reviewed throughout this chapter reflect the scholarship relevant to the findings of this study. The studies illuminate the trajectories of the fields this project contributes to and places this project squarely within a current movement to highlight the unique experiences of Black girls through praxis-based intervention. In summary, the aims of this chapter were to provide a brief overview of the origins and imperatives of Black feminist thought and hip hop feminism, to elucidate the dialogical relationship between early Black feminist scholars and contemporary hip hop feminist scholars, and to articulate the successes and limitations of each theoretical “camp” in which Black Girl Genius (BGG) can help to fill, making theory accessible to Black girls in a way that allows them to better read the world around them. Additional critical objectives include the historicizing of hip hop, and most importantly, a review of the literature on Black girlhood studies and critical discourse studies, all of which inform the qualitative analyses generated from #BlackGirlsOnFleek, the afterschool club in which the four-year research project took place. These analyses serve three primary purposes: 1) explore the state and sources of Black middle school
girls’ knowledge base about Black womanhood, especially through representations of Black women and girls in popular media; to 2) identify and develop critical discourse practices that help girls resist and thwart negative representations; and to 3) add to scholarship on Black and hip hop feminisms, and feminist critical discourse studies.
Chapter Three
Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the study’s research design, which is meant to illuminate how Black girls at the #BlackGirlsOnFleek after-school program made meaning, or read the world around them, using Black Girl Genius (BGG). I define BGG as gender, race, age and class specific language, art, performative arts and musical sensibilities used to enact freedom at a time of national Black violability (Lindsey, 2016). As theorized here, BGG is precipitated, particularly in the public domain, in the form of the instantiations of #BlackGirlMagic that are so beloved by Black women and girls in contemporary popular culture. BGG extends beyond the world of social media hashtag to the actual critical analysis of social stratification that necessitated the hashtag’s creation. BGG represents and unique standpoint, influenced by Black feminism, specifically intersectionality and epistemological privilege, hip hop feminism, Black girlhood studies, and critical discourse studies. This unique standpoint is constituted by three key factors: 1) generationally gender-specific language and discourse practices to articulate and negotiate one’s identity; 2) a youthful view of Black female sexuality, marked by competing respectability discourses and; 3) an emphasis on hip hop as an embodied practice and way of life—as an outlet for creative political expressivity and a site of
critical discourse and community building through political solidarity. The #BlackGirlsOnFleek afterschool program curriculum was created to explore Black girls’ meaning making processes relating to identity in an urban afterschool space; specifically, what radical consciousness raising and critique of structures and strictures occurs at the intersection of identity, the interrogation of Black woman and girlhood in pop and hip hop cultures, and the introduction of Black feminist theory.

The #BlackGirlsOnFleek after school program was conceptualized and designed to be fundamentally different from traditional after school programs. Historically, afterschool programs have been successful and abundant in communities that contain a substantial number of low-income students (Posner & Vandell, 1999). The overwhelming need for after school programs is due to working class families demanding work schedules that make it nearly impossible for parents to care for their children during non-school hours. Afterschool programs have become a staple for working class families and single-parent homes. Although the school that housed the program was Title I due to high poverty, what made #BlackGirlsOnFleek different was that it was available to any and all girls who wanted to take part. The only requisite was that the student needed to be enrolled at the middle school and identity as a girl. Although there were short periods of
time when white girls participated, they never stayed long. Not because they were
disinvited, but because they expressed discomfort that their experiences were not
centered.

In addition to an open participation policy, accessibility, and meals also made
#BlackGirlsOnFleek unique. The program was free to all girls. No monies were ever
accepted for programming, materials, meals, or transportation to field trips/service
learning trips. The girls were also served a meal during each two-hour session. Girls were
then bussed home by district busses shared by students taking part in traditional
afterschool programming, such as athletics. All of these factors contributed to the
programs high participation and retention rate. Many participants were returning students,
who I had the pleasure of working with during their entire matriculation through middle
school. At one point in time, under new mandate, the program took place during the
school day during with a shortened time block. This drastically disrupted the dynamic,
making the program feel more regimented, as it was no longer associated with flexibility,
freedom and informality. It also served to decrease attendance as students were often
pulled for academic purposes during which administration and teachers deemed the
program an unworthy addition since it did not contribute to advanced scoring on state
standardized testing, one of the hallmarks of contemporary education. Considering this, I
know that future research on Black girlhood programming that takes place in a school setting should also be measured in a way that draws parallels to programming and academic achievement, particularly in subject such as social studies and English were concepts of citizenship and democracy are explored.

Core & Guiding Research Questions

The main question of the study was: What constitutes Black Girl Genius (BGG)?

The following additional questions guided my research:

1. What does BGG illuminate?
2. How does it differ from/how it is informed by pop culture’s #BlackGirlMagic phenomenon?
3. How is BGG recognized?
4. Why is it useful/unique and different from traditional conceptualizations of standpoint?
5. How are commercial hip hop and (Black) popular culture implicated in the theorization of BGG?

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methods used for this project. First, I focus on methodological orientation by devoting time to illuminating a less traditional and more contemporary approach to qualitative research dependent upon relationship building between Black women and girls--homegirling. Second, I articulate the utility of qualitative interviewing and epistemological standpoint to feminist scholarship rooted in
troubling traditional notions of power and agency, which is significant to the project.

Next, I approach intersectionality from a methodological standpoint, illuminating its strengths and limitations and role in coding and identifying BGG. In this chapter, I also articulate the purpose and origins of the afterschool program, discuss the group composition and dynamics, and discuss the role of the researcher, followed by data collection plans and procedures.

**Homegirling**

The process of building positive rapport with research participants in paramount in qualitative research (Palmer, 1928; Douglas 1985). According to DiCicco and Crabtree (2006), rapport involves respect and trust for interviewees, and involves the “establishing [of] a safe and comfortable environment for sharing the interviewee’s personal experiences and attitudes as they actually occurred. It is through the connection of *many truths* (emphasis mine) that interview research contributes to our knowledge of the meaning of the human experience.” I emphasize the authors’ use of the term ‘many truths’ as it is foundational to Black feminist thought to acknowledge multiple truths, based upon one’s standpoint. This includes those who are not representative of those in academe. A standpoint, defined as a particular lens through which we experience the
world, rejects the notion of an unmediated Truth and grants members of socially marginalized groups epistemological privilege and authority (Harding, 1987; Collins, 1990). Privileging one’s experience and acknowledging it as truth is critical in understanding and building rapport with oppressed political groups, including Black girls is of the utmost importance.

According to Brown (2013), *homegirling* represents both an identity and a verb, critical in understanding and appreciating the experiences and knowledge produced by Black girls, as well as the special familial bonds forged through this mentorship-like process:

The labor of making Black girlhood worth remembering, and the sacred work of creating Black girlhood as a space of attempted, even if now fully accomplished, celebration, requires the labor of others (Brown, 2009; King, 2005; Ladner, 1971; Sears, 2010) who often act in a way to honor those who came before them. The act of making the space of Black girlhood exist outside of linear and Eurocentric understandings and practices of time (p.107)

*Homegirling* incites a methodological disruption that reinforces the notion that hip hop feminism complicates traditional social constructions of girlhood by acknowledging issues of social stratification and difference. The term *homegirl*, derives from the Black Language lexicon and is specific to hip hop culture. It establishes fictive kinship based upon commonalities having to do with race, gender and other shared social experiences
rooted in identity and truths. In her own analysis of the importance of Black girl relationship building, Cooper (2018) boldly asserts, “Black girls at every age need other Black girls to hold their truths” (p. 18). This is significant to this research for two reasons. First, it points to the very difficult and adult material and psychological cultural work Black girls are forced to undertake in reading the world around them, as well as their relationship to that world, which is rooted in white supremacy. Often, the time to think about questions such as “why is thing happening to me?” when confronted with structural and material inequity is impossible because it is misread by the largely society (including teachers) as being resistant, insubordinate, angry or disorderly and as the potential to lead to “school-to-confinement” (Morris, 2015) pathways and contact with the unforgiving criminal justice system. Or, their adultification leads to the necessity of needing to handle, or get things done immediately, such as caring for younger siblings after school because this is how they are forced to support a hardworking single mother and sacrificing the desire to participate in after school extracurricular activities. Cooper adds, “very often, Black girls don’t get the opportunity to be in process” (p. 6). There is no time to think. No time to think or process. Critical Black girlhood studies is an urgent undertaking simply because there is no time. In other words, “life comes at you fast,” in the words of the popular Nationwide Auto Insurance television commercial. Black girls’
lives come at them very fast. So fast, in fact, that the ability to get things done in the moment out of the necessity to survive often takes priority over any and everything else. Time represents just one more luxury many Black girls are not afforded. This led me to Cooper’s assessment of time in her 2017 TEDx Talk titled “The Racial Politics of Time,” in which she boldly argues that time has been and continues to belong to white people.

We are often told by wealthy elites and self-help gurus that we all have the same 24 hours. That what you do with yours can serve either in your favor, or to your detriment. This problematic neoliberal philosophical ‘gem,’ does not account for the ways in which, historically, time has worked against people of the African Diaspora in the U.S. beginning in 1619 when the first enslaved Africans were brought to its shores. Time did not belong to us, and for many, it still does not. White supremacist capitalist patriarchy’s hold on the time of Black people continues, although the social context has changed.

In addition to thinking about my work with Black girls and how homegirling, as a method, is mediated by the racial politics of time, I realize power also plays a crucial role in this process. Cooper (2018) asserts that “Black girls at every age need other Black girls to hold their truths” (p. 18). The aim of this project was never to empower the girls I worked with because empowerment tends to be a neoliberal project void of structural analysis. Empowerment focuses on “personal responsibility” without the accountability
of those in power at the top. Thus, whatever happens to those of on the bottom of
the social hierarchy is entirely their own faults. Perhaps they did not work enough, lacked
drive, or ambition. #BlackGirlsOnFleek was concerned, instead, with power:

Power is not attained from books and seminars. Not alone, anyway. Power is
conferred by social systems. Empowerment and power are not the same thing. We
must quit mistaking the two. Better yet, we must quit settling for one what we
really need is the other. Those who feel ‘empowered’ talk about their personal
power to change their individual condition. Those with actual power make the
decisions that are of social and material consequence to themselves and others”
(Cooper, 2008: p. 123).

Critical analyses derived from real life experience and what girls glean from popular
culture make excellent starting analytical starting points for understanding power, which
is what Brown (2016) does in the poem about Black girlhood below. In holding each
other’s truths, by understanding that time is not on our side, and that anti-Black girlness
is not something you can simply ‘empower yourself out of,’ we see the nonlinearity of
Black girlhood to which Brown (2009) refers. This is not explicitly a project rooted in
youthfulness, but one that works for both girls and the adult Black women working with
them.

Homegirling represents a non-positivist approach. This is important to this
research because it is not meant to be objective or neutral. Positivist approaches require
the surrender of emotion in order to follow strict methodological rules created and
maintained by cisgender white male leadership in academe. Here, the researcher decontextualizes themselves in order to become casual observers. Homegirling necessitates that Black women get in touch with their inner girl in order to build community heavily rooted in identity politics. While this methodological approach may, to some (perhaps those who do not identify as/with Black women and girls) seem to lack methodological rigor and adequacy, it is necessary in combating explicit ant-Blackgirless. This deviation in approach is very different than traditional models of mentoring, in which girls (especially those deemed “at risk”) are “helped,” “empowered,” and saved from destruction by all-knowing adults. The process of homegirling as a part of critical methodology not only demonstrates the need to recognize multiple truths and the nonlinear nature of Black girlhood, but also the importance of rejecting the banking method of education:

Instead of communicating, the teacher makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated account. Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be "filled" by the teachers. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (Freire, p. XX 1993).
Homegirling disrupts the “teacher-student contradiction” to which Freire refers, by requiring that sharing, teaching and learning be dialogical. Dialogism as an ideology posits that all human interaction (intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and mass) is rooted in sociohistorical context and represents the process of meaning making—a very similar theoretical and ideological perspective posed by critical discourse analysts and Black and hip hop feminists. Like Freire’s analyses of the proletariat, or working class, Brown’s conceptualization of homegirling also focuses on working class-ness. For the purposes of this study, BGG is very much rooted in a working class Black girlhood identity, which is fitting considering the demographics of the girls and school at large. I do not see this as a limitation, but as a more nuanced approach to exploring multidimensional Black girlhood.

In a Black feminist tradition, BGG represents a subjugated knowledge. It’s oppositional knowledge manifests itself in not only the study’s qualitative interviews, but also in creative works, such as poetry and that are included in the following chapter. This is critical, as like their Black feminist foremothers, hip hop feminists and Black girlhood studies practitioners have historically relied on alternative means to express self-definition and self-validation. This results in alternative ways of producing, evaluating and validating knowledge. While the study of Black girlhood studies has made it possible for Black Girlhood Studies as a field to show up more legibly in the politicized sites of academia and K-12 programming, a paradox of legibility occurs in what exactly that legibility looks like when thinking about diversity among Black girls. Specifically, they become a monolithic “at-risk” political group with limited agency and power. However,
the homegirling methodology, in conjunction with the qualitative interviews analyzed using Black and hip hop feminist theory, and feminist discourse perspectives illuminates a very unique standpoint. Epistemology troubles the notion of unmediated Truth and explores why we believe what we believe to be true. Again, there is a very critical distinction between why individuals believe something to be true and seeking a ‘universal’ Truth. Arguably the most important tenet of epistemology (as well as feminist critical discourse analysis), is that it is not meant to be objective or apolitical, but instead requires that power imbalances be explored to theorize social location. Since no individual lives outside of discourse, and because both scholar-mentors and participants are trained to confront issues of gender, race, class, age and other aspects of identity, perspectives are rich and varied. These perspectives are not considered without engagement with sociohistorical context. For instance, not only may a white girl and a Black girls’ reading of certain pop culture phenomena be different, Black girls of differing socioeconomic or religious backgrounds may also differ, demonstrating the importance of how one’s own social context mediates their experiences and perspectives of the world around them. These intragroup differences will also be explored in the following chapter.

Any knowledge produced by subjugated groups must be counter to dominant discourse in order to create shifts in discourses that ideally lead to greater theoretical, cognitive and material outcomes, promoting equity and social justice. Much of this occurs at the site of combating dehumanizing stereotypes. According to Hill Collins, “for any discourse, new knowledge claims must be consistent with an existing body of
knowledge that the group controlling the interpretive contexts accepts as true” (p. 254-255). For instance, anti-Black girlhood philosophies generally posit Black girls as loud, sexually provocative, unintelligent, “at-risk” and troubled, leading to their criminalization and dehumanization. BGG contributes to the field of Black girlhood studies (primarily), Black and hip hop feminisms and feminist discourse perspectives to combat this narrative. This stereotype is maintained and perpetuated by the maintenance of stereotypes rooted heavily in race and gender, making a multi-axis analytical approach necessary when conceptualizing material or theoretical interventions.

Intersectionality

According to Leslie McCall (2005), intersectionality is arguably “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies…has made so far” (p 1772). Coined by Black feminist legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is a theory that was meant to describe the unique ways African American women experience oppression, particularly in terms of violence and workplace discrimination. Specifically, Crenshaw posed the analogy of an accident taking place at a physical intersection and how the criminal justice system goes about ‘investigating’ said accident:

The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is
harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (p. 149)

This explanation, as it is intended to do, poses confusion. The confusion is about which form of oppression is to blame for Black women’s social positioning and lack of justice in encounters with the legal system and represents a great conundrum. That is, is racism to blame? Is gender to blame? Perhaps the case should be dropped because it’s illegible to the legal system. Crenshaw continues:

To bring this back to a non-metaphorical level, I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides (p. 149-150).

Thus, intersectionality became a conceptual, theoretical and methodological intervention to fill gaps that fostered the erasure of Black women. It demonstrates how their very unique position in the social hierarchy made their experiences different than white women based on gender, and also different from Black men based upon race.

Intersectionality has been adapted over time to fit the theorizing of other marginalized groups, including Black girls. While Crenshaw’s analysis focuses squarely on race and gender, it now encompasses more aspects of identity, including (but not limited to) class, geography, age, sexual orientation and religion, all of which constitute unique epistemological perspectives and analyses--analyses that are not meant to be objective or neutral. In my own qualitative analyses of primary source material including interviews,
focus group and written artifacts, race, gender, age, class language and engagement with popular and hip hop cultures mediate varying and contemporary experiences of Black girlhood. These analyses, inspired by intersectionality and its conceptual, theoretical and methodological predecessors (double jeopardy and multiple jeopardy) illuminate a unique Black girl standpoint.

Black Girl Genius (BGG) centers the experiences of Black girls. When double jeopardy, multiple jeopardy and intersectionality brought conceptually new insights to Black feminist theorizing, Black women were the subjects. While intersectional analyses do lend themselves to Black girls and is one of women’s studies most well-traveled interdisciplinary theories, it is important to keep in mind that it was not originally theorized with Black girls in mind. Many Black feminist theorists define intersectionality in a way that can be inclusive to other identities. For example, Cooper (2018) defines intersectionality as “the idea that we are all integrally formed and multiply impacted by the different ways that systems of white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy affect our lives” (p. 99). This definition, which explicitly names the systems by which Black women are oppressed, does not distinguish between Black girlhood and Black womanhood. However, what does aid my analysis here is what Cooper asserts next: “Intersectionality is not only not objective, it sneers at claims to objectivity, arguing that none of us is purely objective. We all come with a perspective and an agenda. We all have skin in the game” (p. 100). This line of thought aligns with my use of feminist CDA as an analytical tool. Feminist critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis is covered more extensively in chapter two as a critical component of the theoretical
framing of the project. This is because there is not one systematic or correct way to conduct critical discourse analysis; that is, it is more “an attitude” than a method (van Dijk, 1993). According to van Dijk, it should deal primarily with the discursive dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it. Here, I see parallels between the analytic execution of both intersectionality and feminist critical discourse analysis, and argue that there is also no single, systematic way to conduct an intersectional analysis either. According to van Dijk, “critical discourse analysis is far from easy. In my opinion it is by far the toughest challenge in the discipline [discourse analysis]...it requires true multidisciplinarity, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture” (p. 253). Using intersectionality as method requires this very same approach, and the very same non-neutral stance. In fact, Black feminists, both historically and contemporarily, have used critical discourse analysis, although it is not identified as such.

According to Lazar (2007: p.142), the aim of feminist critical discourse studies “is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts...”. Further, “the interest of feminist CDA is how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re) produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people’s social and personal identities in text and talk” (p.150). Lazar argues that (feminist) critical discourse analysis prioritizes social justice and transformation. Similar to Cooper’s (2018) anti-neutrality sentiments, critical
discourse analysts emphatically proclaim, the goal of CDA is not to strive to be objective or neutral, but to expose one’s values, beliefs and attitudes as they relate to oppression, power and opposition to the status quo: “critical praxis oriented research…cannot and does not pretend to adopt a neutral stance…in fact it is scholarship that makes its biases part of its argument” (p.146). Those, both rely on an unapologetic centering of marginalized individuals by critiquing social structures. For Lazar, feminist CDA is “part of an emancipatory critical social science which…is openly committed to the achievement of a just social order through a critique of discourse…[via a] dialectical relationship between theory and practice” (p.145). Additionally, she argues that feminist CDA is a form of academic or analytical activism since scholars are raising critical consciousness through researching, teaching and reflexivity. Using both Marxian perspectives of ideology and Gramscian conceptualizations of hegemony, Lazar posits that gender ideology functions as a structure, and that modern power and dominance are effective because of cognitive internalization of gendered discriminatory ideologies. Gendered ideologies are routinely enacted “in the texts and talk of everyday life,” making power inequity seem invisible and natural (p.148).

The feminist critical discourse analysis below foreshadows the analyses of structured and semi structured interviews undertaken in the next chapter. Black feminisms, Black girlhood studies, intersectionalty and discourse studies are used to understand the interrelation of power, race, age and gender in a poem written for Black girls.
Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

The following poem titled “Black Girl Magic” is an example of an accessible pop culture creative work written by Mahogany L. Browne (2016) that undertakes the task of offering a different picture of Black girlhood by explicitly naming stereotypes that the dominant group accepts as truth:

Black girl, they say you ain’t ‘posed to be here.  
You ain’t ‘posed to wear red lipstick,  
You ain’t ‘posed to wear high heels,  
You ain’t ‘posed to smile in public,  
You ain’t ‘posed to smile nowhere, girl.  
You ain’t ‘posed to be more than a girlfriend,  
You ain’t ‘posed to get married,  
You ain’t ‘posed to want no dream that big.  
You ain’t ‘posed to dream at all.  
You ain’t ‘posed to do nothing but carry babies.  
And carry weaves.  
Felons.  
Families.  
Confusion.  
Silence.  
And carry a nation-  
But never an opinion.  
You ain’t ‘posed to have nothing to say unless it’s a joke,  
Because you ain’t supposed to love yourself Black girl.  
You ain’t supposed to find nothing worth saving in all that brown…
Black girl, you ain’t supposed to love your mind.
You ain’t supposed to love.
You ain’t supposed to be loved up on…
But tell them you are more than a hot comb and a wash n’ set.
You are Kunta Kinte’s Kin.
You are a Black girl worth remembering.
You are a threat knowing yourself.
You are a threat loving yourself.
You are a threat loving your kin.
You are a threat loving your children…
And you turning into a beautiful Black woman right before our eyes.

This poem is representative of many anti-hegemonic characteristics. First, I point out the obvious. It is a creative work, representing the historically alternative ways in which Black women and girls speak out against their dehumanization. Second, although difficult to see visually here, the poem is written in freeform, meaning it does not adhere to classic poetic conventions. Aesthetically, images of Black girls and nonlinear lines best described as ‘squiggles’ appear alongside words or different colors and fonts that are not always intended to be read from left to right, but also in circular form. Some even strewn seemingly haphazardly in various positions on the page. This may be representative of the confusion, a term very intentionally used with the body of the poem, to describe how many Black girls feel combating the metaphorical static or competing discourses Black girls encounter externally regarding their identity and dehumanization, and how they perceive themselves internally.

Next, the poem is written using Black Language. This is critical, as it both
provides an intangible/nonmaterial community for its readers, as well as offers particular epistemological ‘secret code’ for it Black women and girl readers; both critical functions of BL according to renowned sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman (2006). The use of BL represents ‘a tie that binds,’ which comes out of the US slave experience (p.3). Further, it creates, simultaneously, a sense of community and personal identity. While the book is available to anyone wanting to purchase it, its legibility and accessibility may be problematic to non-BL speakers, particularly those representative of the dominant culture, making the intended audience of the text very clear. Rooted in a clear sociohistorical context combating hegemonic stereotypes, the poem is meant to affirm Black women and girls in a way that does not require the requisite and exhausting code switching or linguistic push-pull necessary in everyday life to understand discourse written about or for us in which our own voices are largely deprioritized. Linguistic push-pull is defined by Smitherman as “Black folk loving, embracing, and using Black Talk while simultaneously rejecting and hating on it” (p. 7). This results in a sense of cultural pride, a heightened sense of understanding, and a surge in affective labor appreciation for alternative and epistemological knowledge. This makes the text more contextualized, relevant meaningful.

The poem begins by speaking directly to the Black girl (or woman, since Black girlhood is nonlinear) by addressing her very specific as ‘Black girl.’ This is immediately followed by a statement about her presence not being wanted. This can be explained in a variety of ways, ranging from physical exclusion from particular spaces, or even US society in general. This statement sets the tone for what is to come by foreshadowing to
the reader what she may experience was a result of anti-Blackgirlness. Next, the
poet presents a laundry list of things society tells Black girls they cannot do or be, the
first being that they cannot wear red lipstick. This is significant because it speaks directly
to hegemonic beauty standards that dictate what shades of lipstick are specific to dark
skin tones, representing the persistence of post-slave era colorism. For example, in 2013,
when questioned during an interview about his fashion choices felt compelled for viewers
to know that it is unacceptable for dark skinned women to wear red lipstick stating
unapologetically, “I feel like the whole red lipstick thing depends on complexion. You
have to be fair-skinned to get away with that” (Wilson, 2017). Ironically, even as an
emerging scholar aware of issues of colorism and hegemonic standards of beauty, I only
just purchased my first red lipstick in 2018 from the overwhelmingly popular Fenty
makeup line (pop star Rihanna’s makeup line tailored to women of color consumers)
after a lifetime of fearing I was too dark to experiment with bright hues. Locating myself
in an analysis of the poem in this way demonstrates the nonlinearity of Black girlhood, as
theorized by Brown (2009). It is this nonlinearity that lends itself to the methodological
disruption she refers to as homegirling—a deeper and dialogical relationship between
adult Black women and girls undertaking critical identity and social justice work.

The poet then asserts that Black girls are not supposed to smile. Because they are
forced to grow up before their time navigating the structures and strictures of anti-
Blackgirlness and white supremacy, there, hypothetically, should not be time to embrace
youthfulness, playfulness or happiness. For instance, in a survey conducted by Epstein,
Black and Gonzales (2017), it was found that Black girls are in need of less nurturing,
less protection, less support, to be comforted less, are more independent, and know more about adult topics than their white counterparts (p.1). Their adultification results in the perception of such beliefs by others. While I argue that any Black girl is subject to experience the harshness of structural inequality, my research indicates that those who come from low-income, working class poor families are more likely than their Black middle-class counterparts to be among the those viewed by others, including K-12 administration, in the manner above. This will be explored in the next chapter as a biographical sketch of program participants.

The next several lines of the poem pertain to Black girls’ romantic relationships. Here, the author argues that Black girls consistently live on the fringes of girlhood dreams of courtship, marriage, motherhood and ‘happily-ever-afters.’ Again, this is an argument to show their sociopolitical position, which is girlhood adjacent or wholly excluded from, broad girlhood theorizing. Although the poem seems to solely address heterosexual courtships to be had by cisgendered Black girls, which is indeed problematic. While this is my identity and the one I can most easily theorize, working with the afterschool club certainly exposed me to the diversity of Black girlhood, and the dangers of projecting a monolithic experience to the world. In my continued analysis of this particular poem, Black girls who fit the heteronormative mold, should more realistically accept the eternal status of baby mama, unworthy of titles such as ‘wife.’ Since state-sanctioned definitions of marriage can lend themselves to social mobility and increased perceived respectability, and because it is often the cornerstone of the heteronormative fictional fairytales girls of all backgrounds are exposed to, girls and
women are socialized to desire it. This demonstrates the non-linearity of Black girlhood, as adult Black women often seek to attain this status, even when confronted with a grim statistical outlook on marriage. While women across varying racial groups are getting married later in life, the median age at first marriage is higher for Black women than their white counterparts. Black Americans display lower marriage rates across all racial groups, causing a lower proportion of Black women to experience marriage at least once by age 40. Further, Black women have higher rates of instability, with divorce rates being higher than their white counterparts at every age (Raley, Sweeney & Wondra, 2015). These statistics continue to look bleak, affecting girls into adulthood.

While marriage is not a dream that Black girls are supposed to carry, felons, family, confusion and silence are. Here, Browne lays out the hegemonic and white heteronormative gender ideology that Black women and girls fall outside of, as they are measured against white middle-class norms. The state-gaze under which marriage operates erases its role in dismantling Black families and making the nuclear family the once socially acceptable kindship arrangement. Again, we see references to structural barriers and burdens many Black girls are forced to shoulder. Even more problematic, this is aesthetically illustrated in the text as a young girl walking with her head down. While readers do not know her exact age, we can assume she is a student because of the backpack she carries. According to the Washington Post (2016), Black men are incarcerated at six times the rate of white men. In fact, a staggering one in three Black men have a chance of going to prison in their lifetime, and one in nine Black children has a parent behind bars. Incarceration has a plethora of negative material consequences of
families that include political and financial, in addition to those that are emotional, psychological and spiritual. Thus, the author of the poem’s assertion that Black girls carrying of felons and families go hand in hand, as increased responsibilities may result in the removal of a loved one to the criminal justice system. In my own research, I was astounded at the number of participants living in single-parent homes who were responsible for providing childcare before and after school to younger siblings, or those who did hair ‘on the side’ to earn extra income--neither of which I experienced as a middle school student and contributes to their adultification. Confusion and silence are the result. Confusion stemming from lack of understanding of systemic inequality, and silence due to general anti-Blackgirlness and a dearth of spaces for them to articulate their questions, desires, frustrations and hopes. Thus, Black girls are supposed to “carry a nation, but never an opinion.” This includes school-sanctioned spaces, which is explored in this project, as well as community spaces, as explored in Brown’s (2009) groundbreaking Black girlhood program, SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths). According to Brown, Black girls are perceived as “passive dupes,” rather than valued theorists and activists working from a remixed rendition of traditional Black feminist epistemology that is located within popular and hip hop culture and discourse. Similarly, Browne argues that Black girls are not supposed to have anything to say unless it is a joke.

Browne ends her poem by talking about what a threat the Black girl is. She is ignored, silenced, perceived as joke and adultified because of her potential. Thus, she encourages Black girls to love themselves, their minds, their skin, their loved ones and
their heritage. Here, I find Browne’s (2018) work to be in direct conversation with Black feminist thinker Audre Lorde, who argued the political nature of care and love by asserting that self-care is not self-indulgence, but self-preservation and an act of political warfare. This is also true for Black girls, and precisely what the broad field of Black girlhood seeks to undertake. This project fits squarely within existing research, specifically by illuminating BGG in a safe space co-curated by Black women and girls for radical self-care, love and justice.

**Negotiating Access and the Researcher’s Role**

On November 29, 2010, I received notification that I had been selected to serve as a literacies mentor for #BlackGirlsOnFleek Afterschool Club. I recall being excited by the interest flyer I had received via email that read:

> Interested in working with African American women & girls on important life issues? We need your help in facilitating an after-school program for middle school girls! Come join us to facilitate: This year’s theme focuses on popular culture!

> #BlackGirlsOnFleek Afterschool Program supports the healthy identity development of Black women as it relates to womanhood, literacy, and overall well-being. We are looking for mentors who will commit to coming each week to meetings, participate in activities with youth which includes some outings and just being a support person. The most important criteria are concern for the educational and societal empowerment of young Black women and an open mind.

This program sparked an interest in me because I was looking for a sense of community and belonging as a new graduate student attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). Although I was studying Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies, an
interdisciplinary field committed to the intense study of all oppressed and marginalized identities, I still felt like an outsider in the department. I took for granted attending a historically Black university where although there was diversity among students, faculty and staff across the African Diaspora, everyone looked like me. Where I did not have to strategically seek out opportunities to work and fellowship with other Black women or concern myself with rules limiting the number of classes you could take outside of your home department, since everything I was interested in was offered in other departments and colleges. I quickly expressed my interest in #BlackGirlsOnFleek and eagerly waited for additional information. After completing a written questionnaire and attending several orientation meetings, I was set to begin!

I had worked with youth in the past, and honestly did not expect the life-changing experience that was yet to come. After the first few meetings, I knew this was different. I had not long ago stumbled across feminism in a women’s literature class as an undergraduate at Wilberforce University that led me to a global feminisms course abroad, but I had yet to be introduced to the musings of Black feminist scholars. I soon realized this was not the normal ‘empowerment’ program I had been used to. Although I could not articulate it then, the program was critical, creative and highly reflexive. We talked very candidly about identity and diversity. I recall one specific start of the program cycle in which one of literacy mentors was an Asian graduate student. While pondering a question very intensely and hesitating to raise her hand, one girl nervously asked if she did nails, a popular stereotype about women of Asian ancestry. As some girls laughed, we defined
the term stereotype, discussed the dangers of stereotyping, and then talked about the stereotypes of different racial groups. As we talked in depth about the stereotypes plaguing Black women and girls, we also talked about colorism, the politics of hair, and representations of Black womanhood in popular culture. Working so closely with the girls, my identity as ‘Ms. Sierra’ slowly faded away as I encountered the nonlinearity of Black girlhood. All of my challenges around the issues mentioned about that I had in my own adolescence came flooding back to me, making me realize that I had truly never healed from the emotional scars of white supremacy. As we discussed varying forms of oppression rooted in white supremacy, such as beauty standards, I realized that although I was legally no longer a girl or adolescent, participant and researcher had, and were, experiencing many of the same issues. Thus, a nonlinearity of girlhood was revealed that served to build a deep rapport with the participants. Sacred Black girl practices, such as doing and playing in each other’s’ hair became a part of our weekly program ritual. For example, participants would often practice their French braiding on me during unstructured programming times, one even styling it in a way that I wore for days afterward.

Additionally, I found myself spending more time with the girls outside of the program. Not only to conduct interviews, but to invest time in getting to know them—so they would in fact view me as a trusted homegirl. For example, one participant, Carraze, was troubled by urban developers forcing her and her low-income, home-owning grandparents to move from their home across from a strip mall to build more stores. I
fondly remember the two of us riding to the movie theater together and my attempting to make a conversation about gentrification legible to a Black girl who was forced to navigate losing her home to racist and classist ideologies as a 6th grade student. I recall this conversation vividly for two reasons: first because of conversations in the afterschool club about the importance of social mobility, home ownership, and the myth of the American Dream. Per this dream, her grandparents worked hard, retired and were able to provide for their children and grandchildren. However, they feared displacement from the house they called home for over 40 years. Second, because I realized just how precarious middle-class status was. While I identified as middle-class, I remember being worried about my debit card declining at the movie concession stand because I did not have the heart to tell Carraze she could not have popcorn, soda and candy for the movie because she was so excited. Again, I was confronted with the nonlinearity of Black girlhood. Because my identity as a graduate student had in many ways impacted the class status I was used to as a dependent of my parents, we shared and bonded over a working-class sensibility.

The project’s PI, whose research I was very familiar with from undergrad kept reiterating how my and the others’ presence was such a blessing to the girls, but it was really the other way around. My mother even got involved, making soul and comfort food for our group celebrations. It truly became a family affair. I had found the sisterhood and fellowship I had been looking for. I would continue to work with the program as literacies mentor for the next year as my course schedule permitted. As I took more
feminist theory and education courses, the program would become even more powerful and exciting for me! Further, this experience made earning a PhD a possibility. No one in my family had ever earned this degree, and the thought of pursuing it never crossed my mind. But now, it had. I worked with women intellectuals who looked like me, spoke like me, and were passionate about the same things I did. I had no idea that I could earn a PhD studying Black girls and hip hop! The volunteering, the studying and the training I had received seemed to be second nature. Even my mother was in awe, telling the PI, “thank you for taking care of my baby. I was so worried when I was pregnant because I wasn’t smart and didn’t finish high school. My baby is gonna be a doctor!” So, with the help of the PI, I mapped out what my doctoral research would look like and applied for the program. Eventually, after a brief stint on the waitlist, I was admitted.

Soon, I was one of only few consistent mentors left in the group. While I was not paid, nor did I receive any type of credit for participating, this was the first time I felt wholly accountable to a commitment. With more tools in my theoretical toolkit, I was armed for a more informed experience. I now knew why volunteers were called ‘literacy mentors.’ At first, I was confused because while we, as a group, were reading and writing together, the type of written feedback I observed the faculty PI providing to the girls was not that of grammar, punctuation, spelling or syntax. In fact, this almost went completely ignored. Instead, the writing exercises were more about critical engagement with identity and experience, and the way writing prompts were communicated, there was no “right” or “wrong” answer.” This, literacy did not mean reading in the traditional sense--not
simply a reading of the word, but a reading of the world. Richardson’s (2007) conceptualization of hip hop literacies is useful in gaining more nuanced understandings of a Black girl standpoint. According to Richardson, hip hop literacies:

Foreground[s] the ways in which Hiphoppas (those who actively participate in hip-hop culture) manipulate, as well as read and produce language, gestures, images, material possessions and people, to position and protect themselves advantageously…discourses are ways of being a certain type of person using available resources to present oneself in ways that validate a certain way of being. People internalize or appropriate images, patterns and words from the social activities in which they have participated (p.43)

As expressed by Gee (1990) and Richardson (2007), the words used to express viewpoints do not operate outside of discourse since “nobody looks at the world other than through lenses supplied by language (Gee 1990 p. 29). These words are “always connected to negotiable, changeable, and sometimes contested stories, histories, knowledge, beliefs, and values encapsulated into cultural models (theories) about the world” (Gee 1990 p. 29). If a participant had trouble with handwriting or spelling that was indecipherable, we simply asked what they meant verbally. If there was not enough context, we simply asked for elaboration in our next meeting. No grades were given. In fact, one participant with aspirations to go to art school often illustrated her thoughts through drawings and sketchings with brief captions. In #BlackGirlsOnFleek, this was acceptable—a very different philosophy than that which was allowable during the school day due to the districts emphasis on performance on standardized tests. With this
commitment, I took on increased responsibilities. On a daily basis, I was responsible for taking attendance for my own and University records, all technology (which included set up and tear down of laptops, projectors and speakers), facilitation, curriculum design, interviewing, post-session data transferring, uploading and sharing, and assisting in transcription processes.

As a graduate student, I had now studied Crenshaw (1989), Hill Collins (1990), hooks (1992), Fine (2000) and Richardson (2006) to name a few. I came into the program with the belief that I was a complex intersectional being, and that my race, gender and class identities were inseparable. I was prepared and ready to “work the hyphen,” which according to Fine (2000), is to “suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the context we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations” (p. 72). I also realized that as a co-investigator, I held a particular type of power that I needed to be cognizant of I, of course, wanted to use this power to navigate the hyphen.

My racial, class and language identity had, and continued, to help me eliminate barriers that can arise when conducting research with informants in particular settings. I grew up in a working-class family and attended school in the very same district in which the program was housed. Further I understood many of the discourse practices and colloquialisms the girls used in their day-to-day interactions with each other and others. However, I was not naive enough to render myself a complete insider--that I knew everything I needed to know about Black girlhood. I took the cue from Charles Gallagher
(2004), who argued that “being an insider because of one’s race does not mute or erase other social locations which serve to deny access, create misunderstanding, or bias interviews with those from the same racial background” (p. 205). However, my study of critical discourse perspectives taught me that research with Black girls was not meant to be unbiased or neutral. In fact, because their lives were at stake in my critique of social structures, it was supposed to be far from objective. This helped me navigate my role as a researcher more intentionally, as a quasi-insider, helping to build a rapport with participants that lasts to this very day.

Participants

In this section, I describe several participants of the study in detail. This will provide the reader with in-depth descriptions that serve to provide more context to participants’ meaning making processes as related to BGG. Biographical sketches were provided for the following girls because they participated in program for their entire middle school experience, 6th through 8th grade. The critical analyses they were able to provide overtime moves BGG from the performative realm, to a more cognitive level. While some were quite talkative, others were quiet, which is why I include both written and oral analyses in this chapter. It was important that every participant had a voice and outlet in which to express their BGG. I will begin with one of the introspective and mature participants, Kirsten, one who participated in #BlackGirlsOnFleek for her entire middle school career.
Kisten entered the after-school program as a quiet 6th grader who performed well academically, loved poetry, and was very candid about her school experiences with bullying. She was the daughter of two married parents from the continent of Africa who had stricter religious, moral, and academic values than many of the other girls. She was the youngest of three siblings, and the only girl. Her stellar academic performance and love of writing may be attributable to her mother’s career as a substitute teacher. Kirsten reminded me of myself at that age because I also experienced minor bullying for my quiet, studious behavior, dark skin and unfamiliarity with hip hop and pop cultures due to parental censorship. Her mother was quite involved and lauded the work the mentors did with the girls. While she was not always familiar with pop culture references, she was very opinionated, first in writing and later gaining the confidence to speak more publically. She was often self-conscious of this because she had an accent and spoke very quickly. Kirsten would later go on to perform her poetry at various events in the city, at a college campus academic conference on hip hop, and would even become a published poet.

In contrast, Ashley was one of the most vocal participants. She was middle child of three siblings living with a single mother. She was often responsible for caring for her younger siblings after school, which made her attendance infrequent at times. Ashley has been deemed “at risk” and troublesome by school teachers and administration, being suspended for offenses such as insubordination and fighting. She was often accused of bullying. Ashley was big in stature, vocal brown skinned, and always wore her hair in a
high ponytail. Additionally, her academic record was not satisfactory overall. I believe her involvement and interest with #BlackGirlsOnFleek was so valuable because she was so familiar with pop and hip hop culture, offering advanced analysis of Black women in media. Ashley would later move, causing us to lose contact.

Tasha was the oldest of five children and also a very vocal participant. Like Ashley, she was deemed “at-risk” and troublesome by school staff, and often experienced punitive punishments at school, such as suspension. Overall, her academic record was not satisfactory. Tasha was small in stature, light skinned, wore her hair in a variety of styles and colors, and donned acrylic nails. She was also a sneaker head, using her hair, nails and shoe game as a means to assert individuality at a school where students were mandated to wear uniforms. She too had a great familiarity with hip hop and popular cultures, which facilitated great interest in program topics. Of all the participants who entered and left the program over time, she was the only one to identify as bisexual or queer. Although she never used these terms, it was common knowledge among school staff, participants and investigators that she liked girls and was willing to speak openly and bravely about it.

Keisha was the youngest of seven children and was being raised by a single father. Earning average grades, Keisha was participatory, particularly in writing. She disliked performing or speaking in front of large groups. Like Kirsten, she had stellar program attendance, and participated in the program for her entire middle school career. Like Tasha, Keisha enjoyed doing hair and often performed braiding services as a side
hustle. Keisha was brown skinned and tall with shoulder-length hair that she often wore straightened. She was polite and mannerable and avoided many of the disciplinary run-ins Ashley and Tasha encountered. Keisha loved the pizza we ordered each week and was always laughing and chatting. She too, had a great familiarity with hip hop and popular cultures.

Sanai was the one of the middle children of five siblings. Her attendance in the program was very infrequent, particularly because of her participation on the school’s track team. She was extremely quiet and often taunted by the other girls, although she was known to verbally defend herself. I recall her dealing with her frustrations with this by leaving the space to take breaks in the hallways. There was a running joke among the mentors that she was my daughter, as I was the only one who could get her back into our meeting space to finish sessions. Sanai was tall, thin, dark skinned, and wore her relaxed hair in a high ponytail. She received below average grades and expressed very little interest in school or post-secondary education. Her most respected role model, her aunt, worked at Walmart. Sanai expressed that this was her goal because her aunt was one of few family members to hold a steady job, not receive government assistance and have her own money. Sanai was also very knowledgeable about hip hop and popular cultures. She ultimately left the program and lost touch.

Nylah was a quiet and studious student who had a love of the arts. She would later study art & design as a college student. Most of her contributions to the program took the form of poems and drawings, as she was an introvert. Nylah was larger in stature, light
skinned, wore glasses and had short natural, light brown hair. She had a very quiet laugh and was always cheerful. Nylah participated in #BlackGirlsOnFleek for her entire middle school career. Like Kirsten, her mother was very involved in the program, often lauding mentors for their work with the girls. While Nylah did not have great familiarity with hip hop and popular cultures, she made invaluable contributions to the group about Black girlhood and social stratification.

Ahmari was a quiet girl with a very soft-spoken demeanor. Ahmari lived with her older sister (I essentially know nothing about her biological parents) and loved all things fashion. This included hair and nail design and planned to study fashion design in college. She often carried around a notebook with sketches and self-authored song lyrics or poems. She spoke in a child-like voice, and typically wore her hair in a high ponytail with some type of headband or other accessory. While she tended not to participate much in group discussions, her narrative flourished in more intimate conversations, as well as in her writing. This is how I learned she had been sexually assaulted, and that this shaped her beliefs about the Black girl body.

**Data Collection Plan**

The school at which #BlackGirlsOnFleek was housed is a part of a major Midwestern school district. Sessions were held weekly at the middle school, with extra meetings sometimes scheduled on weekends. The school that sponsored the program served 520 students. 93.7% were on free or reduced lunch. The school is 100% Title I
due to high poverty. The demographic make-up of the school community is 92.5% African American; 3.5% Hispanic; 2.5% Caucasian; 1.5% “Other.” Participants in the study range from ages 11 to 15, and are in grades 6, 7, 8 and 9. The program explores identity making processes, social stratification, and popular cultural representations of Black girlhood and womanhood using various multimedia formats and creative performances, topics not typically explored within standard school curricula. In continued efforts to make this program accessible to as many Black girls as possible, there was no fee required to attend weekly sessions, and after-school transportation was provided by the school. The program provided a safe place for participants, for example, to critically consume music, dance, sing and use the colloquialisms and language most comfortable to them. In this case, the primary language was Black or African American English, which Smitherman (2006) defines as “a style of speaking words with Black Flava—with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns” (p. 3). The use of Black language was allowed, and even encouraged for those who used it regularly as a way to promote comfortability, community and identity development, all of which are critical in my attempt to define and illuminate BGG.

To truly capture BGG, this qualitative research project relies heavily upon primary data analysis, meaning that I have collected and analyzed many transcripts acquired through participant observation and semi-structured individual and group interviews. Thematic analysis was used in each transcription to code for the themes
relating to meaning making/identity development and social location, and how these ideas were mediated by popular and hip hop cultures.

All #BlackGirlsOnFleek sessions, group and individual interviews were audio-Visually recorded. Transcripts were scanned for issues pertinent to Black girlhood—readings of power, contested knowledge and meaning making. Particular attention is paid to themes about identity and respectability. Many times the girls were asked direct questions about these themes. However, in some instances, the themes emerged indirectly and were analyzed using critical discourse perspectives. Qualitative data was gathered using multiple methods of data collection: participant observation, content analysis of media texts, individual and group interviews and focus groups. The purpose of this was to triangulate my data, which functions to “map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint” (Cohen and Manion 2000). In addition to data triangulation, I also incorporated the other three triangulation types for enhanced validity. These include investigator triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and methodological triangulation. As a research project co-investigator, I cross-checked transcriptions with a faculty mentor and another doctoral student who I worked alongside very closely for the duration of the project. As an
interdisciplinary project, I incorporate theories from various schools of feminist thought, girlhood studies and the field of critical discourse studies to understand, code and analyze data. Lastly, methodological triangulation is used to understand engagement in different contexts—on an individual level, and among peers and researchers.

I draw heavily upon Denzin’s (2001) conceptualization of ‘the interview’ as reflexive, dialogic and performative. Thus, I worked diligently not to over-structure interviews or discussions, or (de)prioritize the experiences of Black girlhood that the participants elected to share with me. I emphatically agree with Denzin that “doing interviews is a privilege granted to us, not a right that we have” (24). Acquiring the trust of the girls—committing to the act of homegirling— in this study is a process that was (and continues) to be laborious (in terms of the affective work involved), time-consuming and on-going. Further, understanding the interview in this way contributes to my undertaking of the academic activism that is hip hop feminist praxis and feminist discourse analysis. Denzin, like many critical discourse analysts, is very explicit in his articulation of how language and power are inextricably linked:

[A reflexive project presumes that words and language have a material presence in the world: that words have effects on people. Words matter. I imagine a world where race, ethnicity, class gender and sexual orientation intersect; a world where language and performance empower, and humans can become who they wish to
be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination. Those who write culture using reflexive interviews are learning to use language in a way that brings people together. The goal is to create critically empowering texts which demonstrate a strong fondness…for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people. These texts do more than move audiences to tears. They criticize the world the way it is and offer suggestions about how it could be different (p. 24).

Denzin’s approach has proven useful in my feminist critical discourse analysis as I am using ‘the interview’ to bring the experiences of Black girls from margin to center, to make academics, teachers and policy makers aware of their unique perspectives and needs, and to offer praxis-oriented interventions to make the world a better place. While this may seem like an unrealistically altruistic goal, each piece of scholarship, each girls’ program, each seminar, each conference and each class focusing on these issues will culminate in a small degree of social change, and I am grateful and proud to be a part of the movement. Further, “writing culture” (Denzin, 2001) in a reflexive, dialogical way requires one of the same core principles as feminist critical discourse analysis: not taking a neutral stance and being open about one’s biases and how/why they inform one’s work—which I do in this project.

I very intentionally apply critical discourse perspectives to analyses of all written, spoken and otherwise signified artifacts/texts not only for theoretical and/or methodological purposes, but also to make a very explicit political statement about the
work I am undertaking. To organize hundreds of hours of audio-visually recorded data
and a dense log of written participant journals, I systematically selected to transcribe and
code eight transcripts (each approximately two hours in length) and analyzed
approximately 40 pages of written material (such as surveys, poems and notes). Once I
arrived home after each weekly two-hour session, I would recall what I saw, heard and
experienced during the program in my field notes. I would also re-watch recordings and
recreate conversations, as I tried not to take many notes during the program. Students
were interviewed for this particular project from fall 2012 to spring 2015. This gave me
the opportunity to work with many of the participants throughout their entire middle
school career (even attending graduation). I did not interview school staff for several
reasons, primarily because it was outside the scope of the study and they often (perhaps
unknowingly) upheld dangerous stereotypes of Black girls’ “at-riskness,” loudness,
hypersexuality and academic inadequacies.

**Procedures**

Interviews were an integral part of the study and encompass a large amount of
primary source material. Each #BlackGirlsOnFleek session lasted approximately two
hours in length. A typical program day consisted of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:30</td>
<td>School dismissal/participants begin to arrive at program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30-2:45</td>
<td>Arrival and attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45-2:55</td>
<td>Journaling &amp; sharing and/or media screening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:55-3:40</td>
<td>Curriculum delivery &amp; activity (group interviews/focus groups conducted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:40-3:55</td>
<td>Snack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The semi-structured group interviews were conducted first, with as needed follow-up on an individual basis outside of school. Group interviews worked better than individual interviews at the school because during certain times of the academic year, #BlackGirlsOnFeek was forced to compete with school-sponsored activities, such as athletics and clubs, which made attendance infrequent. Interviews were conducted in a manner that was meant to spark conversation and build rapport. The interviews that sparked that yielded the least data were initial ones on about their age, siblings/family, and date of birth, although they did lay the foundation for later interviews. Many of the interview questions were open-ended and unstructured, as I felt they needed to be constructed on an ongoing basis to keep up with and address both ever-changing pop culture phenomena and each participant’s most current experiences with identity and meaning making.
Data Management Plan

All group interviews and focus groups were audio and visually recorded. This was done to not only capture what was said, but also accompanying discourse practices used by the participants. Each weekly two-hour session was recorded during each academic school year for three years, resulting in approximately 216 hours of data. Rather than paying a transcription service company, I was trained by a nationally renowned sociolinguist and critical discourse analyst to transcribe data myself. This eliminates errors, allows speaker overlaps to be captured, picks up (and validates) Black Language, and illuminates the actions of the speakers. For example, it is easier to see and analyze cruces points. sites of contention/negotiation in the girls’ meaning making processes. This occurs when a discursive crisis occurs, and a participant struggles to correct a communication problem (Fairclough, 1992). This is evident by the girls’ use of certain discourse practices as a way to cope with affronts to their humanity. These discourse practices include silence (Richardson, 2006), representin’ (Richardson, 2007); situated manipulation of raced and gendered sexual stereotypes (Richardson, 2013; Durham, 2012); and talkin’ with attitude (Koonce, 2012; Troutman, 2010), which function as ‘red flags.’ Transcripts were only available to those who were formally listed as researchers on the project. Digital transcripts are available on my personal computer, which is
password protected. Written artifacts, such as drawings, poems and journal entries, were scanned and protected on this computer.

**Data Analysis**

After conducting interviews, transcribing data, editing my transcripts, and reading over data several times over the course of months, I used the “open coding” method to analyze my data. The process of “open coding” means to chunk data into categories that represent categories, often times based on language of the participants (Creswell, 2003). This allowed me to begin asking analytical questions and identify these codes in existing literature by interdisciplinary scholars doing similar work. After thoroughly scanning the corpus, themes of “thoughts on school experience,” “identity/Black girlhood,” “racism,” “beauty standards,” “sexual expressivity,” “respectability” “hip hop,” “popular culture,” and “Heteronormative Cinderella fairy tales” “empowerment/choice.”
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which Black middle school girls perform and make meaning of instantiations of #BlackGirlMagic in school-sanctioned spaces. This lens allows them to think about their relationship to social structures and a feminist lens. This lens allows them to think about their relationship to social structures and intellectually apply their collective knowledge, resulting in advanced and critical analyses. I term these resulting analyses Black Girl Genius (BGG). I define BGG as gender, race, age and class specific language, art, performative arts and musical sensibilities used to enact freedom at a time of national Black violability and anti-Blackgirlness. BGG illuminates a unique Black girl standpoint, which differs from the standpoint theorizing done by and for adult Black women in the field of Black Feminist Thought. This is significant, as girls experience intersections differently based upon age, historical context, and engagement with hip hop and popular culture.

Investigating their engagement with hip hop and popular culture led to rich and descriptive primary source data as the girls revealed their truths about what it means to be a Black girl in contemporary America. The terms ideology, hegemony and respectability are the foundations of the study’s findings.
Ideology

The study’s working definition for ideology is taken from Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who defines it as “a body of ideas reflecting the interests of a particular group” (p. 351). I use ideology to ground the girls’ ideas about what they believe is true about race, gender, class and girlhood. In a culture where resources, wealth, power and status are unequally distributed, social and political ideas are nothing more than the “ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (Marx, 1977: p. 251). These interests or ideas are rooted in control and are necessary to maintain the social hierarchy. Marx also asserts that ideology is an “upside-down” version of reality. In other words, things are not really the way the powerful believe they are, but instead how they want them to be-- the way it “needs” to be if their power is to be maintained in material ways. Girls in this study identified and grappled with anti-Black girl framings and practices such as adultification, stereotypes of being “loud, defiant, and precocious,” and more likely than their white counterparts to be reprimanded for being “unladylike” (Morris, 2016; Blake et al., 2010), leading to contact with the criminal justice system. For the process of ideology to work, Gramsci (1971) argues that the powerful must organize society and its institutions (such as education, the media and the government/politics) in a manner that encourages ways of thinking and behaving that enhance their interests. I refer
to ideology as a process in the preceding sentence because it is not permanent or complete, but rather fragile and must continuously be strategically maintained. Otherwise, those in power run the risk of losing their status in the social hierarchy. The afterschool program and the emphasis on discovering BGG through critical consciousness is an attempt to disrupt problematic ideological assumptions about Black girlhood. The girls participating in the study had an astute awareness of stereotypes regarding race, class, gender and youth, which made them theorists in their own right. According to Hill Collins (1990) “For African American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (p. 209). I extend this type of epistemological privilege specifically to Black girls. These experiences allowed participants to read, interpret and make meaning of the world around them, as well as to identify moments of resistance against status quo ideology. I concur with and seek to build upon Brown’s (2009) assertion that “Black girls know the answers to a wide universe of things but nobody is asking them any questions. We live in a complicated world and Black girls are complex beings. Nobody gives Black girls credit for being complex and negotiating the height of those complexities” (p.34).
Hegemony

Closely related to the concept of ideology is hegemony. In this study, hegemony functions as a domain of power. It is how and where the process of ideology is carried out. According to Hill Collins (1990), the hegemonic domain acts a link between social institutions (the structural domain), organizational practices (the disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (the interpersonal domain). Hill cites both the media and school curricula as important social locations for “common sense” ideas to flourish, which are the two sites explored in this study. Further, regarding the hegemonic domain, Hill Collins argues:

The significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images symbols, and ideologies. As Black women’s struggles of for self-definition suggest, in contexts such as those were ideas matter, reclaiming the ‘power of a free mind’ constitutes an area of resistance. Thus, the hegemonic domain becomes a critical site for not just fending off ideas from dominant culture but crafting counter-hegemonic knowledge that fosters changed consciousness (p. 285).

The goal of the afterschool program and BGG is to provide a space for self-definition and decolonizing of the mind. This is done through a host of discussions, writing and embodied creative projects. Further, the program itself extended far beyond warding off dehumanizing ideologies but promoted the articulation of counter-hegemonic knowledge. Because each girl came to the program with a different story, background, experiences, values and feelings, their understandings of what these empowering counter-knowledges
look and feel very different. There is no monolithic or essentialist notion of Black
girlhood or BGG presented in this study, However, what they do have in common is
gender, age and youth, which creates a sense of community and belonging. This is
because, as Cooper (2018) suggests, “Black girls of every age need other Black girl who
can hold their truths. We need each other to survive” (p. 18). The community theorizing
done in the program is a proactive response to hegemonic ideology, rather than a reactive
one. Critiquing hegemony is a reactive exercise, that is, it is typically done after some
type of spiritual, emotional or material wronging has already occurred. Co-constructing
counter knowledge prepares participants to navigate future inequities.

**Sexuality, The Politics of Respectability and Hypervisibility**

Contemporary hip hop feminist scholars are continually concerned with the ways
in which Black women’s sexuality is misinterpreted and pathologized in all three of the
aforementioned ideological domains (Collins, 1990). The politics of respectability
describes a range of strategies, largely regarding notions of honor, self-respect, piety, and
propriety, deployed by progressive black women to promote racial uplift and women’s
rights and to secure broader access to the public sphere” (Durham, Cooper & Morris,
2014; p. 724). A seemingly invincible ideological and material reactionist strategy, “the
politics of respectability also provided a platform from which these progressive black
women could indict the de jure and de facto racist and misogynist practices they
experienced daily” and that Blacks would experience greater access to full citizenship status, greater access, opportunities and mobility (p. 724). However, because it also employs tactics such as surveillance, control, and repression, its political gains were costly in promoting a mask—self-imposed silencing and interracial divide. For the purpose of this study, respectability is understood as a strategy deployed primarily by the Black middle class to demonstrate their belief in, and adherence to, upholding dominant societal norms.

Similarly, another similar strategy critical to the evolution and development of Black feminist theorizing is Evelyn Hammonds’ conceptualization of the hypervisibility/hyperinvisibility dichotomy. In response to a history of racialized and gendered sexual exploitation, Black women exist in a space where their bodies are “always already colonized” (Hammonds, 1997, p. 94). Understanding the complexities of negotiating sexuality in Black womanhood are usually understood beginning with the genealogy of Sarah Bartmaan (also known as the Hottentot Venus) and shape negative cultural constructions of Black sexuality. The pseudoscientific medical discourses generated by socially constructing race and pathologizing Black female sexuality supported theories such as “the great chain of being,” which positioned the Black race as antithetical to whites on the scale of humanity, genetically comparable to primates.
Within these discourses, Baartman’s overall aesthetic represented unbridled Black female hypersexuality as spectacle, evidenced by her European carnival performances. This stereotype was used to justify rape, sexual abuse and enslavement. Conversely, white womanhood became representative of purity, chastity, and protection; the very antithesis of Black womanhood.

The 19th century and beyond evinced the sexual harassment, attack and intense policing of women’s bodies, and Black women’s protective strategies such as sexual invisibility, otherwise known as the politics of silence and the culture of dissemblance became popular. The “politics of silence” emerged as a political and social strategy of “Black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral Black woman” (Hammonds, p. 85). Similarly, “the culture of dissemblance” emerged as a way for Black women to “protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” (p. 97). It is characterized as “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors…Only with secrecy…thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed
to hold their own” (p. 97). It is within this space that the projection of the hypermoral Black woman that individuals and groups (such as the Black Women’s Club Movement) sought to “garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity for all Black Americans” (p. 98). Continuing to function as a survival strategy under other names (such as DuBois’ Talented 10th), strategies of respectability reek of broken neoliberal promises of meritocracy and freedom and are not guaranteed to thwart the dehumanizing effects of systemic oppression on a wide scale. However, Black people across the Diaspora continue to employ them in the hopes that they will rise above and become exempted from stereotypes and hegemonic ideologies. In fact, respectability is something many Blacks, particularly girls, are taught from a very young age despite it not being explicitly referred to as such. In fact, it is the non-compliance with respectability in school that deems Black girls’ unteachable, criminal and at-risk, which I also explored in previous chapters.
Engaging the girls in thinking about what it meant to be Black girls in the US revealed negotiation of their truths and identities against various hegemonic ideologies aimed at them. A central and complex question guided the program’s focus and was asked at the beginning of each year and periodically: “how do you feel about being a Black girl?” This question was asked verbally and required participants to write a short response in their journal. While the question is somewhat vague and very open-ended, it allowed me to gauge how the girls feel about their identity. Kirsten, a three-year participant wrote this:

I feel happy and very good, but at the same time I don’t feel appreciated because other Black girls always make fun of other Black girls like me and I’m kinda sic[k] of it. I don’t want to die but I want to see change in society (Kirsten, Written Artifact, 2013).

This journal entry is significant for two reasons, it demonstrates that there is no monolithic Black girl identity and that Black girls are complex beings with a multitude of experiences. The competing discourses displayed here by Kirsten are that she simultaneously feels “happy and very good” about being a Black girl, but that she is “sick” of being bullied for being different. While Kirsten shares the commonalities of age, race, geographical location, school, gender and class, her ethnicity is different and causes her to be “othered.” She is African and speaks with an African accent and does not
appeal to hegemonic standards of beauty (as many of us did not by societal standards). For instance, she wears her hair in natural braided styles, has a full nose and lips and has a slightly different cultural value system in terms of religion. hooks (2003) contends that “the most obvious internalization of shame that impacts the self-esteem of Black folks historically and continues to the present day is the shame about the appearance, skin, color, body shape and hair texture” (p. 37). Bullying was an ongoing problem for Kirsten, however, she stayed in the program (which included some of those who bullied her) to build her self-concept. Analyzing her journal entry led me to bell hooks’ musings on essentialism in which she states, “When Black folks critique essentialism, we are empowered to recognize multiple experiences of Black identity…” (p. 29). Further, Hall (1983) wrote that “the essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference…” (p. 20). Encouraging the girls to appreciate differences within the group served to disrupt the creation and maintenance of intragroup hierarchy in the interpersonal domain (Hill Collins, 1990) and work toward building counter-knowledges representative of BGG. This entry also demonstrates the urgency of praxis-oriented Black girlhood studies interventions because suicide is explicitly mentioned as though it may represent an option to escape internalized oppression rooted in racism and hegemonic ideology. Her entry is reminiscent of Ntozake Shange’s (1980) “For Colored Girls Consider Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf,” a choreopoem about struggle, empowerment and sisterhood, represents the psychological challenges faced by Black girls and women who are socialized to be emotionally impenetrable. While all three of
the hegemonic domains to which Hill Collins (1990) refers are applicable more broadly, the work done with the participants was primarily rooted in the interpersonal domain and reflected the meaning making that took place in routine, day-to-day interactions. It is here that we must begin in order to talk about structural and institutional hegemony that is maintained and manifested in schools and popular media.

Addressing the same prompt about what it feels like to be a Black girl, Ahmari was often quiet during group discussions, but extremely reflective and candid in her writing: “I feel good most of the time but mostly men and boys think they can touch you whenever they want to” (Ahmari, Written Artifact, 2013).

I recall reading this the evening following the discussion and being absolutely overwhelmed with grief. Of all the things that could have been said about Black girlhood, Ahmari elected to share something rooted in trauma to capture her experience. Equally important was her demeanor during the session. As she wrote her truth among myself and the other girls, she engaged in the normal side conversations that often occurred at inopportune times, smiling and laughing with those sitting at her table. It was as if nothing was wrong. Approximately five years later in reading Cooper’s (2018) *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, I made a powerful connection between this moment and what she refers to as the “intersectional conundrums that shape...Black-girl life” (p.100). In masking her anger and rage with a looming and unexpected personal situation, Cooper was required to immediately to fulfill an obligation to speak:
I couldn’t fall apart like I wanted to because, well, I’m a Black girl, and we don’t get the luxury of doing frivolous shit like that. This was an invitation to speak at Harvard, after all. Business always comes first, broken hearts later. Black women’s historian Darlene Clark Hine coined a term for the performance I was putting on. She called it the “culture of dissemblance,” this enigmatic way that Black women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries moved through the world...giving the appearance of being open while fully obscuring the operations of their inner lives from public view (p. 100-101).

The strategy Cooper adopted in this particular instance as an adult Black woman, Ahmari had learned and become adept at performing as a middle school girl. While we had not discussed or theorized the culture of dissemblance as group, Ahmari had been socialized to navigate the structures and strictures of the anti-Blackgirlness that prevents so many of them from living a carefree Black girlhood that forces them to grow up before their time (Brown, 2009).

Shortly after this writing prompt was posed, a similar one was posed to the participants that further pointed to awareness of and reliance on the culture of dissemblance as a survival strategy. The question was “What would you teach a Black girl from another planet? Why?” This question was posed for understanding of how participants would convey their understanding of a Black girlhood not mediated by the white supremacist structures and strictures they were navigating. The planet from which this Black girl came was one I imagined epitomized full citizenship, carefree girlhood and innocence. Tasha wrote in her journal one short, incomplete sentence: “how to scream rape, fight, tell people to stop” (Tasha, Written Artifact, 2013). Like Ahmari, this was not something Tasha addressed publicly in the larger group. Further, it was not something she desired to speak about, resulting in routine behavior during this and
subsequent sessions. For Tasha, this sentiment seemed “normal” and commonplace, although I am sure it was only because a safe space had been curated at #BlackGirlsOnFleek in which she felt comfortable in sharing with me. Again, a dependence on dissemblance as a coping strategy to dealt with trauma is evident in how several of the study’s participants make meaning of Black girlhood. I also read this strategic dissemblance as a particular discourse practice--silence. This performance allows Black girls, such as Tasha and Ahmari to “make a way out of no way” (Richardson, 2002; p. 680). A discourse practice also represents “something broader to which events and patterns of activity are linked” (p. 687). While this incident was explored in greater detail with Tasha, I electively do not share details here for the purposes of privacy and being responsible to her. In the words of Richardson, “the strategic use of silence is also a communication strategy used... to resist perpetuation of distorted images of Black female sexuality and womanhood. Some acts and thoughts have no need to be discursively detailed since ‘everybody's business ain’t nobody’s business’ (p. 690). This continues to be one of the myriad of ways I strive to hold Black girls’ truths (Cooper, 2018).

On Being A Black Girl: Reading the World and Talkin’ Wit Attitude in the Classroom

This research indicates that Black girls have an astute understanding of how they are read in both school and society at large. Much of this understanding comes from historically
persistent and pervasive stereotyping that shows up in contemporary popular culture, including television, music, and social media. For example, when specifically asked how she thought adults at school perceived Black girls, one 7th grade participant, Erica, authored the following journal entry:

No education
We don’t listen
We drop out of school
Disrespectful to teachers
We sit in the back
We have low grades/no knowledge
Loud, mad
Roll our eyes and head (Erica, Written Artifact, 2013)

Erica’s understanding of dangerous hegemonic ideologies in the interpersonal domain is astonishing. Here, Erica articulates that institutional education reads Black girls’ actions as school failure; but centering the Black girls’ perspective, we see these performances of “attitude” as a form of resistance to anti-BlackGirlness. After reading this journal entry, I verbally asked Erica “how do you feel about teachers thinking this way about you?” She pursed her lips and shrugged her shoulders indicating that she was indifferent or unbothered. The conversation progressed as follows:

1. Facilitator: Do you try to do things in class that make them think differently? Like in a 2. better way? A positive way about Black girls?
3. Facilitator : Mmm...not really. I know that’s not me. And not all my teachers think that 4. way, just some.
5. Facilitator: Why you think that is?
6: Erica: I guess some Black girls act like that but, not all. Like, if I know it’s not true, I 7: ignore it. And it seems like the white teachers get mad faster. Like…they send you to
Erica gets more specific in her articulation of teacher stereotyping or how she is read by distinguishing differences in disciplinary practices by race. For Erica, white teachers are less patient, and more likely to assign harsher punishments to Black girls, a statistic validated by both Morris (2016) and Ocean et. al (2015). This racialized critique is an example of BGG in which Eric makes an example between race and punitive punishments that have the potential to lead to school-to-confinement pathways (Morris, 2016).

As I reflect on my own experiences of Black girlhood, as a 7th grade girl, I would have never believed the adults who worked with me on an everyday basis felt this way about my humanity, despite having gone to a school with a very similar demographic, and even having one of the same middle school teachers the participants in the study had at the time. Using the pronoun ‘we” in her journal entry, Erica, in the communal safe space of the #BlackGirlsOnFleek program, does not distinguish herself or other participants from this generalization of the narrative of the recalcitrant Black girl. The recalcitrant Black girl that the politics of respectability may not save. Erica’s demeanor was mostly quiet, studious and participatory. However, I would learn that these attributes did not always translate to the traditional classroom, where Erica expressed boredom and disinterest due to a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and what she determined was an overemphasis on state testing. This is one of the first incidents that allowed me to realize
that the girls showed up differently in the program than they did in the classroom. Talking about identity, hip hop and popular culture, valuing their knowledge and opinion, and building rapport via the homegirling methodology truly facilitated authentic relationships based on mutual respect, openness and honesty. Erica’s assessment of the demeanor Black girls possess, “loud, mad. Rolling our eyes,” is a distinct discourse practice that is strategically employed. According to Richardson (2006) Black women and girls employ certain discourse practices to psychologically protect themselves from affronts to their humanity. Being read as loud, defiant and mad while rolling one’s eyes is a discourse practice referred to as TWA, or “Talkin’ Wit Attitude” (Troutman, 2010).

TWA is more than simply a bad attitude:

For many African Americans that self-identify as members of the AASC [African American Speech Community], attitude holds another layer of meaning, including to the extent that attitude becomes manifested overtly, through language and kinesics, by a speaker’s ability to talk with an attitude, walk with an attitude, act with an attitude, be with an attitude. In many instances within the AASC, then, attitude actions are marked distinctly and can be read by other group members. These are actions that are learned socio-culturally in socially real contexts (p. 7).

Troutman goes on to state that those outside the African American Speech Community (AASC), such as administrators and teachers, may look at TWA negatively, but those representative of the AASC may not. When I observed TWA in #BlackGirlsOnFleek, and even in other contexts to this very day, I do not automatically assume my authority is being challenged. In fact, I have never thought this because I, as Troutman asserts, engaged in it playfully in daily or ritualistic homegirl dialogues. The following section will explore the intersection of ideology hegemonic, respectability and TWA more fully in Black girls’ analyses of visual hip hop and popular cultures.
Reading Black Womanhood in Visual Popular and Hip Hop Cultures

There continues to be a dearth of representations of Black girlhood in popular and hip hop cultures (Lindsey, 2013). At the time this research was conducted several years ago, there were even fewer representations, forcing my focus on Black girls’ analyses of Black womanhood. In her 2013 article “One Time For My Girls: African American Girlhood, Empowerment and Popular Visual Culture,” Black and hip hop feminist scholar Treva Lindsey poses questions I will explore in this and the following chapter:

1. How would analysis of representation shift if the focus were on African-American children and adolescents?
2. What are the core and subtle differences and similarities between the politics of representation for African-American adults and for African-American children and adolescents?
3. Do representations of African-American children and adolescents require different theoretical frameworks to uncover the particularities of their experiences with representational politics in mass media?

Analyses of representation shift considerably when focusing exclusively on youth. This largely has to do with issues of age, cognitive ability and consent. While girls are absolutely capable of learning about the sociohistorical baggage that has led to stereotypical, hegemonic and problematic representations of Black womanhood just as adult Black women, research indicates that exposure to such images are linked to Black girls’ hypersexual performances of femininity, their increased preoccupation with appearance in their own lives, as well as attitudes about sexual roles and relationships (Gordon, 2008; Stephens & Few, 2007; Ward, 2001).

In providing historical context for how Europeans exploited African people, labor and resources, the girls viewed a documentary on the life of Sarah Bartmaan.
Additionally, this viewing also served to start a conversation about how this type of economic exploitation is the same or different in contemporary American popular culture and material life. As a group, we sought to humanize Bartmaan by talking about how she may have felt. In doing so, one participant, Kirsten, likened her experiences of loneliness and bullying to Bartmaan in the form of poetry:

Me

Trapped
Teased
Punished

People say that I am a creature
Looking in despair
People looking at the behind
Impressed
Laughing
And mouths open looking at me

How I feel

Me
Trapped
Teased
Punished

People say that I am loud
Looking in despair
Mad, sad,
LONELY!!
Sad that I am exposed
Not by cloth
But by humiliation

This is a very sophisticated comparative analysis in which Kirsten makes parallels between her girlhood experiences of bullying to Bartmaan’s experiences, both which result in them feeling “trapped, teased, punished,” “lonely” and “humiliated.” In addition
to Kirsten’s deep engagement with the text (which in this case was a documentary), she is also demonstrating courage and bravery as again, some of her bullies were also participants in the program. Again, this speaks to Cooper’s (2018) argument that Black girls, no matter their age, need other Black girls to survive. Over time, we began to break down the walls between Kristen and some of the other girls, and Kristen developed and increased sense of self. Specifically, we spoke about why Kristen was made to feel bad about her skin color, African accent, or natural hair, and linked all of these things to white supremacy. Kristen and I deduced that these were probably some of the very same things that aided in Bartmaan’s exploitation, drawing another humanizing historical connection. Being able to draw these types of parallels, those rooted in white supremacy, throughout history to humanize other Black women and girls is indeed a feminist project and yet another example of BGG.

In attempt to make the content explored in the program more engaging, I often asked the girls how they engaged in celebrity culture. That is, who they were watching and listening to. The overwhelming majority of the girls in the program had an interest in the performative politics of rapper Nicki Minaj. Exploding onto the mainstream music industry in 2010 with her debut album Pink Friday, international hip hop star Nicki Minaj is the only female solo artist to have seven singles on the Billboard Hot 100 chart at the same time (Iandoli, 2010), as well as the only female artist to appear on Music Entertainment Television’s (MTV) Annual Hottest MC List (MTV Staff, 2012). In April 2013, Minaj became the most-charted female rapper in the history of the Billboard Hot 100 (Trust, 2013). Minaj has traversed the boundaries of the music industry with voice-
over work in the 2012 children’s animated film *Ice Age 4: Continental Drift*, and earned a judge’s seat on *American Idol*, one of the most successful television shows in the history of American television.

Born Onika Tanya Maraj in Trinidad and Tobago, the artist is said to have adopted the moniker ‘Minaj’ in 2007 at the recommendation of a manager in order to sexualize her image prior to the debut of her mixtape *Play Time is Over*, which begins with a faux telephone call to 1-900-MS-MINAJ, a sex hotline. The moniker, a grammatical play on the French term ménage à trois, refers to a domestic arrangement in which three persons live and engage in consensual sexual relations together. In American and European cultures, it refers to consensual, casual sexual relations occurring between three persons who do not have a domestic arrangement and is commonly referred to as a threesome. Thus, it is evident that from its inception, Minaj’s celebrity persona was constructed to be overtly sexual. Traditional Black feminist readings of Minaj’s performative politics would likely argue that her persona was designed to conjure ‘hypersexual’ tropes of Black womanhood parallel to the iconography of the jezebel. A conceptualization predating the slave era, the controlling image of the jezebel functions to perpetuate the ideology of the deviant, hypervisible and available Black woman that sociopolitical strategies, such as the politics of respectability, sought to deflect. I anticipated that respectability politics would play a significant role in the girls’ meaning.
making and analysis, which is what took place.

During one particular session, the group watched a video performed by an all-Black girl rap group called Watoto From the Nile titled “Letter to Nicki Minaj.” In this video, the performers implore Minaj to use her celebrity to empower girls with political messages, rather than rely on what they deem to be non-political provocative lyrics and dress that perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black womanhood. Below is an excerpt from the group discussion. The lines are numbered for easy reader reference. Each participant is identified by a pseudonym, and brackets are used to indicate overlap, inaudibility and the use of actions identified in the project as discourse practices. The excerpt is followed by an analysis informed by Black girlhood studies, hip hop feminism and feminist critical discourse studies. Using Durham’s (2010) Hip Hop Feminist Media Studies model, the themes explored are (1) Nicki Minaj’s performance of Black female sexuality and (2) Nicki Minaj’s influence on identity development.

“She Ratchet” and Respectability

1. Facilitator: Be writing down notes. Nobody should ask me again what this is
2. about…OK, Imma stop it [referring to the Watoto from the Nile video]. Why do they
3. have that image in there of the behind?
4. Ashley: Cuz that’s what she look like.
5. Erica: Cuz that’s what they’re trying to tell them not to do. And she ratchet.
6. Ashley: Cuz she ratchet [inaudible overlap; smacks lips]...
7. Facilitator: I appreciate the fact that ya’ll wanna see this again, but you gotta also
8. understand that you can get your information from other ways, too. Right? I wanted to
9. capture your attention by showing you this rap because these girls are talking about
10. something. Something important about how artists should be responsible to you, not
11. just show you the sexual parts of art, right? You know she [Minaj] understands that
12. children watch her, right? That’s what these girls are talking about.
13. Ashley: Ok, let me tell you this. My mom’s friend [smacks lips]…well not her
14. friend...[self- corrects]…my mom’s friend’s daughter [smacks lips]…she actin’ jus
15. like Nicki Minaj. She dress like Nicki Minaj. She try to be…she... actin’ just like
17. Facilitator: Why?
18. Ashley: She ratchet, flat out.
19. Facilitator: Why? Because she wants to be like her?
20. Ashley: Yes... [inaudible]. She said that dudes don’t like her.
21. Keisha: A girl used to go here posts stuff on Facebook like she doesn’t care…like she
22. say Barbie and stuff like that. I’m like, you need to read a book and sit down.
23. Tasha: I argued with this dude, we was like really, really arguing’. I was ‘bout to fight
24. him cuz I said that Nicki Minaj was ugly and he got mad at me. And all his friends…
25. Facilitator.: [overlap] She’s not ugly.
26. Tasha: Yes she is.
27. Facilitator: We gotta stop callin each other ugly. She’s not ugly. We might not like her art.
28. We might not like some of the things she does.
29. Keisha: She ugly.
30. Facilitator.: Why do we call each other ugly? Where does that come from
[inaudible]... If
31. we’re all created in the image of God, how is somebody ugly? Why do we call each
32. ugly? (Resumes and stops video) What did her dad tell her (referring to young female
33. rapper in the video)?
34. Erica: Once she start listenin’ to Nicki Minaj, it will lead her to destruction.
35. Tasha: He don’t want his daughter bein’ like that with her fast and ugly self!
36. Facilitator: What’s some of the stuff she (Minaj) raps about that would lead you to
37. destruction?
38. Ashley: Stupid hoe!
39. Facilitator.: OK.
40. Keisha: Beez in the trap!
41. Facilitator: OK. What’s the trap?
42. Several girls simultaneously: A drug house.
43. Facilitator: OK, OK,. So definitely the content she’s talkin’ ‘bout is not gone
44. bring you class mobility. Not from an educational standpoint.
45. Tasha: And she said she was voting’ for Mitt Romney.
46. Shawna: Oh yeah!
47. Ashley: OK she dumb! If she voting’ for Mi..Mi…Ro…What the f…[self-corrects].
48. I mean, whatever his name is, she clearly ain’t gone have a job with her dumb self!
49. Tasha: She rich, that’s why!
50. Ashley: Fake Barbie!
51. Facilitator: And why do you think they put the father figure in this video?
52. Ashley: Cuz dads need to step up and tell they kids…[overlap, inaudible]. They
53. wanna show you how a man is supposed to treat you.
54. Tasha: Miss, miss, miss…[self-corrects] They don’t want their daughter bein’
55. ratchet. Ashley: Yeah, rubbin’ on other girls’ booties.
### Table 1
Analysis of Critical Meaning Making Discourse Patterns Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gendered Hip hop language usage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ratchetness</strong>- A racialized, gendered and classist term used to define Black women or girls whose articulation of sexuality does not fit within the parameters of respectability politics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why would they [conscious young girls] want to be like ratchetness?</strong> (Ratchetness in this case used as a noun to refer to Nicki Minaj as the embodiment of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal fictions and antitheses of Black womanhood)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ratchet</strong>- In this case used to personify Minaj’s essence as false Black womanhood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Signifyin</strong>- A style of verbal play that focuses humorous statements of double meaning on an individual, an event, a situation, or even a government. Signifyin can provide playful commentary or serious social critique couched in the form of verbal play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Because that’s what she look like</strong> (In response to teacher’s question about image of Black woman’s behind in the video). The speaker is critiquing in a playful manner Nicki Minaj’s exaggerated use of her behind. The speaker reduces her to this body part.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…[S]he say she Barbie and stuff like that. I’m like, you need to read a book and sit down. (Speaker juxtaposes Minaj’s stereotypical performance of Black womanhood (she say she Barbie) to illiteracy [she] need to read a book and sit down)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fake Barbie!</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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When asked by the focus group facilitator why a lone image of Nicki Minaj’s buttocks is displayed so prominently in one scene from the Watoto from the Nile “Letter to Nicki Minaj” video, Ashley responds “cuz that’s what she look like.” Ashley observes and agrees with Watoto’s critique of Minaj’s unabashed prominent accentuation of her buttocks in her performances of Black womanhood based on her own adolescent understanding of hypervisible Black female sexuality. The speaker’s reading of Minaj points to several layers of meaning. Budding hip hop feminist such as Ashley revel in the power of the beauty of Minaj’s booty and its ability to command the contrived space of
commercial hip hop. Without question Minaj is the center of beauty and power. Among core hip hop fans this celebration of Black female assets opposes Anglo beauty standards, as Minaj’s buttocks and vivacious figure is helping to redefine the idea of beautiful. Specifically, Erica references Minaj’s Barbie persona. Created in 1959 as a thin, able-bodied, white, blonde, heterosexual girls’ doll, Barbie epitomizes hegemonic standards of beauty. This is done by referring to Minaj as a “fake Barbie,” as she does not possess any of the aforementioned attributes. For Erica, Mnaj’s race, performance and appearance make her illegible as Barbie. Further, her articulation of Minaj’s drawing attention to her buttocks functions to further objectify and dehumanize her to the status of performing product, which is routine practice in the commodified and contrived space of commercial hip hop. For Ashley as well as the larger viewing public, Minaj’s performative politics are being juxtaposed to a literal ass.

   Erica contributes to the video analysis by arguing that the image of Minaj’s buttocks appeared in the video because the members of the socially/politically conscious all girl hip hop group Watoto From the Nile wanted to convey the message to viewers that this type of behavior is inappropriate for young girls. For the participants, the image of Minaj’s buttocks stands in, symbolically, as a racist and sexist marker of sociohistorical systems of exploitation, which is content previously explored in the
program. During one specific session, for example, we worked with the girls to historicize the racial and sexual oppression of Black women and girls. We screened a documentary on the life of Sarah Baartman (1789-1850), the young Khoi Khoi teen who was kidnapped and taken to Europe where she was exploited in freak shows, prostituted due to her appearance, and the effects of a condition called steatopygia—a genetic and evolutionary adaptation found in women of African origin as a way to protect the body against drought and famine. It is characterized by large amounts of fatty tissue on the thighs and buttocks and was not present in the women from the European geographical area, facilitating a process of othering and fetishization. Baartman was eventually sold to a museum where her genitals were placed on display in a French museum with her mummified body—a form of continual, post-death exploitation. In thinking through a sociohistorical legacy of exploitation, I became interested in Erica’s assertion that Minaj voted for 2012 Republican Presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. While this was said in one of her lyrics, she later revealed that it was emphatically untrue. Here, while the participants are critiquing Minaj, she is also positioned as a businesswoman with conservative fiscal interests to maintain and protect. Erica’s assertion that “she rich” indicates she has corporate interests or aspirations that align with capitalist elites. In this
case, we can see Minaj’s physique and performance is important to her brand. This hyper-complex relationship to capitalism is not new to Black cultural producers/performers. However messy, there is an ideological blurring of what it means to be free as Black people who were incorporated into this society as slaves wearing and bearing the brand of an enslaver and being exploited as breeders and sexual objects. The background provided by the Bartmann documentary is not merely about Black sexuality, it is about Black humanity in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal empire. Morgan’s (1999) concept of “fuckin with the grays” is applicable here, as Black peoples’ relationship to capitalism is not as black and white as some may like it to be.

Performance is part of survival. For Minaj, commercial ratchetness is a lucrative endeavor.

Both Erica and Ashley use the term ‘ratchet’ to describe Minaj. One of the first uses of the term occurred in a 2004 song featuring southern rapper, Lil Boosie (Ortved, 2013). In the liner notes of the CD, the producer defined the term as follows: “n., v, adv, 1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty. 2. It’s whatever, bout it, etc.” (Ortved, 2013). Thus, a demonstrated link between the lived experiences, realities and lifestyles of working class Blacks in the South is established and has become a part of the popular hip hop vernacular beyond its geographic origin. It has linguistically been linked to the term
wretched—defined by Merriam Webster as very unhappy, very bad or unpleasant, and very poor in quality or ability—spoken by those with a heavy Southern dialect (Corsetti, 2013; Cooper, 2012). The use of this term serves to continue the tradition of policing Black bodies and causing intra-racial division as it prioritizes middle/upper class sensibilities and pathologizes the working class/poor, creating an intra-racial divide. For the purposes of this research, I define it as a term frequently used by the study’s participants, as a racialized, gendered and classist adjective/noun used to define Black women or girls whose articulation of sexuality does not fit within the parameters of Black mainstream respectability politics. For Ashley, ‘ratchet’ is conceptualized as a pejorative. The friend who Ashley references that mimics Minaj’s performative politics, which indicates that for her peer, Minaj’s performative politics are viewed in a positive way, in her own adolescent meaning making universe. Here, Minaj is framed as an example or idol. When asked why this may be in a follow up interview, Ashley references boys and the inviting of the male adolescent heterosexual gaze. She reiterates that her peer does this “cuz dudes don’t like her.” For Ashley, this is unacceptable (read: ratchet). Although it is not clear if the desired attention is sexual, it can be inferred that this is certainly a possibility since Minaj’s persona is constructed to be overtly sexual and attracts the male gaze.
As a researcher, I am also very interested in the peer Ashley references who idolizes Nicki Minaj and how the girls pathologize her. As mentioned above, one of the reasons she is pathologized is because she invites the heterosexual male gaze. Instead of viewing Minaj’s performative politics through a pornographic, westernized lens, it is possible that, through a hip hop feminist lens, Minaj is disrupting binary understandings of Black women’s sexuality as “good” or “bad,” or “hypervisible” or “hypersexual.”

According to Halliday (2017), Minaj is “ultimately challenging what constitutes positive for productive representation(s) of Blackness by refusing the binary of negative and positive. Minaj’s performances collapse dualistic assumptions about Blackness, womanhood and sexuality, constituting alternative ways for Black women and girls to explore these ideas” (p. 17). Similar to Troutman’s (2011) conceptualization of Feminist Pedagogical Media Literacy (FPML), Halliday argues that it is critical for feminist educators to curate spaces where girls can speak frankly about the intersection of popular culture, desire, pleasure:

If we as womanist/Black feminist/hip-hop feminist scholars desire to place Black girls in the center of intellectual knowledge production, then we must be willing to recognize how our own perceptions about sexuality may impede Black girls’ (and our own) sexual identity construction…Minaj conceptualizes a feminism that fights to have pleasure and pain exist side-by-side and she is unafraid to critique the systems that circumscribe Black women’s ability to be seen as fully human—that is, physically, emotionally, and sexually fulfilled. She urges us to make space and visualize futures for Black girls that allow for sociopolitical critique and embodied pleasure (p. 70-71).
The intellectual space that Halliday conjures is what she has termed ‘anaconda feminism.’ Named after Minaj’s 2014 US Billboard hit “Anaconda.” The video broke the 24-hour streaming record on Vevo by accumulating 19.6 million views the day it was released, and garnered further promotion and acclaim when Minaj performed it at the then upcoming 2014 MTV Video Music Awards. The song, a remix of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s 1992 hip hop song “Baby Got Back,” features Minaj dancing scantily clad in a jungle-esque scene with much attention paid to the backsides of both she and her background dancers. Halliday argues that in the video, and in her performances overall, Minaj has the agency and power to decide on her own terms, how much skin she will display, what dances she will do, and how she wants to evoke sexuality. While this does not mean this performance exists outside of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, that this theorization is intended to address the intellectual or theoretical impasse that exists in conceptualizing girls as beings who have curiosities or interests about sexuality, pleasure and desire and destigmatizing them.

In her work, Halliday (2017) also discusses how adult viewpoints on sexuality inform children and adolescents’ lens of understanding. According to Marcyliena Morgan (1998), in the Black community, there is cultural value attached to the language and discourse practices one uses to communicate identity culture and citizen rights to perform what is called a “social face” (p. 252-253). In this particular conversation, Both Erica and Ashley are performing social faces that align with the principles of
respectability politics. Their use of the term ‘ratchet’ is significant for two reasons. First, it is relevant to the girls’ engagement with hip hop culture, where its linguistic origins exist. Second, because for urban Black youth, “the invention and re-invention of African American terms, e.g. *frontin’* (being deceptive), *dissin’* (being disrespectful, and *readin’* (exposing someone’s interactive deception), actually serve to unravel the relation of verbal skill and social and political power” (p. 252-253). A primary factor in the performance of social face is the notion of fitting in amongst one's peer group or being popular. Per Morgan, “perhaps most widespread cultural concept which both critiques and symbolizes its construction is the notion of being cool (current in trend or meaning)” (p. 253). The girls’ critique is couched in language that exudes coolness, popularity and influence among the group. The critique, though, is also largely mediated by adults, such as well-intentioned parents and educators, who want the participants to understand how they will be read in society.

Ashley’s lip smacking is indicative of what Koonce ([2012] Troutman, 2010; 2012) refers to as “talking with an attitude.” Koonce defines attitude as “…adaptation, disposition, and posture, that is, an outlook on the world” (p.27). To talk with attitude is a raced and gendered strategy many Black girls and women use to resist what they perceive to be hostility and disrespect from others (p. 26). This discourse practice is one of many
available to Black girls to “protect themselves and their loved ones in society” (Richardson, 2006 p. 65). In this case, Ashley is talking with an attitude in order to symbolically shield or deflect stereotypes derived from what she understands to be inappropriate displays of Black female sexuality. Although she symbolically shields herself, Ashley shares with the group a brief narrative about a friend who may not be deserving of this shielding, as she does not deflect stereotypes, but embodies them. Ashley’s use of these discourse practices perpetuates respectability discourses and serves to perpetuate not only the social hierarchy (in which Black women who do not conform to middle class values are ostracized, punished and otherwise deemed unworthy) but, also facilitates the creation of a sociopolitical hierarchy in this specific Black girl context. By dis-identifying with Minaj and demeaning her peer who idolizes her, Ashley is devaluing a fellow Black girl by simultaneously elevating herself under the auspices of respectability and consciousness. This is significant because according to Smitherman (2006), the speaker’s status and standing in a group context is always at stake, and Ashley works diligently through direct (speech) and indirect (smacking of the lips) communications to protect the sanctity of respectability, righteousness and morality for herself, even at the expense of other Black girls and Minaj herself. This further
demonstrates that respectability politics causes intra-racial conflict and dissention, even among youth who do not have the language or theoretical/historical knowledge to articulate the rationale, advantages or challenges that exist with respectability politics or a culture of dissemblance. However, formal academic training in this area is not required since respectability is a matter of being; a way of life—a strategy Black women and girls are taught from a very young age to navigate the world in order to protect themselves from mental and physical harm. Ashley derives power, as a member of politically marginalized group, in being able to distinguish herself by embodying the middle-class values (although she is not representative of this political demographic) that are constitutive of respectability through the use of these particular discourse practices.

Although I was theoretically unable to articulate it during the time this conversation took place, critiques of my own response become evident. First, as a researcher, I did not challenge the participants (or myself) to consider the ways in which “ratchet” behavior functions to continuously police Black women’s sexuality and actions. Although it is certainly permissible for Minaj’s performance of Black womanhood to be understood at an individual level as ratchet or inappropriate within Ashley’s adolescent meaning making universe, I would have liked to have worked more diligently over time.
to talk about the limitations of the politics of respectability and the policing of bodies. While I certainly appreciate Watoto of the Nile’s counter-narrative production (especially since the girls in the program were constantly encouraged to create their own counter-narrative rhymes, poems and dances to combat oppression), my own internal competing discourses about respectability, adolescence, consent and materiality left me unable to articulate a balanced rebuttal about agency and liberation. The result was theoretical impasse, as I had been trained to always consider Sarah Baartman’s experiences and as theoretical or methodological starting point. Further, the participants entered the club with their own adult-influenced beliefs about Black female sexuality and the ways in which certain behaviors or performances would label them deviant or worse, invite violence and trauma. Materially, I understand this parental approach, as the goal is to keep the girls physically and psychologically safe. I was socialized in the same manner as a Black girl. However, critical oppositional readings, such as the ones presented in this section, illuminate possibilities and show up the messiness and gray areas that exist with the politics of representation. This is critical as some girls in the group shared Ashley’s sentiments, but also expressed the fun they experience performing (which appears elsewhere in transcripts) other diasporic dances (such as twerking or the batty dance) that celebrities such as Nicki Minaj are known to perform. As a researcher, difficult questions
emerge from this dialogue: *How can girls be sexual beings when childhood, consent and physical safety are of utmost concern? What are their sexual feelings and curiosities? How do adults nurture a healthy adolescent sexuality for Black girls whose bodies are already read as ratchet and not valuable?*

This particular instance presented a timely opportunity to take up what Cohen (2004) refers to as oppositional practices. Cohen argues that attention must be paid to how marginalized individuals “act with the limited agency afforded to them to secure small levels of autonomy,” and reminds us to closely analyze how oppressed individuals create counter-spaces by willingly choosing outsider status, even if only momentarily (p. 24). I concur with Cohen’s engagement with respectability politics, in which she articulates that behaving in ways deemed pathological or immoral is not always simply about unconsciously acting up, but as a way for those “existing outside of the state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper- class, male heterosexuality” to claim some level of autonomy (p. 27). Although Minaj’s performance of “ratchet” Black female sexuality does not exist outside of the state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper- class, male heterosexual contrived space of commercial hip hop (Love, 2012) within which she is performing a role sanctioned for Black female rappers, one can make arguments for her exercising some degree of autonomy, pleasure and
resistance. Here, I conceptualize Black female sexuality as socially constructed, malleable, and able to be manipulated and used to entertainers’ own ends. This would include Black female performers such as Minaj and Josephine Baker. Perhaps this conversation should have been rooted less in whether Minaj’s performance of Black female sexuality was palatable, but instead what is ratchet about institutions such as white supremacy, capitalism and heteropatriarchy that lead to ratchet politics. These ratchet politics include how poor Black girls are have hypersexuality or availability read onto them, leaving them vulnerable when they innocently perform or mimic ratchet, which is a part of the Black vernacular arts tradition.

Per the analysis above, the participants offered negative critiques of Minaj’s performative politics. However, findings differed when taking a more holistic look at Minaj’s work. For example, the song and video for her 2010 track “Moment 4 Life,” featuring hip hop artist Drake was received much differently by the participants in terms of meaning making and Black womanhood. When asked to complete a journal entry free write about their reading of Minaj, it was overwhelming positive. The video features Minaj and Drake in a heteronormative romantic relationship that replicates the fairytale of popular 1950 Disney classic, “Cinderella.” After her father’s death, the white, able-bodied blonde, blue-eyed, thin, female protagonist, Cinderella, is forced to live with her
evil stepmother and envious stepsisters who mistreat her, forcing her to work in their home as a maid. The town’s prince holds a ball, in which her stepmother forbids her to attend. With the help of her animal friends and fairy godmother, Cinderella magically receives a makeover, which includes a dress, hair styling and glass slippers. She is warned that she must be home by the stroke of midnight, at which time her gown would revert back to her traditional rags and her stagecoach transportation back into a pumpkin. Losing track of time, Cinderella hurriedly leaves the ball shortly before midnight, leaving behind one glass slipper in her haste. The prince finds it, and searches for Cinderella by trying the slipper on the foot of every fair maiden in the small town. When he arrives at Cinderella’s house, she is locked in her room as her stepsisters unsuccessfully attempt to squeeze their large feet into the shoe. However, with the help of her animal friends, she is able to escape her room, rush downstairs and try on the slipper, resulting in her marrying the prince and living happily ever after.

Cinderella has become one of the most famous and recognizable princesses in the history of film. With her iconic glass slippers, ball gown, hairstyle, and transformation, one of the first on-screen makeovers of its kind, the character has been established as a fashion icon, receiving accolades and recognition from InStyle, Entertainment Weekly, Glamour and Oprah.com, as well as footwear designer and fashion icon Christian
Louboutin, who, in 2012, designed and released a shoe based on Cinderella's glass slippers (Breznican, 2017). Because hegemonic ideologies, in institutions such as the media, teach us that this is the standard of beauty, participants in the study idealized the fairytale concept, despite the original film being almost 70 years old. Further, the idea of Cinderella being passive, docile and traditionally feminine fit with traditional understandings of what it means to be an adolescent woman (the character was 19 in the original film), and is rewarded with a wealthy husband who saves the day. In the “Moment 4 Life” video, Minaj takes hiatus from her sometimes-vulgar lyrics and overt sexuality to talk about how she has waited for her fairytale wedding and wishes she could “have this moment for life cuz in this moment [she] just feels so alive.” The story is marked with respectability politics, as she dons gowns and is surrounded by fairytale artifacts, costumes and riches. One participant wrote “I like the video because she get[s] her wedding” (Nylah, Written Artifact, 2012). Thus, Minaj is more acceptable for children here against the backdrop of marriage which for the participants, signals acceptance, fairytale, love, respectability and social mobility. Here, it is significant that of the girls’ voices represented here, only one lived with married parents, although they all espoused this particular relevance of marriage. Of the video, another wrote “She looks real pretty. I like her different hair cuz Black girls[‘] hair is like never done or it's a lot of weave and you can’t comb it” (Sanai, 2012). Thus, there is a valorization with not only heteronormativity and marriage, but also proximity to whiteness. During this topic, I missed an opportunity to take up the very important cultural work Minaj was doing in the video, was which was recreating the Cinderella narrative in a way that was legible and
representative of Black femaleness, just as she did with her Barbie persona in our previous group analyses. However problematic both or either may be, she is using her platform to write Blackness into traditionally white girl spaces, particularly Disney and Mattel.

While “ratchet” seemed to be the operative lens in which the girls viewed Black female sexuality, other gendered hip hop language arose from the study that served to police bodies. One of these terms was “T.H.O.T.,” which is an acronym for “that ho over there.” In a 2014 *Complex* article titled “A New Slang Term is Sweeping the Nation,” writer David Drake spoke about the recent prevalence of the term in hip hop culture, particularly citing male hip hop artists Wale and Chief Keef. At that time, it’s origins were traced specifically to Chief Keef’s song “Aimed At You,” in which he rhymes “…no love for a thot.” Here, we see the reification of the jezebel controlling image being recreated to describe, primarily, any woman or girl whose performance of sexual identity or expressivity is deemed inappropriate. Per Chief Keef’s work, a thot is not worthy of love or respect. The following conversation took place after a more formal group discussion, during “down time” in which music was played during snack time and one participant began dancing beside her seat. Specifically, she was twerking. Gaunt (2015) defines twerking as “a complex spectrum of stylized and rhythmically-timed gestures. It includes demonstrating dropping, popping, locking, and bouncing with the fleshy part of one’s ass to articulate through kinetic orality different aspects of a rap song including
miming lyrical bars or accenting styles of rhythm textures or beats” (p. 248):

1. Ashley: Ewww, what is you doing, bruh?
2. Erica: This my song!
3. Ashley: You need to sit down! Lookin’ like a straight thot! Need to sit down.
4. Erica: But I ain’t no thot!
5. Facilitator: Wait...what’s a thot?
6. Ashley: A ho!
7. Facilitator: For real? I ain’t heard that. What does it mean though? Like…
8. [Overlap] Ashley: That Ho Over There!
9. Facilitator: Ohhhh!
10. Ashley: She dancin’ like a lil thotty thot! We don’t do that, boo boo!
11. Facilitator: So if a girl twerks, she’s a thot?
12. Erica: Nah, I just be dancin’. I ain’t no thot though.
13. Ashley: Yes!
14. Facilitator: So what other things make a girl a thot?
15. Ahmari: Like if they be wearing like...too short clothes or the clothes be tight.
16. Kirsten: Or if they have a lot of boyfriends.
17. Keisha: Or they real ghetto.
19. Keisha: Like...if they loud, they live in the hood, they be actin’....jus ghetto.
20. Facilitator: So can dudes be thots, or just girls?
21. Ashley: Dudes can be thotty, too [snapping and rolling her eyes].
22. Facilitator: But it’s mostly girls and women who get called thots?
23. Ashley: Yuupp.
24. Facilitator: So... Erica..., you said you jus’ havin’ fun. How you feel when you twerk?
25. Erica: I don’t know. It’s just fun.
26. Facilitator: What makes it fun though?
27. Erica...I be feeling myself or whatevah!
28. Facilitator : Well show me how to do it!
29. [Laughter]
30. Facilitator: Nah, for real!
31. Erica:...[laughter].
32. Facilitator 2: [Smacks lips and rolls eyes]
33. Erica: OK, like dis. First you gotta like....get down [demonstrates]. Then you gotta pop yo butt.
34. Facilitator: [Imitates the movement].
35. Group: [Laughter].
36. Erica: No! You can't move your back and shoulders like dat! Just yo booty.
37. Facilitator: Oh! [Imitates the movement] Like this?
38. Ashley: Oh my Lord!
Like “ratchet,” the term “thot” serves as another pejoratively raced, gendered and class term adopted from participant engagement with hip hop culture. Hip hop feminist scholars (Lindsey, 2015; Love, 2012) have demonstrated that this engagement is heavily rooted in the sonic; that sound has liberatory potential. That the beat incites pleasure. That dancing is alluring. Because Ashley viewed Erica’s twerking through the white colonial gaze in which Black girls are socialized to adopt at an early age, it was read as inappropriate and in need of immediate policing. Conversely, Erica cited that she was simply having fun. I was very intentional about asking Erica what about twerking she enjoyed so much after she talked about liking to dance, and twerk in particular, with the larger group, and had to probe to get an answer. For her, twerking made her more confident and boosted her self-esteem. I was particularly careful and intentional with these questions because of a former conversation I had with two of the girls who were doing the 1990s hip hop genre-based dance ‘the butterfly,’ during unstructured free time at a session, explaining that one of their aunts had showed it to them. The dance, popularized by Black women and girls, is performed with the hands on the knees while the dancer moves her legs and buttocks back and forth in a butterfly motion. I recall being uncomfortable and talking about how men and boys read Black female bodies. A dance my own grandmother used to disapprove of when my cousins and I did it on the front porch during my childhood. I would later talk through my discomfort with a faculty
member in greater detail once the program had concluded (Elaine Richardson, personal communication, summer 2012). In “Developing Critical Hip Hop Feminist Literacies” Richardson (2013) devotes much time speaking of the dangers of alienating Black girls who express interest in embodied performances read by the larger society as hypersexual by placing the heterosexual male interest at the fore. By doing this, she argues more specifically that researchers can engage in the very type of patriarchy they are seeking to disrupt (p. 335). Per Richardson, the use of the modifier “just” in Erica’s response is important to critical discourse analysis, and in the case of Black girlhood, sexualities and performance, perhaps demonstrates a youthful ignorance or frivolity. Similarly, Gaunt refers to this type of playfulness as “messing around” and represents what is called auto-sexuality (p. 249). Auto-sexuality is conceptualized as it is the self-presentation of sexuality in social occasions, particularly for women, that does not require the attention of a male gaze or male interactions nor is it necessarily an act of lesbianism.” (p. 249). Erica, in this example of BGG, is enacting just what Black feminist scholar Gaunt is theorizing. In this “messing around,” Erica has uncoupled pleasure and sexuality, something that even adult scholars in the area struggle with (including myself). Twerking is “just” fun for Erica and there is no mention of boys or sexual activity. This presents a new type of Black girlhood feminism. One that acknowledges racist and sexist ideologies that exist in the policing of Black female bodies, but also allows Black girls to be kids and engage in youthful frivolity in front of other Black girls in a safe and curated pro-Black girl space—another example of BGG. This example is one rooted in both the
performative and the cognitive.

To ensure that this point was driven home, I then asked Erica to show me how to twerk. In that moment, it was important for me to affirm Erica’s humanity, particularly due to a particular discourse practice I saw unfolding. A division had taken place amongst the girls. In line 11 of the transcript, Ashley emphatically proclaims that “we don’t do that.” Here, her use of the term ‘we’ signals solidarity with all the girls participating in the dialogue in a way that presents direct opposition to Erica’s perspective. This “we” constitutes what Richardson (2006; p. 797) described as representin’, another strategic discourse practice deployed by Black women and girls as a coping strategy to ward off affronts to their humanity:

The concept and practice of representin is a part of the larger black discourse practice that emerged in the slavery experience and is akin to fictive kinship, wherein enslaved Africans devised a way of surviving, achieving prestige and creating a black human identity apart from dehumanized slave. Consonant with the fictive kinship ideology, black people performed in a manner that protected the humanity of the collective enslaved community. As Signithia Fordham (1996: 75) explains, ‘in contexts controlled by (an) Other, it was necessary to behave as a collective Black Self while suppressing the desire to promote the individual Self.’

While representin’ can function as a means of building community and solidarity, in some instances, such as this, it can cause intra-group tension, promote a type of intra-group hierarchy, and perpetuate the dichotomy of the good “can do” girl, or the bad “at risk” Black girl. I wanted Erica to exert her Individual Self, rather than blending in with the group’s collective Black Self by conforming to dominant ideologies and stereotypes. Cooper (2007) asserts that we must understand how industry performances affect the lives of non-industry folx. This is why Black communities socialize their daughters to
avoid overt displays of sexuality. This, however, perpetuates state-sanctioned dominance and control. Curating of our safe group space also made me comfortable enough to twerk, which was not something I did anywhere else. That day, I learned that it was actually harder than it looked, and that I was pretty bad at it. However, Erica forced me to deal with my own respectability conflicts and genuinely enjoy a temporary moment where my body was not read in a colonizing way by outsiders. In retrospect, I now better understand and appreciate how hip hop feminism helped me exist comfortably in the grays (Morgan, 1999), and how I could simultaneously be a #ProfessionalBlackGirl graduate student who twerked and listened to trap music--that the two are indeed *not* mutually exclusive (Blay, 2018). Thus, the cultural work Erica performed here is indicative of BGG. As group, we had discussed and were well aware of the stereotypes that existed to condition us to believe twerking was a primitive abomination, rather than a Diasporic performance taken out of context by a colonizing western eye. Here we see two of three of BGG’s core tenets: 1) generationally gender-specific language and discourse practices to articulate and negotiate one’s identity or perceived identity (“ratchet” and “thot”) and the discourse practices of representin’ and TWA; and 2) a youthful view of Black female sexuality, marked by competing respectability discourses among the participants. Next, I will discuss participant readings of Beyoncé, which were markedly different.
Reading Beyoncé: Acceptance and Respectability

One celebrity figure there seemed to be no qualms about was international superstar Beyoncé. Participants did not read her performative politics in the same harsh or critical manner in which they read Minaj’s and peers who sought to mimic her in order to develop their own self-identity. Beyoncé, an American singer and entertainer who has gained international acclaim, has sold over 100 million albums, making her one of the best-selling music artists of all time (Hamlin, 2017). Her accolades include 24 MTV Music Awards, 22 Grammy Awards. She is the most nominated woman in the award’s history. In 2014, she became the highest-paid black musician in history and was listed among Time’s 100 most influential people in the world for a second year in a row (MTV, 2014). Forbes ranked her as the most powerful female in entertainment on their 2015 and 2017 lists, and in 2016 she occupied the sixth place for Time’s Person of the Year (Cummings, 2016; Harris-Perry, 2016).

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles grew up in a middle-class family and community in Houston, Texas. Her image as a new artist was carefully curated to project values of wholesomeness, purity and respectability. Additionally, her appearance, which is much different from Minaj’s, seemed to be more socially acceptable to public tastes, which allowed her to, in many way, transcend discourses of Black female hypersexuality in
popular culture. Unlike Minaj, Beyoncé’s approximation to whiteness was more evident, allowing her to appeal to hegemonic standards of beauty. For example, she is light skinned (of Creole descent), often dons straight, blonde hair, is thin, and able-bodied. Further, unlike Minaj, her body is read as more wholesome—free of any tattoos or the exaggerated buttocks associated with hypersexuality and pathology, and her music is largely absent of overtly foul language or references. Moreover, her career was carefully curated more in the lane of pop music, rather than hip hop, which tends to be the scapegoat genre for misogyny, sexism, internalized racism and hypermasculinity, among other social ills. More importantly, Beyoncé’s carefully curated image was designed to represent the antithesis of female hip hop artists such as Minaj, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, who are known for their performances of sexual prowess. This is not to say that Bey adopted an androgynous look or projected a type of asexuality. However, in the earlier part of her solo career, her performance of sexuality was completely divorced from her identity. This was done through the use of an alter ego, Sasha Fierce.

An alter ego is an ego can be defined as a secondary or alternative personality that exists separately from one’s primary identity. Alter egos are often said to signal the living of another, or alternative lifestyle. Particularly, this lifestyle is markedly different from the primary one, in a manner that is commonly understood to be questionable or negative.
Beyoncé’s alter ego was named Sasha Fierce. Sasha Fierce was curated to perform and embody sexuality and sexual expressivity in the public sphere. These two women were highly distinguishable, with Beyoncé stating, “I’m not like her in real life at all” (Complex, 2012). While the visual art accompanying the music of her later years became more risqué, particularly with the release of her fifth studio album *Beyoncé*, she continued to elude the colonizing footholds of respectability both in the eye of the public and for the participants of the study because of how carefully her early solo career image was crafted. More interestingly, this was an interesting conundrum because her music had shifted to what the industry calls “alternative r&b,” which is indicative of a more hip-hop sound, as well as the fact that she was now a wife and mother. Surprisingly, there was no longer a need for Sasha Fierce, who dropped quietly from the public eye and pop culture discourse.

In one particular session, the girls viewed and analyzed her 2011 video “Best Thing I Never Had.” The video is about the breakup of Beyoncé of her lover/fiancé, after she is mistreated and taken for granted in their relationship. Karma plays a role in the vengeance Beyoncé seeks as she absolves herself of her dreams of a wedding and the ‘happily ever-after’ theme explored in Minaj’s “Moment 4 Life,” both conjuring themes
of heteronormativity. Many parts of the video feature Beyoncé in wedding-inspired lingerie. Interestingly, the girls’ critique of the video did not include assessments of her body being on display. In fact, they seemed to have missed it completely. Instead, the focus of how she was wronged and robbed of the life she deserved.” For example, one participant wrote “I like the video even tho[ugh] it was sad because it was like fairytale that didn’t go right (Lea, 2013),” while another wrote “she always look pretty. Like her hair and stuff. A dude would be stupid not to marry her (Ahmari, 2013).” The video was designed for viewers to sympathize with Beyoncé’s character as a respectable Black woman.

The purpose of this chapter was to elucidate the ways in which BGG shows up in assessments of identity and popular visual culture. By providing a conceptual foundation, articulating the purpose of certain discourse practices and acknowledging and valuing the language in which they use to show up in the space authentically. In the next chapter, I will further explore some of the limitations of respectability politics, specifically as it relates to Black girlhood. Contemporary Black and hip hop feminist scholars (Morgan, 2015; Lindsey 2014) have heavily theorized the limitations of the politics of respectability for adult Black women in terms of its ability to foreclose on pleasure and
the erotic. While these arguments are certainly valid, these same approaches are complicated by issues of legal consent when theorized with girls in mind. Considering the girls probably understand how they might be read negatively in the context of the program setting talking about personal encounters of sex, curiosities, or pleasure, this is something that never came up explicitly. Additionally, dissemblance or deflection may have mediated their very harsh critiques of Nicki Minaj and other Black girls who displayed any type of sexuality. Their own understanding of respectability would certainly color their analyses, and possibly the positions they took about her performative politics, which may be completely different outside the context of a school-sanctioned space, even with homegirl mentors.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black girls in an afterschool program setting made meaning related to their identities from popular and hip hop cultural messaging in their everyday lives. Further, the study also illuminates the ways in which the participants made the intellectual shift from the social and popular cultural phenomenon #BlackGirlMagic to what I refer to as Black Girl Genius (BGG). I define BGG as gender, race, age and class specific language, art, performative arts and musical sensibilities used to enact freedom at a time of national Black violability (Lindsey, 2016). I purposefully apply the term ‘genius,’ defined as one with “exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability” (Merriam Webster, 2017) to Black girls in thinking of them as advanced theorists in their ability to read the word as well as the world around them (Richardson, 2002; Freire & Macedo, 1987). I concur with Cooper (2018) that “...Black girls are always the compass pointing us to the North” (p. 37) when their subjugated knowledge is moved from margin to center. This is done by allowing them to work through their own theorizations of themselves and how they show up in the world, and in this particular instance, a social-sanctioned space governed by a white supremacist master script and the footholds of respectability.

BGG is a state of mind, of critical consciousness, and is not representative of neoliberal notions of empowerment. In analyzing the data, I came to understand that an additional aim of BGG required that counter-knowledge be conceptualized during
discussions of social stratification in a proactive manner, rather than only offering up critiques based upon reactive analyses about the world in which we live. BGG promotes power. The power to create better outcomes, rather than powerlessness, which Cooper argues is a never-ending cycle of being “repeatedly jammed up at the personal and political crossroads of one’s intersections while a watching world pretends not to see you there, needing help…” (p.123). In the same vein, I have been very cautious as explicitly describing or conveying that what was done at the afterschool program was empowerment-based. In my experiences working in the nonprofit sector, ‘empowerment’ was the quintessential buzzword for the development and grants team seeking to secure funds for social justice-based programs for women and girls. The idea is that the organization’s staff should be able to empower women and girls right up out of homelessness, poverty, financial debt, mental illness, physical disabilities, criminalization and academic underachievement, just to name a few. This experience taught me that if I continued to buy into that rubric or of meritocracy and hard work as an African American woman, that I would never be professionally, spiritually or academically fulfilled, that I would watch Black women and girls being repeatedly jammed up in the intersections, as Cooper argues, while the world looks on. Further, I realized working with the girls that empowerment politics can lead to grave emotional and spiritual disappointment. Again, I turn to Cooper’s work to further explain:

‘Empowerment’ is a tricky word. It’s also a decidedly neoliberal word that places responsibility for combating systems on individuals. Neoliberalism is endlessly concerned with ‘personal responsibility’ and individual self-regulation. It tells us that in a free market devoid of any regulation or accountability at the top, what
happens to those on the bottom is entirely our fault. Did we have enough drive? Enough vision? Enough hustle to change our condition…” (p.122).

It is important that those belonging to marginalized groups do not succumb to the various forms of internalized oppression that believe they are responsible for what are said to be their bad choices and failures. This manifests itself in an aforementioned dichotomy of Black girlhood, in which only two types of girls exist: the “can do” and the “at risk.”

I recall watching 2Pac’s 1993 video “Keep Ya Head Up” with the girls during one session and working with them to analyze the lyrics, as well as his character portrayal in the video during a discussion about hip hop’s social justice origins and the knowledge of self-paradigm (which also necessitates that one be able to read the world around them in order to identify injustices). Although I had heard the song literally dozens of times since I was a little girl of about eight years old, three particular lines stood out to me in a way that they never had before: “We ain't meant to survive, 'cause it's a setup/And even though you're fed up/Huh, ya got to keep your head up.” This was mind blowing for me, again proving that the ongoing process of reading the world around you is not a one way transfer of knowledge. It is dialogical and communal. In this moment, hip hop gave me the words to talk about the social hierarchy in a way that was accessible and meaningful at a time when being in the academy would not allow. It was not only the analyses that Pac was making that helped me to better understand and share knowledge with the girls, but also his use of Black language in doing so. In my own written translation, I understood that white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1990) is a system in which Black people are not meant to thrive in. Or in Pac’s words, to survive in at all, let
alone thrive. That the cards are stacked against us. That the game is rigged, and even though it’s exhausting always being jammed up at the intersections of our identity, that have to keep working toward change. In analyzing this conversation in the present-day, I rhetorically answered a powerful question posed by Cooper: “Have you ever noticed that people who have real ‘power’- wealth, job security, influence- don’t attend ‘empowerment’ seminars?” (p. 123). No, I had no because “power is not attained from books and seminars. Not alone, anyway. Power is conferred by social systems” (p. 123).

My job, as a researcher was to think about and share my ideas about how to disrupt, or in a hip hop feminist tradition, “bring wreck” (Pough, 2004) to these social systems in even the smallest of ways in everyday life.

Another concept I learned to shy away from in my working with the girl and analyses was that of resilience. While this was not a buzzword in the nonprofit sector, it certainly was in academic. I recall being awarded several small research and travel grants as a graduate student in which I vowed to equip Black girls with the necessarily resilience in combating they oppression injustice and inequality they faced on a daily basis. At this time, resilience was key. In my mind, resilience could help Black women and girls work themselves right out of everyday macroaggressions and other manifestations of racism, sexism and classism, to name a few. As I became older, I realized, on a personal level, how exhausting it was to have to always be ‘on’ in deciphering discriminatory ideology and practices in everyday life and conditioning myself to be tough and hard after each incident. I was then able to relate this, theoretically, to the archetype of the strong Black woman. Harris-Lacewell (2001) describes her as having a “seemingly irrepressible spirit
unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection” (p. 3.). This is a quality that is so ingrained in the psyche of Black women, that they pass this irrepressible spirit to their daughters as a genealogical ‘gift’ to prepare them for the harsh realities of racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression: The centrality of strength to African American women’s self-concept is further reflected in the lessons that “[B]lack women pass on to [B]lack girls. Thorton (1995) explains that [B]lack parents, presuming their children will encounter a hostile environment, must make their children comfortable with their blackness’ (p. 56). According to Harris-Lacewell, Black women are not socialized to seek help for fear of appearing weak and have no place to turn when the world is overwhelming. Similarly, Boyd (1995) argues that the strong Black woman symbol can be harmful to one’s self-esteem because it creates a perfect image that is unattainable and creates guilt and shame when not accomplished. I never wanted the girls to feel that because they could not prevent incidents of discrimination, became/remained disinterested in lessons not incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy, or have their discourse practices misread as troublesome, that they were failures. That they were not strong enough. Not resilient enough.

Cooper (2018) defines resilience as “being asked to do more with less” (p. 266). She cites this not only as unfair, but inhumane. When discussing the backgrounds and lives of marginalized children, Cooper offers that many social scientists attribute their living and thriving to resilience. Why are Black children, girls in particular, expected to be so resilient when their white counterparts are not? According to Cooper:
Celebrating the resilience of poor folks is a perverse way of acknowledging the unreasonable demands placed upon people who are already struggling to make it. In fact, in this moment, when a broad-scale conservative backlash threatens to absolutely gut the social net, ‘resilience’ is a dangerous word. The logic of relying on people’s resilience goes something like ‘Let’s see just how much we can take away from you before you break’ (p. 266-267).

Thus, the program was never aimed to ‘empower’ Black girls to overcome structural inequality through resilience and strength, but to instead strive to achieve critical consciousness, or BGG, to gain power. The study’s findings indicate that Black girls have an astute understanding of the stereotypes that harm their humanity, as well as hegemonic ideologies that can influence their understandings of Black girlhood related to identity, beauty, hip hop and popular visual culture and respectability politics.

The purpose of Chapter 1 was to introduce the current study and its potential contributions to the literature in Black girlhood studies, Black and hip hop feminisms, and feminist critical discourse studies. It also maps the popularity and utility of the viral #BlackGirlMagic social media and popular cultural phenomenon. In Chapter 2, I historicized Black feminist thought, parsing out its core tenets, how it is useful to the study, and its points of conversion and departure from contemporary hip hop feminist theorizing. I then historicize hip hop, illuminating its roots in social justice and change. From there, I define and discuss the birth and need for hip hop feminism in filling an ideological gap for women and girls of the hip hop generation. I also seek to show up some of the core tensions among Black and hip hop feminisms, while articulating a space for both simultaneously. I then map a history of Black girlhood studies and critical
discourse studies, with all of these field creating the theoretical framing for the project.

In Chapter 3, I re-articulate the study’s primary research question: what constitutes Black Girl Genius (BGG)? The following additional questions guided my research: 1) what does BGG illuminate; 2. How does it differ from the social media/popular culture phenomenon #BlackGirlMagic; 3) How is BGG recognized; 4) Why is BGG useful, unique and different approach to theorizing tradition conceptualizations of standpoint; and 5) How are commercial hip hop and visual popular culture implicated in the theorization of BGG. I then discuss the methodological orientation, provide a sample analysis to orient the reader to style, discuss my role as a researcher, and offer profiles of select participants. I then describe the data collection plan, procedures, data management plan and discuss how data analysis would be performed. In Chapter 4, I define and explain three major concepts that are deemed critical to the analyses: 1) ideology; 2) hegemony; and 3) respectability. I then perform critical feminist discourse analysis on select on qualitative data from primary source material. This is constitutive of thematic coding done for the following themes: “identity/Black girlhood,” “racism,” “beauty standards,” “sexual expressivity,” “respectability” “hip hop,” “popular culture,” and “heteronormative Cinderella fairy tales.”

In this chapter, I review the findings of the study, the significance of the findings in the realm of theory and research to the aforementioned areas of academic study. I then discuss the limitations of this study in order to further the research on Black girlhood,
who are often ignored in broader fields, such as girlhood studies. I conclude the chapter by articulating a need for programming and promotes critical consciousness, rather than empowerment and resilience, which is gained through culturally relevant pedagogy influenced by engagement with culture and the belief that Black girls *always, already* possess critical valuable readings of the world around them.

**Review**

The findings of the study speak volumes about how Black girls make meaning of the world around them. As I’ve sought to demonstrate, the Black girl participants of the #BlackGirlsOnFleek afterschool program in fact utilize Black and popular cultures as a framework to understand their experiences, how they are perceived, and how they perceive others. While the girls all identified as Black, of the Diaspora, there were differences in class, nation, and background that ruled out any monolithic notion of Blackness, which provided rich differences in experience. Participants indicated that Black girls were often perceived as loud, over-sexualized and troublesome in school, although they did not overwhelmingly read themselves in that same manner, attributing those findings to stereotypes. My findings also indicate that the politics of respectability had been ingrained into their understandings of Black woman and girlhood (perhaps even by me), and that many performances of Black female sexuality were read as inappropriate. Specifically, women were labeled as ‘ratchet’ and ‘thots,’ both deriving from the hip hop lexicon. One of the goals of BGG is to show up the generationally gender-specific language and discourse practices to articulate and negotiate one’s
identity, which was evident in the findings. These debasing terms became common language for the Black girls who partook in the consumption of Black and popular culture content and wanted to reduce their chances of their bodies and personhood being read in a certain way. Additionally, this was also done by studying their body language, or the discourse practices they use to articulate and protect themselves, such as TWA (talking with attitude), silence (not speaking at all) and representin’ (communal talking together), among others. All of which can be read by those not a part of this particular discourse group as disrespectful or insubordinate, especially in school settings.

While the participants of the #BlackGirlsOnFleek very rarely sought to epitomize or valorize white girlhood, it is certainly white supremacy that drove their beliefs about sexuality, beauty, and performances of girlhood. For example, commentary about hair texture, colorism, beauty norms were abounding. Although Black female celebrity figures, such as Nicki Minaj, were critiqued, her cosmetic aesthetic was not. That is, while her physique and performance of sexuality was often under attack, her refashioning of the Mattel’s Barbie was not. In other words, her able-bodiedness, long straight blonde hair, and lighter brown skin were not the issue. Further, Beyonce was held to very high esteem and recognized as one of the most beautiful Black celebrities in contemporary popular culture due to her light complexion, long straight light hair and modest sexuality, which was put in stark contrast to that of Minaj’s. In many ways, Minaj’s was read as complicit in her degradation, which included attacks on her intelligence. Beyoncé was read as powerful and a good role model for girls in a manner that seemed to transcend racial tropes of problematic Black female sexuality. While one of the purposes of the
study was to unearth a youthful and playful view of Black female sexuality that was more relaxed, the study’s findings indicate that Black girls are socialized to be just as concerned about upholding respectability politics as many adult Black women. This illuminates the stronghold this ideology has across generations, and how Black girls critique other Black girls for appealing to, questioning or participating in performances of sexuality. As argued by Cooper (2018), “the problem with provisional strategies [such as respectability], particularly when they begin to work for the exceptional few is that they rise to the level of ideology. Soon, Black folks begin to blame other Black people for bringing the race down” (p. 153). This is precisely what was illuminated in some parts of the study. Black girls, like many other social groups, sometimes recreate social hierarchies among themselves in attempt to deflect negative stereotypes due to the astuteness they have about these stereotypes having real material consequences, particularly in school settings. However, other instances show how girls pushed back against respectability, both verbally and through embodied performances, such as twerking. Moreover, the study showed the messiness that emerges in reading representations of Black female sexuality through a lens constrained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and the socialization that can occur by elders as a means to keep youth safe.

The significance of the study lies in the experiences of youth engagement with Black girls’ meaning making abilities. For four years I examined the lives of Black girls for how they read themselves and other Black girls around them. Specifically, how in school-sanctioned spaces, they leaned more heavily on their ability to read the world,
rather than the word to unearth BGG. The findings revealed the nuances and complexities of being a Black girl, which involves navigating very similar structures and strictures as adults while being asked to be strong and resilient. Because popular culture serves as a site of education, it is important for educators and practitioners to stay abreast of what is being consumed.

As the study indicates, media does in fact shape how Black girls define themselves. However, in this particular study, the degree to which Black girls depend on media for self-definition was overstated. Being hyper-aware of the stereotypes about Black girls in both media and school caused more dissociation with celebrity figures than what was initially anticipated. The struggle for self-definition, for the Black girls in this study, seems to come from within. Although they are a part of a generation heavily influenced by hip hop, rep the culture, and are up-to-date on its happenings, they have not internalized sexist and racist ideologies as essential to Black girlhood, or as damning or dooming. It does not represent the holistic Black girl narrative for the Black girl experience. Journal entries more often talked about pride, skills, talents achievements and goals (both academically and non-academically) that helped them in the quest for self-definition.

Additionally, being stereotyped as loud, precocious, troubled and/or at-risk in school was so much the norm that the girls came into the program articulating these stereotypes and seeking to deflect and disprove them. I argue that culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy, which was utilized in the afterschool program under the name hip hop feminist pedagogy, is one way in which to decrease Black girls’ detachment from
school, as well as the negative and positives ways they are “managed.” The hip hop feminist pedagogy used in #BlackGirlsOnFleek was one that affirmed the girls’ cultural identities and challenged inequities. A hip hop feminist pedagogy is one that examines how dialogue, creative projects and embodied performances are mediated by hip hop in the context of girl-centered experiences.

A hip hop feminist pedagogy also contributes to Black feminism. This is accomplished through its building of Hill Collins’ (2000) work on epistemology, since both Black girlhood and BGG represent a unique epistemological standpoint rooted in the intersections of race, gender, youth and engagement with hip hop and popular cultures. Specifically, it still involves an ethic of caring, which is rooted in a tradition of African humanism, the appropriateness and validation of emotion in progressive girl-centered spaces (which is marked in this research by one participant’s mention of suicide), and the capacity for empathy. It still involves an ethic of accountability to one’s self and the others she is working with to create change. It still involves a prioritizing of lived experience as criteria enough to produce theories and exist as valued agents of knowledge. It demonstrates that while intersectionality continues to serve as a useful theory and method for understanding oppression, interventions are continually needed that address the nuances of Black identity over time.

Feminist critical discourse analysis is an invaluable theoretical tool in highlighting these nuances. This is because it is predicated on the idea that identity and critical social justice-based work is not supposed to be undertaken with a neutral lens. In fact, it allows that scholars reject objectivity completely and lay claim to their belief and investments,
and how they manifest in the process of data analyses. Attempting to be neutral in the analysis process would not only have been methodologically irresponsible and morally reprehensible in my guest to be an advocate for Black girls. This study shows the necessity and value of qualitative research that seeks to disrupt status quo ideology in an area of post-racial and post-feminist rhetoric.

**Implications**

Buckingham (1998) argues that teaching popular culture in school is difficult because it requires that teachers relinquish a great deal of power, as students become the experts on the material. I found this to be true in my work at #BlackGirlsOnFleek. However, this ‘relinquishing’ of power was not problematic, as I approached the work from the Freirean belief that learning is a dialogical process. Curricula and extra-curricular programming with Black girls as the target audience should welcome the exploration of girls’ own cultural concerns and investments in both culture and meaning making. Teachers, administration, and practitioners who ignore popular culture’s power as educational tool are missing out on the ability to promote critical thinking, democracy and rapport building. Because media literacy is not a part of contemporary standardized testing paradigms, it is not deemed of being of importance or value. #BlackGirlsOnFleek succumbed to pressure of standardized testing, experiencing shortened programming time, several attempts at disruptive intrusions by school staff to critique content and eventually being pushed out of the school completely by a new incoming regime of administrators.
However problematic some hip hop and popular culture messages may be, the ability to critique them in meaning making processes is key. This promotes both critical thinking. For example, the social hierarchy can be used to discuss ideals of democracy and the American Dream in social studies. The language flow and style of hip hop artists can be discussed in English/Language arts. Discussions about sexuality and sexual health can be explored in biology and/or health classes. Thus, the classroom can be a place where Black girls are not criminalized but encouraged to engage in curricula that bridge a gap between school and home life. Until this reform occurs in the realm of educational policy, program such as #BlackGirlsOnFleek remain critical in tackling these issues and exposing the genius of Black girls, even those who are deemed “at risk” or underperforming per the criteria of white supremacist master script (Billings, 1994).

**Limitations**

While I attribute the success of the study to my ability build rapport with participants over four years, one limitation is that the study took place at only one site in one Midwestern public school, with a limited number of participants. The afterschool program space was indeed beneficial, as it created a space of comfort that was accessible and free to students who wished to participate. The school site allowed eliminated the need for transportation, provided meals and made for easy engagement with parents that may have otherwise been missed at other spaces, such as public community centers. I also believe that the school setting helped with attendance and punctuality, as the students had adapted to a strict class schedule. However, it is also true that this same school-
sanctioned space posed many challenges. For example, as a program that did not produce measurable academic results (particularly those transferable on state standardized testing), the program was not always seen as valuable. This proved to be truer with the changing of administration. The program saw inconvenient changes in scheduling in regard to time that resulted in shortened meeting times, and at one point was moved from the school’s library to an unused storage-like space during winter with no heat. For many weeks, we permitted students to wear outdoor clothing and I bought a small space heater from a local department store. Another example of how the school setting proved challenging was that the curricular content of the program was somewhat policed by administration. For instance, there was one participant who identified as gay and often attempted to disrupt heteronormative leanings in our conversations to make meaning for herself. However, explicit discussion about sexual orientation or identity was forbade by administration. This was a disservice not only to this particular student, but the group as a whole, which was robbed of a varying viewpoint as it foreclosed opportunities for questions promoting principles of inclusion and democracy. Had the program taken place at a community center or space with less political oversight, greater curricular autonomy could have been achieved.

In the methodology section of the dissertation, I discuss how BGG is representative of a working-class Black girlhood. This was intentional, as this was the demographic of both the program participants and the school at large. Further, hip hop’s roots are also working-class. By extension, the term homegirl, rooted in the hip hop lexicon, conjures a particular working-class consciousness. While BGG can be theorized
for middle and upper class Black girls, the results may not be the same. While I do not see this as a limitation of the study, it is worth noting. Additionally, the questions arise: *Who can be a homegirl? Who can’t?* The goal here is not to provide a blueprint on how to organically develop a homegirl rapport, because this does not exist. However, because class status is an identity one can experience more fluidly throughout life, it *is* possible to have had a working-class existence, identify as a homegirl and enter a new tax bracket. Blackness and a working-class consciousness are key to homegirling. In this regard, homegirling is not always replicable.

Lastly, working with school staff to incorporate ideals of democracy and freedom related to identity development and meaning would be ideal. These principles, which are often studied in social studies and English classes, have the potential to make test-heavy curricula more exciting, accessible and culturally relevant. Using popular and hip hop cultures as the starting point to introduce and examine these principles would serve to be invaluable, as it positions Black girls as experts in their own right, making the classroom a more democratic one. As fellow educators, interviews could be done with school staff to gain insight on their understandings of Black girlhood or what they thought about the work being done at #BlackGirlsOnFleek, particularly since many of the educators at the school were white women. What biases do they harbor? How do they influence their interactions with the participants? Did they see behavioral changes in participants during and after their participation in the program? Academic changes? Had they sought to mimic any of these pedagogical practices in their own classrooms, or depend less on
punitive approaches to discipline when certain discourse practices occurred in their classrooms?

**Future Research**

Additional research projects are needed to continue the work of exploring how Black girls make meaning and develop critical consciousness. New research in this area will forever be timely, as popular and hip hop cultures are continually changing, offering ripe sites for analyses. For example, although this had not yet happened at the time this particular #BlackGirlsOnFleek discussion took place, I understand Beyoncé’s half-time Super Bowl performance to be transgressive and would have presented an excellent site of cultural analysis. In commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Black Panther Party, Beyoncé and an all-Black woman dance troupe performed “Formation,” which has recently been heralded as a contemporary hip hop feminist anthem due to its empowering and prideful messages about (southern) Black culture and celebratory Black woman and girlhood, wearing Black outfits reminiscent of Panther uniforms (which were not modest but, were not overwhelmingly described in popular discourse as ratchet or inappropriate), including Black leather, berets and afros. Immediately following the performance came a firestorm of white supremacist critique, citing Beyoncé as racist for her honoring of what white America refers to as a terrorist group. Backlash also included a poorly attended anti-Beyoncé rally in New York, and police departments around the country threatening not to provide security protection for her upcoming world tour. This is an overt example of a Black female pop culture icon transgressing or shaking up a contrived space—when
White supremacist interests are threatened by a perceived power imbalance.

In the words of Queen Bey herself, “You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation” (Formation, 2016). In a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, for a Black woman, in addition to self-defined autonomy, Bey reminds us to “always stay gracious,” and that “the best revenge in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society is yo paper” (Formation, 2016).

In this study, I investigated how Black girls made meaning about their identity through a critical conscious called Black Girl Genius (BGG), which is informed by age, race, class, youth, and engagement with hip hop and popular cultures. Research is needed to show how results are different or similar across geographical regions, in schools that are public, private, charter or parochial, as well as in settings that are not at all school-sanctioned, such as community centers or other public facilities. Perhaps findings will be different. Further, a great deal of research needs to be done on how to approach what happens at the intersection of pleasure politics, respectability, sexuality and consent for curious Black girls living in a highly sexualized society. Morgan (2015) advocates for a politics of rearticulation, void of the anchor of the politics of respectability in thinking about pleasure and desire and explicitly articulates pleasure politics as a liberatory feminist project that “elevates the need for sexual autonomy and erotic agency without shame to the level of black feminist imperative” (p. 5). While this strategy may work well with adult women in mind, questions emerge from girlhood that include how to navigate parent and/or school support, issues of consent, and how perhaps to merge such conversations with those of anatomy, biology and safety. Most importantly, how are
these conversations had responsibly with girls who have experienced sexual trauma, such as some of the participants of this study? While Troutman’s (2009) feminist pedagogical media literacy (FPML) model seems more youth or age appropriate, it simply opens the door for students to discuss what sexual scripts they have taken from popular culture, rather than how they themselves question or engage in practices of desire and pleasure. What is needed, is an intervention that exists in the middle of these two concepts.

Because the program took place in a school-sanctioned space, I was mandated not to discuss these issues, and feel that this is an area in which the study is greatly lacking. While theory in this area is greatly advancing and promoting a critical counter-knowledge about sexuality for adult Black women in the fields of Black and hip hop feminisms, it is a dialogue that lacks critical material critique rooted in issues of consent and safety of many kids (physical and emotional, for example).

During one of the 2014 concluding sessions, the participants of #BlackGirlsOnFleek formed a circle and shared a brief sentence about what they felt they got out of participating in the program and how they would use that knowledge moving forward. Many cited increased self-esteem, cultural pride and friendships. ‘Magic’ had been scribbled on the margins of many pages of art and journals but had not been thoroughly addressed aloud. I understood it to mean that Black girls were magic in my notes. At this time, #BlackGirlMagic was not the huge social media phenomenon it is today. However, I captured Nylah’s remarks, which centered around her own magic, and the magic that #BlackGirlsOnFleek promoted:
I liked learning about my history and culture. I felt like I could be myself and I ain’t have to put on. I could say what I wanted to say and do what I wanted to do without a grown person correcting me about it. And I like how we went to the college to perform our work that time. I did kinda hate that we had to practice so much for dat [laughter] but, it was like magic when were got up there, though. People were proud of us that we didn’t even know.

Here, Nylah is referring to a trip the girls went on to local university of hip hop feminisms that they participated in. Here, the girls had the opportunity to visit a college campus and hear adults talk about academic and hip hop, and could not believe this was their profession. For the girls, it also helped destigmatize hip hop, as it is usually regarded as the scapegoat genre for hypermasculinity, violence, misogyny, and materialism, among other negative attributes. Here, Nylah is commenting on how much she enjoyed the experience, even though she disliked the hours of performance practice that went into her poetry reading about self-love, stereotypes. For outsiders, this moment may have “come out of nowhere,” as creator Cashawn Thompson stated is often the case with instantiations of #BlackGirlMagic. However, we knew the work Kirsten dedicated to developing BGG and articulating it succinctly to a room full of some of hip hop’s most revered scholars:

I ain’t think I could do something like that. *It was foreal like magic. Like Black Girl Magic. We like geniuses [laughter]!*
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