

Navigating Deviance and Respectability: Black Girls Defining Sexuality for Themselves

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Introduction

Adult perceptions of Black girls ages 5-14 code them as more mature and less childlike and innocent. Black girls are also “perceived to know more about adult topics and [be] more knowledgeable about sex than their white peers” (Epstein et al., 2017, p. 8). The misreading of Black girls' bodies by society causes internal conflict about how their bodies and their performances around sexuality are read. Conflicts continue to arise for Black girls who are not cis-gendered or heterosexual, existing outside of heteronormative sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 2003; Thorpe et al., 2022). In this research, I attempt to uncover and analyze how Black girls have been able to define themselves outside of the narratives projected on them. This paper will explore the ways Black girls are hypersexualized and adultified, how they disrupt the binaries of being either respectably chaste or sexually aggressive, and how they grapple with misogynoir through performance and sexual negotiation tactics. Finally, this paper interrogates how Black girls resist these sexual scripts and assert their narratives through creative expression, including hip-hop, spoken word, and dance.

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, author and gender studies scholar, defines Black girlhood as “the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity” (Brown, 2009, p. 1). This definition allows us to move towards the creation of the social body of a Black girl, one that does not exclude queerness or gender diversity. Discussions on how Black girls construct their narratives, social bodies, and realities must be seen along this Black girlhood continuum. Thinking about the power

dynamics that construct the body as sexual, we must first ask who has the power to create these narratives that influence both desire and identity. Scholars who theorize about the influence of power dynamics and sexuality in shaping the feminine body have failed to engage with the influence of race on the formation of the feminine body and “implicitly [hold] up one ideal of femininity to the exclusion of all others” (Cahill, 2000, p. 51). Because of this intersectional failure, prevailing racialized sexual stereotypes are ignored, and how power is acquired through performance, as done by Black girls, are not accounted for in the shaping of their social body (Bartky, 1988; Cahill, 2000; Simon & Gagnon, 2003; Young, 1990). It is through performance, then, that Black girls can take power away from the opposing forces, i.e., anti-Black racism, capitalism, and heteronormative patriarchy, that wish to shape narrations of Black girls’ sexuality.

Sexual Scripts and the Construction of the Social Bodies of Black Girls

William Simon and John H. Gagnon initially introduced the theory of sexual scripts, which places sexual behavior within cultural, interpersonal, and interpsychic forces (1984). These scripts place guidelines around what is accepted and expected sexual behavior, necessitate negotiation, and can reveal themselves as an opposing force to the shaping of one's sexual identity (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). Black women have been forced to navigate the sexual scripts of the oversexual woman Jezebel, opportunistic welfare queen, asexual mammy, and aggressive matriarch (Collins, 2000; Hobson, 2018). Because of the adultification of Black girls, these sexual scripts have also been applied to them in varying ways. In *Sexual Not Sexualized: Remembering Black Girlhood Using Tactile Motion*, Aliyah Winfrey, an Africana Studies scholar, questions the way Black girls navigate their sexuality and remember their girlhood through the creation of colorful plastic lanyards, a creative tool used by many young Black girls.

Describing a conversation she had with her mother, one of the participants discusses how her mother's interpretation of her body has been a sexual script she had to navigate.

There was a picture of me from a year or two ago, so there's nothing you can do about it now. She asked me what this picture was, and she could see my nipples through the shirt. I just said, "oh that's crazy, you know what it was real hot outside and I was sweating in my bra so I just took it off, I didn't see my nipples when I posted it." She said you have to remove the picture if you ever want to be successful in life (Winfrey, 2021, p. 66).

This participant is tasked with navigating not only the expectations about her body placed upon her by her family but also the way society will monitor her body. She must not be sexual publicly lest she risks severe limitations on her future. Nor is she able to exert any agency over her body's presentation, as she is required by her mother to remove the picture from her social media platform. She is thus held responsible for the consumption of her body. This is just one of many ways Black girls are shamed into avoiding certain sexual scripts (in this case, the hypersexual Jezebel). If they cannot do that, they are deemed undeserving of a good life or are told they will succumb to inevitable failure.

Black girls begin to understand the inevitability of consumption, namely, that they are first viewed by the world by how they look, present, and perform. Young Black women feel pressure to be thinner, to adhere to the physical and sexual preferences of men, and to compete against other Black women, all with the understanding that the media misrepresents what Black women look like (Poran, 2006). Thus, Black girls are not only navigating intangible scripts, but they are also grappling with physical pressures. When thinking about physical aesthetics, darker-skinned Black girls are usually viewed as more sexual, more masculine, and less attractive, especially by men (Hill, 2002). For dark-skinned Black girls, the scripts they must navigate become more complex depending on factors like skin tone. This dilemma also has implications

for queer and gender-diverse Black girls. These Black girls are more likely to not fit into the distinct boundaries of femininity, nor do they desire to fit within the constraints of heterosexual romantic expectations of their bodies and personalities. Furthermore, at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, Black girls must navigate desires outside of cisheteronormativity, resulting in greater social and psychological stressors that impact their identity formation (Thorpe et al., 2022).

Black girls are hyperaware of the perceptions society has of them as they are not just repeated among those they are in community with (like family and friends) but also by popular media (television shows, music videos, etc.). Black girls must then draw upon their “creative potential” to amplify their “critical thought... [and] affirm differences among” themselves (Brown, 2013). This potential is best cultivated in community and is an expression of the knowledge that Black girls hold in the form of creative expression. This potential also positions Black girls as creators of knowledge and culture and articulates how they can take power from the “larger social, political, metaphysical, ecological, and economic systems” that wish to infringe upon their sexual expression (Brown, 2013).

Hip-Hop, Spoken Word, and Dance: The Creative Performance of Black Girls

Given that Black girls feel the pressures of these sexual scripts at a young age, it is through the possibilities offered by Black girlhood, particularly creative performance, that Black girls navigate these sexual scripts and construct a new social body. Black girls wish to find power and control in their sexual relationships and work to create spaces that allow other Black girls to express their sexualities and desires (French, 2013). In a study of Black girls in high school, Bryana H. French finds that they also express the value of authentic desire. With the understanding that they are viewed as hypersexual, Black girls wish to express and discover their

sexuality without the pressures of outsiders. There is “external pressure to engage in sexual behavior; however when girls [express] a desire to do so it was discouraged” (French, 2013, p. 46). One of the ways Black girls hope to combat these sexual scripts is by giving voice to one another and seeking social support. Particularly, they wish to discuss sexual matters with their peers and parents, but especially with other girls who look like them. They also note feelings of self-reliance; many girls have “difficulty expressing and understanding empowerment outside of individual responsibility” (French, 2013, p. 46). I believe that these feelings of responsibility, which place the onus on young girls rather than the culture of misogynoir, as scholar Moya Bailey articulates it, that exists in their communities, are further navigated and disrupted by creative performance (2021).

Scholars have also generated sexual scripts concerning hip-hop culture's racialized and gendered understanding of women. These hypersexual scripts include the “Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama” (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, p. 6). Young Black rappers like Megan Thee Stallion, Flo Milli, and Monaleo have traversed these scripts by taking on many personas. Megan Thee Stallion’s (Megan Pete) personas are Tina Snow, inspired by rapper Pimp C., who is confident, cool, and in charge of their sexuality and sexual partners, and Hot Girl Meg, who is sexually empowered but also takes on an almost nurturing role to listeners, doubling as the “hot girl coach.” These personas exist at the intersection of many of the stereotypical roles of women in hip-hop cultures. Pete also shows that these characteristics do not have to be mutually exclusive through her songs and performances. In “Tina Montana,” she raps about going to college and having sex with any guy she desires (2018). In “Anxiety,” Pete also raps about having anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, stating, “Bad bitches have bad days too” (2022). Though this is a simple phrase, by expressing

her struggles with mental health, she declares that her sexuality and appearance are not all that she is, affirming that she is not simply a sexual object to be consumed but a person who exists outside of the binary roles of society. After the release of this project, she then launched a platform named after the lyric, focusing on providing mental health resources to both the Black and queer communities.

Spoken word is also an avenue for navigational performance. Chicago poets DaJona Butler, Anaya Frazier, and Kennedy Harris came together to perform “Shoot Your Shot,” a poem about how they traverse the dangers of dating culture. The group fully embodies the scenario they describe of an overzealous man hitting on a girl waiting for her bus stop, particularly through the use of big movements. One even takes up more of the stage, moving from behind her microphone to vividly act out the scene. Butler, Frazier, and Harris also recognize two themes throughout this poem: the separation of Black girls' humanity from their personhood (as noted in the Freak and Jezebel sexual script) and the responsibility placed on Black girls to navigate sexual narratives correctly to avoid the dangers of not adhering to sexual expectations. The girls raise their voices to emphasize their words, yelling,

You niggas so greedy, know you do this all the time. Know you probably got hella bodies pillin up on every street you be on. You don't just shoot your shot. Your body is a walking storm of gunfire. A constant showering of bullets. And now you're mad, 'cuz we ain't tryna get caught up in the crossfire (2019).

Then, after failing to meet the expectations of the person hitting on her, the girl in this poem is shot and killed, and her thoughts race. One of these thoughts is that she knows “they will say this is [her] fault,” and that she is responsible for her death. This scenario, while extreme, is a valid fear these Black girls must deal with daily. Black girls are shown in many ways that their identity necessitates a complex understanding of sexual scripts. However, it is through this spoken word piece that these Black girls acknowledge how they are wronged and critique this normalized system.

They make demands for the existence of authentic desire, the coexistence of personhood and sexuality, and the ability to push against dominant sexual scripts without the fear of retribution.

Dance also reveals itself as a method of resistance and identity expression. Vogueing is a type of dance that has its origin in resistance rituals as a part of the queer Ballroom Scene of the 1980s “that emphasizes whole-body improvisatory action” in response “to the rhythm and phrasing of the music” (Jackson, 2002). In a protest of the beating of Iyanna Dior, a Black transgender girl, activists and Ballroom icons Gorgeous Mother Karma Gucci (Karma Munez), Adonte Prodigy (Dhee Lacy), and Amya Miyake-Mugler (Amya Jackson) “removed Vogue from the more private ritual space of a House runway and transferred it to the public streets of Chicago to bring greater visibility to Black queer and transgender girls’ lives” (Forsgren, 2021, p.). We also see the popularity of vogue amongst young queer Black girls like Nevaeh Autumn, a dancer and choreographer from New York who gained popularity on the social media platform TikTok by making videos of her and her friends voguing throughout the halls of their performing arts school. *In some of these videos, one can see her being chastised by school authorities for dancing while at school.* In this way, Black girls assert their queerness through dance, disrupting the aspect of sexual scripts that conflate sexuality with heterosexuality.

Acquiring Power and Asserting Personhood

Through movement and loudness in their creative performances, Black girls take space that they have been taught they would never be able to gain. Because “Black women experience oppressions along the lines of space, place, race, gender, sexuality, and class, liberation should be imagined along those same lines” (Butler, 2018, p. 28). So, using physical space becomes crucial for Black girls to acquire power. In *She’s Mad Real*, Black girls create a permanent and transient space wherein they can engage in identity production and activities centered around building

community. They do this by bringing what they learn in the Brooklyn Children's Museum program (whose attendants are mostly Black girls) to the predominantly white neighborhoods around them (LaBennett, 2011). Black girls thus become alchemists, not just navigating and disrupting the spaces around them but transforming them into something completely different. Transforming other creative spaces like poetry, many Black girls incorporate physical movement and dance into spoken word performances, emphasizing oral performance. Auditory space is another critical aspect of this creative performance. Colonialism has quieted Black women for centuries, from the Black codes that banned the use of drums for communication to the Victorian ideals that have long shaped womanhood, positioning women as quiet and submissive (Carlson, 1992). By raising their voice or adding specific instruments into performances, Black girls play with how sound registers the racial politics of our world while actively producing them (Stoeber, 2016). Through creative performance, Black girls also engage with spatial and audio politics.

Black girls thus use creativity to assert their being in a space, rejecting forced invisibility through artistic performance. No longer quiet, submissive, or too loud for comfort, they find the balance necessary to center themselves and their autonomy. The artistry expressed is how they add nuance to the binaries to which they are subjected. They are no longer deviant or respectable; they are just themselves. They are only Black girls navigating desire, pleasure, and sexuality through the lens of creativity offered by the flexibility of Black girlhood. In *for colored girls*, the culmination of such performance is seen as healing in "a layin on of hands". The women gather together, dancing and embracing to the beat of loud music. They proclaim themselves whole, and the lady in red states, "i found god in myself // & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely" (Shange, 1976, p. 87). The other women repeat these words over and over until they

finally unite in a circle. Despite the abuses they have suffered, this performance brings healing.

I begin to frame my definition of healing by first defining care, primarily as it relates to Black girls and women, given the appearance of this practice throughout *for colored girls*. I define care as the intentional practice of pouring into another person (offering emotional, physical, monetary, etc. support), without expectation, in a way that supports their well-being or development. For Black girls, I contend, care involves a sense of collectivity and the cultivation of positive emotions within oneself through that freely given care. This type of care allows Black girls to envision healing beyond systems that do not allow for creative performance and form kinship networks through healing. Inclusionary kinship systems built on care, collaboration, and sociocultural relationships create a fertile ground for healing. Care also brings into question the discreteness of spaces without the possibility for creativity and can break the boundaries formed by blood relations, further shaping the social body of Black girls as possessing a distinct culture of care that promotes healing. Psychological and physical care for Black girls is the first step to healing. Their healing is done in community with others and allows for the creation of emotional safety that resists the trauma of oppressive systems. Because healing resists oppressive systems, it is thus necessary for effective creative performance to occur. It also creates a cycle of sexual affirmation through performance. Black girls can take power through creative performance to assert their sexual narratives and disrupt systems, thus facilitating healing; this healing promotes emotional safety and allows Black girls to create more and form connections through care that allows them to find social support that, once again, allow them to assert their sexual narratives in community with others; and the cycle continues.

From the trio of poets in “Shoot Your Shot,” to Black girl rappers like Hitkidd, Gloss Up,

Slimeroni, Aleza, and K. Carbon, who collaborate to proclaim their sexuality and playfulness loudly in songs like *Shabooya*, Black girls form communities of healing that allow them to navigate sexual scripts.

Conclusion

Black girls successfully negotiate sexual scripts through creative performance. They engage in performance through hip-hop music making, spoken word performance, and different forms of dance. It is through this performance that Black girls can build their understanding of sexual scripts and assert their own sexual identity. Moving outside of these narratives that shape the social bodies of Black girls, Black girls become authors, creators, and architects of a new social body, one that does not adhere to the boundaries of oppressive systems. Black girls assert themselves as individuals who acknowledge that their bodies have been seen as things for consumption but say to onlookers, “If you are gonna view me, view me not only in my fullness but view me as I want, not as you want me to be.” They showcase these pieces of themselves through performance and designate it as healing, prompting other Black girls to do the same.

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