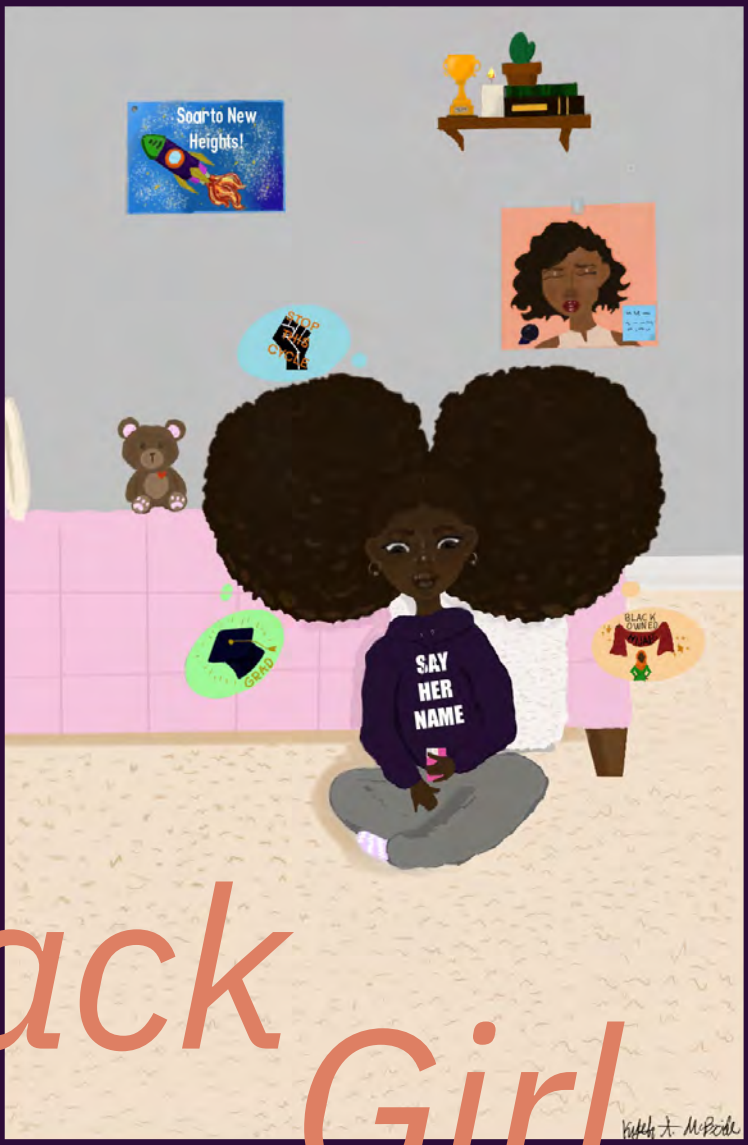
Ashleigh Greene Wade



Black Girl Autopoetics

Agency in Everyday Digital Practice

Black Girl ***Auto-poetics***

Black

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Girl ***Auto-poetics***

Agency in Everyday Digital Practice

Ashleigh Greene Wade

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In memory of my grandmother
Willie Jean Greene,

with whom I shared a love
for words and stories.

Contents

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Introduction

Defining Black Girl Autopoetics

November 24, 2016: I was back home in Kinston, North Carolina, visiting family for Thanksgiving at my maternal grandparents' house, the house that has been the center of our family functions since it was built in the 1950s. This Thanksgiving, it was unseasonably warm—even for Kinston—but the warmth was not the only unusual thing about that day. This particular Thanksgiving was the first one any of us had celebrated without our family matriarch, my grandmother, who died unexpectedly a couple of months before. So, the mood was heavy as we were still navigating the newness of her absence.

As the day progressed, we eased into our normal traditions: the prayer, the meal, the conversations, the laughter. As much of a staple as the turkey, postdinner activities involved the grown folks sitting in the kitchen talking while the children—five girls ranging in age from six to twelve—played outside. After being outside almost all afternoon, the girls came in the house excited to show us what they had been doing all day: making a video on Triller.[1] The song they chose as the backdrop of their production came from the viral "You Name It" meme, which featured an excerpt from Shirley Caesar's "Hold My Mule" set to a hip-hop beat by DJ Suede the Remix God. Each girl had a part, and the oldest one edited the video to make the choreography flow seamlessly with the lyrics of the song in the background. Aside from thinking the finished product was incredibly cute, the video intensified my growing interest

in the mundane nature of digital technologies in the lives of children living in the United States and how the ubiquitous nature of these technologies shapes what it means to be a Black girl in this moment, a moment in which they do not have to wait for magazines, television networks, and film production companies to produce the media they want to see. In fact, Black girls have the tools at their disposal to produce *their own media*—creating media as play, as communication, as an outlet. This book is about Black girls' everyday digital practices, what their digital content reveals about their everyday experiences, and how their digital productions contribute to a broader record of Black life. In what follows, I weave together a series of stories of how Black girls create spaces and discourse through their digital media production. I do not present the digital (or Black girls' digital content) as a clear-cut example of or avenue toward Black liberation. Instead, I present these stories as a provocation to (re)evaluate processes that are integral to Black life—space-making, archiving, communicating, and organizing—through the lens of Black girlhood. Black girls' digital practices constitute a means through which they invent and reinvent themselves, in turn, inventing and reinventing what it means to live, create, and preserve Black life.

The Stakes: The Social Backdrop of Black Girls' Digital Practices

To understand the creative and disruptive power of Black girls' digital practices requires an examination of the sociopolitical contexts in which their digital content emerges. The digital landscape is neither the utopia early proponents thought or hoped it would be nor the utterly depraved hellscape technophobes cautioned us against. Instead, like every other space occupied by humans, the digital is fraught with ambivalence, which this text cannot escape in its focus on Black girls. While I center Black girls' creativity, I cannot discuss that creativity without acknowledging the clear and present danger of the internet for Black girls.

While the social backdrop of Black girls' digital practices could make up an entire monograph by itself, a life-changing moment for seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier captures the multifaceted, multilayered "matrix of domination" that shapes Black girls' experiences in the United States.[2] In Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020, Frazier walked her nine-year-old cousin Judeah Reynolds to a local corner store to get some candy. What should have been an uneventful occurrence in the lives of two Black girls turned into a nightmare as the street right in front of the store became the scene of yet another police

murder of a Black person: George Floyd. Frazier recorded the murder on her cell phone and posted it to social media that night as a way of witnessing the tragedy and seeking justice.[3] Frazier's impulse to record and share Floyd's murder reflects an instinct that has developed as a result of the quotidian nature of police violence against Black civilians.[4] Inextricably linked to the all-too-familiar violation of Black people at the hands of police, fear of incredibility drives the need to record police murders. Ironically, the fact that few police officers have been charged with or convicted of crimes, even with video evidence, bolsters the impulse to record police violence because Black people feel (read: know) that if investigators will not believe the video evidence before their eyes, they certainly will not believe the testimony of a Black person. For Frazier, her age, race, and gender all shape perceptions about her believability within a white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Given these realities, Frazier's act of recording was, unfortunately, not abnormal or exceptional.

Recalling the incident, Frazier explained, "They killed this man. And I was right there! I was like five feet away! It is so traumatizing."[5] Now This, an online, video-based news-media company, reported about Frazier, but not everyone saw her as a hero. Some people began to bully Frazier online, claiming that she posted the video for attention and suggesting that she should have physically intervened instead of recording the murder on her cell phone.[6] Since the bullying, Frazier has not spoken to media sources, but she did post on her Facebook page:

> I'm doing it for clout?? For attention?? What?? To get paid?? Now y'all just sound dumb and ignorant!! I don't expect anyone who wasn't placed in my position to understand why and how I feel the way that I do!! MIND YOU I am a minor! 17 years old, of course I'm not about to fight off a cop I'm SCARED wtf. If it wasn't for me 4 cops would've still had their jobs, causing other problems. My video went world wide for everyone to see and know!! His family was reached out to! The police most definitely would've swept it under the rug with a cover up story. Instead of bashing me, THANK ME! Because that could've been one of your loved ones and you would want to see the truth as well.[7]

Frazier's response to these bullies reflects both the level of vitriol spewed at her and her psychological and emotional trauma.

The attacks on Frazier put a spotlight on the threats Black girls face online. In some ways, the structure of social media sites makes cyberbullying and harassment easy to enact without consequences. While Facebook requires users to provide their given names on their profiles, other sites like Instagram, You-

Tube, Snapchat, and Twitter allow users to choose a screen name that is not necessarily the same or related to names on their official identification documents, thereby fostering a sense of anonymity that emboldens potential bullies.[8] Additionally, people create fake accounts. Sometimes these accounts are bots, a form of artificial intelligence (AI), and other times hackers and trolls create fake accounts posing as a real person—a form of digital identity theft. While these features of social media already create ripe conditions for cyberbullying, algorithms have the potential to intensify online harassment. Major tech companies use algorithms to increase their profit margins, oftentimes at the expense of marginalized folks.[9] While there have been recent campaigns to put pressure on companies like Twitter and Facebook to do more extensive content monitoring, the same algorithms that can make a cat meme go viral can also make disparaging comments about Black girls go viral. In Frazier's case, the viral video that she shared made her more exposed, and therefore a more susceptible target for bullying. Despite popular social media applications having policies about online harassment, algorithms tend to feed the trolls because more reacting, commenting, and sharing—regardless of the nature of the content—means more revenue for these companies.

Cyberbullying—and the algorithms that fuel it—does not pose a unique threat to Black girls, but the backlash leveled against Frazier illustrates how online harassment can be driven and exacerbated by misogynoir.[10] The expectation that Frazier, a child, would approach four armed adults—already in the process of killing another adult—to stop them exemplifies many people's inability to see Black girls as innocent, to see them as deserving of joy and peace, and to see them as children. Based on the evidence that points to how Black girls in the United States are seen as adults earlier than their white counterparts, it would be hard to believe a white girl who witnessed a murder before her very eyes would have been met with judgment and bullying for not intervening. Most likely a white girl in Frazier's position would have been called a hero for filming the incident and people would have questioned the moral fiber of a group of police officers who could do such a thing in front of a perceivably innocent little girl.[11] Another way that the attacks on Frazier illustrate misogynoir lies in how the video garnered sympathy for George Floyd (as it should have) and galvanized protests around the world in his honor while Frazier's trauma, along with Black girls' collective trauma in general, dropped from our purview. To be clear, I am not juxtaposing Floyd and Frazier to engage in a form of oppression Olympics that would measure compassion and sympathy based on identity categories or personal traits. Instead, I am pointing out how the story of Frazier—a Black girl—dropped from the conversation about how (po-

lice) violence impacts Black families and communities, further illustrating how the violation and endangerment of Black girls and women does not generate the same collective sense of urgency as that of Black boys and men.

Darnella Frazier's story is a high-profile case that helps to consolidate key features of the social climate in which Black girls have to be creative. Unfortunately, Frazier's situation brings renewed attention to an old problem: the paradox of Black girls' hyper(in)visibility. On the one hand, Black girls' online activity makes them hypervisible and, in turn, creates a "scopic vulnerability" that puts them at risk for cyberbullying, harassment, and other forms of violence.[12] On the other hand, Black girls get lost in digital contexts on (at least) two levels. One, we lose the voices, stories, and identities of Black girls in how people respond to them in contexts of hypervisibility. For instance, when people use Black girls' digital content to make reductive generalizations, Black girls' voices are often absent from the discourse that arises. Two, after the moment of hypervisibility passes, Black girls' stories get lost among continuously updating newsfeeds and talking heads pontificating. In Frazier's case, even as news stories continued to talk about George Floyd, the girl behind the video got buried further. This act of moving on has not transpired out of respect for Frazier's privacy; instead, it is on par with how noise of seemingly more important issues drowns out Black girls' stories.

Along with violence, the paradox of hyper(in)visibility makes Black girls more susceptible to (hyper)sexualization and criminalization, and amateur video platforms have played a central role in depicting Black girls as overly sexual criminals. As Safiya Noble points out, these platforms facilitate and perpetuate a form of algorithmic violence that increases the likelihood for these types of dehumanizing images to appear in online searches for Black girls.[13] For example, entertainment site World Star Hip Hop helped popularize the video genre featuring Black girls fighting. The 2013 viral video of Sharkeisha Thompson attacking ShaMichael Manuel made its way from Vine to World Star and received millions of views. Instead of generating a sense of concern about the conditions—psychological or otherwise—that catalyzed the fight, the video, and the girls it depicted, became the butt of jokes and evidence of Black girls' presumed propensity for violence and criminality. Although the Sharkeisha video did not have an explicitly sexual nature, videos of Black girls fighting and Black girls twerking go hand in hand when it comes to Black girls' hyper(in)visibility. Twerking is a dance style that involves gyration and rapid movement of the butt, which makes many people perceive it as inherently sexual. Therefore, people invested in Black girls' denigration point to videos of them twerking online as confirmation of their supposed sexual proclivity. These discursive

discrepancies between how Black girls dance and how other people perceive them sometimes translates to material harm. As ethnomusicologist and Black girlhood studies pioneer Kyra Gaunt argues, Black girls' twerking videos on YouTube can make them victims of "digital sexploitation."[14] Gaunt's research uncovers how "Black girls are doubly-exploited" by adults (especially men) and YouTube as a corporation when they post twerking videos on the platform.[15] YouTube makes money off Black girls' twerking videos through Google AdSense, and the songs that form the soundtracks of these videos generate profit for (mostly) male artists.[16] On a more violent level, grown men have subjected young Black (and Brown) girls to predatory, sexually explicit comments as well as doxxing. Historically, YouTube has done little to nothing to stop, investigate, or remove predatory, pornographic comments grown men make on young Black girls' twerking videos. To be clear, Black girls have no responsibility to debunk stereotypes about their sexualities, nor should they be denied opportunities to find embodied pleasure. Therefore, I do not mention twerking videos here to suggest Black girls modify their online presentation, though they may want to mitigate these potential harms by doing so. Instead, I point to people's reductive interpretations of Black girls twerking as an example of how hyper(in)visibility maps onto Black girls' digital content. While there are seemingly countless examples of the dangers facing Black girls, the aforementioned instances of harassment, criminalization, and (hyper)sexualization epitomize the social backdrop against which Black girls engage the digital because they reflect a convergence of forces working against them (both on and offline), robbing them of their innocence and joy. The dangers that I have outlined here can stifle Black girls' creativity. So, Black girls' continued creation and re-creation—through media, stories, and art—in the face of danger represents a power struggle where Black girls work to shift power away from the forces that seek to destroy them. This creative process helps Black girls assert themselves within and against systems so quick to exploit and discard them.

The Sites: Locating and Collaborating with Black Girls

For the purposes of this research, I defined *Black girlhood* using the following parameters. Even though the research focuses on girls based in the United States, I use the word *Black* or *Black American* instead of *African American* to reflect the ethnic diversity of US-based Black people. To define *girl*, I used gender expression and the legal age of adulthood in the United States as primary indicators. However, since the legal age of adulthood is arbitrary, I also used experience as an additional marker.[17] While the book aims to extend our conceptions of

Black girls' subjectivities beyond their roles as students, I still use participation in (or being of an age to participate in) primary and secondary school as an experience that defines girlhood since K–12 school attendance or affiliation tends to be a marker of childhood in the United States.

Given the paradox of hyper(in)visibility, an examination of Black girls' digital practices must not only locate Black girls but must also find where and how Black girls tell their own stories. In committing to the journey of learning more about what Black girls do online, I knew I would have to peruse digital spaces. However, my reading of Black girls' digital content, while rooted in established analytical methodologies, is informed by my own acquired, embodied, and lived knowledge.[18] Therefore, telling the story of Black girls' digital practices required going directly to the source.

Driven by the impetus to center Black girls' voices, I decided to combine my own interpretation of their content with ethnography. In the spirit of scholars like Moya Bailey and LeConté Dill, who viewed research participants as collaborators and coresearchers, respectively, I engaged Black girl interlocutors both in person and online.[19] For the physical site research, I conducted participant-observation, interviews, and discussion groups with Black girls in Richmond, Virginia.[20] I chose Richmond as a site for understanding everyday Black girlhood for several reasons. Richmond has been and remains a prominent location for Black cultural production, as evidenced by the inclusion of Black Richmonders in the historical accounts of the city's museums and other cultural institutions. Given Richmond's historical relevance and contemporary developments, Richmond has emerged as a Southern, urban arts hub in its own right. For instance, the largest university in the city, Virginia Commonwealth University, hosts a nationally ranked visual arts program, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts features a number of world-renowned exhibitions that have included Deborah Willis's *Posing Beauty* (2013) and Kehinde Wiley's *New Republic* (2016). Richmond's burgeoning reputation as an art city was significant to this project because it meant there were a number of youth-serving organizations in the area that expose children to artistic techniques, including photography and film. Even though the research focuses on more mundane media production (as opposed to media produced within formal institutional contexts), these art organizations proved to be a productive starting point for finding Black girls to talk to about their digital content.

Another reason I chose Richmond has to do with situating the United States South more prominently within conversations about youth and digital technologies. The representative studies on youth and digital media in the United States do not focus much on youth in the South even though, accord-

ing to census data, the majority of Black Americans still live in the South; Atlanta, Georgia, is the exception.[21] Richmond is one of many cities in the South where Black people make up the largest percent of the population. This statistical reality along with Richmond's role in Black culture helped solidify the city's relevance to a study about everyday Blackness.

Richmond's significant Black population in combination with its historical and contemporary importance to Black cultural production played a role in my decision to conduct research there, but I also had personal ties to the city. I moved to Richmond in 2008 to pursue a master's degree at the University of Richmond, and after finishing the degree program, I began teaching English and history at an independent (private) all-girls school in the area in 2010, the same year that Snapchat launched. I elaborate more on the confluence of conditions that drove me to want to learn more about Black girls' digital spaces in chapter 1, but my observations of how the Black girls who frequented my classroom used Snapchat (and social media in general) made me keenly aware of commonalities in Black girls' experiences of restriction, particularly in school settings, even when they had access to the resources that people claimed would be a panacea to all the problems in public schools. In this way, choosing Richmond as a research site was also about going back to the place that set me on the path to learn more about Black girls' digital practices in order to make sense of their experiences within broader sociocultural contexts.

I found Richmond to be an important, relevant site to study Black girls' digital practices, and I learned a great deal from the girls who shared their time, thoughts, and stories with me. However, I knew I wanted to engage with Black girls throughout the country to get deeper immersion into their everyday lives at the intersection of the digital. To find more Black girls to engage with online, I turned to the census. The United States Census Bureau released "The Black Population: 2010," a report that offers in-depth discussion of Black American demographic data.[22] The report includes two top-ten lists: one of the ten cities with the highest number of Black people and another of the ten cities that had the largest percentage of Black people. Using these lists, I looked up predominantly Black high schools in these nineteen cities.[23] Then I looked for Instagram profiles that had geotagged these high schools in their posts. Not all of the people posting about these high schools were students or children, so I only examined profiles of Black girls who indicated they were students at the schools—usually they would include something like "South High School, class of . . ." or "student at South High School." I also used posts about participation in school-sanctioned, extracurricular activities to determine school affiliation.

Once I located the profiles of several Black girls using this method, I would check to see who commented on their posts to find additional hundreds of Black girls. I used Instagram and these specific cities as a starting point for searching for Black girls online, but many of them would often have information about their other social media accounts (Snapchat and YouTube mostly) on their Instagram profiles, so I used that information to find more Black girls across platforms and in several locations. As much as possible, I checked people's profiles for information that would give me clues that they identified as Black and a girl, but in some instances, I did rely on a combination of phenotypical features and cultural signifiers to determine race and gender.

Methodologically, finding Black girls involves more than locating them. While I used the tools and resources above to search for and locate Black girls, *finding* them means learning (from and with) them. Ethically, this process of finding Black girls translates to asserting their right to be heard and understood in addition to being seen. Through this process of finding, we come to see Black life through the lens of Black girlhood, which adds nuance to critiques of broad social structures and sheds light on both inter- and intragroup dynamics that go unnoticed when we do not learn (from) Black girls. Therefore, Black girls' perspectives play an essential role in chronicling, analyzing, and understanding Black life.

The Invention: Black Girl Autopoetics

I would eventually come to understand what my cousins created—along with the digital content of hundreds of other Black girls—as a product of Black girl autopoetics. To think through autopoetics as a concept and a practice, I draw from Sylvia Wynter's theorizations and analyses of poesis and autopoiesis from the 1970s into the twenty-first century. In a 1976 conference talk entitled "Ethno or Socio Poetics," Wynter uses George Quasha's definition of ethnopoetics, breaking the term down to its roots, in order to convey a broad application of "poetics." Quoting Quasha, Wynter defines poesis as "acts of 'making.'"[24] Building on this definition, Wynter goes on to explain poetry—the outcome of poesis—as an instrument for "naming" and "conceptualizing" that allows for the "invention and reinvention of humanness" as well as the reinterpretation/repurposing of semiotic meaning.[25] Further expanding her definition of poetics in an interview with Greg Thomas of *ProudFlesh*, Wynter clarified that she doesn't discuss "poetics or poesis . . . as some narrow, literary affair" but instead attributes poetics to the "continuation of humanness" through its deliberate and ongoing rejection of Man (which Wynter defines as white, Judeo-Christian,

bourgeoisie, cisgender, heterosexual male) as the generic human in exchange for more livable, infinitely heterogenous ways of being.[26] For Wynter, poetics reflects a nonlinear mode of thinking, theorizing, and creating.

These musings help illustrate the functions and power of poetics, but according to Wynter, people are not naturally or instinctively inclined to question the social systems that valorize Man as the generic, right way to be human. Instead, the inventive, counter-hegemonic potentialities of poetics must be awakened. In an interview with Katherine McKittrick, Wynter delves into the concept of autopoiesis using Maturana and Varela's *Autopoiesis and Cognition* as a point of reference and departure. Maturana and Varela describe autopoiesis as a self-replicating function and use the term in a strict biological context. However, Wynter applies this concept to human social structures, noting our tendency to replicate the status quo, oftentimes without even realizing we are doing so. She uses bees in a hive as an analogy to describe how autopoiesis applies to human societies: "So that in the same way as the bee can never have knowledge of the higher-level system that is its hive, we too can in no way normally gain cognitive access to the higher level of the genre-specific autopoietic living system of our status quo structured social worlds."[27] In other words, the repetition of and complicity in the status quo obscure our agential capacities to create ourselves and live our lives differently. Though Wynter identifies autopoiesis as a process of reproduction and replication, she does not concede this process as one beyond breach. As McKittrick points out, Wynter's concept of autopoiesis is about breaching the "recursive logic" that "depicts our presently ecocidal and genocidal world as normal and unalterable."[28] Using Fanon's "out-of-body" third-person consciousness and Du Bois's double-consciousness, Wynter describes how people become aware of their existence in relation to Man.[29] That moment of recognition "provide[s] the conditions to assert different living systems and/or breach the existing social system" through "creative human aesthetics that generate a point of view *away* from this consensual circular system."[30] It is from this rupture that I theorize Black girl autopoetics.

I define Black girl autopoetics (BGA) as an inherently spatiotemporal praxis of creation. In breaking down autopoiesis to its roots, the word translates to self-making. I deploy the concept of self-making in two ways: Black girls making themselves (i.e., their subjectivities) and Black girls staking claim to a creative process that is their own (i.e., making *for* themselves). I present BGA as a praxis of creation because it encompasses how Black girls (re)invent cultural products, spaces, and discourses in their subjective formation and expression. Throughout this text, when I refer to Black girls' creativity I do not mean this as a conflation with artistry—even though art is part of Black girls' creative rep-

ertoire. Instead, I am using creativity to mean inclined toward creation. Black people have created (and continue to create) alternate, new worlds within the worlds we were not meant to survive.[31] Therefore, BGA functions as a world-making technology; it is both theory of the flesh and a survival methodology rooted in Black girls' ways of knowing and making meaning. BGA aligns with Aisha Durham's conception of "life affirming poetics," which "emerge from a doing, knowing body whose historical, conjunctural speech-bodily-written acts are sometimes irreconcilable and deliberate but never detached."[32] These embodied, affective epistemologies simultaneously reflect Black girls' individual lived experiences and collective, intra- and intergenerational exchanges.

My theorization of BGA is not meant to be a proscriptive—meaning there is no litmus test for measuring if something is or isn't Black girl autopoetics. Instead, BGA is characterized by the ways that Black girls make a way out of no way and carve new paths on old roads. BGA includes Black girls creating spaces for themselves within institutions that try to shut them out, Black girls dancing through the streets of Detroit, Black girls writing poetry and making music with each other.[33] Therefore, Black girls' digital content is not the only source of BGA. However, BGA makes Black girls' digital media production unique: other girls may engage similar processes of self-making in digital spaces, but BGA cannot be separated from the lived experiences and consequences of being a Black girl in worlds built on and sustained by white supremacy and misogynoir: "Being a blackgirl means something specific and carries with it the meanings and microaggressions blackgirls live with everyday."[34] This book demonstrates how Black girls' digital media production elucidates the salient features of BGA in hopes of offering an approach to chronicling and interpreting Black experiences in ways that seek out and pay attention to the often overlooked, unheard voices and stories that are no less valuable to understanding and preserving Black life than the ones that tend to occupy more space in our collective Black imaginaries.

Black Girl Autopoetics as Theory

One of the key interventions of the rapidly expanding field of Black girlhood studies is that not only does it approach Black girls from a point of productivity rather than deficiency, but it also centers Black girls as cultural producers and theorists. While Black girlhood studies itself has grown from the premise that Black girls' stories are inherently valuable to knowledge-production, other fields of study conversant with this work—Black studies, visual or media studies—have not always been intentional about including the voices of children or adolescents. Therefore, cultural studies fields as a whole still need more accounts

of Black girls' experiences in their own words, and these accounts should represent the range of subjective complexities that Black girls embody. Given the prevalence of digital technologies, contending with their role in Black girls' everyday lives and practices not only contributes to a greater understanding of Black girls' lived experiences and realities but also allows for a deeper understanding of Black girls as cultural producers. Taking this radical approach to children's cultural production, Black girlhood studies demonstrates how Black girls (and children in general) are relevant to cultural theory and praxis.

As Black girlhood studies continues to evolve as a field, the question of theoretical frameworks—both informing and emerging from Black girlhood studies—becomes more pressing.[35] While the relationship between Black girlhood studies and Black feminism may seem obvious, there are tensions that exist regarding recognizing Black girlhood as a distinct stage from Black womanhood and, in turn, a distinct source of cultural theory. Black feminism clearly informs many of the displays of Black girlhood that I discuss throughout this text. At the same time, as a framework generally formed from the experiences of *adult* Black women, Black feminism can sometimes obscure the *girl*-specific elements of Black girls' lived knowledges. #BlackGirlMagic helps elucidate this elision. In their foundational collection, Julia Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris present #BlackGirlMagic as "one manifestation of Black women's political and cultural behaviors."[36] Despite the word *girl*, #BlackGirlMagic "is not bound by chronological age or society's conceptualization of moving into adulthood."[37] This fluidity allows the girl within #BlackGirlMagic to operate as an intragroup, "community-building" tool across age, which then facilitates crucial elements of Black feminist politics such as reclamation, restoration, and self-definition.[38] At the same time, #BlackGirlMagic's all-age inclusivity eclipses Black girls' distinct experiential epistemologies. In fact, when I brought up #BlackGirlMagic in discussions with Black girls while conducting research, none of them identified with the concept, which speaks to how Black women's feminist frameworks do not automatically align with the experiences of Black girls.[39] I do not mean to suggest that Black women simply throw away their childhoods when constructing Black feminist theory. Instead, I am pointing out a difference between theorizing through *reflection upon* girlhood and theorizing from *within the stage* of girlhood.

Black girlhood studies pioneer Ruth Nicole Brown has been calling attention to the unique and specific qualities of theorizing Black girls' lives. Brown makes important distinctions between Black girlhood studies theory and Black feminist theory, noting that while Black girls may "speak and enact Black womanist/

feminist sensibilities and actions," Black girls have their own epistemologies that stem from what they know *themselves*, not from what adults claim to know about them.[40] That is not to say that Black girls cannot be Black feminists or that they cannot use Black feminist (or womanist) theory, but Black girlhood has its own frameworks.[41] These frameworks may be derived from and/or adjacent to Black feminism but not always necessarily captured by Black feminist theories rooted in the experiences of Black women. Therefore, my conceptualization of BGA presents it as both a theory that emerges from the study of Black girlhood and a hermeneutic for apprehending Black girls' socialities, which in this case includes their digital practices.

I want to be careful in outlining these distinctions between BGA and Black feminism as they correspond to differences between Black girls and women and not fall into a trap of essentialism, exclusion, and/or proscription. I recognize that Black feminist theory is applicable to, useful to, and concerned with Black people who do not necessarily identify as women or girls. However, I make these distinctions as a way to be attentive to how Black girls' specific needs, desires, and epistemologies get lost when we do not acknowledge girlhood as a distinct stage.[42]

In addition to illustrating the complex relationship between Black feminist theory and Black girlhood studies, BGA provides nuanced approaches to Black visuality at the intersection of Black girlhood. Visuality as a concept has undergone intense revision as more scholars bring intersectional cultural analyses to visual studies. BGA adds to conversations of Black visuality by suggesting that Black girls' production of visual content within digital spaces unsettles some of the traditional (i.e., predigital era) Black feminist literature regarding visual representation of Black girls' and women's bodies. BGA advances conversations regarding Black visuality by showing how the visual field is not inherently harmful to Black girls and women. Of course, we have to remain vigilant about the circulation and appropriation of Black girls' images, but the creative functions of BGA challenge a facile producer-consumer binary and in turn push past a totalizing characterization of visual media that sees Black girls only as victims of technology rather than innovators within a system designed for their exclusion and optimized for their degradation. BGA shows how even though Black girls are participating in media production largely through corporate-driven applications, they can create and share visual media in ways that are not available to them with television and film. In an age of digital (social) media, Black girls do not have to wait to be reflected in the dominant popular imaginary or "unmirrored" by a lack of (undistorted) representation.[43]

Black Girl Autopoetics as Praxis

Despite interventions related to issues of online privacy, media-based moral panics, and self-branding, approaches to media and girlhood rarely place emphasis on what girls *produce* with digital technologies.[44] Notable exceptions include Mary Celeste Kearney and Sharon Mazzarella. Kearney published the "first book-length study of contemporary U.S. girls' media production," which highlights and analyzes girl-produced media ranging from music to zines to films.[45] Likewise, Mazzarella's scholarship has centered girls' media-making in broader discourses of youth, digital technologies, and identity development.[46] Building on the work of Kearney and Mazzarella, my approach to Black girls as cultural producers puts Black girlhood studies in conversation with media and technology studies in an effort to understand what looking at the particularities of Black girlhood can tell us broadly about digital media ecologies. While girlhood studies and media studies intersect frequently, scholarship that looks at *Black* girlhood and media is not as robust and/or tends to be focused on consumption.[47] Other studies provide some theorization of Black girls' media production but still indicate consumptive influences as the main indicator of what Black girls will produce in digital spaces.[48] While the aforementioned authors theorize media practices themselves, others have outlined the productive possibilities presented by Black girls' engagements with digital media, conversations this book continues.[49]

As a technology of making, BGA is both theory and praxis, and Black girls' digital practices elucidate the layered textures of Black girls' creativity. I return to my cousins' Triller video to expound upon the various layers of creation within BGA. At the surface, material level the girls created a digital video that they could save, share, and replay. Another level of creation is a spatial one, which makes sense given that Black girlhood is an inherently spatial formation; Black girls' very existence and survival depend on their negotiations of space within and against sociocultural contexts that demand they take up as little space as possible.[50] The theoretical intervention that my work makes into conversations about Black girls' spatialities lies in the exploration of what Black girls' digital media practices reveal about the materiality and spatiality of the digital. Spatially, the video not only occupies bytes within the storage capacities of Triller and the cloud, but it also incorporates how the girls manipulated the physical space of the backyard to stage the video, find props, and create a plot.

The spatial configuration of my cousins' video also leads to a temporal analysis. Even though the girls had no way of knowing they were doing this, they cre-

ated an intergenerational loop of nostalgia. My first cousins (their moms) and I spent countless days playing in that same backyard as children. Of course, we did not have cell phones to aid in our play. The only props we had were the occasional magnolia leaves that we filled with dirt to create pretend hot dogs for our imaginary restaurant. Don't worry; we didn't actually eat them! Despite the differences between our tech-absent hot dogs and the digitized play represented by their Triller creation, the girls' video transported my first cousins and me back to our childhoods. In creating their own memory of the day, the girls connected their elders to our memories of playing and making as little Black girls.

Along with material and spatiotemporal creations, the girls also created a discourse about the relationship between digital technologies and play. Their video undermines the notion that children playing on their phones automatically stifles creativity and social interactions. In addition to creating the video itself, the girls created a world—however brief or fleeting—where they each had a part to play. In thinking about how the girls played with each other on that day, technology brought their imagined worlds to life. Furthermore, finding an activity that a six-year-old will enjoy as much as a twelve-year-old is not easy. The video, at least in that moment, diminished the significance of age difference in play because they found an activity that held all their interest. For the girls to negotiate those age-difference dynamics in a harmonious way without the supervision of adults demonstrates social skills, which the cell phone facilitated instead of hindered.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that my young cousins consciously created a world-making methodology. As is the case with most everyday cultural products, the intention is more rooted in mundane desires and activities. However, the way I read my cousins' everyday cultural product (and read Black girls' everyday digital practices throughout the text) not only contextualizes the video within its sociocultural moment but also exemplifies BGA and its affective and agential implications.

Chapter Structure

In the chapters that follow, stories and reflections of Black girls' digital practices cohere to illustrate BGA as theory and praxis. Each chapter explores a level of Black girls' creativity—what they create through BGA and what that creation inspires in the (re)evaluation of how we understand integral elements of Black life.

A brief interlude, "On Developing Digital Ethics for/with Black Girls," follows this introduction. The interlude offers a self-reflexive discussion of my

methodological choices in designing and conducting the research for this book. Focusing on ethical questions that arose beyond the parameters of the institutional review board (IRB), this section of the text outlines my positionality and considers the complexities of representing Black girls' digital content against an anti-Black, heteropatriarchal gaze.

The first chapter, "Places to Be: Black Girls Mapping, Navigating, and Creating Space through Digital Practice," highlights the function of BGA as a space-making technology. Using ethnographic data from Black girls in Richmond, Virginia, the chapter theorizes Black girls' geographies through the inextricability of their digital content, physical environments, and worldviews. In this chapter, I use Black girls' posts on social media (as well as their commentary about these posts) to construct a theory of the digital as both spatial and material. I argue that Black girls' digital media productions illustrate the interconnected and multilayered spaces that they must navigate, and their movements through these spaces both shape and are shaped by their production of digital content. In addressing the spatiality of the digital, this chapter also explains how Black girls respond to and attempt to control their environments.

Moving from a discussion of how girls make spaces, the second chapter, "'You Gotta Show Your Life': Reading the Digital Archives of Everyday Black Girlhood," demonstrates how the spaces that Black girls have created have allowed informal archives of Black life to materialize. Connecting Black girls' digital image-making to traditions of Black vernacular photography and videography along with the ways Black girls have historically used the media platforms available to them as a means of self-fashioning, I show how Black girls use social media as a means of self-curation—a process that simultaneously involves thoughtful selection of images to share on social media and creates a sense of authority for Black girls regarding their image(s).[51] Some might argue that self-curation encourages or facilitates a false presentation of self, but I argue that Black girls' digital practices in general force us to push back against the tendency to think of digital products as inherently unreal.

Related to these informal archives, the third chapter, "'I Love Posting Pictures of Myself!': Hypervisibility as a Politics of Refusal," shows how Black girls negotiate and play with the (hyper)*visible* aspect of the hyper(in)visibility paradox. Indeed, some Black girls embrace hypervisibility instead of shying away from its potential consequences. Throughout this chapter, I identify three specific, though certainly not exhaustive, genres of hypervisibility in Black girls' online images: ratchet performativity, sexualization, and flexin.[52] I argue that this deliberate act of making oneself hypervisible operates as a form of refusal through which Black girls reject responsibility for an anti-Black image regime

that tries to strip them of their expressive agency. Black girls' use of hypervisibility is a tool of BGA, commanding space for disruptive imagery and creating a sense of urgency around taking Black girls' subjective expressions seriously.

Finally, the fourth chapter, "Making Time: Black Girls' Digital Activism as Temporal Reclamation," focuses on Black girls' relationship to time. I take an in-depth look at Black girls and nonbinary teens who use their social media profiles as an integral part of their activist work: Eva Oleita and Ama Russell of Black Lives Matter in All Capacities (BLMIAC), Marley Dias of #1000BlackGirlBooks, and the curators of the Art Hoe Collective. These three activist efforts encapsulate the key tenets of Black time and help expound upon the relationship between BGA, Black girls' digital practices, and time. Adding to the many conversations regarding the political potential of social media, the chapter argues that BGA, as it manifests in Black girls' digital activism, undermines temporal dispossession and equips Black girls with the agency to reclaim, make, and keep time. Ultimately the theorization of Black girls' temporal restructuring positions BGA as a method for creating the conditions for a future that does not yet exist.

The text concludes with a discussion of the possibilities that emerge from looking at Black life through a BGA lens. Even though Black girls' creative practices are specific to their experiences, they have broader implications for how we understand Blackness as it relates to space, memory, representation, and time. Looking at how Black girls deploy BGA in their digital practices offers insight into ways of creating alternative spaces, narratives, and temporalities in the face of white supremacist attempts at Black erasure. The conclusion urges us to listen to Black girls and learn from their techniques of survival.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 Triller is a social media platform that allows users to make their own music videos using popular songs.

2 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

3 Even though both Darnella Frazier and Judeah Reynolds witnessed George Floyd's murder, I focus on Frazier throughout the rest of the introduction. In doing this, I do not mean to imply that Reynolds's role was any less significant, but the backlash that Frazier received after posting the video of Floyd's murder online exemplifies the conditions under which Black girls participate in digital discourses.

4 Police violence against civilians also disproportionately affects Indigenous people and non-Black people of color, but I focus on Black people in my explanation here because the people I am talking about (Darnella Frazier and George Floyd) are Black and because the information cycle that informs Frazier's and Floyd's stories focuses most of its attention on Black victims of police violence.

5 Epko, "17-Year-Old Who Recorded George Floyd's Murder."

6 While news sources have not reported the identities of the people who bullied Frazier, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the trolls came from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. From an anecdotal perspective, Black people make up the majority of people I am connected to on social media, and I saw several people who shared a post that read: "If I ever get attacked by the police, don't record me, help me!" While this was not directly attacking Frazier, sharing it in the wake of Floyd's murder was an indirect way of judging Frazier. Days later, I saw more people

posting about Frazier's trauma and defending her, but the damage had already been done.

7 Quoted in Epko, "17-Year-Old Who Recorded George Floyd's Murder."

8 There are ways to get around this, but people have reported Facebook reprimanding them for using a name that does not match their "official" name.

9 Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.

10 *Misogynoir* is a term coined by Moya Bailey that refers to the distinct hatred of Black women and girls. See Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*.

11 Black women did come to Frazier's defense, touting her as a hero, but Frazier received the backlash before being hailed a hero. Frazier's heroic act was eventually recognized in a more mainstream way when she received a special Pulitzer award on June 11, 2021. See "Darnella Frazier," The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed March 8, 2023, https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/darnella-frazier.

12 Benjamin, *Race after Technology*, 69.

13 Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.

14 Gaunt, "The Disclosure, Disconnect, and Digital Sexploitation of Tween Girls' Aspirational YouTube Videos."

15 Weisbard, "Kyra Gaunt, on Played."

16 Gaunt, "The Disclosure, Disconnect, and Digital Sexploitation of Tween Girls' Aspirational YouTube Videos."

17 See Driscoll, *Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*; and Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*.

18 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*; Williams, "Structures of Feeling."

19 Bailey, "#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research"; Dill, "Poetic Justice."

20 I prefer the term *discussion groups* to *focus groups* because it feels more age-appropriate for the girls I engaged using this method.

21 I used the 2010 US Census data along with the yearly estimates provided by the US Census Bureau.

22 At the time I began this study, 2010 was the most recent census collection year. The 2020 census was still in progress at the time I began writing this book. While the data from that census will be available by the time this book is published, it was not available to me during my analysis.

23 Detroit, Michigan, appears on both lists, so that is why there are not twenty total cities.

24 Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," 87.

25 Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," 87.

26 Thomas, "PROUD FLESH Inter/Views."

27 McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 32.

28 McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 2.

29 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

30 McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 136, 138.

31 Lorde, "A Litany for Survival."

32 Durham, *Home with Hip Hop Feminism*, 2.

33 Cox, *Shapeshifters*; Brown et al., "Doing Digital Wrongly."

34 Boylorn, "On Being at Home with Myself," 49.
35 For more on the development of Black girlhood studies as a field, see C. Owens et al., "Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies"; and Halliday, *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*.
36 Jordan-Zachery and Harris, *Black Girl Magic beyond the Hashtag*, 6.
37 Jordan-Zachery and Harris, *Black Girl Magic beyond the Hashtag*, 15.
38 Jordan-Zachery and Harris, *Black Girl Magic beyond the Hashtag*, 15.
39 Of course, this does not mean there are no Black girls who identify with #BlackGirlMagic; I'm just pointing out how the girls in this specific study responded to it.
40 Brown, "Questions Regulate/Knowledge Radiates."
41 Smith, "Theorizing Black Girlhood."
42 The distinction between the experiences of girls and women played a critical role in the establishment of girls' studies and girlhood studies. Girls' agency in theorizing their own lives and bringing attention to their stories along with increased attention to girls as a consumer market contributed to the development and expansion of girls' studies. For more about the development of girls' and girlhood studies, see Kearney, "Coalescing."
43 O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid."
44 boyd, *It's Complicated*; Thiel-Stern, *From the Dance Hall to Facebook*; Banet-Weiser, "Am I Pretty or Ugly?"
45 Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 3.
46 Mazzarella, *Girl Wide Web* 2.0 and *The Mediated Youth Reader*.
47 LaBennett, *She's Mad Real*; Love, *Hip Hop's Lil' Sistas Speak*.
48 Baker, Staiano, and Calvert, "Digital Expression among Urban, Low-Income African American Adolescents"; Stokes, "Representin' in Cyberspace."
49 Lindsey, "'One Time for My Girls'"; Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*; Everett, "Have We Become Post-racial Yet?"
50 Brown, *Hear Our Truths*; Cox, *Shapeshifters*; Chatelain, *South Side Girls*; Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*.
51 Wade, "Not New to This."
52 I use the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) spelling of this word to emphasize its specific connections to hip-hop culture.

INTERLUDE

1 "Shook" is an AAVE colloquialism used to indicate fear.
2 The establishment of institutional review boards was part of the National Research Act of 1974, which Congress passed after the atrocities of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study went public.
3 Luke, "Digital Ethics Now," 87.
4 Floridi, "Digital Ethics Online and Off."
5 I use this phrasing because throughout my childhood my immediate family transitioned in and out of poverty (as defined by federal income standards). We lived in Section 8 housing at times, and my mom received SNAP benefits (aka food stamps) at