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In a Child's Place: Centering Black Girlhood in Black Feminisms through the Bildungsroman

Taylor L. Bailey

Washington University in St. Louis, Department of African and African-American Studies

Senior Thesis, Spring 2019

## Abstract

This thesis examines the effects of misogynoir— a specific form of oppression Black women experience due to the intersection of being deemed inferior in both race and gender— on the development of Black girlhood. In Black feminist theory and criticism, though, the language used often subordinates Black girls and does not ascribe adequate import to their experiences. Using the Black girl bildungsroman, specifically *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Woodson, as a way to survey the effects of misogynoir and the significance of homosocial, intraracial bonding, I argue that Black feminisms should center Black girlhood in their theories in order to understand the position of Black girls in American social structures more thoroughly. With a consideration of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*, I also argue that an in-depth analysis of Black girlhood is necessary in order to understand the complexities Black womanhood.

## Acknowledgements

“But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are.” -Alice Walker

It is with much gratitude and admiration that I acknowledge my beloved advisor Dr. Rafia Zafar for all of the time and effort she has put into this thesis. She has poured much love and care into me which helped me take this project from a small idea to a fully-realized presentation of the inner lives of Black girls. I cannot express how appreciative I am for her constant reassurance and challenging me beyond my own limits. I am also forever grateful to Dr. Wilmetta Toliver-Diallo and Dr. Jonathan Fenderson, who both have provided me with immeasurable love and guidance throughout this writing process and beyond. This project would not have begun without their continuous support and would not have been completed without their encouragement. I would also like to recognize Dr. Long Le-Khac and Dr. William Maxwell, who both have shaped my love for literature during my time at Washington University, for their dedication to this project's and my own development.

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continue to be among the best people on Earth and who perfectly exemplify what sisterhood means. Finally, I cannot thank my mother and father enough for reminding me that it is always darkest before dawn and that I am born from greatness. This project is for every Black girl, all whom deserve to be seen and heard, and for every Black woman who was deprived of the joys and wonders of girlhood.

“The Colored Girl... is Not Known and Hence Not Believed In”: An Introduction to Black Girlhood and the Role of the Coming-of-Age Narrative

*“The colored girl... is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term ‘problem,’ and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her.”*- Fannie Barrier Williams (qtd. in Collins)

The period known as coming-of-age signifies a time when Black girls begin to learn how to navigate the world, understand the intricacies of their position in society, and explore their identity as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Due to their unique experiences of being Black and female, Black girls experience a specific racialized and gendered form of oppression called misogynoir.<sup>2</sup> This form of oppression manifests in various ways as Black girls come of age, including intra- and extra-communal forces. These manifestations include hyper-sexualization, damaged self-image due to racialized sexual “othering,” and externally imposed stereotypes that often become internalized. This subjugation allows for the damaging effects of anti-Black racism and misogyny to create a social space where these oppressions are normalized and, in some cases, championed. The suppression of Black women’s and girls’ voices and bodies often pushes them to find ways to challenge racist and sexist structures on a national and global scale. Since Black girls, and Black women generally, are a minority group in both race and gender, they are often not objects of mainstream study, making the issues they face even more obscure and labeled as less important. Many Black woman scholars, though, have theorized about how to label the physical, emotional, and psychological ways Black women choose to deconstruct oppressive powers that work against

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this project, the term “woman” and “girl” refer to cisgender women who do not specify being outside of the gender binary. As I develop this project in my further studies, I hope to study the nuanced experiences of *all* Black women and girls, and to interrogate how Black feminist theories can better encompass issues specific to trans and other gender variant women.

<sup>2</sup> “Misogynoir” is a term coined in 2010 by queer, Black, feminist scholar Moya Bailey that identifies an anti-Black misogyny which specifically disenfranchises Black women through a larger cultural and social context. The term originated from her work on anti-Black misogyny in hip-hop culture which appeared in the article “They Aren’t Talking About Me...” on her blog *Crunk Feminist Collective*.

them. The formation of Black feminist thought and other subsets of Black feminist theory—like Womanism—offered both Black women and scholars the terms to discuss the complexity of Black female scholarship. Womanism serves as a means of deconstructing structures that uphold and promote misogynoir.<sup>3</sup> Through the creation of equitable spaces for Black women; the prioritization of Black women’s art, life, and work; and the dismantling of violence and oppressive laws and systems, Black feminist theories like Womanism allow Black women the ability to reclaim their voices in both academic and social spaces.

In Womanist theory the priority is given to Black adults rather than centering Black women *and* Black girls. While these theories do touch on the Black girl’s experience, they do not go in depth on these young girls’ experiences nor analyze how young girls have already been using Womanist ideals to navigate their lives. This inattention encourages the idea that the misogynoir that Black girls experience during their coming-of-age is not just as damaging as that of Black women in adulthood. Since the experiences Black girls have during their girlhood shape the women they become, centering only adults in Black feminist theories is counterproductive and effectively ignores the journey *to* womanhood.<sup>4</sup> Black girls must be acknowledged as main agents of change in Womanist and Black feminist theories in order to adequately deconstruct misogynoiristic systems in American society and to understand the complexity of Black womanhood in general.

Coming-of-age marks a dynamic shift in the trajectory of a young person’s life, but what does it mean to “come of age?” Usually defined by the developmental period in one’s life where

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<sup>3</sup> Womanism is a specific sector of feminism coined by Alice Walker that centers the concerns and oppression of Black and similarly marginalized women. Walker created the theory of Womanism in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* which featured biographical and autobiographical texts ranging from articles to speeches and more.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will be referencing the period of “girlhood” as the stages leading to womanhood. This definition encompasses both childhood and adolescence, allowing for the prepubescent and pubescent periods to be discussed in tandem.

one transitions from childhood into adolescence and then into young adulthood, this stage is marked by various physical changes that influence the way young people are perceived and exist within society. This intense developmental period is also marked by a series of complex psychological changes that impact the way childhood is experienced, relationships are created, and self-image is formed. In her book *From Girl to Woman*, Christy Rishoi defines coming-of-age in an American context:

‘Coming of age’ is an imprecise, romantic phrase evoking the period in life during which a child is physiologically, sexually, morally, and socially transformed into an adult. ... when children reach... puberty, they are expected to gradually assume adult responsibilities and interests. It suggests a process with no clear beginning or ending and is usually depicted nostalgically only in retrospect by an adult— adolescents themselves rarely display a misty romantic view of their coming of age (Rishoi 60).

Rishoi believes coming of age to be a transformational period for young people— a period that has no clear boundaries but marks a shift from childhood into adulthood. Although she states that she does not believe adolescents have the ability to reflect on their coming-of-age, I argue that both children and adolescents begin to understand their coming-of-age experiences while they are occurring. The outside pressures imposed upon young people during coming-of-age are often adverse to the overall trajectory of their childhood and adolescence. Society’s unattainable standards of beauty, unrealistically high expectations for the youth, and the tendency to mold children into one particular type of individual without giving them room to discover themselves all establish harmful conditions for young people to construct a positive self-image. These pressures tend to be even more damaging for Black girls. The subordinate position Black women hold in the larger American society make young Black girls particularly vulnerable to the societal pressures young people must face. In many cases, those pressures are more malicious due to the intersection of being perceived inferior in both race and gender.

Coming-of-age narratives constitute their own genre in literature, centering the experiences



of children and adolescents in literature. Kenneth Millard explains the origins of the bildungsroman in his book *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*: "... the word 'bildungsroman' was coined in Germany in 1819, and it means a novel recounting the early emotional development and moral education of its protagonist" (Millard 2). The word "bildungsroman" roughly translates to "formation novel" constituting a specific point in the life of a youth where they are forming the necessary knowledge to develop into adults. He explains that "adolescents are important because of the ways in which they are at the forefront of social change, even while they are simultaneously the products of an adult social culture that shapes their development" (1). In the context of Black literature, this genre allows for the impact of racial oppression on young people to be examined. Unlike adults who inhabit a distinct space due to their age, children and adolescents occupy a liminal space. In anthropologist Victor Turner's "Liminality and Communitas" he explains those in liminal spaces as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.... Thus, liminality is frequently likened... to invisibility, to darkness...." (Turner 95). Adolescents are typically seen as being both adult- and child-like; they are given responsibilities and are expected to exhibit maturity but are often unable to be completely in control of their lives and are expected to adhere to adult supervision and guidance. Black youth often enter this liminal space first in childhood rather than adolescence due to society's proclivity to ascribe maturity and responsibility to Black children. Black girls experience liminality in a specific way as well, which includes a sexual exploitation that places their bodies between childhood and womanhood—a concept I examine throughout my study. Consequently, the bildungsroman allows Black women and girls to reflect on the ways in which oppression has negatively affected their development while also theorizing about the spaces they have navigated in order to survive that oppression.

Through a consideration of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Woodson, concluding with a coda on *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange, I will assess the ways hypersexualization, anti-Blackness in the Black community, and racism from white systems has created a specific form of misogynoir that Black girls must combat. I will also explore how the formation of homosocial bonds during girlhood exists as a form of resistance to anti-Blackness and misogyny. Finally, I will evaluate how Black girls experiencing and combating misogynoir during this intense developmental period vitally transforms Black womanhood and Black feminist and Womanist theories.

Two different coming-of-age stories theorize how Black girls and adolescents organically use Womanist and other Black feminist theoretical ideas to think through girlhood. The first of those books is *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, which is a novel written in 1970 and set in the 1940s that focuses on three young Black girls—Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola—growing up in Ohio. The novel is told mostly through the perspective of nine-year-old Claudia about protagonist Pecola—who is constantly referred to as ugly by her family and who wishes for blue eyes in order to be deemed beautiful. The novel tackles the disadvantages and tragedies of prioritizing Eurocentric beauty standards and the impact of internalized racism and sexism on Black girlhood. A second novel, *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Woodson—written in 2016 but set in late 60s, early 70s Brooklyn—follows the life of protagonist August through the often-melancholic remembrance of her childhood and adolescence. The novel explores the transition of girlhood into adolescence and the importance of Black female homosocial bonds during these periods. The novel exemplifies the value of creating homosocial spaces as a form of social resistance to the internalization of misogynoir—a resistance that is most potent during youth for August and her friends. In my coda *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* by

Ntozake Shange, a choreopoem from the 1970s that features monologues by seven different Black women reflecting on different stages of their coming-of-age and interrogating how these experiences have shaped their womanhood.<sup>5</sup> This piece uniquely considers girlhood and womanhood together, making the argument that both are important when analyzing Black women's coming-of-age. The choreopoem deconstructs the complexities of these problems by creating space for the women to reflect on them and reinforces the idea that Black women are significant even if they are left broken, which directly contests the structures of anti-Blackness and misogyny. The increase in literary works, theoretical texts, and grassroots organizations created and written by Black women during the 1970s made this period the crest of what is now considered Second-Wave feminism—a feminism that is more intersectional and better allows for the specific experiences of Black women to be discussed. I chose these narratives specifically due to their being published or set in this pivotal moment, which exemplified the 1970s as a period of intellectual growth and freedom for Black writers and Black women in general. In this way, all three of these stories allows one to understand the stakes of this crucial historical moment while also showing how Black women writers contributed to the larger scope of Black feminist consciousness through a variety of literary forms.

Women created feminism, which alleviated the social disparities within patriarchal societies. In America, the feminist movement began as an organized effort in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, first at the Seneca Falls Convention, as women fought for their right to vote, work, and live in an equitable and just society. This movement—directed mostly by white women—did

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<sup>5</sup> Shange describes a choreopoem as a type of theatrical piece that marries drama, musical accompaniment, and dance. In the context of *for colored girls*, the intersection of these forms of art allow the audience to regard Blackness and femininity in tandem, showing that the experience of coming into Black womanhood is a combination of a myriad of different phenomenon. Straying away from the novel form by looking at this choreopoem allows insight in how Black womanhood is represented across different art forms.

not account for the intersections of categories like race and class in their fight for justice and suffrage and, in many cases, directly excluded the experiences of women of color— especially Black women.<sup>6</sup> During a subsequent convention in Ohio shortly after the Seneca Falls Convention, abolitionist Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech called out the disregard for Black women in this new feminist movement; this was one of the first widely publicized attempts for Black women to show white women who they were leaving behind in their fight for freedom. In many ways, Truth’s address laid the foundation for Black women to start to theorize about their own forms of feminism and to understand exactly how and why they were left out of mainstream feminist efforts. Not long after Truth’s declaration of Black women’s womanhood, there began an increase in the creation of spaces for Black women. In Gerda Lerner’s “Early Community Work of Black Club Women” she explains that in the late 1800s, what is commonly referenced as the Black women’s club movement began. Organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the Neighborhood Union, and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women were created and provided Black women with the opportunity to promote their wellbeing and advocate for their social and political agency. The works of these organizations led to the formation of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) which is still notable today. In many ways, the Black women’s club movements established the foundation for what came to be Second Wave and intersectional feminism.

bell hooks’ *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* uses the words of Sojourner Truth to illustrate exactly how white women disparage Black women and women of color in

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<sup>6</sup> In July of 1849, at the Seneca Falls Convention in Seneca Fall, New York, many women gathered in order to bring attention to gender disparities, especially in regard to social system like voting. Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who are widely considered to be the “foremothers” of feminism) organized the convention, drafted, and presented the Declaration of Sentiment and Grievances which was pivotal in the formation of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. This convention gained steady attention and gave room for similar conventions to arise. It also paved the way for what is now considered the Women’s Suffrage Movement, or First Wave Feminism.

general. Though American white women did need to address sexism and misogyny as it manifested in American society, hooks explains that

sexist discrimination has prevented white women from assuming the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racial imperialism, but it has not prevented white women from absorbing, supporting, and advocating racist ideology or acting individually as racist oppressors in various spheres of American life (hooks 124).

Due in large part to gender hierarchies, white women did not then have the social mobility to be the main perpetrators of racist ideologies, but still benefitted from the subordination of Black women and other women of color in American social structures. hooks also reminds us that “the first white women’s rights advocates were never seeking social equality for all women; they were seeking social equality for white women” (174). Though all groups of women had to fight against the constraints of a misogynistic society, many white feminist advocates supported the unjust racial structures that existed in mainstream American society.

In bell hooks' 1984 book *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, she states that

much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin... feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experience” (hooks x).

This idea of feminist theory being exclusionary was shared by many different Black feminists and Womanists. Aretha Faye Marbley explains in “African-American Women’s Feelings on Alienation from Third-Wave Feminism: A Conversation with My Sisters” that Black women’s exclusion from First Wave Feminism led to their subsequent hesitation with identifying with feminism in general: “African American women have not perceived feminism and the feminist agenda of White female middleclass women as having anything to do with them, and therefore have shunned White women liberation groups (Mansbridge & Smith, 2000)” (Marbley 606). The increased exclusion of Black women from mainstream feminist theory and movements largely led

to the formation of Black feminisms that brought Black women from the margins of the struggle for gender equity.

Though Black women have historically had to struggle for the space to exist in intellectual and social settings, the efforts of Black women during the 1970s and 1980s allowed for a Black Second Wave feminist movement—a revitalization of Black feminist thought on a national and global scale. One of the more prominent texts from this period is Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology* which featured poetry, literature, articles, and more from well-known Black women like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Frances Beale, Nikki Giovanni, and more. The anthology features sections that discuss Black masculinity, motherhood, Black Power, reproductive rights, and other topics that expanded the ways in which Black women thought through their everyday lives. This was seen not only in the form of canonizing the scholarly work and theories of Black women intellectuals but also in the prioritization of Black women’s literature, music, art, and everyday life.

Womanist theory exists to combat the anti-Blackness and misogyny that exists in the larger American and global cultures; Black feminists and Womanists use these theories to understand the quotidian misogynoir experienced by Black women and to recognize how Black women can utilize their experiences and resources to deconstruct these detrimental structures. But what is Womanism? Though Black women have always theorized about how to better their social situations, the concept of “Womanism” was not widely accepted until Alice Walker coined the term in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*:

1. FROM WOMANISH. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.”

Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength....

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender (Walker xi-xii).

Walker explains a Womanist as one who prioritizes the Black woman, creates space and life for the Black woman, and acts in a sophisticated and ambitious manner. She derives "Womanist" from "womanish" a popular term used by Black families to denote young Black girls acting in a manner befitting an adult. Walker puts "womanish" in direct contrast to "girlish," which is characterized by naïveté, inexperience, and silliness. The language used in Walker's definition of Womanism implies that the quest for knowledge, responsibility, and homosocial bonds exists primarily in adulthood, yet that is not entirely accurate. While we do see Black women creating their own spaces that protect and promote the wellbeing of Black women as a whole, the unique community building that happens amongst Black girls is heavily influenced by the virtue of their naïveté and lack of experience. Their "girlishness" is both immature and knowledge-seeking, naïve and serious, irresponsible and careful; a Black girl does not need to shed her youth to be courageous, curious, nor ambitious. These dichotomies exemplify the limitations of the foundations of Womanist theory; many of the theories use Black girls merely as a component of "femaleness" without fully examining how ideas that are apparent in womanhood have similar manifestations in girlhood. Black girls battle misogynoir and theorize their own lives. Their youth does not inhibit their ability to mobilize against anti-Blackness and sexism or their ability to begin to understand their social position.

The misogynoir that exists within American social structures creates stereotypes of Black women that allow for the hyper-sexualization of young Black girls' bodies, even during a period

where they are still developing their own sense of sex and sexuality. In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins details the extent to which misogynoir is woven into American ideologies and how it manifests in detrimental images of Black women:

Within the U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mummies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression (Collins 5).

Collins details how these structures do indeed promote negative stereotypes due to the inextricable anti-Blackness and misogyny in the hegemonic systems of American society. The labelling of Black women as “prostitutes”, “jezebels”, and “breeder women” strip Black women of their sexual agency. Collins asserts that under these ideologies, Black women felt compelled to either ascribe to the “asexual” mother figure or the “hyper-sexual” whore (156). Black women were not allowed to experience the full range of sexual choice because their submissive role constantly restricted their autonomy. Not allowing Black women to control their sexual image subsequently denies them of their ability to have bodily integrity in general. Without control over how their bodies are presented to larger society, Black women are further pushed into a subordinating role which makes it more difficult for them to subvert the stifling nature of misogynoir, shape their own narratives, or even control what is done to their bodies. Black women being stripped of their autonomy does not exist in isolation; this phenomenon has origins dating back to American chattel slavery. In *Gender Talk: the Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* by Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the unsettling history of Black women being stripped of their bodily integrity and autonomy is documented through the medical breach of ethics



experienced by Black women slaves:

As disturbing in the annals of U.S. medical history, but even less well known, is the use of slave women as human guinea pigs by white male doctors perfecting their gynecological surgery skills. Dr. James Marion... performed painful surgery on several slave women suffering from injuries to the vagina and rectum sustained during childbirth (Cole & Guy-Sheftall 129).

Black slave women's bodily integrity was constantly compromised and violated; they were forced to undergo surgeries, unauthorized by them, in order to further research that would not be used to better *their* gynecological health. Their bodies were owned by another person and, thus, literally not under their own control. Thomas W. Volscho also examines the ways Black and other minority women's bodily integrity was compromised by forced reproductive sterilization in the 1960s and 1970s in "Sterilization Racism and Pan-Ethnic Disparities of the Past Decade: The Continued Encroachment on Reproductive Rights". He writes that these sterilizations "came at a time of intense civil rights activity and political consciousness among non-'white' groups" saying that "American Indian and African American women and girls were especially impacted by sterilization abuse" (Volscho 17). Controlling the reproductive health and bodily integrity of Black women during the Black Power era meant restricting the lineage of Black people vying for the change of racist structures. Without the women's consent, these sterilization projects were both a violation of rights and a violent instance of eugenics.

Throughout the works I study, sexual violation and violence is virtually inescapable. Though many Black girls and adolescents may not be undergoing medical malpractice, they have similar experiences of their bodily integrity being stripped during or before they enter puberty and how these experiences shaped their girlhoods. Generally, the experiences of sexual violation prematurely ends the childhoods of those who were assaulted; they are no longer socially regarded as being in the realm of childhood and are ascribed certain adult-like qualities. This means they

are unable to retain the innocence of childhood but are neither physically nor emotionally women. The ways in which Black girls' bodies are viewed is contradictory; they are viewed as both sexually mature and physically immature. Sexual violation strips them of their innocence and forces them into the sexual space of a woman before they are able to form a relationship with their sexual bodies and sexualities in general.

Womanist theoretical texts regard sexual reclamation as one of the most important purposes of Womanism and Black feminism. In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, bell hooks explains that “re-thinking sexuality, changing the norms of sexuality, is a pre-condition for female sexual autonomy; therefore, sexuality and by implication ‘sexual freedom’ is an important, relevant issue for feminist politics” (hooks 148). hooks goes on to describe the ways in which Black feminists and other feminists of color grappled with the idea of reclaiming a sexuality that had always been denounced or controlled by exterior forces. Feminists were expanding the boundaries of how women could sexually identify, the autonomy of the female body, and how to encompass the views of both sexually active and non-sexually active women. These texts, though, tend to focus more on how Black women and Womanism combat sexual violence during womanhood but do not adequately focus on how these theories can be accessible to help alleviate the realities of sexual assault for Black girls specifically.

Until recently, the experiences of young Black girls were largely ignored and deemed unworthy for in-depth study and analysis; the historical and social implications of the intersectional impact of racism and sexism in larger American and global societies were generally ignored. In 2016, Corrine T. Field stated in her article “The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions” that

until recently, historians interested in black girls and girlhood had to work at the margins of several fields including the history of childhood, black women's history, and girls'

studies. Other people often doubted that there was enough archival material available to write rich histories of those who were young, black, and female” (Field 383).

The lack of recognition of Black girlhood in the academic educational system mirrored the marginalization of young Black girls in America. Black feminist scholars, though, are increasing their understanding for the need for a specific sector of girlhood studies that recognizes how the intersections of race, gender, and age affects Black girls. Nazera Sadiq Wright’s *Black Girlhood of the Nineteenth Century* examines the need to tell the stories of young “outspoken, unafraid, and unmoved” Black girls (Wright 1). These girls existed in the Black bildungsroman but their absence from subsequent scholarly texts that would propel Black girlhood studies forward is also telling. This sentiment was one felt by many other scholars as well. With the increasing influence of childhood studies and the call for more in depth and focused scholarship on the lives and minds of young people, scholars saw the need to investigate the discrepancies between which young people were being given the most space and which ones were left on the sidelines. Aimee Meredith Cox’s *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* describes how Black girls and adolescents specifically are not prioritized in girlhood or childhood studies generally:

Our failure to understand and, therefore, address the interlocking systems and entrenched policies that affect the entire diverse community of Black people in the United States has disastrous life-or-death consequences for the community’s most vulnerable members: children and adolescents. Research in the social sciences on Black men and boys, media attention, and even the initiatives taken by our president have provided the general public with at least a language to talk about young Black men. Black girls, however, remain illegible (Cox vii).

Cox goes on to argue that her book, and Black girlhood studies more generally, finds ways to tell the stories of a group of young girls who are constantly and often deliberately pushed to the margins. Black girlhood studies is a realm where Black girls can be prioritized in scholarship, where their lives and social mobility are studied in depth and given just importance. The idea that these studies create space for Black girlhood to be explored is why the Black girl bildungsroman

is such a significant genre; these stories allow for Black girls to be emphasized in literature which ascribes validity to their experiences. The turn to Black girlhood studies allows us to more fully understand the position of Black girls in America and even globally. This awareness can further encourage reparative tactics Black girls can use to navigate oppression in their daily lives. Black girlhood studies provides an arena for people to understand the particular position of Black women and girls in America and to understand the early impact of anti-Blackness and misogyny on the trajectory of young Black girls' childhoods. Black girls' coming-of-age narratives push that space even further, allowing for Black women and girl readers to gain agency because they are able to see their childhood and adolescence manifested in literature in various different ways. Such representation is important, chiefly because these works show the reality of the detrimental effects of racial and gender-based oppression on the early development of young Black girls, and also serve as a means of combating misogynoir by giving Black girls a voice in Black literature.

The need for Black girls to seek solace in homosocial (and in many cases homosexual or queer) relationships was largely due to the absence of spaces that supported them or even acknowledged their existence. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins describes Black women's need to find the space to support and uplift each other in an American society that generally does the opposite: "As mother, daughters, sisters, and friends to one another, many African-American women affirm one another (Myers 1980)... This shared recognition often operate among American-American women...who see the need to value Black womanhood" (Collins 102-103). Due to their shared experience of being marginalized, Black women are able to see themselves as being valuable and, thus, create spaces (both large and small) that allow them to elevate their voices. A space specifically tailored for Black women—and that allow them to form intracommunal, homosocial bonds— is one that can sustain the multifaceted complexities that

come with living within the bounds of Black girlhood or womanhood. The idea of sisterhood was not always one that was widely accepted. Giving women collective power due to shared fate would arguably give them a collective means to combat sexist oppression and misogyny. In *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, bell hooks describes the need for sisterhood bonds in womanhood and how these bonds were previously written off as unnecessary or somewhat dangerous or unnatural by outsider forces:

We are taught that women are “natural” enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood (hooks 43).

The misconceptions of women being unable to form substantial bonds supports the notion that feminism and other sectors of feminist thought would and could never be successful. Though many women have internalized these ideas of misogyny, other women saw their shared oppression as something to unite them. In a Black context, internalized misogynoir makes it easy for Black women to see homosocial relationships with women to be detrimental to their overall development.

Black women writers transform the way coming-of-age stories are being told. The way they conceptualize the manner in which misogynoir is experienced and homosocial bonds are formed bring the experiences of Black girls to life on the page. The narratives themselves push the theories of Womanism and Black feminism into a vibrant and engaging intellectual space—spaces where the girls are given freedom to shape their own identities, theorize over their own lives, and move freely through these creative mediums. These women quite literally write Black girls into the tradition of Black feminist and Womanist thought. Their story-telling both amplifies the voices of Black girls and allows Black girls’ stories to supply part of Black feminist theoretical framework; these narratives are consciously and subconsciously restructuring how we view,

interact with, and shape Black feminisms.

The intention of Womanism or Black feminism in general is to disrupt and eradicate the anti-Black and sexist structures that vehemently marginalize Black women. Though these theories and concepts have validity and are actively providing scholars and non-scholars the knowledge to understand Black women's place in society and how they are working to make it better, it subliminally ignores the Black *girl*. The language used in Womanist theories are structured so that Black *women* specifically are centered; the misogynoir experienced by Black girls and teens is viewed as an afterthought. Though many of the theories are formed on the basis of the experiences Black women had while growing up, Womanists often do not prioritize Black girls during their deconstruction of anti-Blackness and sexism and exploration of the formation of womanhood. Because this specific oppression faced during coming-of-age strongly affects the way Black girls and teens shape their womanhood, I argue that Womanist and Black feminist theories must re-center Black girls' coming-of-age in order to efficiently and effectively counter misogynoir.

In many coming-of-age stories written about Black girls, their "Blackness" and "woman-ness" are not mutually exclusive. Though the girls are young and naïve in a myriad of ways, their understanding of their community, the world, and themselves are developed enough to question the structures in place in a unique way. By experiencing misogynoir at early stages of life, Black women are able to understand the ramifications of violent and restrictive discrimination as adults. The protagonists and the young female characters in these stories undergo different experiences, all contributing to their overall development in a positive or negative way. Young Black girls simultaneously experience the traumas of an anti-Black and sexist society while also creating homosocial bonds with other young Black girls in order to build community. Focusing on Black girlhood and coming-of-age in analyses of Black feminism provides a more comprehensive

understanding of how Black women navigate the realities of misogynoir and their womanhood.

“Our Limitations Were Not Known to Us— Not Then”: The Manifestations of Misogynoir during Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*

*“We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody... we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us—not then.”*- Toni Morrison

As one of the most foremost Black women writers of the twentieth century, Toni Morrison is championed both as an author and as a writer of Black feminist consciousness. Her first published novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), centers around protagonist Pecola Breedlove, a Black girl who desperately longs for blue eyes in order to think she is beautiful. Told from the adult perspective of Claudia MacTeer, one of Pecola's friends, the novel skillfully considers the damages of child sexual abuse, misogynoir, and internalized anti-Blackness and their long-term impacts on Black girls' development, and the complexities of Black familial relations.

By first publishing in 1970, Morrison joined the likes of Black women writing during the Black Arts Movement (BAM). In Larry Neal's “The Black Arts Movement”, he explains the BAM and its artists as “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic.... A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms. The Black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics” (Neal 184). With Black Power preceding it, the BAM served as an extension of the quest for liberation and empowerment. Black artists—writers, dancers, musicians, etc.— were embodying the objectives of Black Power through the art they created. Writers like Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, and many others created a strong canon of Black women's literature that countered the heavily male-dominated Movement. With the origins of Black feminism in the 1970s writers such as Octavia Butler and Maya Angelou took those theoretical concepts and wove them into their literature, creating an arena where Black women could theorize their experiences within these works of fiction. Black women's literature during



this period expanded what is now considered Black feminist theory. The fictional elements that Morrison and other writers incorporated in their stories allowed for the deleterious effects of an anti-Black and misogynistic American society on Black women and girls to be shown through their characters. Writers like Morrison were able to create characters that exemplified the experiences of Black women; this allowed the content to be relatable and digestible for everyday women reading her novels. As Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* occupies a specific place; it joins the tradition of Black girl coming-of-age narratives, like those previously written by Paule Marshall and Lorraine Hansberry, that bring Black girls and their experiences during their childhoods to the forefront. Writing a coming-of-age story about young Black girls during such a vital moment like the Black Arts Movement and the onset of what is now considered Black feminism began the important work of centering Black girlhood in conceptualizations of Black womanhood.

*The Bluest Eye* addresses various phenomena that affect the trajectory of Black girlhood. With three Black girl characters, the novel captures a full range of what Black girlhood resembled in 1930s and 1940s urbanized Ohio—a popular destination for Black families during the Great Migration. During the Black Arts Movement and the era of Black Power, this period often embodied the idea of Black people having mobility. While the Great Migration is a major component of Black history, the experiences of Black girls during this formative historical time can be overlooked. The following chapter focuses on the novel's themes of the sexual exploitation and abuse of Black girls by intra-familial persons, the effects of internalized anti-Blackness on the mental and physical development of Black girls, Morrison's complex portrayal of Black motherhood, and the necessity of homosocial bonds between Black girls.

### ***Sexual exploitation of Black girls & father-daughter incest***

As young Black girls begin puberty, they begin to form both a personal and conceptual

relationship to sex. Due to them forming their understanding of sex in a society built on the hypersexualization of Black bodies, Black girls are eroticized much sooner than appropriate or desired. The intersections of their age, race, and gender allows the subordination of their identities to strip them of ownership over their bodies. This is unfortunately experienced by many Black girls due to the nature of their position within society; what also remains true is the existence of this sexual subordination in Black womanhood as well. In her article “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West”, Historian Darlene Clark Hine says, “one of the most remarked upon but least analyzed themes in Black women’s history deals with Black women’s sexual vulnerability and powerlessness as victims of rape and domestic violence” (Hine 912). The overlooking of Black women’s— especially Black girls’— sexual exploitation strategically strips Black women and girls of their power, redistributing it to those enacting violence against them. Hine, who specifically mentions the salience of *The Bluest Eye* in this article, cites Black women’s literature as a formative arena for Black women to prioritize discussion of sexual violence against Black women and girls:

...themes of rape and sexual vulnerability have received considerable attention in the recent literary outpouring of Black women novelists.... The combined influence of rape (or the threat of rape), domestic violence, and economic oppression is key to understanding the hidden motivations informing major social protest and migratory movements in Afro-American history (912-913).

Hine notes that though Black women’s sexual violation is a point of contention and silence in the larger scheme of Black politics, Black women authors are bringing this issue to the forefront by depicting harsh and painful, but unfortunately realistic, instances of rape and sexual assault inflicted upon Black women and girls. This provides a venue for Black women to regain their agency and for the experiences these women had as girls to be given importance.

Black girls experience sexual violence at extraordinary rates.<sup>7</sup> Though Black women are often identified as the victims or survivors of sexual violence, Black girls are even more susceptible to this type of violence due to their naïveté and general lack of experience that comes with age. Often times, the sexual abuse Black girls experience is from a perpetrator within the family, causing fraught familial relationships.<sup>8</sup> Incest, much like rape and sexual abuse in general, is largely about control and power. In incestuous relationships, the adult perpetrator often tells the minor— either by coercion or force— to refrain from telling other adults about their relationship<sup>9</sup>. This reinforces the authority they have over the minor and keeps the adult in control of the child’s body.

In *The Bluest Eye*, protagonist Pecola Breedlove is a victim of incestuous sexual violence committed by her biological father, Cholly Breedlove. Throughout the novel Cholly is characterized as a disinterested, alcoholic father who despises his wife and children. Morrison suggests that Cholly’s current disposition is a culmination of problems stemming from his mother abandoning him at four days old. From there, Cholly turns to alcohol and delinquency in order to feel some degree of self-worth, gaining no comfort from his family. The raping of Pecola begins with Cholly seeing her washing dishes in their kitchen; his drunken mind relates the image of her at the sink to a memory of his wife. When he sees Pecola his mind goes through various stages of emotions, ranging from love to guilt to revulsion. He describes her body as being “hunched” saying

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<sup>7</sup> The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault cited the U.S. DOJ Bureau’s 2013 report “Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010” saying that “African American girls and women 12 years old and older experienced higher rates of rape and sexual assault than white, Asian, and Latina girls and women from 2005-2010” (1).

<sup>8</sup> In “Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women” Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson cite that “among Black [childhood sexual assault] survivors who were raised in two-parent families, 43.6% were victimized by a household member.... 28% were victims of incest” (West & Johnson 2-3).

<sup>9</sup> In Tracy L. Robinson’s “Making the Hurt Go Away: Psychological and Spiritual Healing for African American Women Survivors of Childhood Incest” she cites E.S. Blume’s definition of incest as “‘the imposition of sexually inappropriate acts, or acts with sexual overtones, by— or any use of a minor child to meet the sexual or sexual/emotional needs of— one or more persons who derive authority through ongoing emotional bonding with that child’ (p. 4)” (Robinson 3).

that she looked “as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow.... He wanted to break her neck— but tenderly” (Morrison 161). Here, Cholly is trapped between a distant tenderness and a confused rage for his daughter. Cholly acknowledges that Pecola looks perpetually unhappy, then begins brooding over his inability to provide for her or to make her happy:

What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him?... His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit (161-162).

Cholly is uncomfortable with the prospect of true familial love because he is unaccustomed to and deprived of it. He recognizes that part of the reason behind Pecola’s sadness is his inability to fulfill his basic duties to love his daughter as a father. Unable to work through his conflicting emotions, he turns his emotions into a sort of tender rage, where he wants to gently harm Pecola in physical and sexual ways.

Cholly’s rape of Pecola is rooted not in sexual desire but a need to both exert his power over her and protect her; the contradictory nature of this scene exemplifies the complexity of emotion he feels and his internal struggle to be fatherly. He ponders over his inability to form a sustainable bond with Pecola because of his past: “Having no idea how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be” (160). The lust Cholly feels for Pecola during this scene is “not the usual lust...but a tenderness, a protectiveness” which is echoed at the end of the scene where he experiences “hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her” (162-163). Cholly is unable to correctly process his emotions and leads him to violate his daughter in ways that takes advantage of her internalized anti-Blackness and despair. Cholly completes this sexual violation and the “hatred and tenderness”

follows Pecola from the beginning to the end of the scene. Morrison sets up this scene in a very specific way. The rape is told from Cholly's perspective; not once are readers privy to the thoughts of Pecola during this time. The spatial dynamics within the scene are intentional; Cholly is consistently placed physically in control of her body. Right before the rape, he is described as behind and below her, but in control of her legs so much so that he prevents her from falling backward by taking a firm hold of her waist: "... he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance.... Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling" (162). During the remainder of the scene he is depicted to be physically above her, towering over her unconscious body after he rapes her. These spatial dynamics enacted by Morrison harken to the idea of Black girls being stripping of both their sexual agency and control over their bodily autonomy. The scene being told from only Cholly's perspective without access to Pecola's thoughts and feelings highlights the silencing of Black girls, especially when regarding their sexual violation. The scene ends with Pecola unconscious and completely powerless.

Though it is important to recognize how sexual violence enacted upon Black women affects how they navigate through life, it is equally important to analyze the effects of sexual violence enacted upon Black girls. In many ways, these early, negative experiences with sex lay the foundation for how Black girls shape their relationship with sex and their sexuality as they grow into women. Studying how these violations affect Black girls and centering their experiences in discussions of Black sexual politics will provide a more holistic view of Black womanhood and sexual agency.

### ***Fraught mother-daughter relationships and their impact on Black girls***

Historically, Black women have been portrayed as motherly figures, often being associated

with images of the Black “mammy” or super-matriarch of a family. Though this image is used often in media and art, it has a troubled past dating back to slavery. Christopher J. P. Sewell discusses the history of this Black motherly figure in “Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present”:

“The Mammy was the expert in the home; she filled any role that they [slave-holding families] needed in the house.... The Mammy served as a direct juxtaposition to her mistress. Her neutrality was dependent on her not occupying the physical characteristics of the Jezebel” (Sewell 310).

Characterized as a hard-working and docile house slave, the mammy image was created to contrast the stereotypical image of the Black “jezebel”, or hyper-sexual Black woman. Sewell notes that the image lives on past slavery and taints the ways in which Black women— especially domestic workers— are viewed. This stereotype can be stifling in many ways; all Black women workers are expected to be perfectly diligent and nothing else. Sewell states that “Mammies then became the ‘safe’ black person who could sometimes be overlooked, therefore furthering her marginalization in the eyes of the greater American public” (312). By being forced into this image, Black women are forced to relinquish the ability to create their own image and must ascribe to this preconceived one. They are restricted to a role of obedience and service while also having to possibly assume responsibilities that are not theirs. This mammy stereotype, much like racist stereotypes, are not immune to internalization. Many Black women workers embodied the mammy figure which both allowed them to perform their jobs well and to also lose the ability to break this mold.

Pauline Breedlove moved to Loraine, Ohio with her husband Cholly in the middle of the Great Migration. During this time, much of the work available to women was in the domestic service. When Pauline searches for a job and finds one as the servant of a wealthy white family, the Fishers, in a nearby neighborhood, she begins to notice the difference in the way she is treated there versus how she is treated at home. In her own house, she is restricted to doing work for her

two children and husband, none of whom she is particularly fond of. Pauline states “I loved them all, I guess...” when pondering over her relationship with her family, trying to pinpoint if the reason she did not feel fonder was because of their financial instability or the abuse she endured (Morrison 124). Cholly, an alcoholic, often physically and sexually abuses her which causes her to regard her home life as not only unpleasant, but almost unlivable. She often longs to return to the Fishers’ residence to feel whole:

“More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man— they were like the afterthoughts one had just before sleep... the dark edges that made daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely.... Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (127).

Throughout this passage, Pauline juxtaposes the dirty, dingy, and disorderly nature of her own house with the clean, pleasant, neat nature of the Fishers’. Parvin Ghasemi notes that “In *The Bluest Eye*... poverty shapes, influences, and conditions the close and loving mother-child relationship and lead to negligence bordering on abuse” in “Negotiating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s Novels” (Ghasemi 239-240). Pauline Breedlove sees the ways living outside of poverty creates space for love and joy to exist— something that her poverty-stricken house cannot seem to hold. She becomes more attached to the Fishers than to her own family. Not only is she longing for better living conditions, the language of her finding “praise” in that house also represents how she is embracing the mammy figure. The Fishers frequently praise her, saying ““We’ll never let [Pauline] go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will *not* leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant”” (Morrison 128). The Fishers place Pauline’s worth in her ability to work hard and complete the job better than everyone else, not in her actual character. Since Pauline is largely devoid of familial love at home, she latches onto this pseudo-love, this stereotyping disguised as affection. This allows her to instill more of her with in her job and to further neglect her family, especially Pecola.

In William Grier's *Black Rage*, he explains that "the first measure of a child's worth is made by her mother, and if, as is the case with so many black people in America, that she herself is a creature of little worth, this daughter, however valued and desired, represents her scorned self" (Grier 40). A mother's relationship with her daughter is not only special in its supposed exchange of love, it also lays the foundation for the ways in which the daughter will approach society. In Black families, these relationships tend to be even more important because of the mother's social responsibility to teach her daughter about the racism and sexism that exists in America. If the mother sees little to no value in herself, Grier argues, she will be apt to pass that devaluation on to her child. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove—Pecola's mother—often does little to nothing to instill a sense of self-worth in her daughter. Morrison writes that instead of the love and care which is often given from mothers to daughters, she instead "beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" into Pecola (Morrison 129). Their relationship is tense, often abusive, and lacks any sense of motherly emotion; many scenes including both characters are riddled with whippings and hurtful words. Such behavior furthers Pecola's internalized anti-Blackness, severe self-esteem issues, and lack of dignity.

Pauline remembers her pregnancy with Pecola as a point of happiness in her life; she was excited to have had girl and promised herself that she "*would love it no matter what it looked like*" (124). When Pecola is born, though, Pauline first realizes that she "*knoved [Pecola]... was ugly*", though she never specifies how she "knows" this, which colors much of how she regards Pecola in the novel (125). Pauline struggles to form a loving relationship with Pecola which can be attributed to Pecola's lack of beauty. Pauline instead latches onto the Fisher's young, white daughter as she increasingly spends time with and cares for the child much more than her own daughter. Where Pecola is physically ugly and is associated with their ugly home, the Fisher girl



is associated with a house full of wonder and beauty and, thus, deserving of more love than Pecola. When Pecola goes to the Fisher's house and accidentally drops the pie Pauline has made for the family in front of the Fisher girl, Claudia, and Frieda—who came to the house in search of Pecola—witness the abusive relationship she has with her mother is displayed:

... The pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered.... In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor.... Mrs. Breedlove... slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. 'Crazy fool... my floor, mess...' The [Fisher] girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. 'Hush, baby, hush. Come here.... Don't cry no more....' (108-109).

The juxtaposition of Pauline's treatment toward Pecola and toward the Fisher girl is extremely salient. Pecola has suffered from a serious burn injury and is writhing in pain; Pauline not only ignores her cries, but also harms her further by knocking her to the floor and beating her for ruining the pie and the cleanliness of "her" floor. The Fisher child, however, receives much attention and care, though she is not physically hurt. Claudia and Frieda are not hurt either but are characterized as sharing Pecola's hurt both because they care for her as a friend and because Mrs. Breedlove's wrath seems to be directed toward the Black girls only. With Pecola and the MacTeer girls at the Fisher residence, Pauline is not able to separate the "ugly" (Black) part of her life and the "beautiful" (white) part of her life. She would rather continue to ascribe to this artificial sense of comfort in her proximity to this white family than to care for or form a healthy relationship with, her own daughter.

Mothers and mother-figures are Black girls' main source of guidance, love, and protection in many ways. Without this relationship, Black girls are not able to navigate the world as successfully as possible. If the mother-figure is the first and most formidable person shaping the trajectory of a Black girl's childhood, then the ways in which they regard their Black womanhood,

their past Black girlhood, and their self-image is extremely important. Fraught relationships between mothers and daughters create spaces where anti-Blackness can fester, self-worth can be diminished, and love can be absent.

### ***Internalized anti-Blackness and its effects on Black girlhood***

The race relations between Black and white people in America have historically been largely negative, creating the foundation for a racially oppressive system to grow and change. Due to the subordinate position of Black people in mainstream American society, racism—specifically anti-Blackness— infiltrates the ways in which Black people think of themselves and others of their race. In “The Relationship Between Internalization and Self-Esteem Among Black Adults”, sociologists Tony N. Brown, Sherrill L. Sellers, and John P. Gomez define internalization: “The black self-hatred literature referred to the pivotal role of internalization, which in the context of race is defined as *abhorrence for being black and acceptance of contemptuous characterizations about blacks as a group*” (Brown, Sellers, & Gomez 56). In many American contexts, Black people are constantly described as ugly, criminals, unworthy, unintelligent, and other negative attributes. Through the prevalence of internalization, Black people begin to accept these negative stereotypes as fact. These negative stereotypes and characteristics regarding Black people were introduced principally during slavery; one of the reasons behind enslaving Black people was to create a free labor force with people white racists deemed less worthy. Though Black people found communities amongst themselves to mitigate the negative effects of these actions and stereotypes, the onset of internalized anti-Blackness was inescapable. This internalization was quickly and, largely, unintentionally ingrained into the fabric of Black American society and social teachings. Generation to generation, the realities of this internalization began to manifest in various different ways, including negative self-image, a quest to approximate oneself to whiteness, and ideas of

colorism.<sup>10</sup> These manifestations are a harsh reality for many Black girls and only worsen as they get older if they are not adequately addressed and eradicated early on.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison takes the harsh realities of internalized racism and presents them to readers primarily through her three Black girl characters. Claudia MacTeer, who narrates the story, illustrates how Black girls question the reasoning behind internalized racism. Claudia does not particularly understand why Black girls are made to feel lesser and the novel follows her both rejecting and embodying these ideals of internalized anti-Blackness. Pecola, however, consistently personifies the detrimental effects of both an anti-Black and misogynistic society on the development of a Black girl. Her character is a harrowing culmination of the misogynoir Black girls are consistently experiencing and the juxtaposition of these characters exemplifies the manifestations of misogynoir in its different stages of being taught and learned.

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<sup>10</sup> Colorism is a scholarly term to describe the concept of people of lighter complexions being created and humanized in better ways than those who are of darker complexion. In Black Diasporic societies, this idea is of large contention. Though this concept is experienced across races and ethnic groups, Black societies experienced high levels of negative colorist ideals following slavery. In the article “Teaching and Learning Color Consciousness in Black Families: Exploring Family Processes and Women’s Experiences with Colorism” JeffriAnne Wilder and Colleen Cain define colorism as “defined as an intraracial system of inequality based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features that bestows privilege and value on physical attributes that are closer to white” (Wilder and Cain 578).

Throughout the novel, the girls are introduced to many different white images that are theoretically associated with purity and goodness. Toward the beginning of the novel, after Pecola comes to stay with the MacTeers, the girls are first introduced to the extent of Pecola's internalized anti-Blackness. Frieda brings Pecola a snack including milk that she serves to her in a "blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup" (Morrison 19). Claudia notes that both Pecola and Frieda are fond of Shirley Temple, even noting that Pecola spends extra time drinking her milk in order to look at her adoringly. Claudia does not share the same sentiment, though, and struggles to connect with the image of the white girl:

Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those white girls (19).

Claudia's reasoning for despising Shirley Temple is particularly intriguing; she sees Bojangles as her friend or a member of her family. Bojangles here transcends a Black actor in a film; her personalization of Bojangles allows him to stand as an image of Black fatherhood and Black manhood more generally. In her mind, the image of Bojangles dancing with a white girl taints her idea of what the relationship between Black women and girls and Black men and boys should be. If Black men give more attention to white girls than Black ones, Black girls lose something personal and tangible, but also somewhat intangible, in their relationship with their male counterparts. Claudia fears that Bojangles' fascination with white girls will not translate to Black girls, and that they will be left without that same attention causing them to continue to search for that care elsewhere. She continues to question Frieda and Pecola's infatuation with the Shirley Temple figure: "Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at the time was

unsullied hatred” (19). Here, Claudia is aware that this fascination with white girls is something that is socialized— something that is inevitable and an ingrained stage in the development of Black girls. She goes on to describe how adults would give her white baby dolls, ogling at their beauty and reprimanding her for dismembering the toys, which she did “to see of what it was made... to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped [her]” (20). The prioritization of white girls’ beauty and virtue caused Claudia to search for what made Black girls receive less attention than white girls. Karen D. Pyke’s “What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don’t We Study It? Acknowledging Racism’s Hidden Injuries” explains that internalization can manifest in unexpected ways:

White racism can infiltrate the world view of the racially oppressed without their conscious consent (Osajima 1993) in a subtle process some refer to as ‘indoctrination’ and ‘mental colonialization’ (hooks 2003). The concept of hegemony also encourages attention to how White racism can be *indirectly* internalized via cultural myths and ideologies that seemingly have nothing to do with race per se (Pyke 556).

With this understanding of internalized anti-Blackness, we see how cultural images and objects like dolls can act as a form of racial indoctrination. This obsession with images of whiteness taking priority over images of Blackness was a manifestation of internalized anti-Blackness that has an extensive past which Claudia was unaware of in her young age. Her naïveté and genuine desire to identify the differences between the beauty of Black girls and the beauty of white ones exemplifies the idea that internalization of whiteness as purity and goodness is learned, both in mainstream society and in the Black community. She states:

...To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’ but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.... I learned much later to worship [Shirley Temple] (22-23).

Claudia recognizes that other Black people do not acknowledge or delight in her beauty, or that of any other Black girl like her. Here, Shirley Temple represents the virtuous white female figure—

full of beauty, wonder, and charm. Claudia does not understand the infatuation at her age but acknowledges that she will develop these same thoughts when she grows older, even speaking from a future space to recount her eventual internalization of this concept. Their inattention—even to other Black women—solidifies the idea of the Black woman and girl being placed in a subordinating caste, even by themselves. This testifies not only how seamlessly ingrained this anti-Blackness becomes even in Black women and girls, but also the meticulous and deliberate way in which this oppression is indoctrinated.

Though Claudia can be seen trying to both understand and reject these ideals of anti-Blackness in her young age, the opposite can be seen in Pecola. While Claudia searches to find the meaning behind worshipping white girls, Pecola accepts this idea as normal and even ideal. In William Grier's *Black Rage*, he describes how Black girls' perception of beauty is shaped by American standards:

...attractiveness is determined by the artificial standard each community selects. In this country, the standard is the blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned girl with regular features.... She [the Black girl] is, in fact, the antithesis of American beauty. However beautiful she might be in a different setting with different standards, in this country she is ugly (Grier 40-41).

In America the standards of beauty are built around the racial majority; since Black girls are at the opposite end of that spectrum, they are unable to be regarded as “beautiful”. Until the Black Power movement where many Black women began to embrace visibly Black features, many Black women and girls were having to measure their beauty on a scale that did not even include them. Pecola embodies this ideal. Instead of trying to determine if people find her beautiful, she already knows and accepts that she is *not* beautiful solely because she is not white. Morrison includes many instances in the novel where Pecola is seen both being despised because of and despising her Blackness:

As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people [her Black family]....Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike (46).

Pecola not only wants to become white, she also wants to extract herself from all relationships to Blackness, stating that somehow what linked her and her family members was this “ugliness” which can be interpreted as Blackness in general. She sees the pillar of beauty being blue eyes, which she associates with images of white female figures, and spends her time longing, searching, and praying for the bluest eyes to feel and be regarded as beautiful:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes... if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyes Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.’ *Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes....* Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope (46).

Pecola is unable to enjoy her childhood because she is constantly reminded of her “ugliness” because she is a dark-skinned Black girl. Since ideas of beauty are so intrinsically linked to images of whiteness in the novel, she is unable to find beauty within herself without blue eyes, and is even given externally imposed images of her ugliness being linked to her Blackness from her family and classmates. She recognizes, much like Claudia, that white girls are treated differently and positively— their beauty and virtue is constantly reinforced and validated. Her naive understanding of the politics of beauty and whiteness only allow her to understand that, for everyone she knows, whiteness and beauty are intrinsically linked— and with beauty also comes favorable treatment and love.

Pecola does not believe that the bullying and hatred she experiences would be as prevalent, or even occur, in her life if she was closer to whiteness. This can be seen in her psychological break at the end of the novel where she states in her inner dialogue “... I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs...”;

she is convinced that she has been given the bluest eyes which make her intrinsically better than everyone else and, because of this, she no longer has to endure the destruction of being a Black girl in America (197). Though this is not true, and she has indeed not actually been given blue eyes, the scene tells of the internalization of misogynoir and anti-Blackness as a whole. Related to Patricia Hill Collins' idea of anti-Blackness being woven into the fabric of American society, Morrison presents that idea and likens it to America's failed ability to nurture the lives of Black girls: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter" (Morrison 206). Morrison takes this metaphor of Black people, Black girls specifically, being a set of flowers that American society cannot and will not sustain, linking this metaphor directly to the idea of American society being built on the basis of anti-Blackness. That anti-Blackness so integrally functions in this society and seemingly cannot be eradicated. This oppression is so salient that Black people also partake in the upkeep of this damaging soil, which is depicted as the fabric of American society, politics, and economy. Morrison takes this idea that all of those things directly disenfranchise Black people due to anti-Blackness which, in turn, causes Black people to struggle to reach their full potential. They are "wrong", though, because the Black people's humanity should not be linked to their success in a system that was not built for them to succeed; it "doesn't matter", though, because the realities of its effects are still, indeed, real.

Morrison also describes the deliberate subordination of Pecola—and, thus, people like Pecola—as a way for certain people to be placed higher on a hierarchy rooted in the idea that being proximate to Blackness is ruinous. Distancing themselves from Pecola allows everyone unlike her to look better, feel better, and be regarded as more beautiful because it denounces the very Black



and “lesser” features that are not valued in an American context:

All of our waste we had dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her— felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness.... Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used to silence our own nightmares (205).

Viewed as being a dumping ground for the anti-Blackness that, here, corrupts the Black community, Pecola represents an externalization of the misogynoir that has historically plagued American society. American social structures constantly place Pecola— and other young girls like her— at the bottom, especially if they are dark-skinned. Not only is Pecola susceptible to this type of subjugation because she is a dark-skinned Black girl, but also her history of surviving violent incestuous rape and heavy emotional abuse leaves her more vulnerable and defenseless against this oppression. The waste “dumped” on her is internalized anti-Blackness; internalized anti-Blackness forces Black people’s worth to be contingent upon their proximity to whiteness. Pyke explains this internalization becomes integral in the oppressed peoples sense of self:

The categorical distinctions become habitual as they are constructed in and through social relations and organizations, causing even the oppressed to have a stake in their subordinated identity.... When the oppressed come to accept these identities as ‘real,’ they are in effect internalizing their subjugated status in their definition of self (Perry 2002:9) (Pyke 557).

Since Black girls are not equipped to combat the full extent of the trauma of anti-Blackness, it allows people, Black women and girls included, to dump their insecurities regarding their Black identities onto Black girls. Given Pecola’s constant struggle with her and her quest for blue eyes, it is a particularly complicated notion that causing her to feel less beautiful allows other Black people to feel more beautiful, how keeping her impoverished and inarticulate allows them room for growth and upward mobility. The word “silence” here is telling not only because it discusses how keeping subordinating Pecola allows them to alleviate any internalized tensions they may feel

it also shows how Pecola herself is suppressed in the process. The silencing of Pecola during her coming-of-age lays the foundation for continued ideas of Black women being subordinated and viewed as unimportant, especially in regard to beauty standards and sexuality. Many Black girls and adolescents have similar experiences of internalized anti-Blackness corrupting their self-images and overall girlhood. In many cases, this internalization causes them to be ashamed of their Blackness and leads to such phenomenon like increased distance from Black culture and even skin bleaching in order to appear light and, thus, closer to whiteness.

### ***The role of homosocial bonding amid misogynoir***

As Black girls began to learn to navigate American society—especially during the 1930s and 1940s where segregation and rampant racism were entrenched in American culture—the relationships they formed with each other served as small solaces from the horrors and confusions of the rest of the world. These homosocial bonds are often vital to the overall development of Black girls; the lack of such relationships means the inability to share the comfort of knowing other people like you have had similar world experiences. Though older Black women and mother figures can relate to Black girls on an intimate level because they have already experienced girlhood, their separation from girlhood due to age establishes distance between Black women and girls. Sisterhoods amongst Black girls carry great importance. In such spaces, Black girls exist freely, without having to modify their existences in order to present an image to outside groups.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explores the idea of homosocial bonds in girlhood in their entirety—including the limitations of not forming or having access to these bonds. As Claudia and Frieda are biological sisters, they provide a constant and positive representation of the benefits of sisterhood bonds to readers. Toward the beginning of the novel, Claudia fondly recounts being sick and Frieda taking care of her, making readers privy to the love that exists between the

sisters:

My sister comes in. Her eyes are full of sorrow. She sings to me.... Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it... everywhere in that house. It stuck, along my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes.... And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die (Morrison 12).

It is important that the comforting, mothering figure here is not her mother, but her sister. Mothers are typically associated with an obligation to care for their sick children; subverting this image and placing Claudia's care in the hands of an "other-mother"—her sister— not only exemplifies that this specific bond provides something the parental bond cannot, it also shows that Black girls are also capable of caring for one another. Not only does her sister's presence provide comfort, it also provides love and healing. Frieda's love is so present that it leaves traces throughout the entirety of the house, a presence that is so substantial it becomes quasi-corporeal. This relationship, while seemingly imperfect in the novel, produces a positive and therapeutic bond that is not found with adults. This sisterhood is only extended with the arrival of Pecola. Claudia and Frieda try their best to "keep her from feeling outdoors" after her family is left homeless (18). This instinctual camaraderie they feel toward her allows them to attempt to shield her from the feeling "outdoors" or out of place. When Pecola starts her menstrual cycle while playing outside, Claudia and Frieda frantically find ways to help her without humiliating her further. They attempt to bury her soiled "little-girl-gone-to-woman pants" in order to hide her onset of what many deem as the start of womanhood (31). Though Mrs. MacTeer is in the house and easily accessible to the girls, neither girl solicited her assistance. When she eventually is notified, she begins to whip them, believing they are playing a "nasty" game until she sees the bloodied napkin Claudia and Frieda have pinned to Pecola's dress. Though the scene is humiliating for each girl, it illustrates not only how Black women cannot access the sisterhood Black girls form because of their age gaps, but also the

importance of the girls attempting to protect Pecola. Claudia and Frieda were both prepared to hide this seemingly humiliating incident for Pecola, to keep her secret safe from possibly harmful outsiders. The scene culminates with the girls sleeping together and being “full of awe and respect for Pecola”, strengthening their bond after sharing this formative experience with her (32). In this quiet moment, the girls revere Pecola's closeness to womanhood and feel safe enough to ponder over the wonders of love, having children, and what this stage of growing up may mean. This is something that could not happen under the gaze of Mrs. MacTeer and, thus, adults in general. In this scene, not only Claudia and Frieda are sisters, but Pecola also joins; their bond refines the way sisterhood is thought of in the novel. These Black girls are building their relationships with each other on respect, admiration, protection, and care, forming the foundation for which sisterhoods can be forged when they are adults.

Their protection of Pecola, though, extends further than a shielding from Mrs. MacTeer. Pecola is often taunted at school due to her supposed ugliness and Black features. This taunting not only mortifies Pecola, it also begins to infuriate both Claudia and Frieda because they feel intrinsically linked to Pecola. When Claudia and Frieda see Pecola being bullied by a group of boys at their school, the two sisters disregard their fear of standing up to them and defend her:

A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove.... ‘Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo.... They danced a macabre ballet around the victim... Pecola edged around the circle crying.... We watched, afraid they might notice us and turn their energies our way. Then Frieda, with set lips and Mama’s eyes... ran toward them and brought her books down on Woodrow Cain’s head.... ‘You cut that out, you hear?’ I had never heard Frieda’s voice so loud and clear.... Woodrow looked frightened just long enough to give her more courage. ‘Leave her ‘lone...!’... ‘Gon on, gal!’ Ain’t nobody bothering you.’ ‘You shut up, Bullet Head.’ I [Claudia] had found my tongue (65-66).

The boys' jeers ridicule Pecola's Blackness, calling her a “black e mo” which causes her to cry. Pecola is characterized as a “victim” here and does not possess the strength nor the confidence to stand up for herself due to her low self-esteem. Their ridiculing her is not only tied to her ugliness

but also to her Blackness, so Claudia and Frieda are afraid that the hate the boys are directing toward Pecola may turn toward them. Frieda then gets a burst of courage, seemingly coming from previous interactions with Black women by mentioning “set lips and Mama’s eyes”, which then allows both her and Claudia to protect the vulnerable Pecola from getting hurt even more. Their strength and bravery grows out of their need to protect their friend and is able to thoroughly challenge the hurtful, misogynistic jeers. Not only are Claudia and Frieda strengthening their bond with Pecola by defending her, they are also both confronting internalized anti-Blackness and sexism in the Black community and finding their voices while helping other Black girls which subsequently challenges harmful social systems.

Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola create this bond at the beginning of the novel and attempt to nurture it throughout the novel. With the pressures of misogynoir surrounding them, though, their efforts are insufficient. Though the girls initially welcome Pecola into their sisterhood, their bond is not powerful enough to combat the severe anti-Blackness and sexism that affects not just Pecola, but them all. As Pecola is forced into motherhood and subsequently develops a mental illness, both Claudia and Frieda no longer talk to her and allow the community's disdain for Pecola to break their developing bond. As Claudia reflects at the end of the novel, she notes that they avoided Pecola “not because she was absurd, or repulsive... but because [they] had failed her” (204-205). Their friendship could not withstand the horrors of misogynoir; without her bond with Claudia and Frieda, Pecola is left totally alone and cannot attempt to recover from her abuse or her mental break. Though Pecola is physically the one without friends, her subordination also restricts Claudia and Frieda's development. After abandoning Pecola and capitalizing off of her weakness, they are left with a false comfort which does now allow for genuine maturation: “We... yawned in the fantasy of our strength. And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not

free, merely licensed.... We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life..." (205). Pecola's bond with Claudia and Frieda represents a hope for Pecola to move past her trauma and for the girls to expand their sisterhoods and protect each other. Without this, Pecola is irreparably broken, and Claudia and Frieda are weak and cowardly. They are also subjected to living a half-life, hiding from reality like Pecola. The strength of their homosocial bond was crucial; since it was not yet fully formed it was ill-equipped to combat the anti-Blackness and sexism that plagued their self-worth. Their bond would have cultivated respect, trust, and protection as they aged, but ended so prematurely that it was unable to truly provide the girls with a source of reparative love.

“Amazingly Beautiful and Terrifyingly Alone”: Black Girlhood and the Role of Homosociality in *Another Brooklyn*

“*Sylvia, Angela, Gigi, August. We were four girls together, amazingly beautiful and terrifyingly alone.*” -Jacqueline Woodson

Jacqueline Woodson’s 2016 novel *Another Brooklyn* follows protagonist August as she recalls her coming-of-age, as an adult, through late childhood, puberty and adolescence, and into the early stages of her womanhood. Woodson sets the novel in 1970s Brooklyn and characterizes the borough as one with much vibrancy and community, though filled with perils that come to affect August and her friends. The novel not only illustrates the importance and complexity of Black girlhood and homosocial bonding, but also community engagement for Black girls during their prepubescent and pubescent years.

The early to mid 2010s proved to be an important time for Black communities as a whole. With the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the continued murders of young Black people, a new—and racist, sexist, and, xenophobic—president, and the rise in transparency around sexual abuse survivors’ stories, the topic of Black girlhood seemed especially potent. As with many Black social movements, the recurring murders of Black youth by the police state and increased violence against women provided impetus for social change, which also redefined how Black feminists chose to discuss and dissect issues. Black feminists, and Black women in general, were reminded of the harsh reality of having to navigate and circumvent both racial and sexist oppression—two forms of oppression that have always been prevalent but seemed to be gaining traction through the upsurge of tragedies like the murder of Sandra Bland and Rekia Boyd who were both victims of police brutality.

Forecasting the formation of Fourth Wave feminism, the 1970s and 1980s provided a

different arena for the growth of feminist thought and, specifically, Black feminist thought. With what is referred to as Second Wave Feminism, the 1970s brought on preliminary discussions of the need for an intersectional approach to feminism; many Black women felt left out of “mainstream” feminism that often did not account for the intersection of racism and sexism and, therefore, could not accurately aid Black women mobilize against or theorize about their issues. With Woodson publishing *Another Brooklyn* in the 2010s— a time where Black feminism was getting more inclusive of women’s issues like the rights of trans women and sex workers— and setting the novel in the 1970s, a time where Black feminism was being birthed as a major feminist movement, is not coincidental. The significance of the time periods is reflected in the growth and shifting of the protagonist's views throughout the novel— all of which I will be discussing further in the chapter. By drawing on the origins of Second Wave Black feminism in her novel, Woodson displays how girlhood fits seamlessly into the larger Black feminist movement.

*Another Brooklyn* takes the novel form of the bildungsroman and builds upon it, creating dynamic, young, female characters who are naïve and strong and learning what it means to grow. When protagonist August moves to Brooklyn following the death of her mother she meets Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela and joins their friend group; the girls quickly become inseparable and embark on their journey through girlhood together. The novel displays Black girlhood and the struggles that accompany it as serious, painful, vibrant, and tender; it gives depth to the experiences Black girls face as they come-of-age and establishes importance to the lives they are learning to lead. August, Angela, Sylvia, and Gigi roam Brooklyn with their eyes wide and their hearts ready to experience life and learn that the world is not as innocent as they once believed. The bond that they share is unique and provides the foundation of what is referred to as “sisterhood” between Black women as they age. Their relationships not only help them mobilize against the misogynoir they so



prematurely face, but also teaches them the importance of homosocial bonds as they traverse through life. In this chapter I will focus on the relationship between Black motherhood and girlhood, the sexual exploitation of Black girls, and the importance of homosocial bonds that form in girlhood. Woodson's portrayal of how Black girlhood fits into the larger portrait of Black feminisms, the effects of hyper-sexualization, and how focusing on the ways Black girls form homosocial bonds allow us to understand the breadth of Black womanhood.

### ***Black motherhood and its influence over the lives of Black girls***

The relationship children have with their parents during their prepubescent and pubescent stages is vital to their overall development as young adults. Mothers and fathers, ideally, serve as positive examples of what adulthood should be and how adults should function. Mothers in particular provide young girls with an example of what womanhood should look like. In "Black Mothers' Messages of Pride to their Adolescent Daughters", Tracy Nichols and Regina McCoy explain the importance of a maternal figure during girlhood, stating that "adolescence is a critical time in mother-daughter relationships (Nichols) and maternal strategies play a large role in socializing girls into womanhood" and that Black mother-daughter relationships must be examined in order to understand the ways in which "the messages Black women send their daughter regarding Black Womanhood" function for young Black girls (Nichols & McCoy 185). The absence of this maternal relationship often leads to various mental and emotional issues as well as trouble establishing a sense of self. Historically, for Black people, familial structures do not seem complete without the presence of a matriarch, or what bell hooks describes in *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* as "the special intimacy, closeness, and bonding purported to characterize the mother/child relationship" (hooks 135). Often times, Black families view the matriarch as the sole person responsible for the overall well-being of everyone in the household. What hooks

referenced as the “mother/child” bond, though, is extremely influential in the overall development of a child. The mother’s presence is especially impactful during coming-of-age, when children are experiencing the starkest physical, emotional, and social changes. Due to the matriarch historically playing a large role in a child’s life, a mother’s presence— or lack thereof— can significantly impact the way children develop values, establish further relationships, and move through the world socially.

In Woodson’s *Another Brooklyn*, protagonist August has both an intimate and impossibly distant relationship with her mother. Her mother, who is characterized as being an enigmatic figure in August’s life, dies before August, her brother, and her father relocate to Brooklyn. August, though, takes years to accept her loss as fact and spend much of the novel in a seemingly endless time waiting for her mother to return to her family. Though August’s relationship with her mother while she was alive was not particularly healthy due to her mother’s mental illness, August longs for her presence, advice, and love while she learns what it means to grow into a woman herself. The book begins with August recalling her childhood and how she did not readily accept her mother’s death. She opens with “for a long time, my mother wasn’t dead yet” and later adds “each week, I began with the words *I was waiting for my mother...*” (Woodson 1-15). August’s mother dies by suicide after suffering repeated breakdowns and delusions that began when her brother was killed in the Vietnam War; two years after his death, her mother begins to hear his voice calling to her which eventually prompts her to drown herself and is subsequently cremated by August’s father. August, her brother, and her father leave their home in Tennessee shortly after, August never accepting her mother as gone. During this period of yearning, August feels the growing anxiety of having to come of age without the presence of her mother; she asks, “how were we to learn our way on this journey without my mother?” (46). She is unsure of her ability to successfully navigate

her coming-of-age without the presence of her mother. August's constant desire for her mother during this vital period in her development represents how formative mother-daughter relationships are to the overall trajectory of Black girlhood. August feels as though she cannot successfully complete this journey to womanhood without the guidance and affection her mother would provide. In this way, Black mothers and daughters are inextricably linked. It is difficult for August to understand her journey through girlhood to womanhood without having the example of what that journey's culmination looks like.

Since August is mostly devoid of a matriarchal figure in her life throughout the novel, she seeks similar forms of affection in what Patricia Hill-Collins explains as “other-mothers” or “women who assist bloodmothers [biological mothers] by sharing mothering responsibilities” (Collins 178). Though these figures are likely older women who have experience caring for young women and children, like the religious role-models Sister Sonja and Sister Loretta that enter the novel as August’s father joins the Nation of Islam, Collins explains that “young women are often carefully groomed at an early age to become othermothers” which is seen as August forms strong homosocial bonds that help her understand herself better (180). The Black community looks to the Black mother to be in charge of the well-being of the family but also expects Black daughters to be other-mothers as well. Though many Black feminist theories have deep understandings of how motherhood affects Black women and their families as a whole, they do not analyze the effects of other-mothering on Black girls. In *Another Brooklyn*, the positive effects of other-mothering, both by adult women and young girls, provide August with the comfort and guidance that would mimic that of her own mother. This form of mothering not only helps Black girls develop their characters, but also provides them with community members that demonstrate how to care for other people.

In a desperate attempt to experience an intimate relationship with other female members

of her newfound community in Brooklyn, August takes to three young girls—Angela, Sylvia, and Gigi—who accept her as a friend. This closeness to other girls, though, was something August’s mother explicitly warned her against. Throughout the novel, August recalls her mother’s lessons: “My mother had not believed in friendship among women. She said women weren’t to be trusted. *Keep your arm out*, she said. *And keep women a whole other hand away from the farthest tips of your fingernails*. She told me to keep my nails long” (Woodson 19). Her mother is wary of other women, warning August against forming any kind of bond with any girl or woman. She also warns “*Don’t trust women.... Even the ugly ones will take what you thought was yours*” (41). Her sweeping generalization that all women cannot be trusted is indicative of the reality of internalized misogyny. Her mother’s opinion on other women can be described as a form of internalized misogyny. Much like internalized racism, this form of misogyny can manifest in different ways. Though thinking of this in a context of racism, Karen D. Pyke discusses this idea in “What is Internalized racial oppression and Why Don’t we Study It? Acknowledging Racism’s Hidden Injuries” which can also apply to sexism: “The internalization of oppression *is* a multidimensional phenomenon that assumes many forms and sizes across situational contexts, including the intersections of multiple systems of domination (Padilla 2001)” (Pyke 583). What August’s mother is exhibiting can be understood as a form of domination; she believes that she, and her daughter, are better than other women and that women are intrinsically untrustworthy. This is not something for which her mother ever provides an explanation and it reveals itself to be an internalization of misogyny throughout the course of the novel. In “Racism and Sexism as Correlates of African American Women’s Psychological Distress”, Syzmanski and Stewart state that the intersection of racism and sexism for Black women allows space for these oppressive systems to become internalized and adversely affect their overall mental health (Syzmanski and Stewart 226-227). For

August's mother, these ideas are manifested in her reluctance to teach August about the importance of sisterhood bonds. The detrimental effects of internalized misogyny can lead to increased isolation and inability to form female bonds. August is initially wary of Angela, Sylvia, and Gigi but soon realizes that the bond she shares with her friends is instrumental in finding her understanding her sense of self and the development of character:

Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela had moved far past my longest fingernail, all the way up my arm. Years had passed since I'd heard my mother's voice. When she showed up again, I'd introduce my friends to her. I'd say, *You were wrong, Mama. Look at us hugging. Look at us laughing. Look at how we begin and end each other.* I'd say, *Can you see this, Mama? Can you?* (Woodson 75).

August has been taught to internalize this misogyny; after experiencing how transformative these relationships are, she begins to unpack her mother's damaging lessons. Instead of keeping her distance from other girls as much as possible, she has embraced the possibilities of sisterhood. The girls "begin and end each other" and August begins to detach herself from the unhealthy coping mechanisms she has taken to in her mother's absence, like hearing her voice and feeling her presence constantly (75). She begins to feel like these moments of "other-mothering" are completing her. Despite these cautionary measures constructed on internalized misogyny, August comes to understand how restorative relationships with other girls, and even women, can be.

In addition to August's band of friends, August is also introduced to two religious, matriarchal role-models who help her work through the trauma of her mother's untimely death. Sister Loretta comes into the home as August's father begins his transition into the Nation of Islam, making sure August and her brother are cared for physically and spiritually. August recalls her memories of Sister Loretta with ambivalence:

She was Sister Mama Loretta when our foreheads burned with fever, when our stomachs curled back over themselves and our heaving heads needed soft hands holding them. When we gathered over Monopoly boards and checkers games we found ourselves laughing at stories and begging her *Tell us another one Sister Mama Loretta* (98).

Sister Loretta fulfills many of the roles a mother should— caring for the children when they are sick and looking after their overall well-being. This form of other-mothering can be helpful for children who do not have a constant, readily available matriarchal figure in their lives, and so this relationship is extremely vital to both August and her brother. The need for their biological mother, though, is undeniable. August remembers thinking “but she [Sister Loretta] was not my mother. We all knew this” (98). No matter how nurturing Sister Loretta’s mothering tactics were, they only temporarily masked August’s need for her mother.

August takes all of these forms of other-mothering and attempts to fill herself with the love enough to forget about the void that is her mother. While these relationships with other-mothers prove to be largely beneficial in her life, she still longs for her biological mother. During this intense developmental period another figure, Sister Sonja, prompts August to take the first step to healing from the loss of her mother, by actually acknowledging that she is gone and will not return. The end of the novel shows August’s progression; it references her first meeting with Sister Sonja: “*When did you first realize your mother was dead?* Sister Sonja wanted to know.... I looked up at her. *Why do you think my mother has died?*” (153-154). August begins her journey being stubbornly unable to accept the reality of her mother’s death. After her community helps her through her coming-of-age, she is able to begin to acknowledge her trauma: “*When did you realize your mother was actually dead,* Sister Sonja would ask again months later. Never. Every day. Yesterday. Right at this moment” (166). The novel ends much like it begins—with August and the ghost of her mother— the difference being that she begins to properly heal from the loss of her mother. August’s constant searching for her mother and feeling her mother’s presence throughout the novel is indicative of Black girls’ need for a maternal figure during this transitional period. Losing a mother, or being devoid of a mother, is harmful to the overall development of the Black

girl because Black mothers and daughters have a distinct familial relationship. For Black girls growing up as subordinate in both race and gender, their mothers are essential to reinforcing their value, beauty, and significance. Without that figure, it is easy for Black girls to struggle with self-worth, love, and respect in a society and community that is plagued by misogynoir. Though August is exposed to other fulfilling relationships, she is never fully whole because she does not have her mother. It is as if she constantly moves through life trying to find a vital part of her identity. August's constant pining for her mother, her inability to accept her death, and her constant search to feel the void her mother left with community other-mothers is indicative of the inextricable link between motherhood and girlhood.

In many cases, the mother-daughter relationship is the first instance Black girls learn how to navigate the realities of misogynoir. Without this bond, many Black girls must learn how to combat forms of oppression almost entirely on their own. Even with healthy relationships with Black male figures, much like August has with her father, Black girls cannot fill the void of an absent mother figure. Black mothers will have experienced many of the challenges of living in a misogynoiristic society and are able to connect with their young Black daughters, giving specific advice on how to exist in a heavily anti-Black and sexist world. Important questions to ask are: how do these young girls learn to navigate anti-Blackness and sexism without their mothers? What does the healthy Black mother-daughter relationship provide young Black girls that they cannot obtain elsewhere? In order to completely understand the depth of Black motherhood, we must look into what it means to be a Black daughter—especially one without a mother. Finding the answers to these questions will not only lead to a holistic understanding of Black motherhood but also a deeper understanding of how Black motherhood, or lack thereof, affects the development of Black girlhood.

### *Sex, exploitation, and Black girlhood*

Due to their limited knowledge of sexuality and sex due their youth, the experiences Black girls have during puberty are unique because of the misogynoir they encounter. Many girls going through puberty and forming a sexual consciousness cling to familiarity. With bonds formed between girls during these periods being a strong constant in their lives, many young girls seek solace within their homosocial communities to help them understand their sexuality, which can lead to an exploration of homosexuality. In *Another Brooklyn*, August and her friends utilize their homosocial community to explore their sexualities and feel as if this community is the most comfortable place to develop their sexual consciousness. August recalls these formative experiences:

“Sylvia and I wore baby-doll pajamas that felt obscene and made us giddy. We slow-danced with each other. Angela showed us how to French-kiss and we spent hours practicing. We practiced until our bodies felt as though they were exploding. We whispered, *I love you* and meant it. We said, *This is scary* and laughed” (Woodson 115-116).

The girls, now in their teenage years, are beginning to form an understanding of sexuality. They look toward this community to gain an understanding because it is comfortable and familiar. The use of language like “exploding” demonstrates that this relationship feels whole and this exploration is sexually pleasurable. They tell each other “I love you” and mean, which presents an image of intimacy and sexual pleasure that is built upon trust and friendship.

Often times, for Black girls especially, sexuality is not something they are allowed to form themselves; because of the reality of sexual assault for Black girls, many of them are forced into developing a sexual consciousness before they themselves understand what sexuality is. In Evelyn Hammonds' “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” she describes the contradictory portrayal of Black women's sexuality: “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 already colonized” (Hammonds 8). A Black woman’s sexuality is not her own; her body is “colonized” which means she is not expected to be in control of what happens to it, stifling her ability to wholly form her own ideas about sexuality under this oppression. For Black girls, this is an even worse reality; the intersection of them being regarded inferior in race, gender, and age places their bodily and sexual autonomy almost completely out of their control. The inclusion of this healthy exploration allows August and her friends the opportunity to claim sexual autonomy in their adolescence.

These moments, though, build trust within these girls. Although they do not completely understand what being sexually active or forming a sexual orientation means at their young age, they have already begun to encounter sexual assault and harassment, a confusing and extremely damaging reality for Black girls. These positive explorations of sexuality within their homosocial community creates a foundation of healing from instances of sexual violence and/or harassment and other forms of pain:

There were days when we sat in front of the television watching Clark Kent fall in love with Lois Lane and understood what it meant to hold secrets. When Angela cried but wouldn’t tell us why, we promised her our loyalty, reminded her that she was beautiful, said *Knock, Knock, Angela. Let us in, let us in*. We stroked the sharp knots of her cheekbones, moved our fingers gently over her lips, lifted her shirt, and kissed her breasts. We said, *You’re beautiful*. We said, *Don’t be afraid*. We said, *Don’t cry*. (Woodson 117).

The trust built between these girls provides a foundation of trust that allows them the space to exist without pain. Though Angela is not able to verbalize her pain, August, Sylvia, and Gigi are able to comfort her. They express their adoration for her and her body, stroking her face and kissing her body to express their love for her and to remind her of her beauty. The image of Clark Kent and Lois Lane falling in love but keeping secrets is what the girls are experiencing here. Angela,

August, Sylvia, and Gigi *are* in love with each other, but Angela's pain prevents her from articulating her emotions. The girls, though they do not understand Angela's pain either, are too connected to allow her to feel alone and remind her that she deserves the love and intimacy they can offer her.

Positive depictions of sexual exploration between girls are indirectly juxtaposed with the girls' sexual interactions with Black boys in the novel. While their homosexual exploration is steeped in mutual trust and affection that progresses without force, their early heterosexual interactions are characterized as points of confusion, discovery, and often times hurt. As their Black male counterparts develop their own sexualities, the ways in which they interact with Black girls changes from an innocent comradeship to a more troubling nuisance bordering harassment. Such behavior seems in direct contrast to the positive relationship August has to her younger brother, one built upon familial love and trust. The juxtaposition demonstrates that this exploitation is something that is built out of Black boys' puberty development which subsequently seems to negatively affect the ways they are allowed to sexually and socially interact with Black girls. In many ways, these instances of harassment proved to be some of their first encounters with the phenomenon of sexual exploitation by men of their own race. August and her friends begin to see how boys treat them differently as their bodies develop during puberty:

When boys called our names, we said, *Don't even say my name. Don't even put it in your mouth.* When they said, *You ugly anyway,* we knew they were lying.... We watched them dip-walk away, too young to know how to respond. The four of us together weren't something they understood. They understood girls alone, folding their arms across their breasts, praying for invisibility (71).

Though at this point in the novel the girls have come into contact with many instances of sexual exploitation from grown men, the boys' scrutiny feels invasive in a different way. This is their first instance of having to combat these things with their Black male peers, which makes this

harassment also a breach of trust and comradery between Black girls and boys. The girls are being catcalled and reject their advances. The boys saying phrases like “you ugly anyway” demonstrates their new acquaintance with the language of sexual harassment. They walk away without knowing how to respond to the girls’ rejections because they have not yet acquired the full language of this exploitation. The last line of the passage shows us the terms in which girls are allowed to exist in the mind of boys and men. They are these partially invisible objects, allowed to exist in corporeal form only for the pleasure of male subjects but expected to be invisible in all other ways. This is indicative of the boys being uncomfortable with the girls’ rejections. Many Black women experience sexual assault and harassment at young ages which ultimately leads to a negative view of sex and intimacy. In a myriad of ways, these Black boys are a depiction of the likelihood of growing into the men who sexually harass, objectify, and assault August, Angela, Sylvia and Gigi within the novel.

The Black men in the novel are complicated figures because they often present a sexually violent and largely unpleasant presence in the girls’ lives, with the exception of their father figures. These moments demonstrate the stark reality that the sexual objectification and exploitation of Black female subjects does not halt solely because these girls are underage. The girls recall feeling awareness of their hyper-sexuality at early ages: “At eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, we knew we were being watched” (71). The girls often recall members of their community sexually scrutinizing them, making them both uncomfortable and afraid: “We didn’t know that for weeks and weeks, the lock had been broken on her building’s front door. We didn’t know about the soldier who slept behind the darkened basement stairwell, how he had waited for her in shadow. We were twelve. *I can’t tell nobody but you guys*, Gigi said” (58). These acts seem to be premeditated; at twelve Gigi’s body is on display before she can understand her body for herself. The girls are often met

with inappropriate, pedophilic sexual advances that they are unsure how to approach:

*Take somebody with you, we said, Don't wear dresses when you go there. He'll offer you a quarter to see your panties.... Just a little, the man said. Please, the quarter, held up and gleaming between his thumb and pointer finger as we shook our heads No and embarrassed tears we didn't yet understand sprang forward (71-72).*

The girls cannot even visit the community shoe store without facing sexual assault; their lack of sexual experience and their age allows them to be easier target for this type of sexual violence. The man is attempting to bribe them into sexual favors, using their innocence to his advantage and hoping it will allow him to manipulate them into sexual acts. The girls are crying tears of confused embarrassment; they do not understand why the man makes such advances on them, but they know it is unnatural and wrong for him to desire them sexually. Instances like this and Gigi's sexual assault lead to confusion and embarrassment. These early encounters with sexism and exploitation force the girls to create barriers of protection:

We wanted to make her broken self know she was still beautiful. *It wasn't you, we said again and again. We can kill him, we said. We sat on Sylvia's bed... then spent the afternoon practicing how Gigi would hold [the razor blades] when she slashed the soldier.... We had blades inside our kneesocks and were growing our nails long. We were learning to walk the Brooklyn streets as though we had always belonged to them... (58-61).*

The girls suggest killing the soldier, trying desperately to rid themselves of the threat of sexual violence. They think of ways to arm themselves and protect one another from the threat of sexual violence that they do not yet completely understand. Though this abuse breaks Gigi, the girls fortify their bond by musing over ways to repair her and to rectify this immoral act. Their commitment to shielding each other from the horrors of sexual assault gives them a sense of purpose and confidence while strengthening their friendship. They understand the importance of protecting each other from sexual violence and preserving each other's sense of worth which is a principle concept discussed in Black feminist theories.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins explains that Black women are robbed of their ability

to consent due to their lack of sexual agency: “Black women experienced a parallel form of race- and gender-specific sexual violence. Treating African-American women as pornographic objects and portraying them as sexualized animals.... Rape became the specific act of sexual violence forced on Black women...” (Collins 147). Due to Black women’s unique position in society, they are not regarded as worthy of sexual autonomy which leads them to be more vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual assault and harassment. This idea dates back to slavery, where Black women experienced a form of sexual violence that is often cited as being indescribable. In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West”, historian Darlene Clark Hine states that “clearly, Black women did not possess the power to eradicate negative social and sexual images of their womanhood” and this lack of autonomy provided space for sexual exploitation to grow (Hine 916). In “Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present”, Christopher J. P. Sewell discusses the root of the subordination of Black women’s agency in the context of American slavery:

As a result of the slave trade in 1808, the reproduction of the slave community lied within those slaves who already resided in America. This only fueled the need for Black women to come to being sexual objects as they were now viewed for their potential to breed.... In the case of the Black woman, her body became the ultimate space to take out these desires the white man had for her body (Sewell 310).

The belief that Black women cannot be in control of their own bodies reveals their subordinate role in the social order which is predicated both on them being Black *and* women; since they are “objects” not worthy of personhood they do not deserve bodily integrity and can be sexually exploited. This exploitation is even worse for young Black girls, especially during their coming-of-age. At a time where they do not have fully formed thoughts and opinions about sex, do not fully understand the concept of sexual violence, and are still becoming comfortable in their rapidly changing bodies, an act of sexual violence can irreversibly damage their development. In this way,

focusing on the specific sexual exploitation Black girls face can help understand the intricacies of Black women and sexual violence. Looking toward their early encounters with sexual assault and harassment can identify exactly how the damage from sexual violence manifests itself in womanhood and what it means for the overall development of Black girls and women.

### ***The importance of homosocial bonds in Black girlhood: August, Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela***

In the wake of Black women facing disproportionate oppression in America, these women must construct and uphold safe spaces where they are allowed to exist fully and support one another. In order to create these spaces, many Black women form close bonds that resemble sisterhoods; these homosocial bonds are formed as a means of protection, comfort, and love. Though Black sisterhoods are often thought of as groups of adult women congregating and fellowshipping, these crucial bonds begin in girlhood; the self-less nature of these early bonds allows young girls to connect in ways Black women may not be able to in adulthood. These bonds between girls not only help them to not feel alone as they traverse through puberty, it also lays the foundation for sisterhoods like Black feminist collectives and Black Greek-lettered sororities to thrive. These girls are learning how to sustain friendships, compromise, lead and follow, and nurture bonds— all tenets that collectives and groups need in order to prosper. The early formations of sisterhoods in Black girlhood uniquely allow girls to develop their personal characters, as well as their relationship skills, in tandem with one another. This both strengthens the bonds between the girls and allows each individual space to shape their self-worth.

Following August's mother's views, it is understandable why August was unable to feel comfortable making friends when she moved from SweetGrove to Brooklyn; she was taught to be wary of creating relationships with women who were characterized by her mother as solely wanting to take from her. She recalls, though, a feeling of deep longing despite her mother's

warnings: "...as I watched Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi walk past our window, I was struck with something deeply unfamiliar— a longing to be a part of who they were, to link my arm with theirs and remain that way. Forever" (Woodson 19). August is drawn to the idea of being a part of something— of having a group of people who are not biological family to support and love you unconditionally. She longs for a sisterhood—the need for homosocial bonding one that she cannot ignore. She expresses this sentiment as "wanting to be on the inside of Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi's continuum" (20). Her life feels somewhat incomplete without the presence of other Black girls and feels as though if she is allowed into this "continuum" she can learn more about and begin to shape herself.

As August evades the reality of her mother's death, she attempts to find solace in what come to be part of her other-mother community. She is seen first as an outsider, creeping along the outskirts until Sylvia confronts her: "*Why do you stare at us like that, Sylvia said. What are you looking for?... Sylvia came closer to me. Really, I'm asking what are you seeing? When you look at us? I'm not trying to be mean. Everything, [August] said. I see everything*" (Woodson 37). August is not familiar with what it means to be a part of a sisterhood, but she is intrigued by the fact that the girls seem whole when they are together. August sees "everything" in their relationship because it holds affection even though, and maybe even especially because, they are young. The four girls begin to form a deeper bond, readily accepting August and embarking on their separate journeys together. These bonds create a space where each girl can exist freely, a space that provides comfort, a space that provides home. Homosocial bonds are seen as integral to the trajectory of these Black girls' lives and their ideas of trust:

When we finally had become friends, when the four of us trusted each other enough to let the world surrounding us into our words, we whispered secrets, pressed side by side or sitting cross-legged in our newly tight circle. We opened our mouths and let the stories that had burned nearly to ash in our bellies finally live outside of us (56).

The girls have just begun to experience the effects of misogynoir on daily life and are unsure how to process the racist and sexist things they have encountered. This intimate homosocial space they have cultivated allows them to be organically themselves; it allows them the space to begin to understand their positionality as Black girls in America and to start to form their own voices. Since the novel is told from August's perspective as an adult reflecting on her coming-of-age, her focus on her past homosocial relationships allows readers to understand the importance of such bonds. The friendship between August, Gigi, Sylvia, and Angela represents the reparative nature of Black sisterhoods, bonds strong enough to combat the cruelty of anti-Blackness, sexism, and sexual violence while also teaching Black girls how to protect, uplift, and love one another.



“I Found God in Myself”: The Journey to Black Womanhood in *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

“ *i found god in myself  
& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely*” -Ntozake Shange

Arguably the most important part of Black women’s literature in general is not the high praise it receives, the affluent diction it employs, or the forms it uses to tell a story. The most potent part of Black women’s literature, and arguably the purpose of it as well, is its ability to depict the lives, experiences, and hardships of Black women and girls. Black women’s writing serves as a way to fully realize the past, present, and future of Black women. In this way, the Black girl bildungsroman gives readers both a glimpse into the interiority of the Black girl and also provides a lens through which one can examine the formation of womanhood. The term “bildungsroman”, though, signifies a specific form: the novel form. Consequently, what is noteworthy about Black girls’ coming-of-age tales is that they are not married to the novel form. Black women are writing their childhood experiences in ways that allow them to encompass the totality of their trajectory. Though many authors chose the novel form, memoirs like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and plays like *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry diversify this canon. One of the most influential examples of a Black woman’s coming-of-age narrative that pushes the bounds of how these stories are told is *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange. Written throughout the early 1970s and premiering first in 1976, Shange describes *for colored girls* as a choreopoem; this theatrical piece joining literature, dance, performance, and music allows Black women to ponder over how the traumas and triumphs experienced in girlhood informed the way they presently shape their womanhood. Incorporating numerous art forms allows the expansiveness of the Black female experience to take up maximum

space on the stage. Black women's collective voice is not only prioritized in the written choreopoem, but also in the inclusion of multiple art forms, allowing the author to mirror the complexity of Black womanhood in general. Shange uses the form of the choreopoem— a term and art form of her own creation— and dynamically changes the way she tells the story of her Black woman characters and represents how Black women's coming-of-age and womanhood is depicted across various artistic mediums.

*for colored girls* features stories from seven different Black women who discuss their traumas, abuses, and joys. The choreopoem represents the final culmination of the development of Black womanhood. The women in the choreopoem reflect on their past and find ways to navigate deconstructing the misogynoir they have experienced while cultivating ways to heal from the damage. The choreopoem's opening monologue by the lady in brown proclaims that she has known “dark phrases of womanhood/ of never havin been a girl/ half-notes scattered/ without rhythm” (Shange 17). The lady in brown remembers not being given the space to indulge in her childhood; these “dark phrases” of womanhood are scattered like skeletons of womanhood during that should be girlhood. This created an intriguing space for both Black girls and women; Black girls are being forced into womanhood prematurely and Black women have to learn how to move through the world having not known anything *but* womanhood. The lady in brown goes on to advocate for the Black girl's voice:

somebody/ anybody  
sing a black girl's song  
bring her out  
to know herself  
...  
sing her song of life  
she's been dead so long  
she doesn't know the sound  
of her own voice  
her infinite beauty

...  
sing the song of her possibilities  
let her be born  
let her be born  
& handled warmly (18-19).

This is the first of many declarations from the ladies that their girlhoods have been robbed of them; the fact that the advocacy for Black girls' voices and experiences to be heard comes at the beginning of the choreopoem implies that they are building their ideas of womanhood from their experiences in girlhood.

The lady in brown believes that Black girls only have a pseudo-childhood, one where the girls are deprived of their humanity. This pseudo-childhood Black girls are subject to places them in a liminal space where they are regarded as both children and adults. As Black girls transition into womanhood, they are forced to confront this constricting liminality. In Sarah Mahurin's article "‘Speakin Arms’ and Dancing Bodies in Ntozake Shange" she explains the seven women being described as being "outside" of urban areas not denoting a suburban area but rather "a literal disembodiment— it indicates liminality, unoccupied space" (Mahurin 334). Shange is bringing the Black woman out of this liminal space that Mahurin identifies by first bringing the Black girl out of a similar space. These women, having gone through girlhood already, are advocating for the experiences of Black girls to be prioritized so that they can "be born". The repetition of "let her be born" stresses the need for the Black girl to be brought out of the ashes and into the light. The Black girl must no longer be overlooked or buried, but to be celebrated and understood.

Though not technically a coming-of-age story in the sense that it does not focus on children or adolescents, *for colored girls* instead depicts a conclusion to the coming-of-age experience. This stage is hugely important to the overall experience of coming-of-age in general; the transition from girlhood to womanhood symbolizes more than a passage from child to adult but also the pinnacle

to growth as the Black female individual. In conclusion, I would like to sketch the similarities between how girlhood has been depicted in the previous chapters and how womanhood manifests in this text, describe how womanhood must be understood by looking back at girlhood, and analyze the benefit of utilizing a non-traditional art form to tell the story of the Black woman.

The thread of recognizing and reconciling with experiences of abuse is especially present in the Black female bildungsroman. In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Another Brooklyn* the reality of sexual, physical, and emotional violation, unfortunately, exists in multitudes for young Black girls. The ways they encounter abuse and how they navigate it in their girlhood significantly informs the ways in which they choose to cope with this abuse as women. Unfortunately, becoming an adult does not halt sexual violation and abuse for Black girls; Shange includes various different cases of Black women having to confront all forms of abuse from intra-communal and extra-communal persons. In *for colored girls*, Shange describes how the women assess the sexual violation from their peers. The characters in the choreopoem feel this subordination when they experience sexual assault and rape:

*lady in blue.* a friend is hard to press charges against  
*lady in red.* if you know him  
you must have wanted it  
*lady in red.* a rapist is always to be a stranger  
to be legitimate  
...  
*lady in red.* but if you've been seen in public wit him  
danced one dance  
kissed him goodbye lightly  
...  
*lady in blue.* bein betrayed by men who know us  
...  
*lady in red.* women relinquish all personal rights  
in the presence of a man  
who apparently cd be considered a rapist  
*lady in purple.* especially if he has been considered a friend (Shange 31-34).

The women describe here that they are pushed to rethink the grounds of their sexual assault when

it comes from those who are a part of their communities and, in many cases, former friends or acquaintances; this dismisses the realities of interpersonal violence for Black women. The sexual violation of young Black women and Black women is disregarded. The idea that being seen with a man in public establishes consent and gives him control over the woman's body takes the responsibility away from the perpetrators and redistributes the blame to the victims. The sexual violation of Black women is only legitimated if the rapist is a stranger, effectively absolving the role of familiar persons in the assaults. They are told they “must have wanted it” because Black women are allowed to have sexual autonomy if it is not hypersexual. This demonstrates how the hyper-sexualization of the Black female body and internalized anti-Blackness affects the way Black women are subjected to sexual violence and violation. Internalized misogynoir allows male community members to perpetuate the idea of the “hypersexual jezebel” who is only allowed to compel men into having sex and then expected relinquish her autonomy to men.

Though the women describe these adverse experiences in vivid detail and Shange uses theatrical modes like stage direction to show the women’s intense emotions, the importance of homosocial bonds remains one of the most important ways of subverting misogynoir. In the other two texts, the homosocial bonds formed in girlhood help Black girls to learn how to move through a heavily anti-Black and sexist world while also learning how to define themselves. These strong homosocial relationships formed in youth lay the foundation for continued ideas of sisterhood as adolescents transition into womanhood. In *for colored girls* the women share “one laugh/one music/ one flowered shawl/ knotted on each neck” which supports the idea of needing this bond and togetherness in order to successfully navigate the world (53). This “oneness” is akin to a shared fate; if a woman experiences harm, happiness, or disappointment, all Black women are affected due to their emotional and social proximity to each other. These close bonds and ideas of shared

fate can also be seen in the stage direction: “*The lady in green then breaks into a dance, the other ladies follow her lead and soon they are all dancing and chanting together ....The dance reaches a climax and all of the ladies fall out tired, but full of life and togetherness*” (63). The women are not only together, but they are also all full of life and positive emotion due to this intimacy. Shange often uses the stage direction as a way to employ a collective voice; many times, the women are described completing the same movement, singing the same song, or feeling the same emotions. By employing this affinity in these theatrical ways Shange expounds upon how Black homosocial relationships can be depicted. They do not have to solely exist on the page through a dramatic work— they can also exist in body, mind, and voice. The collective voice not only symbolizes the expansiveness of Black women’s literature, but also the expansiveness of Black sisterhoods in general. They occur in a myriad of different yet important ways for each set of women. Throughout the choreopoem, as each character is describing both tragic and reparative experiences of their girlhood and womanhood, the other women are characterized as being attentive and caring, being conscious of the others in order to create the feeling of closeness as they try to restore each other’s sense of worth after misogynoir has broken it. Many instances, the ladies must reassure each other: “never mind sister/ dont pay him no mind/ go go go go go go sister/ do yr thing/ never mind” (52). Here, Black women are seen repairing each other from the harm inflicted on them by male subjects; the speaker is reassuring the woman that it is best to maintain strong sense of self in the midst of male violence. The act of voicing this reassurance creates a space where Black women are unafraid of supporting their sisterhoods. Between the text, dances, and music, this production allows its audience— allows Black women— to see their bodies represented on stage. The act of performing these scene to an audience of Black women allows both actors and spectators alike to see their experiences and ascribe validity to them and actively cultivates this bond of sisterhood amongst

the actors and Black female audience members. Shange uses the choreopoem form to narrate this culminating ending to Black women's coming-of-age, effectively depicting how creative means subvert misogynoir.

Giving Black girls the space to be seriously studied, especially in Black feminist and Womanist spaces, allows the both Black girls *and* women to be understood more thoroughly, creating spaces where misogynoir can be more readily contested. Identifying and giving ample attention to the complex connection between the experience of girlhood and the formation of womanhood can allow scholars and society alike to understand the subordinated position of Black female subjects in America. Telling these stories and making these connections can help alleviate the Black girl's realities of childhood sexual violation, internalized anti-Blackness, and fraught familial relationships. Sarah Mahurin says in ““Speakin Arms”” that “words are forgettable, even useless, when they ‘aint got no definitions’ and thus no real powers of signification” (Mahurin 332). Black women writers are just that—writers—but they symbolize much more than that in a social context. Their writing—their words do not exist merely on the page. These coming-of-age narratives relate so closely to real experiences documented by Black women and girls that they exist far beyond the realm of fiction. These Black women speak signification into their stories by shining light on those Black girls who have felt silenced, overlooked, understated, and ignored. By doing so—by telling these stories—Black girls are put at the center of their own narratives and being ascribed not only literary importance, but also social significance. The focus being on Black girls in these stories begs the question *how can Black feminist thought discuss womanhood without an in-depth discussion of girlhood?* These narratives depict the complexity in the experiences of Black girls and adolescents as they transition to womanhood. The truth revealed by such works seems to be that one cannot and should not discuss Black womanhood without an in-depth

discussion of Black girlhood as well. In order for Black women to “find god” in themselves, or to appreciate their worth in general, Black girlhood must be legitimized and centered in Black feminisms. Black girls are noteworthy, powerful, and invaluable; their voices— loud, confident, fierce— deserve to be heard.



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